PRINCE

Beauty for Ashes

PRINCE KAYIGIRE

PRINCE
Beauty for Ashes

Published in the United States by the author
Imprint: Independently Published

ISBN: 979-8-302-79723-0

Printed in the United States of America

Editorial Team
Cynthia Swanson and Beth Foster

Book Cover and Interior Design
Victoria Wolf, Wolf Design and Marketing

Cover Design Project Contributor
Emery Gahuranyi

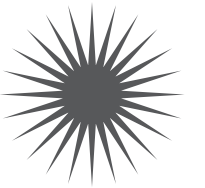
Artwork Credits
Mucyo

First Edition, 2024

To my parents, who gave their all for me and
with whom we struggled through it all.

To my two sisters, Bea and Tila, who deserve their place on these pages lest they be forgotten. Especially to Bea— your love, care, and support, along with your contagious happiness and laughter, will never be forgotten.

Finally, to my wonderful wife Denise, and our two sons, Ellis and Yoel— your love and support are unmatched.



Contents

Author's Note

To me, readers are more than merely an audience. Those who read this book will become witnesses as I share the horrors that my fellow Tutsis and I endured leading up to and during the 1994 Genocide Against the Tutsi in Rwanda—as the world watched, indifferent to our peril.

The perpetrators were indiscriminate in their killing, employing a single criterion: Tutsi. Over a period of one hundred days, more than a million members of Rwanda's Tutsi community, including women, children, and infants—ten thousand a day, one in every seven of my country's total population—were mercilessly slaughtered.

These pages contain a firsthand account of what I experienced as a fifteen-year-old youth during the genocide. Memories of those times have long been imprisoned in the deepest recesses of my mind, their keys seemingly lost in the vast expanse of a distant recollective ocean. By reclaiming those lost parts, I hope to reconnect with my younger self.

This narrative is a heartfelt homage to my sisters Bea and Tila, who during the 1994 genocide were in their late teens or early twenties—a pivotal time of transition from youth to adulthood. I hope to cast a light on experiences and struggles unique to their generation, particularly among young Tutsis like

themselves. It's a tale of tragedy, as my sisters' and other young Tutsis' bright futures were abruptly extinguished, echoing a painful reality that has touched many lives in our history.

Also among the victims was a girl on the cusp of her fifteenth birthday—a girl named Tati, who had bright, shining eyes and dreams of someday becoming a pediatrician. In these pages, you will learn much about her, for my story is inextricably linked with hers.

Finally, this narrative serves as a tribute to individuals like Didia, who was like a grandmother to me. Because of the persecution of Tutsis, which began long before I was born, the role of a blood-related grandmother had been left vacant in my life—but Didia stepped in to fill that space, until the genocide took her from us.

It is crucial to highlight that during the genocide, the perpetrators systematically obliterated everything of sentimental value, including visual memorabilia. All our photographs were destroyed, erasing the tangible traces of family, childhood, and the few cherished moments I had captured with those I loved and lost—my sisters, my grandmother, and dear friends, among others. The loss extended far beyond physical items; it was a deliberate assault on our identity and an attempt to erase our history. This destruction has made the act of remembering and honoring our heritage not only poignant, but essential.

One of the most treasured memories that was lost was a photograph of our family from the spring of 1980, when I was just nine months old. Taken in our front yard by the side of the house, it showed my mother holding me up, arm-supported, with everyone present except my brother Gerald, who was at school.

A few notes on terminology:

- In these pages, I frequently utilize the terms *aliens* and *cockroaches*. These dehumanizing labels (in Kinyarwanda, *Imburagasani z'inyenzi*) were insidiously employed in Rwanda via propaganda prior to and during the Genocide Against the Tutsi. They were directed at Tutsis

and intended to demean the Tutsi population. Used together, they amplified the effect of dehumanization. Their widespread use demonstrates how language can perpetuate hatred and violence.

- As I navigate one of the most challenging periods of my life, it is vital to address the 1994 Genocide Against the Tutsi with precision. While authoritative entities like the United Nations have appropriately named these atrocities, there remains a tendency among some others that still refer to it incorrectly as "the Rwandan Genocide" or "the Genocide in Rwanda." This imprecise language not only dilutes the specific targeting of the Tutsi population but also undermines the historical record.

Some may use such terminology out of a lack of understanding or awareness. However, there are others who intentionally distort the truth, perhaps due to the significant implications that acknowledging it entails. Among them are individuals and groups whose connections to the events, whether direct or indirect, influence their unwillingness to engage with the facts. This distortion often takes root across generations, perpetuating harmful narratives either openly or covertly.

Additionally, there exists another dimension to this issue—those who, despite being fully aware of the truth, choose to manipulate the narrative to serve their own political, economic, or strategic interests. These individuals or entities leverage their influence and resources, choosing either to remain silent or to propagate narratives that suit their agendas. In doing so, they not only fail to uphold justice but also contribute to an ongoing cycle of misinformation and unrest, prioritizing personal gain over the pursuit of truth and accountability.

It's my intention to remain committed to factual accuracy while telling my story. I invite the reader to join me on this difficult but vital journey. Let these pages stand both as a remembrance of the lives lost and as a cautionary tale for our collective consciousness.

"Please forgive me; I won't be a Tutsi again."

Reconciling with My Childhood

In late 2022, I was living in Denver, the proud father of a two-and-a-half-year-old son. One night, our child was struck by what appeared to be a viral infection that left him feverish and without appetite. Our world seemed to crumble as my wife and I watched him teeter on the brink of dehydration, his small body unable to retain any food, diarrhea wracking his frame. Panic and anxiety gripped us as we rushed him to the emergency room at our local hospital, Denver Health.

Upon our arrival, the medical professionals attempted to administer intravenous fluids. This process, however, quickly escalated into a nightmarish ordeal. The team struggled to locate a vein amid the tiny folds of my son's delicate skin. It was heart-wrenching to witness the traumatizing scene unfold: my child enveloped in pain as multiple doctors probed his tiny arms with needles in a desperate search for a vein. The medical team's valiant (and necessary) efforts to restrain him only added to his distress.

In the midst of turmoil, I stood with my child's mother, silent pillars of support for each other. I knew that she looked to me as her rock in this storm. And for a while, I was just that—until everything changed.

Our son's cries pierced the silence as he looked up at the doctors and begged, "Forgive me, I won't do it again. I promise I won't be sick again."

His plea unlocked the most guarded recesses of my heart, stirring memories I had forcibly secluded. It catapulted me back through time to the genocide, to haunting moments when innocent children, at the mercy of ruthless killers, cried out, "*Mumbabarire, sinzongera kuba umututsi.*"

"Please forgive me; I won't be a Tutsi again."

If these words sound familiar, it might be because they were featured in the 2005 movie *Hotel Rwanda*. This makes sense, because soon after the genocide, people began sharing their testimonies—and this statement from children, promising not to be Tutsi again, became widely known in Rwanda.

Culturally, before the genocide, parents in Rwanda would spank young children as a form of moderate discipline, usually with a light stick and only a few swats. Every child in Rwanda knew this. During the genocide, Tutsi children, especially those under ten, misunderstood the killings as a punishment for being Tutsi. They pleaded and screamed, mistakenly thinking their only power to stop the killing was to beg.

"Please forgive me; I won't be a Tutsi again."

In an American hospital nearly thirty years later, my son's anguish was also born from a misunderstanding. In contrast, however, his appeals were addressed to compassionate healers—not to the ears of monsters. But his words brought it all back to me: the innocent children's cries as they pleaded with merciless butchers.

The second time my son let out that gut-wrenching, desperate scream, pleading, "Please forgive me, I won't do it again," it reverberated in the very depths of my soul, akin to the sound of thunder and lightning slicing through ominous dark clouds, penetrating the hard, unyielding ground below. This was not merely a scream; it was a piercing cry that forcibly cracked the fortresses of my heart, those rooms where I had securely locked away the echoes of a past strewn with pain and torment.

Overwhelmed by the weight of this emotional uproar, I had to leave the room. I retreated to the sanctuary of the restroom, seeking solitude and a moment of respite to gather my thoughts and regain my composure. As I stood

there, isolated from the outside world, the stark reality of my youthful horrors unfolded before my eyes in an unrelenting, vivid stream of consciousness. Each memory, each face, each moment from those dark days played out in front of me with crystal-clear precision. The ticking of the clock seemed to synchronize with the rhythm of my thoughts, and for what felt like an eternity but was in fact a mere fifteen minutes, I was completely and utterly engrossed in the past.

In the midst of this emotional storm, a realization pierced through the dark clouds of my turmoil. The weighty truth was this: I was a father, and my son, in his moment of vulnerability and pain, needed me more than ever. This realization pulled me back from the precipice of my past. Digging deep into the innermost resources of my being, I wiped away the tears that had stealthily made their way down my cheeks, composed myself, and returned to the treatment room, where I stood beside my wife, watching my son being helped by a dedicated healthcare team.

When it was all over and our son was on the road to recovery, I had time to reflect. Instinctively, I realized that there was no longer an option to avoid confrontation with my younger self. I needed to muster the courage and take responsible, deliberate steps to face and reconcile with my past—not for just myself, but also for the legacy that I would leave my son and any other children we might have.

All those years earlier, after losing Tati, Bea, Tila, and Didia, I'd made a profound decision: I emotionally barricaded the years spanning the ages of eleven to fifteen, treating them as if they never existed in my life. But in the pivotal moment of witnessing my son's anguish, I resolved to painstakingly revisit the intricate tapestry of my past, starting from when I was an eleven-year-old boy.

Come, join me on this journey.

PART ONE—

The Hate Divide: An Alien Among Us

Chapter One:

Othered Beings

To tell my story, I must begin by explaining Rwanda's history both before and during colonization, which began in 1897. Throughout its history before the colonial era, Rwanda was a state with its own organization, political governance, economy, and military, with the king as the head of the state, known as *Umwami w'uRwanda*: the king of Rwanda. The country's population was made up of three groups of people. Those who occupied higher social positions, called Tutsis, were fewer in percentage and raised many herds of cattle, a form of wealth at the time. The second and largest group, called Hutus, mainly practiced agricultural activities. The third and smallest group, the Twa, were involved in pottery. All three groups spoke the same language, Kinyarwanda, shared the same culture, and were considered social classes.

Tutsis were generally considered relatively wealthier, although it wasn't uncommon to find impoverished Tutsis among the general population. Social mobility was possible: a Hutu who acquired a large number of cattle could

climb up the ladder into the Tutsi group, while impoverished Tutsis would climb down. The third group, the Twa, contrary to race theory that mistakenly categorized them as pygmies of Central Africa who lived in equatorial forests, resided side by side with the Hutus and Tutsis in pre-colonial Rwanda and were an important part of the population.

All three groups adhered to the leadership of the king of Rwanda. The Twa served in the king's palaces, formed unique entertainment groups for various palace functions, and were skilled potters. They played a crucial role in the economy, providing around 80% of the household items used in every Rwandan home, including storage containers, cooking pots, and decorative pieces, all made from clay. Even during my youth, the Twa sold colorful clay pots to my mother. They crafted the vessels in various shapes to suit different purposes, like cooking, storage, or serving as flowerpots. In pre-colonial times, the Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa formed a unified nation, intricately woven into a single societal fabric. Each group played a crucial role in maintaining an interconnected symbiosis through shared obligations and responsibilities.

All of that changed with the arrival of colonization in Rwanda.The Germans, who ruled briefly, adopted an indirect approach by befriending the king. When the Belgians came and ruthlessly ruled, they introduced race theory and created political polarization. For the colonizers, the "divide and rule" strategy was in full force, and a once simple social classification evolved into unwavering racial boundaries, with Tutsi and Hutu firmly etched in the minds of generations to come. (As for the Twa, due to their small societal representation, they did not receive much attention during colonial times.)

At the 1885 Conference of Berlin, Germany gained control over Rwanda along with other African nations. However, during World War I, Germany lost Rwanda, and Belgium quickly appropriated it. Belgian troops stationed in eastern Congo, now the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), pushed the German soldiers to the shores of Lake Kivu without much resistance, forcing them to retreat eastward through Tanzania to the Indian Ocean. This gave Belgium a strong position to negotiate with the League of Nations,

ultimately securing official authority over Rwanda and Burundi. Belgium then formally took control.

Driven by a political agenda, the colonial authorities and then senior Catholic Church fervently pushed and demanded written histories that aligned with their agenda of the time. In Europe, racial theory began to emerge in the 18th century and gained momentum in the 19th century, including the Hamitic hypothesis and a couple of others. With these ideas swaying the intellectual climate, scholars became obsessed with finding racial differences. In Rwanda, they searched for distinctions they could use in societal adjustments. Eventually, they found these differences. According to their prevailing theory of racial superiority, they concluded that the Tutsi were Hamitic pastoralists and not true Rwandans. By the mid-1800s, these ideas had permeated anthropology, history, and colonial governance, laying the groundwork for their application in Rwanda. According to the Hamitic race theory, the Tutsi were believed to trace their lineage back to Ham, one of Noah's sons. This theory proposed that certain African ethnic groups, including the Tutsi, descended from Ham. These narratives endowed the Tutsi with positive attributes like intelligence, exotic allure, grace, and adaptability, often linking them to a Semitic origin. The implication suggested that such qualities could only have come from elsewhere.

Popular culture has long been a powerful force in shaping perceptions, and few stories illustrate this better than *King Solomon's Mines*. Penned by Sir Henry Rider Haggard in 1885, this novel was one of the pioneering English adventure tales set in Africa. Its 1950 film adaptation only served to deepen these cultural narratives, embedding them firmly within the collective imagination.

The allure of Africa, with its rich tapestry of myths and legends, captivated Western audiences. This fascination found new expression in the 1960s with the popular dance and song "Wah-Watusi" by the American R&B group The Orlons. At the heart of this cultural phenomenon was a scene from the *King Solomon's Mines* film that featured a mesmerizing traditional Tutsi dance. This

depiction likely influenced American perceptions of African dances, sparking a dance craze that swept across the United States.

By the time the 1959 sequel, *Watusi*, hit the screens, the connection was cemented. The dance and song, though American inventions, borrowed the name "Watusi" to evoke an exotic and rhythmic charm. This clever nod to African culture captivated audiences, playing into the mid-twentieth century Western fascination with the mystique of Africa. These cultural portrayals did more than entertain; they shaped a narrative, one that blended fact and fiction, reality and fantasy. The Swahili term *Watusi* originates from the Kinyarwanda term *Abatutsi*, which is directly translated to Tutsi in both English and French.

Starting in 1935, all Rwandans over the age of sixteen were mandated to carry identity cards categorizing them as Twa, Hutu, or Tutsi. This classification system deeply influenced the country's education system, shaping the beliefs and perceptions of generations from the 1930s up to the genocide in 1994. As colonial powers began to wane and Rwandans demanded independence, tensions rose. Many of the elites pushing for independence were Tutsis, who had previously been favored by the Belgian colonial authorities. This shift in allegiance contributed to a growing tide of persecution against the Tutsis.

The Belgian colonial resistance was, of course, driven by pragmatism; they were determined not to relinquish control of Rwanda easily. Over their four-decade rule, the Belgians exploited Rwanda's natural resources with little regard for sustainability. Hills were aggressively and unsustainably mined, leaving behind treacherous, gaping pits that scarred the landscape. These excavations, transformed into hazardous open pits, became a legacy of colonial exploitation. Decades later, during my childhood, we were repeatedly warned about these perilous abysses, reminiscent of advisories issued for minefields, with hidden dangers lurking beneath the overgrown grass.

In July 1959, the Rwandan king's mysterious death in a Belgian-run medical facility in Bujumbura, capital of the neighboring country Burundi, cast a shadow over Rwanda. The king's passing came just months before a United Nations General Assembly at which he was expected to advocate for

his country's independence from Belgium. To many Rwandans, his death was not an accident but an assassination. The aftermath was calamitous: civil war erupted and thousands of Tutsis were slaughtered. Countless others were driven into exile, uprooted from their ancestral lands and forced into hostile territories.

It was in this environment that my parents married on May 30, 1959. Soon thereafter, the king was killed and real turmoil began. Their home razed and their possessions looted, my parents fled southeast from the Kanombe suburb of the city of Kigali to Bugesera, a savanna heretofore populated primarily by wild beasts. In Ntarama, a then-uninhabited area of sweeping vistas about ten miles from the small town of Nyamata, they started anew.

My mother would later recount tales about those times in the late 1960s after they settled in Ntarama. My father sometimes had to go away on business, leaving her alone with her first child, my brother Gerald, who was just a toddler then. She described encounters with buffaloes, those formidable creatures that would halt at the yard's gate. Mom and Gerald would stay inside, hearts pounding, watching as the massive animals stood imposingly, their presence a mix of raw power and wild unpredictability, before they eventually wandered off into the wilderness.

My parents labored tirelessly to cultivate their land. With the modest returns from a cattle farm and a coffee plantation, they raised six children, nurturing an environment of love and protection that stood in stark contrast to their own traumatic past. My mother managed the household and cared for us, while my father dedicated himself to the farm and cattle. He had an uncanny skill for veterinary care, always knowing exactly which medicine was needed. He would get it from the local veterinary medicine store, prepare it with precision, and administer it himself, either by injection or orally. Over time, my parents' relentless effort began to bear fruit—their dedication not only improved our family's economic standing but also elevated our social position, eventually enabling them to employ farmhands, though they continued to meticulously supervise every aspect of the operation.

Mom, with her green thumb, ensured our meals were always delicious and fresh from the farm. Both of my parents could be strict, expecting us to follow an established order, but everything was crafted in a way that reflected warm love. Punishment and discipline were necessary only to correct, never to belittle or abuse.

My parents and the entire community lived in hamlets with homes spread out over a wide area. My parents' property included large farm fields that stretched through the valley to the wetlands. All the homes in the community were connected by a network of dirt roads. About a quarter-mile from our house was a small trading center called the Kuruhuha. It was sort of like a street mall, with shops and bars. Just behind the Kuruhuha was a primary school. Ntarama Catholic Church was a mile away from our home.

In the mid-1970s, Bugesera, particularly Nyamata and Ntarama, had become predominantly Tutsi due to the government's forced relocation of Tutsis from other regions of Rwanda. Twenty years later, on the eve of the genocide, their numbers would reach a peak. In January 1994, the municipality of Nyamata recorded over 60,000 Tutsis. Six months later, following the slaughter, only 5,348 remained.

Born in 1979 at the Sainte-Marthe Maternity Clinic, adjacent to Nyamata Catholic Church, I was the youngest in the family by five years. Altogether, there were six of us: Gerald, Legrand, Bea, Donata, Tila, and me—a lively tribe unto ourselves. In my early childhood, the presence and warmth of my older siblings enveloped me.

Systemic discrimination against Tutsis, especially after the 1970s in Bugesera, starkly limited our access to higher education. For many now fallen on the wrong side of the political fence, the harsh reality had settled into an inescapable certainty. Tutsis reached a formidable education barrier after the sixth year of primary school, beyond which they could not advance.

Some individual Tutsis managed to ascend the educational and social rungs alongside Hutus by clandestinely acquiring Hutu identification, either claiming they were Hutu or using bribes to secure favor with powerful Hutu

allies. Others who had the means sought higher education for their children in neighboring countries, leaning on relatives who had escaped during the tribulations of 1959, despite the poignant separations this entailed.

This was the path my parents chose for their children. Despite the manifold challenges and adversities they faced, my parents staunchly believed in education as the gateway to a better life for their children. My mother, especially, was unwavering in her pursuit of ensuring a brighter future for us, no matter the sacrifices it entailed. My parents had firsthand experience with educational disruptions and were adamant that their children should pursue their studies, even if it required crossing international borders.

After my eldest sibling, my brother Gerald, completed primary school, our parents faced the agonizing choice of sending him out of the country for continued education, given the limited opportunities for Tutsis in Rwanda. Gerald first ventured to Bukavu town in southeastern Congo, then known as Zaire. Subsequently, he moved to Bujumbura, Burundi, taken in by an uncle, Gatamba Gaspard, who had escaped the 1959 Tutsi massacres. This extraordinary uncle and his family would later embrace my other siblings with the same warmth.

Driven by the search to continue their children's education, my parents enrolled Donata and Tila in secondary schools in Goma, Congo, after the girls completed primary school. However, the early 1990s witnessed escalating security threats in Goma. When the regime in Rwanda began to track Tutsis living across the border, particularly in Goma, and to target Tutsi youths who had sought refuge there, our uncle coordinated, with the help of friends in Goma, my sisters' escape to Bujumbura, which was safe. There, Donata and Tila reunited with Legrand, who had been living with my uncle for a couple of years. Meanwhile, Bea remained in Kigali.

While my siblings grappled with the emotional toll of living abroad far from their parents at a tender age, at least they could be accepted in the foreign education system, which came with no shortage of challenges and its own stark realities. But as my siblings departed Rwanda for higher education, I

found myself left in a solitary state, with only my parents for companionship. The solitude bore down on me, pressing the weight of mature responsibilities onto my youthful shoulders. I found myself juggling a myriad of responsibilities, ranging from assisting my father on the farm, tending to our cattle, and supporting our farm workers, to working alongside my mother in managing household chores.

My parents focused on cash crops and cattle. This taught me early lessons in business. They diversified their farm's income sources effectively, balancing livestock, coffee, and banana production and banana-wine brewing. This diversification was crucial, especially when coffee prices dropped in the late 1980s and early 1990s, allowing other areas of our farm to compensate financially.

When international coffee prices plummeted, my parents shifted focus to banana groves, cattle fattening, and other crops like dry beans and grain. They would harvest these crops in large quantities and store them, holding off on selling until they calculated the best season to get the highest priccurrye. Though I was too young to grasp the bigger picture, I got exposed to the dynamics of supply and demand.

Brewing banana wine, known as *urwagwa* in Kinyarwanda, became their specialty. Their brew was the best in town, known for its perfect balance of acidity and sweetness and its distinctive reddish hue. It was highly sought after. I vividly remember sampling it with my father when I was still little, to ensure it had reached its highest quality and maturity for consumption before he halted the fermentation process.

It was my mother, with her extraordinary gift for connecting with people and her keen intelligence, who often determined the best-selling price for our freshly crafted red banana elixir. She would casually remark, "I spoke with this trader," or "My friend mentioned that the price per jerrycan [twenty-liter container] unit is now this much." Armed with this vital information, she'd inform my father, her vast social network always weaving its wonders. They would then decide where to sell this ambrosia. Brewing banana wine became our lifeline, especially after coffee prices plummeted and my parents had

to juggle the financial demands of supporting us and funding my siblings' education abroad.

At that time, financial markets were nonexistent in Rwanda. Reflecting on my childhood now, my fervent and early passion for business and entrepreneurship would have undoubtedly drawn me into such a market to buy and sell commodity futures, especially in corn, cattle, or coffee—had such an opportunity been available.

Dad never frequented the local bars. Instead, our home became the gathering place where he welcomed friends and neighbors for warm conversations that stretched into the night, especially on weekends. They shared urwagwa from traditional Rwandan gourds known as *igicuma* (one) or *ibicuma* (many). These gourds, expertly crafted from specially cultivated calabash, were nurtured to maturity, then harvested and dried to enhance their durability. In the flickering glow of evening lamps, laughter and stories mingled with the rich aroma of the wine, creating a tapestry of memories that lingered long after the last sip was taken...

My mother excelled at crafting ibicuma, and I relished decorating them with different plants' leaf blades. I'd imprint the leaf patterns on the gourds, giving each an artistically unique design. By the time I learned the science of plants in school, delving into botanical forms, leaf morphology and their types, I'd already mastered their different forms. It can be so much fun learning naturally.

Chapter Two:

Natural Abundance

THE ENTIRE BUGESERA REGION is a tapestry of gently rolling hills and valleys, where serene lakes are cradled by the embrace of winding rivers. The vistas stretch endlessly, each view imbued with a profound sense of greatness, freedom, and noble simplicity. Flowing from the west and south, the Akanyaru and Nyabarongo Rivers converge to encircle Bugesera, merging to form the birth of the mighty Akagera River that opens up their triangular embrace around the region.

Our home, gracefully perched on our farm, nestled at an altitude of over 5,000 feet, offered a breathtaking vantage point. This unique geographical position and elevation crafted a landscape of unparalleled beauty, a true masterpiece of nature. From our doorstep, we could behold rolling hills, verdant valleys, and the life-giving rivers, painting a scene of calm perfection. The

tranquil mornings and golden evenings, caressed by gentle breezes, made Ntarama a sanctuary of peace and natural splendor, a place where the soul could find true rest.

Skies of unblemished blue stretched endlessly above, adorned with majestic, ever-changing clouds that drifted effortlessly. Nights, cloaked in darkness, brought a comforting chill and were illuminated by a blanket of stars. The moon's gentle glow bathed the land in a soft light, revealing its quiet splendor.

From our home, I could stretch my view without obstruction fifteen miles south to behold the edge of the beautiful Lake Cyohoha North. On the brightest days, my gaze could extend over a hundred miles, capturing the awe-inspiring sight of two conical volcanoes in the north. Their sharp peaks, piercing the sky, ignited curiosity and sparked dreams of distant adventures—the gorillas. The hills rolled on without end, their valleys cradling rivers and wetlands in a symphony of natural beauty. Summers were dry, with the sun's heat at its zenith, but the shade was a remedy that felt like a gentle respite. The rainy seasons lingered, infusing the air with a moist, invigorating freshness, but never oppressive humidity. The temperature, a steady 70 degrees Fahrenheit year-round, offered a climate of perpetual comfort. This is a timeless beauty, with its pure and exotic landscape forever etched in my memory.

Growing up, the picture that I had of home (*murugo*) was a warm and safe place, a shield from any harm, a place of fresh, delicious meals where you have the feeling of relaxation and safety unmatched anywhere else. My parents cultivated our farm into a beacon of natural abundance. On the land, fertile and bolstered by cattle waste and dung, we harvested more than we could consume. We dined on the bounty of the land without fussing over terms like "organic"—we didn't need the label, because the produce was inherently natural. We ate fresh-grown produce from the farm and never needed to buy fresh food from the market. Mom filled baskets with the freshest of it to send to friends, both nearby and distant, especially those who couldn't farm themselves. Our abundance of milk, too, she gladly shared with families with children. She never sold it; to her, milk was sacred and too precious to have

a price tag. Our visitors were always greeted with a cup of milk, a hallowed tradition in the culture I grew up in. For Mom, it was unthinkable to put a price on what she considered a gift from God.

My breakfast routine was a simple yet irresistible affair: sweet potatoes paired with kefir. I mastered the art of making kefir (*ikivuguto*), learning through keen observation of my mother's work. The delicate sweet-potato-and-kefir combination, which I found utterly addictive, was more than just the start of my day—it was a cherished ritual. Oh, how I relished those mornings!

"Prince, your breakfast is on the table," Mom would call as I dashed around, perpetually late for school. No matter how rushed I was, I never skipped breakfast.

In our household, milk management was solely under Mom's expertise; it was beyond Dad's role and interest. My understanding of milk handling grew from watching her meticulous care. In our culture, milk is revered, treated with a near-holy reverence. Mom handled the dairy utensils—a collection of artistically crafted wooden jars (*inkongoro*), both large and small—with utmost care. These were washed with sand and specific types of tall grass with thin and elongated leaves, chosen to impart an exceptionally fresh smell. Then they were rinsed with boiling water and set to dry under the natural sunlight. We avoided soap, due to the unavailability of liquid and the difficulty of removing soap residue from the jars' interiors.

Our home had a special milk room, with stands built about a meter high (hip level), and embellished with traditionally woven rugs. These rugs were skillfully crafted from the skin of papyrus stems, adding both function and cultural beauty to the space. All dairy utensils were dedicated exclusively to milking, kefir-making, and serving milk in small cups. A common belief in our family, and perhaps for all who owned many cows at a time, was that milk utensils and handling are sacred and therefore should not be mixed with anything else.

Mom made kefir from fresh milk to extend its shelf life, either for drinking or for making ghee. The process involved mixing fresh milk with the morning's batch of milk, balancing the heat and cultures for fermentation. Placed at room temperature, it took nearly twenty-four hours for the milk to ferment into kefir and reach the perfect consistency—thick, with characteristic flavor, taste, and texture that energized one's entire day. Alternately, she would extend the culturing time to naturally allow the complete separation of fats from other milk substances, including proteins and minerals, to make ghee for crafting delicious dishes. Once matured, the ghee would be used to season food, infusing it with a distinctive flavor.

In our household, ghee was more than just a culinary ingredient; it was a cherished part of our heritage. Its rich aroma transformed everyday meals into extraordinary experiences. My mother, a skillful cook, masterfully used ghee to elevate our dishes, making even the simplest vegetables or freshly cooked meals with farm-picked ingredients taste like an ancient biblical king's delicacies. The aroma of spices and ghee would fill the air, a sign of the delicious meal to come.

My mother's dedication to her work may have been fueled by the absence of her extended family. She had been separated from her mother and siblings during the turmoil of the late 1950s. During the pogroms of that time, her father was killed by a Parmehutu mob in Mayaga, now part of Rwanda's Southern Province. Parmehutu, a sectarian party of the era, ruled Rwanda under the leadership of its first president, Grégoire Kayibanda. With the backing of the Belgian colonial administration, they systematically orchestrated the persecution, displacement, and killing of thousands of Tutsis. Afterward, my grandmother and four of her children, all except my mother, fled Rwanda—initially to Tanzania, then to faraway Uganda. Other relatives also scattered across the region: to Bujumbura in Burundi, Congo, Kenya, and various parts of Tanzania. A similar story of grief and displacement affected my father's side of the family. He'd lost both his parents at a very young age, and during the late 1950s he lost many more relatives, and his extended family dispersed.

Communication was tough back then, especially for Tutsis reaching out

across borders. Mom often spoke of the deep longing she felt for her mother, from whom she was separated at sixteen. It was many years before she learned of her mother's passing, and the fact that she couldn't be there in my grandmother's final moments was a sorrow Mom never fully confronted.

In my world, heroes didn't leap from the pages of comic books or flash across movie screens. Heroes were the very real people making profound differences in their communities and the lives of others. One of the most venerable figures in our community was Didia. Although we were not related by blood, she was, in every sense, the grandmother I never had. Didia was a true hero. She had an immense love for children—not just blood relations like her grandsons Viateur and Emmanuel, who were five and two years older than me, respectively, but all children in the community. Sitting by her side, I was always captivated by her enchanting tales. Each story was a well-crafted masterpiece. Her soothing voice painted vivid images, and I would lose myself in the wonder of her words, eager for the next chapter. She embodied grace under pressure and unwavering resilience. Her composed demeanor and the subtle authority she possessed earned her deep respect and admiration. Her life, directed by strong ethical convictions and characterized by serene grace, was a testament to her enduring strength and sagacity. Despite the deep loss of her husband, who'd been killed in the 1959 pogroms in Kicukiro-Kigali, Didia's spirit remained unshaken. Her wisdom and love were a beacon for her children and the numerous grandchildren blessed with her presence.

During those years, my toy collection was unlike most kids' toys in the industrialized world. I fashioned cars from copper wires and rubber from old slippers, and I molded hardened clay bricks into toy trucks. Our soccer balls (*umupira wa karere*) were crafted from banana leaves and polyester bags; by age five, I'd become a master weaver of these. Traditional games played with glass marble balls, known as *Gukina biye* or *amagorori*, were childhood favorites. The beautiful crystal marbles came in different colors, and the objective was to skillfully shoot them into target holes in the ground. The game had many rules, and we appointed ourselves arbitrary referees. Most of the time, the rules'

terminology was a mix of Kinyarwanda and French. When your adversary made an error, it was common to say "*Pas byose*" or "*Contour*," meaning, "Do not cross the line—freeze!" It was fun for us kids, but later in life, I came to understand the educational value of this game: enhancing hand-eye coordination and developing fine motor skills.

As we outgrew the simpler joys of young childhood, the allure of football (soccer, in US terminology) began to dominate, yet we never lost our penchant for strategy games like Adugo and Karé. These games didn't require a manufactured board; instead, we sketched our battlegrounds in the dirt and used pebbles as pieces. Our version of digital warfare was handmade bows and arrows crafted from tree branches, challenging each other to see who could strike the farthest target.

These makeshift games and toys brought me immense joy. In my youngest years, my parents would occasionally assist in the crafting process, but as I grew older, the creations became mostly my own. We understood that if we wanted to have fun or play, there was no store where we could purchase toys or a PlayStation; instead, we had to think, create, and build what we wanted, then enjoy the fruits of our creativity. I became a master toy creator, spending endless hours with my handcrafted toys, alongside my friends.

I was also particularly captivated by pilots. They seemed to defy gravity and dance with the clouds. Each time I saw a plane in the sky, my dream of becoming a pilot grew stronger.

By the time I turned nine, my aspirations were in the realm of business. I embarked on my entrepreneurial journey by setting up a modest cigarette shop in our home. As a marketing strategy, I used an empty cigarette box as a sign, hanging it on our fence to attract potential customers. This early venture gave me firsthand experience in running a small enterprise, buying cigarettes wholesale and selling them at a slight markup.

I split my time between school and the farm, helping both my parents, partaking in the shared labor that bound us together, and taking on an entrepreneurial hobby: my cigarette business.

"Hey, Prince, I sold this much while you were at school," my mother would proudly tell me, her dedication to my small business unwavering.

"Great, Mom," I'd reply. "I think I can just stop going to school and grow the business full-time to get more clients."

Overhearing, my father would retort, "Then there will be no shop in this house. You will have to go find somewhere else." Both he and my mother valued education, seeing it as the key to breaking free from the many decades of injustice Tutsis had endured.

From an early age, I was drawn to commerce, reveling in the autonomy of making my own money. Selling cigarettes brought me particular satisfaction. Seeing neighbors stop by our home to buy what I was selling brought me immense joy, even if sometimes the purchase was on credit and the purchaser failed to repay. When I'd inform my father about those who hadn't settled their debts, feeling the sting of these losses, he'd tell me, "Don't give out debt, because you lose your money and time in waiting when they don't pay. You can't know if they'll pay or not, and if they don't, you are the one who will suffer." At the time, I wasn't aware of the health issues caused by cigarettes; had I been, I likely would have chosen a different product for my venture. Nonetheless, the enjoyment I found in the act of selling was undeniable. If not cigarettes, I would have gladly sold something else—I felt so good doing that.

My little entrepreneurial experiment took a hit when the economy began to nosedive. Sales dwindled, prompting me to halt restocking of my inventory. I've always had a soft spot for dogs, so I used the little I'd saved to acquire puppies to keep as pets and entrusted the remaining amount to my mother to keep safe for me.

I wasn't the only one facing economic hardship. As mentioned previously, my parents' coffee farming was hit hard at this time, largely due to a combination of prolonged drought and struggling international markets that drove down prices for coffee and other cash crops. We were certainly navigating a tough economic landscape, each in our own way.

In the 1980s, there was a perception in Rwanda that the government was performing satisfactorily. However, by the end of the decade, the economy had declined sharply, with the lower and larger segment of the population being hit much harder than the small clique of elites at the top.

Coffee exports were a primary driver of the economy, accounting for over 80 percent of Rwanda's export earnings. This was in stark contrast to the dwindling per-capita food supply during the early 1980s, which was further exacerbated by environmental degradation and population growth. Coincidentally, Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) were introduced in the 1980s with the well-intentioned goals of fostering economic growth, mitigating poverty, and stabilizing the economy. These programs sought to correct fiscal imbalances, alleviate foreign exchange shortages, and rectify structural weaknesses in the Rwandan economy, ultimately aiming to create a more robust and sustainable economic foundation for the nation.

At the beginning of the 1990s, Rwanda received close to $100 million in loans from the World Bank, with the requirement to implement Structural Adjustment Programs. These programs, which called for fiscal discipline, led to the privatization of numerous state-owned enterprises and the liberalization of markets, significantly altering the country's socioeconomic landscape.

The SAPs in Rwanda aimed to stimulate private-sector employment and mandated civil-service reforms. However, these adjustments had adverse consequences for small farmers, as declining global market coffee prices plunged them into poverty and jeopardized national food security. To balance payments and reduce government expenditures, austerity measures required cuts in education, healthcare, and other subsidies, prioritizing debt repayment to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank. This shift deteriorated the quality of public education and healthcare services, while also placing additional burdens on an informal private sector that was now expected to fill the gap left by the state's withdrawal from these essential areas—all to meet the borrowing requirements set by the lending institutions. Additionally, these measures aimed to raise tax revenues. However, the efficacy of this strategy

was undermined by a corrupt and inefficient tax-collection system, and the national debt continued to increase.

Despite the escalating socioeconomic imbalances, the World Bank's loan package recommended that Rwanda prioritize cash crops over food crops to boost export earnings. The argument was that income generated from cash-crop exports could be used to purchase food, encapsulated by the notion, "Once you have income, you can buy food."

One of the strategies to increase coffee exports was a devaluation of the Rwandan franc. However, this currency devaluation led to a surge in inflation, which reached double digits in 1990. As fuel costs surged, both trade and the prices of goods were impacted, and the entire supply chain got punched.

In an economy constrained by limited innovation and diversification, the private sector remained minimal, primarily confined to a small informal segment. As a result, economic activity relied heavily on government expenditure. The austerity measures further strained already underfunded social services, which were struggling to reach rural and impoverished areas. This deterioration rendered many services virtually defunct, disproportionately affecting vulnerable populations and exacerbating poverty and inequality in Rwanda.

Of course, as a child, I knew little about these policies and their effects, despite my interest in economics. My primary concerns were school, soccer, my cigarette business, and my family.

While my mother encouraged us to excel academically, my father's unwavering belief in the value of education was shaped by his own distressing expulsion by white Catholic fathers during the period when Tutsis became a disgrace to the colonialists. A priest who was Dad's instructor suspended him, saying he was too clever to remain in his class.

This traumatic history resurfaced during a 1991 town hall meeting I attended with Dad when I was twelve. Mayor Rwambuka Fidele pointed to my father and said, "Look at you. All your brilliance...But do you remember how you were so smart that you used to teach our class when the teacher was absent?" He was referring to the time before my father was expelled from

school by the Belgian priest. Then, turning to the audience gathered to hear him speak, the mayor repeated, "That man was so smart," but with a tone that implied it had done my father no good, due to his heritage.

The mayor went on, derisively and scornfully, to imply that despite my father's brilliance in school, his Tutsi identity had led him to a dead end. This bitter reminder stirred the embers of long-standing injustice, prompting our early departure from the meeting.

That evening, over dinner, the conversation inevitably circled back to the mayor's words. Dad sighed, his voice heavy with resignation. "Rwambuka had every reason to say what he said. Look, the regime made him one of the important people."

Mom, never one to let an insult lie, retorted, "But you're better off with all you've become. All they do is dirty their hands."

A year later, in 1992, Mayor Rwambuka, a key cadre in the ruling extremist party and a long-serving parliamentarian, would become a chief organizer in the mass killings of Tutsis in Bugesera.

Despite distressing situations like the one above, the business downturn for both my parents and me, and the scarcity of other supplies, I realize my childhood sounds relatively idyllic. At home, this was true—but school was a different story.