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Gaël Faye

Petit pays

roman



Grasset

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GAËL FAYE

PETIT PAYS

roman

BERNARD GRASSET
PARIS

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Pour Jacqueline

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PROLOGUE

I really don't know how this story started.
Dad had explained everything to us one day in the van.
– You see, in Burundi it's like in Rwanda. There are three different groups, we call them ethnic groups. The Hutu are the most numerous, they are short with big noses.

– Like Donatien? I had asked.
“No, he’s from Zaire, it’s not the same. Like Prothé, for example, our cook. There are also the Twa, the Pygmies. Let’s not dwell on them, there are only a few of them, we’ll say they don’t count. And then there are the Tutsi, like your mother. They are much fewer in number than the Hutu, they are tall and thin with blunt noses, and you never know what they’re thinking. You, Gabriel,” he said, pointing at me, “you’re a real Tutsi, you never know what you’re thinking.”

At that point, I didn't know what to think either. Anyway, what can you think about all this? So I asked: – Is the war between the Tutsi and the Hutu
because they don't have the same territory?

– No, that's not it, they are from the same country.
– So... they don't speak the same language?
– Yes, they speak the same language.
– So, they don't have the same god?
– Yes, they have the same god.
– So... why are they at war?
– Because they don't have the same nose.

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The discussion ended there. It was a strange affair, all the same. I don't think Dad understood much of it either. From that day on, I started looking at people's noses and heights in the street. When we went shopping downtown with my little sister Ana, we would discreetly try to guess who was Hutu or Tutsi. We would whisper: "That guy in the white pants, he's a Hutu, he's short with a big nose."

– Yeah, and that guy over there, with the hat, he's huge, really skinny with a big nose, he's a Tutsi.

– And him over there, with the striped shirt, he's a Hutu.

– No, look, he's tall and thin.

– Yes, but he has a big nose!

That's when we started to doubt this whole ethnic thing. And besides, Dad didn't want us to talk about it. For him, children shouldn't get involved in politics. But we couldn't do otherwise. This strange atmosphere grew stronger every day. Even at school, friends started bickering all the time, calling each other Hutu or Tutsi. During a screening of Cyrano de Bergerac, we even heard a student say, "Look, he's a Tutsi, with his nose." The air had changed. No matter what kind of nose you had, you could feel it.

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This return haunts me. Not a day goes by without the country calling to me. A furtive noise, a lingering scent, the afternoon light, a gesture, sometimes even silence, is enough to awaken childhood memories. "You won't find anything there but ghosts and a pile of ruins," Ana keeps repeating, never wanting to hear about that "cursed country" again. I listen to her. I believe her. She's always been more clear-headed than I am. So I banish the thought from my mind. I decide once and for all that I will never go back. My life is here. In France.

I no longer live anywhere. To inhabit means to become one with the very topography of a place, the nooks and crannies of its environment. Here, there's none of that. I'm just passing through. I'm staying. I'm crashing. I'm squatting. My city is a dormitory, functional and functional. My apartment smells of fresh paint and new linoleum. My neighbors are complete strangers; we politely avoid each other in the stairwell.

I live and work in the Paris region. Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines. RER C. A new town, like a life without a past. It took me years to integrate, as they say. To have a stable job, an apartment, hobbies, friendships.

I love meeting people online. One-night stands or flings lasting a few weeks. The women I go out with are all different, each more beautiful than the last. I'm intoxicated by listening to them talk about themselves, by the scent of their hair, before surrendering completely to the warmth of their arms, their legs, their bodies. None of them ever forgets to ask me the same nagging question, always on the first date, by the way: "What's your background?"

A banal question. A given. An almost obligatory step to move the relationship further. My caramel skin is often required to prove its worth by

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declaring his pedigree. "I am a human being." My answer irritates them. Yet, I'm not trying to provoke them. Nor am I trying to sound pedantic or philosophical. When I was knee-high to a grasshopper, I had already decided never to deny myself again.

The evening continues. My technique is well-oiled. They talk. They like me to listen. I soak it all in. I immerse myself. I drown in hard liquor and shed my sincerity. I become a formidable hunter. I make them laugh. I seduce them. For my own amusement, I return to the question of origins. I deliberately maintain the mystery. We play cat and mouse. I reply with cold cynicism that my identity carries the weight of corpses. They don't react. They want lightness.

They look at me with doe eyes. I desire them. Sometimes, they give themselves to me. They think I'm eccentric. I only amuse them for a while.

This return obsesses me; I keep pushing it back, relentlessly, further and further. A fear of rediscovering buried truths, nightmares left on the threshold of my native land. For twenty years I've been returning; at night in dreams, by day in reveries; to my neighborhood, to this dead-end street where I lived happily with my family and friends. Childhood has left its mark on me, and I don't know what to do with it. On good days, I tell myself that this is where I draw my strength and sensitivity. When I'm at rock bottom, I see it as the cause of my maladjustment to the world.

My life is like a long, rambling trip. Everything interests me. Nothing excites me. I lack the spice of obsessions. I belong to the breed of the complacent, the mediocre. I pinch myself sometimes. I observe myself in public, at work, with my office colleagues. Is that really me, that guy in the elevator mirror? That guy by the coffee machine forcing a laugh? I don't recognize myself. I've come from so far away that I'm still amazed to be here. My colleagues are talking about the weather and the TV schedule. I'm not listening anymore. I'm having trouble breathing. I loosen my shirt collar.

My body is swaddled. I observe my polished shoes; they gleam, reflecting a disappointing light. What has become of my feet? They are hidden. I have never seen them walk in the open air again. I approach the window. The sky is low. A gray, sticky drizzle is falling; there are no mango trees in the small park wedged between the shopping center and the railway lines.

That evening, after work, I ran to the first bar I saw, across from the train station. I sat down at the foosball table and ordered a whisky to celebrate my thirty-third birthday. I tried to call Ana on her cell phone, but she didn't answer. I persisted. I dialed her number several times. I couldn't remember that she

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He's away on a business trip in London. I want to tell him, to tell him about this morning's incident. It must be a sign of fate. I have to go back. If only to get to the bottom of it. To settle this story that's haunting me once and for all. I close the door behind me, forever. I order another whisky. The sound of the television above the bar momentarily drowns out my thoughts. A 24-hour news channel is broadcasting images of human beings fleeing war.
I watch their makeshift boats land on European soil. The children emerging are shivering with cold, starving, dehydrated. They are risking their lives on the battleground of the world's madness. I watch them, comfortably seated here in the presidential box, a whisky in hand. Public opinion will think they fled hell to find Eldorado. Nonsense! Nothing will be said about the country within them. Poetry is not information. Yet, it is the only thing a human being will retain from their time on earth. I avert my gaze from these images; they depict reality, not truth. Perhaps these children will write it down one day. I feel as sad as an empty highway rest area in winter. It's always the same thing, on my birthday, a heavy melancholy falls upon me like a tropical rain when I think back to Dad, Mom, my friends, and that eternal party around the gutted crocodile at the bottom of the garden...

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I'll never know the real reasons for my parents' separation. Yet there must have been a profound misunderstanding from the very beginning. A flaw in their relationship, an asterisk that no one saw, or wanted to see. Back then, my parents were young and beautiful. Hearts brimming with hope like the sun of independence. You should have seen them! On their wedding day, Dad couldn't believe he'd put a ring on her finger. Of course, he had a certain charm, my father, with his sharp green eyes, his light brown hair streaked with blond, and his Viking stature. But he didn't hold a candle to Mom. And Mom's ankles were something else! They heralded long, slender legs that made women's eyes fire and men's eyes open like half-open shutters. Dad was a young Frenchman from the Jura region, who had arrived in Africa by chance to do his national service. He came from a small village in the mountains that looked remarkably like the landscapes of Burundi, but where he lived, there were no Burundians. Instead, there were women with the bearing of Mom, slender, freshwater reeds, beauties as lithe as skyscrapers with ebony skin and large, Ankole cow-like eyes. You should have heard it! On their wedding day, a carefree rumba drifted from out-of-tune guitars, happiness whistling cha-cha-cha tunes under a star-studded sky. It was all set! There was nothing left to do but go for it!

To love. To live. To laugh. To exist. Always straight ahead, without stopping, to the end of the track and even a little beyond.

My parents were just lost teenagers suddenly expected to become responsible adults. They were barely out of puberty, their hormones, their sleepless nights, when they already had to clear away empty bottles and clean out joints.

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Ashtrays, putting the psychedelic rock records back in their sleeves, folding the bell-bottoms and Indian shirts. The bell had rung. The children, the taxes, the obligations, the worries arrived, too soon, too fast, and with them doubt and highway robbers, dictators and coups d'état, structural adjustment programs, the abandonment of ideals, mornings that struggle to rise, the sun that lingers a little longer in its bed each day.
Reality intruded. Harsh. Fierce. The initial nonchalance transformed into a tyrannical rhythm, like the relentless ticking of a clock. Their natural instincts backfired, and my parents took the brunt of it, realizing they had confused desire with love, and that each had fabricated the other's qualities. They hadn't shared their dreams, only their illusions. Each had their own selfish dream, and they weren't prepared to fulfill each other's expectations.

But in the old days, before all this, before what I'm about to tell you and everything else, there was happiness, life without needing to explain it. Existence was as it was, as it had always been, and as I wanted it to stay. A sweet, peaceful sleep, without mosquitoes buzzing in my ear, without that rain of questions that never stopped drumming on the metal of my head. In those happy days, if someone asked me, "How are you?" I always answered, "I'm fine!" Just like that. Happiness keeps you from overthinking. It was later that I started to consider the question. To weigh the pros and cons. To dodge it, to nod vaguely. Besides, the whole country had joined in. People only answered with, "I'm okay, sort of." Because life couldn't be completely fine anymore after everything that had happened to us.

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The beginning of our happiness, I think it goes back to that Saint Nicholas Day, on Jacques's large terrace in Bukavu, Zaire. Once a month, we visited old Jacques; it had become a habit. That day, Mama came with us, even though she hadn't been speaking much to Papa for a few weeks. Before leaving, we stopped at the bank to withdraw some foreign currency. As we were leaving, Papa said, "We're millionaires!"

In Mobutu's Zaire, the currency devaluation was such that you could buy a glass of drinking water with five million banknotes.

From the moment we crossed the border, we entered a different world. The restraint of Burundi gave way to the tumult of Zaire. In this turbulent crowd, people made friends, called out to each other, and hurled insults at one another as if at a cattle market. Noisy, filthy children peered at the rearview mirrors, windshield wipers, and rims soiled by splashes of stagnant water; goats offered themselves as kebabs for a few wheelbarrows of silver; mothers weaved between lines of freight trucks and minibuses bumper to bumper, hawking hard-boiled eggs to dip in coarse salt and sachets of chili-flavored peanuts; beggars with legs twisted by polio pleaded for a few million to survive the dire consequences of the fall of the Berlin Wall; and a pastor, standing on the hood of his rickety Mercedes, loudly proclaimed the imminent end of times, holding a Swahili Bible bound in royal python leather. In the rusty sentry box, a dozing soldier half-heartedly waved a fly whisk. The fumes of diesel fuel mixed with the hot air parched the throat of the civil servant, unpaid for ages. On the roads, huge craters formed where old potholes had been.

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They mistreated the cars. But this didn't stop the customs officer from meticulously inspecting each one, checking tire grip, engine coolant level, and the proper functioning of the turn signals. If the vehicle revealed none of the expected defects, the customs officer demanded a baptismal or first communion certificate for entry into the country.

That afternoon, weary of the struggle, Papa refused to pay the bribe demanded by all these grotesque maneuvers. The barrier was finally lifted, and we continued on our way through the steam rising from the hot springs by the roadside.

Between the small town of Uvira and Bukavu, we stopped at roadside eateries to buy banana fritters and fried termite cones.
All sorts of signs were hung on the fronts of the dives.

whimsical: "At Fouquet's on the Champs-Élysées," "Giscard d'Estaing Snack Bar," "Restaurant celebrating like at home." When Dad took out his Polaroid to immortalize these signs and celebrate local inventiveness, Mom chirped and accused him of marveling at an exoticism meant for white people.

After nearly running over a multitude of roosters, ducks, and children, we arrived in Bukavu, a kind of Garden of Eden on the shores of Lake Kivu, an Art Deco vestige of a once futuristic city. At Jacques's place, the table was set, ready to welcome us. He had ordered prawns fresh from Mombasa. Papa exclaimed: "It's not as good as a platter of oysters, but it's nice to eat good food

once in a while!"

"What are you complaining about, Michel? Are you being fed badly at home?" said Mother without tenderness.

– Yes! That idiot Prothé forces me to eat his African junk food every lunchtime. If only he knew how to cook a proper ribeye steak!

"Don't even talk to me about it, Michel!" Jacques continued. "My monkey in the kitchen grills everything under the pretext that it kills parasites. I don't even know what a good rare steak is anymore. I can't wait to get back to Brussels and get a course of amoebas!"

A burst of laughter erupted. Only Ana and I remained silent at the end of the table.
I was ten, she was seven. Perhaps that's why Jacques's humor went over our heads. In any case, we were strictly forbidden to speak unless someone spoke directly to us. It was a golden rule whenever we were invited somewhere. Dad couldn't stand children joining in grown-up conversations. Especially not at his house.

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Jacques, who was like a second father to him, a role model, to the point that he unconsciously copied his expressions, his mannerisms, and even the inflections of his voice. "He's the one who taught me about Africa!" he often repeated to Maman.

Leaning under the table to shelter from the wind, Jacques lit a cigarette with his silver Zippo engraved with two deer. Then he straightened up, a few wisps of smoke escaped his nostrils, and for a moment, he gazed at Lake Kivu. From his terrace, he could see a string of islets lost in the distance. And beyond, on the other shore of the lake, lay the town of Cyangugu, in Rwanda.
Mother kept her eyes fixed on that beyond. Heavy thoughts must have crossed her mind every time we had lunch at Jacques' house. Rwanda, her country, which she left in 1963 during a night of massacre, by the light of the flames that set the family home ablaze, that country to which she had never returned since she was four years old, was there, a stone's throw away, almost within reach.

In Jacques' garden, the grass was impeccably mowed by an old gardener who swung his machete in sweeping, pendulum-like motions, like a golf swing. Before us, metallic green hummingbirds busied themselves sipping nectar from the red hibiscus, putting on a remarkable display. A pair of crowned cranes wandered in the shade of the lemon and guava trees. Jacques' garden teemed with life, bursting with color, and filled with the sweet scent of lemongrass. With its blend of rare wood from the Nyungwe forest and porous black rock from the Nyiragongo volcano, his house resembled a Swiss chalet.

Jacques rang the bell on the table and the cook arrived immediately.
His outfit, a toque and a white apron, contrasted sharply with his bare, cracked feet.

"Give us three Primus bottles and clear up this mess!" ordered Jacques.

"How are you, Évariste?" asked Mother to the cook.

– Thank God, I'm a little better, Madam!

"Leave God where he is, please!" Jacques retorted. "It's okay because there are still a few white people left in Zaire to keep things running. Without me, you'd be begging like all the others of your kind!"

"When I talk about God, I'm talking about you, boss!" replied the cook mischievously.

– Don't mess with me, monkey!

They started laughing together and Jacques continued:

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– When I think that I've never been able to keep a woman for more than three days and that I've been stuck with this chimpanzee for thirty-five years!

– You should have married me, boss!

– Funga kinwa! And go get us those beers instead of talking nonsense! said Jacques with another burst of laughter followed by a throat clearing that made me want to throw up my prawns.

The cook left, humming a religious tune. Jacques blew vigorously into a handkerchief embroidered with his initials, took out his cigarette, let a few ashes fall onto the varnished parquet floor, and said to Papa: “The last time I was in Belgium, the doctors told

me I had to quit smoking, or I’d die. I’ve seen it all here: wars, looting, shortages, Bob Denard and Kolwezi, thirty years of this ‘Zairianization’ nonsense, and now cigarettes are going to get me! Good God!”

Age spots dotted his hands and balding head. It was the first time I'd seen him in shorts. His hairless, milky legs contrasted with the sunburnt skin of his forearms and his face, weathered by the sun; it looked as if his body was an assemblage of disparate parts.

"The doctors might be right, you should slow down," said Mom, worried. "Three packs a day is a lot, my Jacques."

“You’re not going to start smoking that too, are you?” said Jacques, continuing to talk to Papa as if Mama wasn’t there. “My father smoked like a chimney, he lived to be ninety-five. And don’t even get me started on the life he had. It was a whole different ball game, the Congo, back in Leopold II’s time!”

My father's a real idiot! He's the one who built the Kabalo-Kalemi railway line. A line that hasn't worked for ages, by the way, like everything else in this goddamn country. What a mess, I swear!

“Why don’t you sell everything? Come and settle in Bujumbura. Life is good there,” said Papa, with the enthusiasm he sometimes had when he spontaneously offered an idea for the first time. “I have loads of construction sites and I’m getting tons of bids. Right now, there’s money to be made!”

"Sell everything? Stop talking nonsense! My sister keeps calling me to come to Belgium. She says, 'Go back, Jacques, it's going to end badly for you. With the Zairians, it always ends with looting and lynching white people.' Can you imagine me, living in an apartment in Ixelles? I've never lived there, what do you expect me to do there at my age? The first time I set foot in Belgium, I was twenty-five and had two bullets in my gut."

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They were ambushed when they were hunting communists in Katanga. I went under the knife, got stitched up, and came right back here. I'm more Zairian than the blacks. I was born here and I'll die here! Bujumbura is fine for a few weeks, I sign a couple of deals, shake hands with a few big shots, visit the locals and old friends, and then I go back here.

Honestly, Burundians don't appeal to me at all. Zairians, at least, are easy to understand. A quick bribe, and they're good to go! Burundians? Those people! They scratch their left ear with their right hand...

"That's what I keep telling Michel," said Mother. "I can't stand this country anymore either."

"It's not the same for you, Yvonne," retorted Papa, annoyed. "You dream of living in Paris, that's your idea."

– Yes, it would be good for you, for me, for the children. What is our future in Bujumbura? Can you tell me? Apart from this miserable little life?

– Don't start, Yvonne! You're talking about your own country.

– No, no, no, no, no... My country is Rwanda! Right here, in front of you. Rwanda. I am a refugee, Michel. That's what I've always been in the eyes of Burundians. They made that perfectly clear to me with their insults, their insinuations, their quotas for foreigners, and their school enrollment limits.

So let me think what I want from Burundi! – Listen,

my dear, said Papa in a tone he meant to be soothing. Look around you. These mountains, these lakes, this nature. We live in beautiful houses, we have servants, space for the children, a good climate, business isn't too bad for us. What more could you want?

You'll never have all this luxury in Europe. Believe me! It's far from the paradise you imagine. Why do you think I've been building my life here for twenty years? Why do you think Jacques prefers to stay in this region rather than go back to Belgium? Here, we're privileged. There, we'll be nobody. Why don't you want to hear it?

"You talk, you talk, but I know the other side of the coin here. When you see the gentle hills, I know the misery of those who live there. When you marvel at the beauty of the lakes, I can already smell the methane that lies dormant beneath the waters. You fled the tranquility of your France to find adventure in Africa."

Good for you! I'm looking for the security I've never had, the comfort of raising my children in a country where you don't fear dying because you

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"Stop it, Yvonne, with your worries and your persecution complex. You always dramatize everything. You have a French passport now, you have nothing to fear. You live in a villa in Bujumbura, not in a refugee camp, so please, avoid the grand pronouncements!"

"I couldn't care less about your passport; it changes nothing, this threat that lurks everywhere. The story I'm talking about doesn't interest you, Michel, it never has. You came here looking for a playground to prolong your spoiled Western fantasies..."

– What are you talking about? You're really getting on my nerves! Many African women would dream of being in your shoes...

Mom yelled at Dad so hard he didn't dare finish his sentence. Then, very calmly, she continued: "You

don't even realize what you're saying, my poor Michel. A word of advice: don't try your hand at racism, you old hippie, it doesn't suit you at all. Leave that to Jacques and the other real colonists."

Jacques choked instantly on his cigarette smoke. Mom didn't care; she got up, threw her napkin in Dad's face, and left.

The cook arrived at the same moment, a cheeky smile on his lips, the Primus chocolates on a plastic tray.

"Yvonne! Come back immediately! Apologize to Jacques right away!" shouted my father, his buttocks slightly lifted off the chair and both fists on the table.

"Forget it, Michel," said Jacques. "Women..."

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In the days that followed, Papa repeatedly tried to make amends with kind words or jokes, but Mama remained unmoved. One Sunday, on a whim, he decided to take us to lunch in Resha, on the lake, sixty kilometers from Bujumbura. That was our last Sunday together as a family, the four of us.

The car windows were wide open, and the wind was so loud it was hard to hear each other. Mom seemed distant, and Dad tried to fill the silence by constantly giving us explanations no one had asked for: "Look, there, that's a kapok tree. The Germans brought this tree to Burundi at the end of the 19th century. It produces kapok, the fiber used to stuff pillows." The road ran alongside the lake and headed straight south to the Tanzanian border. Dad continued his explanations to himself: "Lake Tanganyika is the most fish-rich and longest lake in the world. It's over 600 kilometers long and has a larger surface area than Burundi."

It was the end of the rainy season and the sky was clear. The glistening of corrugated iron roofs could be seen on the mountains of Zaire, fifty kilometers away, on the other side of the river. Tiny white clouds formed cotton balls suspended in front of the peaks.

The Mugere River bridge had collapsed following recent flooding, so we crossed the river in its bed. Water seeped into the vehicle, and Papa engaged four-wheel drive for the first time since owning the Pajero. Arriving in Resha, a sign advertised "Restaurant Le Castel." The vehicle turned onto a small dirt track lined with mango trees, greeted by a group of green monkeys grooming each other on the...

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parking. At the entrance to the restaurant, a strange building with a red sheet metal roof, topped with a semaphore, a copper plaque depicted the pharaoh Akhenaten.

We settled down on the terrace, under an Amstel parasol. Only one other table was occupied, near the bar, by a government minister having lunch with his family, flanked by two armed soldiers. The minister's children were even more well-behaved than we were; they didn't move a muscle, only timidly reaching for their bottles of Fanta placed in front of them. Speakers faintly played the distorted sound of a Canjo Amissi cassette, and Papa rocked back and forth in his plastic chair, twirling his keys on his finger.

Mom watched Ana and me with a sad smile. When the waitress arrived, she placed the order: "Captain's skewers, four! Two Fruito. Two Amstel." Mom never spoke in sentences to the junior staff; she sent telegrams. The clerks didn't deserve a verb.

It often took a good hour to be served. Since the atmosphere at the table was rather strained, between the jingling of Dad's keys and Mom's forced smile, Ana and I decided to slip away and take a dip in the lake. To scare us, Dad shouted, "Watch out for the crocodiles, kids..." Ten meters from the shore, a rock jutted out of the water's surface, like the rounded back of a hippopotamus. We raced to it, before continuing on to the metal jetty where we could dive and watch the fish swimming among the large rocks in the turquoise water. Climbing back up the ladder, I spotted Mom on the beach, in her white outfit, with her wide brown leather belt and red scarf in her hair. She was waving us over for lunch.

After lunch, Dad drove us to Kigwena Forest to see the baboons. We walked for almost an hour along a small, muddy path without seeing anything except a few green turacos. The atmosphere between Mom and Dad was tense. They didn't speak to each other and avoided each other's gaze. My shoes were full of mud. Ana ran ahead, trying to spot the monkeys before everyone else.

Then Papa took us to visit the Rumonge palm oil factory, whose construction he had overseen upon his arrival in Burundi in 1972. The machines were old, and the entire building seemed covered in a greasy substance. Mounds of palm nuts were drying on large blue tarpaulins. A vast palm grove stretched for miles around. While Papa explained the different stages of pressing, I saw Mama

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We walked away to get to the car. Later, on the way, she rolled up the windows to turn on the air conditioning. She put a Khadja Nin cassette in the player, and Ana and I started singing "Sambolera." Mom joined in. She had a beautiful voice that soothed the soul, giving us chills as much as the air conditioning. We wanted to stop the cassette just to hear her.

As they drove through the Rumonge market, Papa changed gears and, in one swift motion, placed his hand on Mama's knee. She swatted him away violently, as one might swat a fly from above their plate.

Dad immediately looked in the rearview mirror, and I pretended not to have seen anything, turning my head toward the window. At kilometer 32, Mom bought several balls of ubusagwe (cold cassava paste) wrapped in banana leaves, which we loaded into the trunk. On the way back, we stopped at the Livingstone and Stanley stone. It read "Livingstone, Stanley, 25-XI-1889." Ana and I amused ourselves by recreating the explorers' meeting: "Dr. Livingstone, I presume?" From a distance, I saw Dad and Mom talking. I had high hopes that they would make peace, that Dad would embrace her with his big arms and Mom would rest her head in the crook of his shoulder, and then that they would hold hands for a romantic stroll down in the banana grove. But I could not understand that they were arguing, with lots of gestures and accusatory fingers pointed under each other's noses.

A warm wind prevented me from hearing what they were saying. Behind them, the banana trees were bending, a group of pelicans flew over the promontory, the red sun plunged west behind the high plateaus, a blinding light covered the sparkling surface of the lake.

That night, Mother's rage made the walls of the house tremble. I heard the sounds of breaking glass, shattering windows, and plates crashing to the floor.

Dad kept repeating:

– Yvonne, calm down. You're waking up the whole neighborhood!

- Kiss my ass !

The sobs had transformed Mama's voice into a torrent of mud and gravel. A hemorrhage of words, a roar of insults filled the night. The sounds were now moving around the plot. Mama's screams beneath my window, the car windshield she was smashing. Then nothing, and the violence again, rolling, rolling all around. I watched the

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the back and forth of their footsteps in the light that drew them under my bedroom door. My little finger was widening a hole in the mosquito net of my bed. Voices mingled, distorted into low and high notes, bounced off the tiles, echoed in the false ceiling; I no longer knew if it was French or Kirundi, shouts or cries, if it was my parents fighting or the neighborhood dogs howling their heads off. I clung to my happiness one last time, but no matter how tightly I held on to keep it from slipping away, it was saturated with the palm oil that oozed from the factory in Rumonge; it kept slipping from my grasp. Yes, that was our last Sunday together, the four of us, as a family. That night, Mom left the house, Dad stifled his sobs, and while Ana slept soundly, my little finger tore at the veil that had always protected me from mosquito bites.

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To top it all off, Christmas was just around the corner. After a battle between Dad and Mom over who would keep us for the holidays, it was agreed that I would stay with Dad and that Ana would go with Mom to visit Eusébie, one of Mom's aunts who lived in Kigali, Rwanda. It was Mom's first time back in Rwanda since 1963. The situation seemed more stable, thanks to the new peace agreements between the government and the Rwandan Patriotic Front, a rebel group made up of children of exiles about Mom's age.

Dad and I spent Christmas alone together. I received a red BMX bike as a gift, decorated with multicolored straps hanging from the handlebars. I was so happy that at the first light of Christmas morning, before Dad even woke up, I took it to the twins who lived in the house across the street from us, at the entrance to our cul-de-sac. They were impressed. Then we had fun doing donuts in the gravel. Dad came home in his striped pajamas, furious, and yelled at me in front of my friends for leaving the house so early without telling him. I didn't cry, or maybe just a few tears, probably from the dust kicked up by the skidding or a gnat stuck in my eye, I can't quite remember.

For New Year's Day, Dad decided to take me hiking in the Kibira forest. We spent the night with the pygmies in the potters' village, at an altitude of over 2,300 meters. The temperature was around zero degrees Celsius. At midnight, Dad allowed me a few sips of banana beer to warm up and celebrate the start of the new year, 1993. Then we lay down on the earthen floor, huddled together around the fire.

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Early in the morning, Papa and I tiptoed out of the hut while the pygmies still snored, their heads resting on their gourds of urwagwa, the banana beer. Outside, the ground was covered in frost, the dew had turned to white crystals, and a thick fog enveloped the eucalyptus treetops. In the forest, we followed a winding path. I picked a large black and white beetle from a rotten log and put it in a metal box to start my entomological collection. As the sun climbed higher in the sky, the temperature rose, and the freshness of dawn turned into a sticky humidity. Papa walked ahead of me in silence, sweat making his hair look duller and causing it to frizz at the nape of his neck. We could hear the cries of baboons echoing through the woods. Sometimes I would startle; something was moving in the ferns, surely a serval or a civet.

At the end of the day, we met a group of Pygmies with their pack of dogs, Nyam-Nyam terriers. They had come from the blacksmiths' village, higher up in the mountains. They were returning from hunting with their bows slung over their shoulders and a haul of carcasses of moles, Gambian rats, and a chimpanzee. Papa was fascinated by these little people whose way of life had remained unchanged for millennia. As we left them, he spoke to me sadly about the impending disappearance of this world due to modernity, progress, and evangelization.

Before reaching the car, on the last stretch of the trail, Dad asked me to stop. He took out a disposable camera: "Stand there! I'm going to take
your picture, so we'll have a souvenir."
I climbed a tree shaped like a giant slingshot, standing between the two trunks. Dad wound up the winding wheel. Watch out! There was a "click" and then the sound of the film rewinding. That was the end of the film.
In the village, we thanked the Pygmies for their welcome and hospitality. The children ran after the car for several kilometers, trying to cling to the vehicle, until we reached the paved road. On the descent from Bugarama, we were overtaken by the "banana kamikazes," men on bicycles who rode as fast as the cars, their panniers loaded with heavy bunches of bananas or sacks of charcoal weighing several dozen kilos. At that speed, a fall was often fatal, and the slightest deviation from the road led to the bottom of the precipice, to the graveyard of crushed Tanzanian trucks and minibuses. On the other side of the road, the same cyclists, after delivering their goods to the capital, were heading back up the

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mountain by discreetly clinging to the rear bumpers of trucks. I imagined myself in turn with my red strap-on BMX speeding down the turns of Bugarama, overtaking cars and trucks in a mad race, the twins, Armand and Gino, cheering me on my arrival in Bujumbura like a winner of the Tour de France.

It was dark when we arrived at the house. Dad honked the horn several times in front of the gate, which had a sign posted that read "Beware of Dog. Imbwa Makali." The gardener came to open it, limping, followed by our little white and ginger curly-haired dog, a haphazard cross between a Maltese and a terrier, who, without believing it, embodied the warning on the gate. When Dad got out of the car, he immediately asked the gardener, "Where's Calixte? Why are you the one opening the gate?"

– Calixte has disappeared, boss.

The dog always followed him. It had no tail, so it wagged its rear end to show it was happy. And it curled its lips, which gave the impression that it was smiling.

– What do you mean, disappeared?

– He left very early this morning and he will not be returning.

– What's this all about now?

– There were problems with Calixte, the boss. Yesterday we celebrated the New Year. When I fell asleep, he came into the store and stole a lot of things. Then he disappeared... That's what I saw.

– What did he steal?

– A wheelbarrow, a toolbox, an angle grinder, a soldering iron, two cans of paint...

The gardener continued his inventory, but Dad interrupted him with a wave of his hand.

– That's good! That's good! I'm filing a complaint on Monday.

The gardener added: –
He also stole Mr. Gabriel's bicycle.

Upon hearing that sentence, I felt my heart sink into my stomach.
Impossible. I couldn't imagine Calixte capable of such a thing. I burst into tears. I was angry at the whole world. Dad kept saying, "We'll find your bike, Gaby, don't worry."

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The following Sunday, the day before school started, Ana returned from Rwanda. Mom dropped her off at home in the early afternoon. She had braided her hair with very blonde highlights. Dad didn't like it; he thought the color was vulgar for a little girl. He argued with Mom, and she immediately started her motorcycle and left before I even had time to kiss her and wish her a happy new year. I stood on the front steps for a long time, convinced she would come back after realizing she had forgotten me.

And then the twins came over to tell me about their Christmas holidays at their grandmother's in the countryside.

"It was horrible! There was no bathroom, so we had to wash completely naked in the courtyard in front of everyone. Good God, Gaby!"

And since they weren't used to seeing mixed-race people like us, the village children would come and spy on us through the fence. They would shout, "Little white asses!" It was insulting. Grandma would chase them away by throwing stones at them.

– And that's when she noticed we weren't circumcised.

– Do you know what circumcision is?

I shook my head no.

– That's cutting off the penis!

– Grandma asked Uncle Sosthenes to circumcise us.

– We didn't know what it was about either at that point. So, at first, we didn't pay attention. Grandma was speaking Kirundi with Uncle, we didn't understand anything, but she kept pointing her finger at our crotches. We wanted to call our parents because we felt that Grandma

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And Uncle was up to something really shady. But I'm telling you, over there, it's the real countryside, no phone, no electricity. The toilet, my dear, is a hole in the ground with flies camped out around it for the long haul! Good God!

Every time the twins swore, they said "In the name of God" and at the same time slid a finger across their neck like the knife that slaughters the chicken, concluding the gesture with a snap of their fingers in the air, thumb against forefinger, snap!

– Uncle Sosthène arrived with the older cousins, Godefroy and Balthazar. They took us to the edge of the village, to a small mud house with a wooden table in the middle of the room.

– Uncle had bought a razor blade at the shop.

Godefroy held my arms behind my back and Balthazar held my legs. And Uncle pulled down my pants. He grabbed my penis, put it on the table, took the Gillette razor out of its wrapper, pulled back my foreskin, and ziiip! Cut off the tip! Then he put salt water on it to disinfect it. In the name of God!

– Yebabawé! When I saw that, I galloped straight up the hills like an impala being chased by cheetahs. But my cousins caught up with me, blocked me, and ziiip! Same thing!

– Then, Uncle Sosthène put our little penises in a matchbox and gave it to Grandma. She opened the box to check her work. She had the satisfaction of the Rolling Stones on her face, by God! It was amazing! To top it all off, she buried our penises in the garden, under the banana trees!

– They've gone to the paradise of little penises! May God have mercy on their souls!

– Amen !

– And then it wasn't either! We had to wear a dress, like the girls, because trousers rub too much on the wound, you understand.

– That dress was an international disgrace, my dear!

– When our parents came to pick us up at the end of the holidays and found us dressed like that, they were surprised. Our father asked what we were doing in skirts.

– We spilled everything. Dad was angry with the old woman, he said we were French, not Jewish!

– But our mother explained to him that we did it for hygiene. To avoid having dirt getting stuck in there.

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The twins were always out of breath when they finished one of their stories. They fidgeted about, explaining and miming every last detail. Even a deaf person could have understood them. When they spoke, it was a flurry of words and a collision of speech. As soon as one finished a sentence, the other would immediately pick up where they left off, like a baton being passed in a relay race.

"I don't believe you!" I said.

Because the twins also liked to lie. If one of them started telling a lie, the other would continue without them even having consulted each other.

It was a real gift. My father used to say they were masters of tall tales, conjurers of truth. When I told them they were making fun of me, they replied in unison: "In the name of God!" Finger to the neck, a snap in the air, index finger against thumb, snap! Then they lowered their trousers at the same time, and I saw two small bits of purplish-red flesh. I closed my eyes in disgust. As they pulled up their underwear, they added: "You know, in our grandmother's village, someone was seen riding your

bicycle. In the name of God!"

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Dad's hoarse voice woke me up. "Gaby! Gaby!" I jumped out of bed, afraid I'd be late for school. I often overslept, and Dad had to call me. Ana, on the other hand, was always early, all dressed up, her hair neatly combed, barrettes in her hair, coconut milk all over her body, teeth brushed, shoes polished. She even remembered to put her water bottle in the fridge the night before so it would be nice and cold all morning. She did her homework ahead of time and learned her lessons by heart. What a kid, Ana. I always felt like she was older than me, even though she was three years younger. Stepping out into the hallway, I saw that Dad's bedroom door was closed. He was still asleep. Once again, I'd fallen for it: the parrot had copied him.

I went to sit on the barza, the terrace opposite his cage. He was eating his peanuts, holding them firmly in his talons. With his hooked beak, he crushed the shells to extract the kernels. He looked at me for a moment, his black pupil in his yellow eye, then whistled the beginning of the Marseillaise that Papa had taught him, before poking his head out from between the cage bars so I could stroke the top of his head. My fingers sank into his gray feathers; I could feel the warm, pink flesh of his neck.

In the courtyard, a flock of geese walked Indian-style past the night watchman, who sat on a mat, a thick gray blanket pulled up to his chin, with his small radio playing the morning news in Kirundi. At that very moment, Prothé came through the gate, up the path, climbed the three steps to the terrace, and greeted me. He had lost a lot of weight, and his drawn features made him look old, though he normally already looked older than his years. He hadn't been to work for the past few weeks.

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because of cerebral malaria that had almost killed him. Dad had paid all the medical expenses and the sessions with the traditional healer. I followed him into the kitchen, where he took off his street clothes to put on his work clothes: a threadbare shirt, trousers that were too short, and plastic sandals.

"Would you prefer an omelet or a fried egg, Mr. Gabriel?" he asked me, inspecting the refrigerator.

– Two fried eggs, please, Prothé.

Ana and I were already settled on the terrace, waiting for breakfast, when Papa arrived. He had a few superficial cuts on his face and some shaving cream behind his left ear. On a large tray, Prothé brought a pot of tea, a jar of honey, a saucer of powdered milk, margarine, currant jam, and my slightly crispy fried eggs, just the way I liked them.

"Hello Prothé!" said Papa, noticing her earthy complexion.

The cook gave a timid nod in response. – It seems to

be getting better!

– Yes, I'm feeling better, thank you very much, sir. Thank you for your help. My family is very grateful. We are praying for you, sir.

"Don't thank me. What I paid for your care will be deducted from your next paychecks, you know that," said Dad in a neutral voice.

Prothé's face hardened. He picked up his tray and disappeared into the kitchen. Donatien arrived with a swagger. He was wearing an abacost, a kind of short-sleeved jacket in dark, lightweight fabric, without a shirt or tie, which Mobutu had imposed on Zairians to break free from colonial fashion. Donatien had been Papa's foreman for twenty years, his most loyal employee. On the construction sites, the workers called him mzee, the old man, even though he was barely forty. Donatien was Zairian, having come to Burundi after finishing high school to work in the Rumonge palm oil factory that Papa supervised at the time. He never left. He lived in the north of the city, in the Kamenge neighborhood, with his wife and three children. Pen caps peeked out of his shirt pocket, and whenever he could, Donatien read passages from the Bible that he kept in a crocodile-skin satchel.

Every morning, Dad gave him instructions for the day and a sum of money to pay the day laborers.

A few moments later, Innocent came out onto the terrace to get the keys to the service van from Dad. Innocent was

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A young Burundian, barely twenty years old. Tall and thin, a vertical scar ran across his forehead, giving him a stern look he cultivated. He constantly moved a well-chewed toothpick from one corner of his mouth to the other. He wore baggy pants, a baseball cap, chunky white sneakers, and a red-green-yellow terrycloth bracelet around his wrist —the Pan-African colors. He was often in a foul mood and haughty with the other employees, but Papa cared for him deeply. Innocent was much more than just the company driver; he was his handyman.

He knew Bujumbura perfectly and had connections everywhere. He was close to the mechanics in Bwiza, the scrap metal dealers in Buyenzi, the merchants in the Asian quarter, the soldiers at Camp Muha, the prostitutes in Kwijabe, the meatball vendors at the central market... He always knew who to bribe to expedite administrative requests that had been stuck for months on the desks of low-level officials. The police never stopped him, and street children watched over his vehicle for free.

After giving his orders, Papa emptied the tin of tea into the pot of a sad-leaved oleander, whistled the Marseillaise for two seconds to the parrot and we all jumped into the car.

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The French school in Bujumbura brought together classes from kindergarten to the final year of secondary school on a large site. There were two main entrances. On the Prince Louis Rwagasore Stadium side and on Independence Boulevard: the entrance for the older students, which led directly to the administrative building and the classrooms. middle and high school. At the corner of Muyinga Avenue and Uprona Boulevard: the entrance for the kindergarten children. The primary school was in the middle.

As a matter of habit, Dad would drop us off at the entrance for the little ones.

– Innocent will pick you up at noon and drop you off at your mother's shop. I'm going back tomorrow; I have a work site in the interior of the country.

"Okay, Dad," said Ana wisely.

– Gabriel, next Saturday you'll accompany Innocent and Donatien to Cibitoke regarding this bicycle issue. You need to be with them to properly identify it. Don't worry, we'll find it.

That morning, there was a real buzz in the classroom. The teacher handed each of us a letter, sent by the students of a fifth-grade class in Orléans, France. We were very excited to discover our pen pal. On my envelope, my first name was written in pink capital letters, surrounded by French flags, stars, and a few hearts. The paper smelled strongly of sweet perfume. I carefully unfolded the letter. The handwriting was neat and slanted to the left:

Friday, December 11, 1992

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Dear Gabriel,

My name is Laure and I am 10 years old. I am in the same grade as you. I live in Orléans in a house with a garden. I am tall, I have shoulder-length blond hair, green eyes, and freckles. My little brother's name is Mathieu.
My father is a doctor and my mother doesn't work. I like playing basketball and I know how to make pancakes and cakes. What about you?
I like to sing and dance too. What about you? I like to watch television. What about you? I don't like to read. What about you? When I grow up I'm going to be a doctor like my father. Every holiday I go to my cousins' house in the Vendée region. Next year, I'm going to visit a new amusement park called Disneyland. Do you know it? Can you send me your picture?

I eagerly await your reply.
Kiss

Laure

PS: Did you receive the rice that was sent to you?

Laure had slipped her photo into the envelope. She looked like one of Ana's dolls. This letter intimidated me. I blushed when I read the word "kiss".
It was as if I had just received a package of sweets; I suddenly felt like I was opening the doors to a mysterious world I hadn't imagined.
Laure, that island of France, with her green eyes, her blond hair, somewhere in the distance, was ready to kiss me, Gaby from the Kinanira district.
I was afraid someone might notice my distress, so I quickly put his picture in a pocket of my schoolbag and put the letter back in its envelope. I was already wondering which photo of myself I could send him.
The very next hour, the teacher asked us to write our answers for our pen pals.

Monday, January 4, 1993

Dear Laure,

Gaby is my name. Anyway, everything has a name. Roads, trees, insects... My neighborhood, for example, is Kinanira. My city is Bujumbura.
My country is Burundi. My sister, my mother, my father, my friends, they have

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Everyone has a name. A name they didn't choose. You're born with it, that's just how it is. One day, I asked those I love to call me Gaby instead of Gabriel, so I could choose for those who had chosen for me. So, could you call me Gaby, please? I have brown eyes, so I only see others in brown. My mother, my father, my sister, Prothé, Donatien, Innocent, my friends... they're all coffee-colored. Everyone sees the world through the lens of their own eyes. Since you have green eyes, I'll be green for you. I like a lot of things I don't like. I like sugar in ice cream but not the cold. I like the swimming pool but not the chlorine. I like school for the friends and the atmosphere but not the classes. Grammar, conjugation, subtraction, composition, punishment—it's all so tedious and barbaric! Later, when I grow up, I want to be a mechanic so I'll never break down in life. You have to know how to fix things when they stop working. But that's a long way off; I'm only 10 years old, and time drags, especially in the afternoons because I never have school, and on Sundays because I'm bored at my grandmother's. Two months ago, the whole school was vaccinated against meningitis under the covered playground. If you get meningitis, it's serious; apparently, you can't think anymore. So the headmaster insisted that all the parents get the shot—it's normal, it's his business, our minds. This year, there will be elections to elect a president of the Republic in Burundi. It's the first time that's ever happened. I won't be able to vote; I have to wait until I'm a mechanic. But I'll tell you who the winner is. Promise!

See you soon.

Kiss

Gaby

PS: I'll look into the rice.

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We set off very early, with Innocent and Donatien. The van was going faster than usual, weighed down with bags of cement, shovels, and picks that were normally piled high on the back. We were quite a strange bunch, the three of us. That's what I thought when we came across the first military checkpoint on the outskirts of Bujumbura. What would we tell the soldiers if they stopped us? That we were heading out on an expedition, at dawn, to the other side of the country, to find a stolen bicycle? We'd look suspicious, that's for sure.
Innocent was at the wheel, chewing on his ever-present toothpick. This habit disgusted me. All the nerds in Bujumbura had adopted it. They wanted to look manly, fancied themselves cowboys, guys like Innocent. No doubt some poor guy had wanted to show off after watching a Clint Eastwood movie one afternoon at the Caméo cinema, and in no time this trend had spread throughout the city like wildfire.

In Bujumbura, there are two things that travel fast: rumors and fashion.
Donatien was sitting uncomfortably; he'd been sulking since the start. He had the middle seat but couldn't position his legs properly because of the gear lever.
He was sitting sideways, his left shoulder against Innocent's and his legs at an angle. I'd thrown a tantrum to be by the window because it was raining and I loved watching the raindrops race along the glass and blowing on them to draw in the condensation. It made the time pass during long journeys inland.

When we arrived in Cibitoke, it had stopped raining. Donatien refused to let us take the track leading to the twins' grandmother's house because it was too muddy and we risked getting the car stuck. He suggested we continue on foot, but Innocent didn't want to get his white sneakers dirty. So I went ahead with Donatien.

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and we left Innocent alone in the van to pick his damn teeth.

In the hills, even when you think you're alone, there are always hundreds of pairs of eyes watching you, and your presence is announced for miles around by voices echoing from hut to hut. We arrived at the old woman's house; she was already [1] So, when waiting for us with two glasses of curdled milk in her hands. Neither Donatien nor I really spoke Kirundi, especially not the complicated and poetic Kirundi of the hills, the kind where a few words of Swahili and French aren't enough to fill the gaps in your language. I had never really learned Kirundi; in Bujumbura, everyone spoke French. Donatien, on the other hand, was a Zairian from Kivu, and Zairians from Kivu often only speak Swahili and the good French of the Sorbonne.

That was a whole different story. Inland, you can't converse with people like the twins' grandmother did; their Kirundi is full of subtleties, with references to age-old proverbs and expressions that seem to date back to the Stone Age. Donatien and I just weren't up to it. The old woman was trying to explain where we could find the new owner of the bicycle. Since we didn't understand a word, we went back down to the car with Godefroy and Balthazar, the infamous penis-cutting cousins, to meet up with Innocent, who was supposed to be our translator. With the cousins in the back of the van, who had agreed to show us the way, we headed back onto the paved road. Two kilometers after leaving town, another track led us to a village where we found a certain Mathias, the one the twins had seen on my bike. The Mathias in question had resold it to a man named Stanislas from Gihomba. We got back in the car with the two cousins, plus Mathias, and we tracked down the aforementioned Stanislas, who had himself resold the bicycle to the beekeeper in Kurigitari. So off we went again, heading towards Kurigitari, with Stanislas now in the car. We did the same with the beekeeper, whom we took with us so he could give us the address of the new owner, a man named Jean-Bosco from Gitaba. Once in Gitaba, we were told that Jean-Bosco was in Cibitoke. So we went back to Cibitoke. And there, Jean-Bosco told us that he had just sold the bicycle to a farmer in Gitaba...

We turned around. Except that, on Cibitoke's main street, police officers stopped us to ask what we were doing, crammed nine to a car. Innocent started telling the story of the stolen bike and the search for the

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new owner. It was noon and onlookers flocked to the scene. Very quickly, hundreds of people gathered around the vehicle.

Opposite us was the central cabaret, the largest drinking establishment in town. The mayor and a few district dignitaries were finishing a batch of goat kebabs soaked in hot Primus beer. The crowd gathered around us quickly drew their attention. The mayor rose slowly from his stool. He belched as he pulled up his trousers, adjusted his belt, and advanced toward us like a weary chameleon, parting the crowd with his broad belly, greasy lips, and meat stains on his dung-colored shirt. His face was pale and elongated, but his large, auntie-like backside extended up to the middle of his back, and his stomach was taut and firm like that of a woman in full term. The mayor looked like a gourd.

While all these people were chatting, I suddenly recognized Calixte in the crowd. Calixte, who had stolen my bicycle... I barely had time to raise the alarm before he bolted as fast as a green mamba. The whole town chased after him, like chasing a chicken you want to decapitate for lunch. In sleepy provinces, there's nothing like a bit of bloodshed at the midday lull to kill time. Popular justice, that's what they call lynching; it has the advantage of sounding civilized. Luckily, that day, the people didn't have the last word. They had caught Calixte, but the police quickly put an end to the democratic beating. The mayor then tried to capitalize on the event: he presented himself as a wise man, attempting to calm tempers with a pompous speech on the importance of being an honest citizen. But given the time and the heat, his lyrical outbursts quickly fell flat. He stopped mid-speech and returned to his usual spot, in front of a beer, to calm his nerves. Calixte, badly bruised, was taken to the municipal jail, and Donatien promptly filed a complaint.

Calixte being behind bars didn't solve the problem with my bike. We decided to find the farmer from Gitaba. To do that, we had to take the track that led to the grandmother's house again. Ignoring his own instincts, Innocent drove the car onto the muddy track despite Donatien's repeated warnings about the risk of getting stuck. At the place called Gitaba, there was a small mud-brick house with a banana leaf roof.
The hut was on a hilltop, and for a moment, the view captivated us. The rain had washed the sky clean, and the sun's rays on the soaked ground painted

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Spirals of rosy mist rose above the vast green plain, crossed by the ochre waters of the Rusizi River. Donatien admired the spectacle in reverent silence, while Innocent couldn't care less; he was picking the grime from under his fingernails with the same damned toothpick he'd had in his mouth earlier. The beauty of the world was none of his concern; he was only interested in the filth of his own body.

In the courtyard, a woman was kneeling on a mat, grinding sorghum. Behind her, a man sitting on a stool invited us closer. He was the farmer. At home, when a stranger arrives, before even saying hello, Dad barks, "What's this for?" in an irritated tone. Here, it was the opposite; there was restraint, politeness. We didn't feel like outsiders. Even though we'd arrived unannounced, looking rather odd, in their small courtyard lost at the top of the mountain, we had this pleasant feeling of having been expected for a long time. Before we even knew the reason for our visit, the farmer offered us a seat in his yard. He was coming back from the fields. His bare feet were dried by the mud, he wore a patched shirt, and his cotton trousers were rolled up to his knees. Behind him, a hoe full of earth leaned against the wall of the hut. A young girl brought us three chairs while the woman smiled at us, grinding sorghum seeds between two stones. We had barely settled in when a boy my age appeared in the courtyard, pedaling my bicycle. I didn't hesitate for a moment; I jumped up from my chair and lunged towards him to grab the handlebars. The family stood up, wondering what was happening, giving us bewildered looks. The boy was so surprised that he didn't resist when I took the bicycle from his hands. There was a very awkward moment, and Donatien shook Innocent's shoulder, urging him to speak in Kirundi and explain why we were there. Innocent made a superhuman effort to extricate himself from his seat, where he had already made himself quite comfortable. He seemed weary of having to repeat the explanations he had given the police officers earlier, but he proceeded to recount the whole story from the beginning in a monotone voice. The family listened in silence. The boy's face fell as he grasped the situation. When Innocent finished, the farmer began to explain himself in turn, tilting his head to the left and opening his palms to the sky, as if begging us to spare his life. He said he had sacrificed everything to give this gift to his son, that he had saved for a long time, that they were humble and good people.

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Christians. Innocent seemed not to be listening; he was scratching the inside of his ear with his toothpick, then inspecting the impurities at the end of the stem with great interest. Donatien was troubled by our guests' distress; he didn't dare say anything. While the farmer continued talking, Innocent approached me, grabbed the bicycle, and loaded it into the back of the van.
Annoyed, he coldly advised the family to turn to the person responsible for their misfortune, who was now in prison in Cibitoke. He said they simply had to file a complaint against Calixte to get their money back. He then gestured for me to get into the vehicle. Donatien joined us reluctantly. I could see he was racking his brains to find a solution. When he sat down next to me in the cab, he took a deep breath.

– Gabriel, please, let's not take the bike. What we're doing is worse than stealing. We're breaking a child's heart.

"That's all," Innocent retorted.

"And what about me?" I replied, upset. "My heart was broken too when..."
Calixte stole my bike.

“Of course, but this bike means less to you than it does to this child,” Donatien continued. “He’s very poor, and his father worked hard to give him this gift. If we leave with the bike, he’ll never have another chance.”

Innocent glared at Donatien. "What

are you playing at? Do you think you're Robin Hood? Just because this family is poor, we should let them have property that doesn't belong to them?"

"Innocent, you and I grew up in this poverty. We know they'll never get the money back and that, in the end, they'll have unjustly lost years' worth of savings. You know very well how it works, my friend."
which.

"I'm not your friend! And here's a piece of advice: stop feeling sorry for these people. In these remote areas, they're all liars and thieves."

“Gabriel,” said Donatien, turning back to me. “We can tell the boss we haven’t found your bike and he’ll buy you another one. It’ll be our little secret, may God forgive us, for it’s for a good cause.”
To help a poor child.

"Are you planning to lie?" said Innocent. "I thought your God forbade it? Leave Gabriel alone, stop making him feel guilty. Anyway,"

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He's just a damn peasant, the kid, what's he going to do with a BMX?

Here we go !

I didn't want to turn around or look in the rearview mirror. Our mission was accomplished. We had found my bike. The rest wasn't our concern, as Innocent would say.

When we got stuck a few minutes later, just as Donatien had predicted, he recited a passage from the Bible about difficult times, selfish people, and the last days, and he said all sorts of things in a low voice that frightened me. He implied that God was punishing us for our misdeed. All the way back, I pretended to be asleep to avoid his gaze. Even though I tried to justify our actions, shame grew inside me. When we got home, I told Innocent and Donatien that I would never touch that bike again in my life to atone for my behavior. Innocent stared at me incredulously, then snapped, in an exasperated tone, "Spoiled brat," before heading off to the kiosk to buy a new pack of toothpicks. Donatien leaned towards me, his large, square head just inches from my face. His acrid breath suggested an empty, acidic stomach. His eyes, filled with cold anger, stared right into my soul.

"The damage is done, kid," he said slowly.

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1. Traditional house, in Burundi and Rwanda.

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In Bujumbura, Mamie lived in a small, green-plastered house in the OCAF (Office of African Cities) neighborhood of Ngagara, Ward 2. She lived with her mother, my great-grandmother Rosalie, and her son, my uncle Pacique, who was in his final year at Saint-Albert High School. Pacique was quite the looker. All the girls in the neighborhood chased after him. But he only loved his comic books, his guitar, and singing. He didn't have as beautiful a voice as Mama, but his interpretive power was remarkable. He adored the romantic French singers we heard on repeat on the radio, the ones who sang about love and sadness, and sadness in love. When he sang them, they became his own. He would close his eyes, grimace, cry, and then the whole family would fall silent, even old Rosalie, who didn't understand a word of French. We listened without moving, or perhaps only with our ears open, like hippos surfacing in the harbor waters. At OCAF, the neighbors were mostly Rwandans who had left their country to escape the killings, massacres, wars, pogroms, purges, destruction,
fires, tsetse flies, looting, apartheid, rapes, murders, settling of scores, and who knows what else. Like Mama and her family, they had fled these problems and encountered new ones in Burundi—poverty, exclusion, quotas, xenophobia, rejection, scapegoating, depression, homesickness, nostalgia. Refugee problems.

The year I turned eight, war broke out in Rwanda. It was at the very beginning of my third year of primary school. We heard on RFI that rebels—called the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF)—had launched a surprise attack on Rwanda. This RPF army was made up of children of Rwandan refugees—Mother and Pacique's generation—
from neighboring countries.

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Uganda, Burundi, Zaire... Mom danced and sang when she heard the news. I had never seen her so happy.

Her joy was short-lived. A few days later, news arrived of Alphonse's death. Alphonse was Maman's second brother, the eldest in the family, Mamie's pride and joy. A brilliant man. A chemical engineer, a graduate of the finest universities in Europe and America.

Alphonse, who had given me math lessons and inspired me to become a mechanic. Dad loved him dearly; he used to say, "With ten Alphonses, Burundi would become Singapore in no time." Alphonse was top of his class with the laid-back attitude of a dunce. Always joking around, teasing, tickling us under the arms, and kissing Mom on the neck just to annoy her. And when Alphonse laughed, joy repainted the walls of Grandma's little living room.

He left for the front without telling anyone, without even leaving a letter. They didn't care about his diplomas at the RPF. To them, he was just another soldier. He died there, bravely, for a country he didn't know, where he had never set foot. He died there, in the mud, on the field of honor in a cassava field, like someone who knew nothing, nothing at all, nothing to read or write.

When he'd had a bit too much to drink, Alphonse would get the melancholy mood of children of exiles. One day, as if he'd had a premonition, he spoke of his funeral. He said he wanted a big party with clowns and jugglers and colorful loincloths like at the central market, and fire-eaters and uplifting prayers, and certainly not gloomy requiems, hymns to Simeon, or mournful faces. On the day of Uncle Alphonse's funeral, Pacique took his guitar and sang him his favorite song.

The story of a war veteran denouncing the absurdity of war. A song that reflects Alphonse's character: funny on the surface, but sad at its core. But Pacique couldn't finish the song; his vocal cords gave out.

Now it was Pacique who had decided to go to war. He had told Grandma about it. So that Sunday morning, when we came back from mass and sat down to eat, Mom didn't wait to bring up the subject.

– Pacique, we're worried about you. Professor Kimenyi contacted Grandma. You're not going to Saint-Albert anymore?

– All the Rwandans from my graduating class are at the front. I'm getting ready too, big sister!

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"You have to wait. The peace agreements will bear fruit. I was at Aunt Eusebia's in Kigali ten days ago; they're hopeful, they think things can be resolved politically. Please be patient!"

"I have no confidence in these extremists. The Rwandan government puts on a show for the international community, but inside the country they continue to arm militias, incite violence in the media, and commit massacres and targeted assassinations. Politicians are giving hate speeches, calling on the population to hunt us down, to throw us into the Nyabarongo River. We must organize ourselves too. We must be ready to fight if the peace agreements fail. Our very survival depends on it, dear sister."

The old women said nothing. Mama had her eyes closed, massaging her temples. The neighbors' radio was playing liturgical chants. We could hear our forks clinking on our plates. A light breeze stirred the window curtain. With the heat, a thin layer of sweat glistened on Pacique's beautiful skin. The piece of beef he was chewing tightened the muscles in his jaw, and I sensed what wasn't being said around the table, what was as present as the flies Ana was removing from the tomato sauce: Alphonse's death.

After lunch, Grandma ordered everyone to go and rest.
As usual, I was napping in Pacique's room, the one Mama had occupied when she was young. There was no window, just two cots on either side of the small room, and a red-painted lightbulb on the end of a bare "l" that cast a sinister light on the green walls covered in posters. Pacique slept directly on the bedsprings; he said it was to get used to the harsh living conditions at the front. In the morning, he got up early to train on the beach with a small group of young Rwandans.

They ran in the sand along the coast. Some days, he ate only a handful of beans to get used to the feeling of hunger and deprivation.

Lying on the bed, I recalled the image of that boy whose bike I had taken back the day before, and Donatien's moral lesson on God's work, self-sacrifice, sacrifice and all those atrociously guilt-inducing things... Since yesterday, I felt selfish and vain, I was ashamed of this story, I had gone from victim to executioner simply by wanting to get back what belonged to me.
I needed to talk to someone, to chase away my dark thoughts. I whispered: –
Pacique, are you asleep?

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– Mmm...

– Do you believe in God?

- What ?

– Do you believe in God?

No, I'm a communist. I believe in the people. Leave me alone now!

– Who's that on the calendar above your bed?

– Fred Rwigema, the leader of the RPF. He is a hero. It is thanks to him that we fight. He gave us back our dignity.

– So you're going to fight with him?

– He died. At the start of the offensive.

– Ah... Who killed him?

– You ask too many questions, Little One. Go to sleep!

Pacique turned toward the wall with a metallic creak. I never slept at naptime and never understood the point of it. Nighttime was enough for me to recharge. So I waited for time to pass. I was only allowed to get up if I heard an adult walking in the house. I scrutinized every sound, waiting for the first movement that would signal me to leave that mattress. Sometimes I had to wait two hours. The half-open bedroom door led into the living room, letting in a little light. I examined the posters on the walls. They were magazine pages crudely glued on. The stars of Mom's youth mingled with Pacique's. France Gall between Michael Jackson and Jean-Pierre Papin, a photo of John Paul II in Burundi that encroached on Tina Turner's leg and Jimi Hendrix's guitar, a Kenyan toothpaste advertisement covering a James Dean poster. I also sometimes used to pick up Pacique's comics lying under the bed to kill time: Alain Chevallier, Spirou magazine, Tintin, Rahan...

When the house began to shake, I rushed out of bed to join Rosalie. Every afternoon, she had the same ritual. She would settle down on a mat in the backyard, open her vegetable ivory snuffbox, take pinches of tobacco to pack her wooden pipe, strike a match, and, with her eyes closed, inhale the first aromas of fresh tobacco in small puffs. Then, she would take sisal strands or banana leaves from a plastic bag to make coasters and conical baskets. She sold her crafts downtown to earn a little money.

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money for the household, which survived only thanks to Grandma's small nurse's salary and occasional help from Mom.

Rosalie had frizzy, gray-white hair that stood on end like a toque atop her skull. This gave her head an oblong shape, its size seeming disproportionate to the slender neck that supported it; it looked like a rugby ball balanced on a needle. Rosalie was almost a hundred years old. Sometimes she would tell stories about a king who had rebelled against the German and then Belgian colonists and had been exiled abroad because he refused to convert to Christianity. I couldn't bring myself to be interested in this nonsense about monarchies and White Fathers. I would yawn, and Pacique, annoyed, would reproach me for my lack of curiosity. My mother would retort that her children were just little French people, and that we shouldn't be bothered with their stories about Rwandans. Pacique spent hours listening to the old woman tell him about ancient Rwanda, its great feats of arms, pastoral poetry, panegyric poems, Intore dances, clan genealogy, moral values...

Grandma resented Mom for not speaking Kinyarwanda to us. She said that the language would allow us to maintain our identity despite exile; otherwise, we would never become proper Banyarwandas, "those who come from Rwanda." Mom scoffed at these arguments. To her, we were just little white people, with slightly caramel skin, but white nonetheless. If we happened to say a few words in Kinyarwanda, she would immediately mock our accent. In the midst of all this, I can tell you that I couldn't care less about Rwanda, its royalty, its cows, its mountains, its moons, its milk, its honey, and its rotten mead.

The afternoon was drawing to a close. Rosalie continued to recount her time, her sepia-toned memories of an idealized Rwanda. She repeated that she didn't want to die in exile like King Musinga. That it was important for her to pass away on her own land, in the country of her ancestors. Rosalie spoke softly, slowly, with the intonations of a zither player, like a gentle whisper. Cataracts made her eyes blue. It always seemed as if a few tears were about to stumble down one of her cheeks.

Pacique drank deeply, his ears catching the old woman's words. His head bobbed, lulled by his grandmother's nostalgia. He approached her, clasped her small, flat, bony hand in his own, and whispered that the persecution would end, that it was time to go home, that Burundi was not their country, that they were not destined to remain refugees forever. The old woman clung to her past, to her lost homeland, and the young man

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He was selling her his future, a new and modern country for all Rwandans without distinction. Yet, they were both talking about the same thing: returning home. One belonged to history, and the other had to make it.

A warm wind enveloped us, swirling around us for a moment before drifting away, carrying precious promises with it. In the sky, the first stars were timidly twinkling. They fixed their gaze on Grandma's little courtyard, down below on earth, a square of exile where my family shared the dreams and hopes that life seemed to impose upon them.

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It all started with Gino's idea. He wanted us to find a name for the band. We searched for a long time. We thought about the Three Musketeers, but there were five of us. The twins only suggested corny names, like "The Five Fingers of the Hand" or "The Best Buddies in the World." Gino came up with the American name. At that time, Americans were all the rage at school, and everyone was using the word "cool" all the time, walking with a limp, drawing designs in their hair, and playing basketball in baggy clothes. But Gino mainly got the idea because of the American singers Boyz II Men, whom we saw on TV on Saturdays in the show "Beyond the Sound." We thought it was a good name because there was a Burundian in the group, and it was a tribute to him. Enn, we weren't sure, but in Bujumbura, the rumor, the famous one, said that the tall, skinny guy from Boyz II Men was from Bwiza or Nyakabiga, although no journalist had confirmed the information. Gino also wanted that name, Kinanira Boyz, to assert ourselves as the new kings of the street, to show that we controlled the neighborhood, that no one else could impose their law.

The cul-de-sac was the area we knew best; it was where all five of us lived. The twins lived across the street from me, at the entrance to the cul-de-sac, the first house on the left. They were mixed race; their father was French and their mother Burundian. Their parents owned a video rental shop, mostly American comedies and Indian romance films. In the afternoons, when it was pouring rain, we'd all gather at their place and pass the time in front of the TV. We sometimes secretly watched adult films, but we didn't really like them, except for Armand, who

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xait the images with bulging eyes while rubbing against a pillow like a dog on one leg.

Armand lived in the large white brick house at the end of the cul-de-sac. Both his parents were Burundian, so he was the only Black person in the group. His father was a burly man with sideburns so long they met his mustache, forming a circle around his eyes and nose. He was a diplomat for Burundi in Arab countries and knew many heads of state personally. Armand had pinned a photograph above his bed of himself as a baby, in a romper, on Colonel Gadda's lap. Because of his father's frequent travels, Armand lived most of the time with his mother and older sisters, bitter, bigoted women I had never seen smile. In his family, they were uptight and strict, but he had nevertheless decided to dance and clown around. He feared his father, who only returned from his travels to assert his authority over his children.

No hugs, no sweet words. Never! A slap in the face and he'd be back on his plane to Tripoli or Carthage. As a result, Armand had two personalities. The one at home and the one in the street. One side, one side.

And then there was Gino. The oldest of the group. A year and nine months older. He'd repeated a grade on purpose to be in the same class as us. That's how he justified his failure. He lived with his father, behind the red gate in the middle of the cul-de-sac, in an old colonial house. His father was Belgian, a professor of political science at the University of Bujumbura. His mother was Rwandan, like Maman, but we'd never seen her. Sometimes he said she worked in Kigali, and other times that she was in Europe.

We spent all our time arguing with our friends, but there's no denying it, we loved each other like brothers. In the afternoons, after lunch, the five of us would head to our headquarters, the abandoned wreck of a Volkswagen van in the middle of the vacant lot. In the van, we'd chat, laugh, secretly smoke Supermatch cigarettes, listen to Gino's incredible stories, the twins' jokes, and Armand would tell us the unbelievable things he could do, like showing the inside of his eyelids by turning them inside out, touching his nose with his tongue, twisting his thumb back until it reached his arm, opening bottles with his front teeth, or biting into chili peppers and swallowing them without flinching. In the Volkswagen van, we decided on our plans, our getaways, our big road trips. We dreamed a lot, imagining, with eager hearts, the joys and adventures that we

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reserved life. In short, we were calm and happy, in our hideout on the vacant lot at the end of the cul-de-sac.

That afternoon, we were wandering around the neighborhood picking mangoes. We had abandoned the technique of throwing stones to dislodge them from trees the day Armand had thrown a pebble a little too far and damaged the bodywork of his father's Mercedes. His old man had given him a memorable beating. From the end of the cul-de-sac to the Rumonge road, his shouts had echoed, mingling with the swish of the belt. After that incident, we made long poles, topped with iron L-shaped hooks, held in place by old inner tubes.

The stems were over six meters long and allowed us to pick even the most inaccessible mangoes.

Along the asphalt road, some motorists insulted us because of our appearance. Barefoot, bare-chested, with our poles scraping the ground and our t-shirts serving as bundles for the harvested mangoes, we looked rather strange.

An elegant lady, probably a friend of Armand's parents, walked past us. Recognizing Armand, with his bare midriff and dusty feet, she looked up to heaven and made the sign of the cross: "My God! Get dressed quickly, my child. You look like a little street thug."
The adults, sometimes, were too funny.

Back in the cul-de-sac, we were drawn to the large mangoes hanging in the Von Gotzens' garden. Using poles, we managed to pull a few down from the road, but the most tempting ones were much too far away. We would have had to climb the low wall, but we were afraid of running into Mr. Von Gotzen, a slightly eccentric old German crossbow collector who had been imprisoned once for urinating in his gardener's meal—because the gardener had dared to ask for a raise—and a second time for locking his houseboy in the freezer after he accused him of burning his ripe bananas. His wife, even more discreet and racist, played golf every day on the grounds of the Méridien Hotel and was president of the Bujumbura equestrian club, where she spent most of her time tending to her horse, a magnificent thoroughbred with a gleaming black coat. Their house was the most beautiful in the cul-de-sac, the only one with an upper floor and a swimming pool, but people preferred to avoid it.

Opposite, behind the twins' house, was the house of Mrs. Economopoulos, an old Greek woman who had no children, but a...

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A dozen dachshunds. We entered her home by going under the fence, through a hole that neighborhood dogs had dug for their nocturnal visits when the female dachshunds were in heat. In the shady garden, there was not only a huge mango tree, but also grapevines, probably the only ones in the country, as well as flowers in abundance.

Armand and I were sneaking bunches of grapes while Gino and the twins were picking plump mangoes, when the Greek woman's servant arrived, furious, brandishing a broom above his head. He opened the dachshunds' enclosure, and they took off after us. We fled as fast as we could, slinking back under the fence. In the rush, Armand ripped his shorts, which got caught on the barbed wire. With his bare bottom exposed, he made us laugh for a good fifteen minutes. After that, we positioned ourselves in front of Mrs. Economopoulos's gate. We knew she came home from downtown every day at the same time and that she would be happy to see us.

When she arrived in her little red Lada, we rushed to her door to sell her our mangoes. Or rather, hers...
She bought us about ten of them, while her house servant opened the gate and we ran off with our thousand-franc note in our pocket.
He threw his broom in the air, beside himself, insulting us in Kirundi, but we were already far away.
With the rest of our harvest, we returned to the Volkswagen van to gorge ourselves on mangoes. A veritable orgy. Juice dripped down our chins, cheeks, arms, clothes, and feet. We sucked, shaved, and scraped the slippery pits. We scraped, cleaned, and cleaned the undersides of the fruit's skin. The mushy flesh remained between our teeth.

Once we were full, drunk on all that juice and pulp, breathless and with round bellies, the five of us sank deep into the old, dusty seats of the Volkswagen Combi, our heads thrown back. Our hands were sticky, our nails black, our laughter easy, and our hearts sweet.
It was the mango pickers' rest day. – How
about we go play in the Muha River? asked Armand.
"No, I prefer to go fishing at the Yacht Club!" said Gino.
"Why not a game of football on the pitch of the International School?" replied the twins.

– And why don't we go to the little Swiss boy's house to play Atari? I said.
– Forget it, he's an idiot! He charges five hundred bucks for a game of Pac-Man!

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We didn't even have to walk down the Muha River to the Nautical Club. It was quite an expedition. At one point, we came across a waterfall that nearly swept the twins away. With the rainy season, the current was strong. In front of the Nautical Club, we made our own fishing rods out of bamboo reeds and bought maggots and flour for bait. The vendor was an Omani man from the Asian quarter who always hung around the beach. People called him Ninja because he spent his time doing karate moves in the air and shouting as if he were fighting thousands of invisible enemies. The adults said he was crazy with his katas. We children liked it, we found it more normal than many things that adults do, like organizing military delegations, spraying deodorant under their arms, wearing ties when it's hot, drinking beer all night sitting in the dark or listening to those endless Zairian rumba songs.

We settled down on the bank, in front of the Cercle restaurant, a few meters from a group of hippos in the throes of mating. The wind was blowing hard, the waves were foaming on the lake, the foam at the foot of the rocks looked like soap lather. Gino started urinating in the water.

He wanted to start a longest throw competition. But nobody wanted to play. The twins were barely recovered from their circumcision, Armand was the modest type when it came to that part of the body, and me, seeing that the others weren't following along, I backed out.

– Bunch of cowards, school of virgin fish, bits of spoiled goat meat!

– We don't give a damn about you, Gino, you can just piss all the way to Zaire, Mobutu will send the BSP to cut your balls off.

"As for me, I'm going to cut Francis's if I see him hanging around our area again," said Gino, while continuing to relieve himself as far away as possible.

– Here we go again! It's been a while since you talked about him. We're not going to believe you have a crush on him.

– Kinanira, this is our home! I'm going to give that son of a foreskin a good thrashing! he shouted, opening his arms wide to the wind.

Stop showing off, you won't do anything to her. You've got a big mouth like a gharial!

Francis was an old boy, around thirteen or fourteen. He was Gino's and our gang's worst enemy. Except that Francis was stronger than the five of us combined.

Yet he wasn't strong at all; on the contrary, he looked like an iron l.

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Dry as a bone. But he seemed invincible. His arms and legs were like vines, crisscrossed with scars and burns. In some places, it looked as if he had iron plates under his skin, rendering him impervious to pain. One day, he grabbed Armand and me, trying to extort the Jojo chewing gum we'd just bought at the kiosk. I gave him a good kick in the shin to get away, and he didn't even flinch. I was stunned.

Francis lived with an old uncle, opposite the Muha bridge, just a street and a half from the dead end, in a gloomy house covered in lichen. The river flowed at the bottom of his garden, brown and slimy like a Seba's python. We used to hide in the gutter whenever we passed his house. He hated us, saying we were spoiled rich kids, with mommy and daddy and a little snack at four o'clock. It infuriated Gino, who dreamed of being known as the biggest rascal in Bujumbura. Francis said he was a former mayibobo, a street kid, and that he knew the gangs of Ngagara and Bwiza personally, the ones they called the "Without Failure" and the "Without Defeat," who had been in the news for some time because they were extorting money from honest citizens.

I didn't dare tell the others, but I was afraid of Francis. I didn't really like it when Gino kept pushing for fights and brawls to protect the dead-end street because I could see that the other guys were getting more and more motivated by what he was saying. I was a little motivated too, but I preferred it when we made boats out of banana tree trunks to go down the Muha River, or when we watched the birds in the cornfields behind the International School with binoculars, or when we built huts in the back alleys of the neighborhood and lived out all sorts of Native American and Wild West adventures. We knew every nook and cranny of the dead-end street and we wanted to stay there for the rest of our lives, all five of us, together.

Try as I might, I can't remember the moment we started thinking differently. The moment we began to see ourselves as one side, and enemies like Francis on the other. I can turn my memories over and over, but I can't clearly recall the instant we decided to no longer be content with simply sharing what little we had, to stop trusting each other, to see the other as a threat, to create this invisible boundary with the outside world by turning our neighborhood into a fortress and our dead-end street into an enclosure.

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I still wonder when my friends and I started to get scared.

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Nothing is sweeter than that moment when the sun dips behind the mountain ridges. Twilight brings the evening's coolness and warm light that shifts with every passing minute. At this hour, the rhythm changes. People return home peacefully from work, night watchmen begin their shifts, and neighbors settle in by their gates. It's the silence before the arrival of the toads and crickets. Often the perfect time for a game of football, to sit with a friend on the low wall above the gutter, to listen to the radio with your ear glued to the set, or to visit a neighbor.

The dull afternoons would eventually fade away in fleeting moments, and it was in this interval, in these exhausted instants, that I would meet Gino in front of his garage, under the fragrant frangipani tree, and we would both lie down on the mat of the night watchman. We would listen to the news from the front on the small, crackling radio. Gino would adjust the antenna to reduce the static. He translated each sentence for me, putting his whole heart into it.

The war in Rwanda had started again a few days earlier. Pacique had no choice but to pack his gear and leave his guitar behind. "The RPF was on its way to give us our freedom," Gino proclaimed. He grumbled about sitting there doing nothing; in his eyes, we were cowards, we should be going to fight.

Rumor had it that mixed-race people like us had left. Gino even claimed that some were Kadogos, twelve- or thirteen-year-old child soldiers.

years.

Gino, my friend who was terrified of the tarantulas we collected in his garden and who would crawl flat on his stomach whenever we heard thunder in the distance, that same Gino wanted to wage guerrilla warfare with a Kalashnikov bigger than himself in the fog of the Virunga Mountains. He had tattooed himself with a branch.

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FPR was scratched on his forearm, drawing blood. His skin had healed poorly, leaving three raised, raised letters. He was half Rwandan, like me, but I secretly envied him because he spoke perfect Kinyarwanda and knew exactly who he was. Dad would get annoyed seeing a twelve-year-old boy participating in adult conversations. But for Gino, politics held no secrets. His father was a university professor and always asked his opinion on current events, advising him to read this article in Jeune Afrique and that one in Le Soir. As a result, Gino always understood what grown-ups were saying. It was his handicap.

Gino, the only child I knew who drank black coffee without sugar at breakfast and listened to the news on Radio France Internationale with the same enthusiasm I had for watching a Vital'O Club match. When it was just the two of us, he insisted that I acquire what he called an "identity." According to him, there was a way of being, feeling, and thinking that I had to have. He used the same words as Maman and Pacique and repeated that here we were just refugees, that we had to go back home to Rwanda.

Home? It was here. Sure, I was the son of a Rwandan woman, but my reality was Burundi, the French school, Kinanira, the dead end. The rest didn't exist.
However, with Alphonse's death and Pacique's departure, I sometimes thought that I too was involved in these events. But I was afraid.
I was afraid of Dad's reaction if he saw me talking about those things. Afraid because I didn't want to disrupt my order of things. Afraid because it was about war and, in my mind, it could only mean misfortune and sadness.

That evening, we were listening to the radio when night fell unexpectedly. We retreated inside the house. The walls of Gino's living room were a veritable gallery of animal portraits. His father was a photography fanatic. On weekends, he would set off, in hat, shirt, cape, sandals, and socks, on photo safaris in the Ruvubu National Park. Then he would make his prints in the soundproofed bathroom. The house reeked of a dentist's office; the fumes from the chemicals used in his darkroom mingled with the cologne his father liberally doused himself with. He was a ghost, his old man. We never saw him, but we sensed his presence because of the smell of bleached toilets that clung to him and the noise of the typewriter on which he hammered away at his notes and political books throughout his life. Gino's father loved order and cleanliness. When he did something, like opening the curtains

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Or when he'd water the plants, he'd say, "There, that's done!" And all day long, he'd mentally check off what he accomplished, muttering, "One good thing done!" He brushed the hair on his forearms in a specific direction. He had a monk's baldness that he concealed by combing the hair to one side over his tonsure. On tie days, it was the right side; on bow tie days, the left. And he meticulously trimmed the length of this hairdo to leave room for a neat, clean part, like a trench without camouflage. In the neighborhood, his nickname was Kodak, not because of his passion for photography, but because he had tons of film stuck in his greasy hair.

Once home, Gino wasn't much fun. He was less inclined to laugh, spit, burp, or wedge my head between his buttocks to let out gas. He followed me around like an amorous poodle, checking if I'd flushed the toilet properly, if I hadn't left any drops on the toilet seat, and if I'd put the knick-knacks in the living room back in their places. His father's obsessive-compulsive tendencies rubbed off on him, making the house cold and unwelcoming.

That night was tropical, but the feeling of a polar wind swept through the rooms, and Gino himself noticed it. After a few minutes, we looked at each other and sensed that neither of us felt comfortable in his shack.

Without a second thought, we left the pale light of the neon lights, let the nocturnal moths be pecked by the geckos, and moved away from the exasperating clatter of the father's Olivetti to find the reassuring night.

The dead end was a cul-de-sac two hundred meters long, a dirt and gravel track with avocado and grevillea trees in its center, naturally creating a two-way road. Gaps in the bougainvillea fences offered glimpses of elegant houses nestled among gardens planted with fruit trees and palms. Lemongrass plants lining the gutters gave off a sweet fragrance that kept mosquitoes away.

When we strolled together down the cul-de-sac, we liked to hold hands like friends and share our stories. Of the group, Gino was the only one I sometimes dared to confide in, despite my shyness. With my parents' separation, I was asking myself new questions.

– Don't you miss your mother?

– I'm going to see her soon. She's in Kigali.

– Last time, you didn't tell me she was in Europe?

– Yes, but she went back.

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– And your parents, are they separated?

– No, not really. It's just that they don't live together.

– They don't love each other anymore?

– Yes. Why are you asking me that?

Because they don't live together. Isn't that what happens when parents don't love each other anymore?

– That's how it is for you, Gaby, not for me...

Slowly, we approached the pale light of the hurricane lamp hanging from the kiosk's bars. In front of the container converted into a grocery store, I took out what remained of the thousand francs that Mrs. Economopoulos had given us. We bought a packet of Tip Top biscuits and some Jojo chewing gum.

Since we still had quite a bit of money left, Gino offered to buy me a beer at the cabaret which was located in a recess of the dead end, under a stunted amber tree.

The cabaret was the greatest institution in Burundi. The people's agora. The street radio. The pulse of the nation. Every neighborhood, every street had these small, unlit huts where, under cover of darkness, people would come to drink a warm beer, perched uncomfortably on a crate or a stool, just inches off the ground. The cabaret offered drinkers the luxury of being there unrecognized, of participating in conversations, or not, without being noticed. In this small country where everyone knew everyone else, only the cabaret allowed one to speak freely, to be true to oneself. There, one had the same freedom as in a voting booth. And for a people who had never voted, casting their ballot was important. Whether one was a high-ranking official or a simple boy, in the cabaret, hearts, minds, stomachs, and bodies expressed themselves without hierarchy.

Gino ordered two Primus coffee machines. He liked coming here to hear politics discussed. How many of us were sitting there under the corrugated iron awning of the little shack? Nobody knew, and it didn't matter. The darkness plunged us into a gloom from which only words emerged, here or there, at random, and then faded away like a dying star. Between each speaker, the pauses lasted for eternities. And then a new voice would rise from the void, surface, and then fade back into silence.

– I tell you, democracy is a good thing. The people will finally decide their own fate. We should rejoice in these presidential elections. They will bring us peace and progress.

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“Let me disagree, my fellow citizen. Democracy is a white invention whose sole purpose is to divide us. We made a mistake in abandoning the single-party system. It took centuries and many conflicts for white people to reach the stage they are at. Now they ask us to accomplish the same thing in a matter of months. I fear our leaders are playing at being sorcerer's apprentices with a concept whose intricacies they barely understand.”

– He who does not know how to climb a tree remains on the ground.

– I'm still thirsty...

– Culturally, we have a cult of the king. One leader, one party, one nation! This is the unity referred to in our motto.

– A dog cannot become a cow.

– I can't quench this damn thirst...

– It's a facade of unity. We must cultivate a cult of the people, the only true guarantor of lasting peace.

Without prior work towards justice, I fear that peace, the necessary framework for democracy, is simply impossible! Thousands of our brothers were massacred in 1972, and not a single trial. If nothing is done, they will seek revenge for their fathers.

Nonsense! Let's not dwell on the past; the future is a march forward. Death to ethnicism, tribalism, regionalism, and antagonism!

– And alcoholism!

– I'm thirsty, I'm thirsty, I'm thirsty, I'm thirsty, I'm thirsty, I'm thirsty...

– My brothers, God accompanies us on our path as he accompanied his son to Golgotha... – That's it, I know. It's

because of her that I'm thirsty. I need another beer.

– The whites have succeeded in their Machiavellian plan. They've given us their God, their language, their democracy. Now we go there for medical treatment and send our children to study in their schools. Black people are all crazy and doomed...

– That bitch may have taken everything from me, but she won't take away my thirst.

– We live on the site of the Tragedy. Africa is shaped like a revolver. There's no arguing with this obvious fact. Let's shoot. At it or elsewhere, but let's shoot!

– The future results from the past like the egg from the chicken.

– Beer! Beer! Beer! Beer! Beer! Beer! Beer! Beer! Beer! Beer! Beer!

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We stayed there a while longer, silently downing our warm Primus beers, and then I whispered goodbye in Gino's ear. With the alcohol in my system, I wasn't sure that the shadow beside me was really his. I had to go home. Dad would worry. I walked back to the house, down the dead-end street in the darkness. I was slightly unsteady on my feet. Hooting drifted down from the branches. The sky was empty above my head, and in the darkness, the sounds of the night still reached me. The drunks at the bar, they talk, listen to each other, uncork beers and thoughts. They are interchangeable souls, voices without mouths, disordered heartbeats. In these pale hours of the night, men disappear; only the land remains, talking to itself.

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Frodebu. Uprona. These were the names of the two major political parties vying for the presidency on June 1, 1993, after thirty years of Uprona's unchallenged rule. Those two words were all you heard all day long. On the radio, on television, from adults. Since Dad didn't want us to get involved in politics, I listened elsewhere when it was being discussed.

Throughout the country, the election campaign had taken on a festive air. Uprona supporters dressed in red and white T-shirts and caps, and when they passed each other, they greeted each other with their three middle fingers raised. Frodebu supporters had chosen green and white, and their rallying symbol was a raised fist. Everywhere, in public squares, parks, and stadiums, people sang, danced, laughed, and held huge, boisterous festivals. Prothé, the cook, had nothing but the word "democracy" on his lips. Even he, always serious with his hangdog expression, had changed. Sometimes, I'd catch him in the kitchen, wiggling his malaria-ridden behind and singing in a raspy voice: "Frodebu Komera! Frodebu Komera!"

("Frodebu, it's okay!") What a pleasure to see the joy that politics brought! It was a joy comparable to that of Sunday morning football matches.
I understood even less why Dad refused to let the children talk about all this happiness, this wind of renewal that ruffled people's hair and filled their hearts with hope.

The day before the presidential election, I was sitting on the kitchen steps in the backyard, busy popping ticks off the dog and removing tick worms. Prothé, squatting, was washing clothes in front of the chipped sink, humming a religious hymn. After filling a large basin

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He poured in a container of water and the contents of an OMO laundry detergent box, then submerged the pile of clothes in the blue liquid. Donatien, sitting on a chair opposite us, was polishing his shoes. He was wearing an anthracite abacost and a plastic comb was stuck in his hair.

Innocent was taking a shower a little further away, at the back of the garden. His head and feet hung over the rusty sheet of metal that served as the shower stall door. To annoy Prothé, he had invented a song mocking Frodebu and sang it at the top of his lungs. "Frodebu in the mud, Uprona will prevail." While casting cautious glances at Innocent to make sure he wasn't overheard, Prothé muttered, "He can keep up this childishness all he wants, they won't win

this time. I'll even tell you, Donatien: they're blinded by thirty years in power, and their defeat will be all the more crushing."

"Don't be presumptuous, my friend, it's a sin. Innocent is young and arrogant, but you must show wisdom. Don't let yourself be distracted by these childish provocations."

– You're right, Donatien. But I'm still looking forward to seeing his face when he finds out about our victory.

Innocent stepped out of the shower, shirtless, and strode towards us with the grace of a cat. The water droplets in his curly hair glistened in the sunlight, creating a white bald patch. He stopped in front of Prothé, who lowered her head and began scrubbing the clothes even more vigorously. Innocent reached into his pocket and pulled out one of his damn toothpicks, which he shoved into his mouth. To impress us, he tensed his muscles and struck a pose, all the while staring contemptuously at the back of Prothé's neck.

– Hey, you, boy!

Prothé stopped scrubbing abruptly. He stretched out to his full height and fixed his eyes on Innocent with the cold demeanor of a devil. Donatien stopped polishing his shoes. I let go of the dog's paw. Innocent couldn't believe the frail Prothé standing up to him. Taken aback by such audacity, he managed a small, slightly embarrassed smile, spat his toothpick on the ground, and walked away, making the Uprona sign above his head, his three middle fingers raised. Prothé watched him go. When Innocent disappeared behind the gate, he sat down again in front of his basin of water and started humming "Frodebu Komera..." again.

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It was a morning like any other. The rooster crowed. The dog scratched behind its ear. The aroma of coffee wafted through the house. The parrot imitated Dad's voice. The sound of a broom scraping the ground in the neighboring yard.
The radio blaring in the neighborhood. The brightly colored gecko basking in the sun. The column of ants carrying away the sugar cubes Ana dropped from the table. Just another morning.

Yet, it was a historic day. All across the country, people were preparing to vote for the first time in their lives. From the first light of dawn, they began making their way to the nearest polling station. An endless procession of women in colorful pagnes and men dressed in their Sunday best marched along the main road, where minibuses crammed with euphoric voters were waiting. On the football field next to the house, people were pouring in from all directions. Voting tables and booths had been set up on the grass. I watched through the fence this long line of voters waiting patiently in the sun. People were calm and disciplined. In the crowd, some couldn't contain their joy. An old woman dressed in a red pagne and a John Paul II T-shirt came out of the voting booth dancing. She was singing: "Democracy! Democracy!" A group of young people approached her and lifted her up, cheering to the sky. At the four corners of the football field, white and Asian people wearing multi-pocket vests, emblazoned with "International Observers," could also be seen. The Burundians were aware of the significance of the moment, of the new era that was dawning. This election put an end to the one-party system and coups d'état. Everyone was finally free to choose their representative. At the end of the day, when the last voters had cast their ballots,

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Once they had left, the football pitch resembled a vast battlefield.
The grass had been trampled. Papers littered the ground. Ana and I crept under the fence. We crawled to the voting booths. We picked up forgotten ballots. There were those from Frodebu, Uprona, and the PRP. I wanted to keep a souvenir of this memorable day.

The next day was strange. Nothing was happening. The city was anxious, waiting for the results. At home, the phone rang incessantly. Dad wouldn't let me go to the cul-de-sac to see my friends. Our garden was empty; the caretaker had disappeared. Very few cars drove down the street. A striking contrast to the jubilation of the day before.

While Dad was napping, I slipped out the back door. I wanted to talk to Armand. Through his father, he must have some information. I knocked on the gate and asked the houseman to call him. When Armand arrived, he told me that his father was pacing around the house, smoking cigarillos, and putting much more sugar than usual in his tea. The phone at his house was ringing off the hook too. He advised me to go home, not to linger in the street; you never knew what might be happening. Disturbing rumors were circulating.

Shortly before nightfall, the three of us—Papa, Ana, and I—were sitting in the living room when someone called my father and told him to turn on the radio. It was dark, Ana was biting her nails, and Papa was searching for the station. He couldn't find the frequency just as the announcer on National Radio and Television was announcing the imminent announcement of the results. There was the hiss of an old band, then a brass band accompanied by a choir singing at the top of their lungs: "Burundi Bwacu, Burundi Buhire..."
After the national anthem, the Minister of the Interior spoke. He announced Frodebu's victory. Papa remained impassive. He simply lit a cigarette.

In the neighborhood, there was no shouting, no honking, no firecrackers. I thought I heard a clamor in the distance, up there in the hills. Was it my imagination? With his obsession to keep us out of politics, Dad went to his room to take a few swipes. Through the door, I could hear phrases I didn't understand. "This isn't a democratic victory, it's an ethnic revolt... You know better than I how things work in Africa, the Constitution has no weight... The army supports

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"Uprona... In those countries, you can't win an election without being the army's candidate... I don't share your optimism... They'll pay for this affront sooner or later..."

We had dinner quite early. I had made an onion omelet, and Ana served pineapple slices and strawberry yogurt from the Poor Clares. Before going to bed, we watched the news in Dad's room.

The picture was shaking. There was snow on the canal. I shook the coat hanger above the television. Major Pierre Buyoya, sitting in front of a Burundian flag, said calmly, "I solemnly accept the people's verdict and I invite the population to do the same." I immediately thought of Innocent. Then the new president, Melchior Ndadaye, appeared on the screen. He was calm. "This is a victory for all Burundians." And then I thought of Prothé. At the end of the news broadcast, the Chief of Staff spoke in turn: "The army respects democracy based on a multi-party system." I then thought of Papa's words.

I was brushing my teeth when I heard Ana scream. I rushed into our room. She was standing on my bed, clinging to the curtain. A centipede was crawling on the tiled floor in the middle of the room. Dad squashed it, yelling, "You bastard!" As I was getting into bed, I asked Dad if the arrival of this new president was good news.

He replied, "We'll see."

Dear Laure,

The people have voted. On the radio, they said 97.3% turnout. That means everyone except children, the sick in the hospital, the prisoners, the mentally ill in asylums, the criminals wanted by the police, the lazy ones who stayed in bed, the one-armed who can't hold a ballot, and foreigners like my father, my mother, or Donatien, who have the right to live here, to work here, but not to express their opinion, which must stay where they come from. The new president's name is Melchior, like the Wise Man. Some adore him, like Prothé, our cook. He says it's the people's victory. Others hate him, like Innocent, our driver, but don't worry, it's because he's a grump and a sore loser.

I think the new president looks serious; he has good posture, doesn't put his elbows on the table, and doesn't interrupt. He wears a plain tie, a neatly pressed shirt, and uses polite language. He's presentable and clean. That's important! Because later we'll have to hang his picture all over the place.

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country so as not to forget that it exists. It would be annoying to have a president who is unkempt or who squints at the photo in ministries, airports, embassies, insurance companies, police stations, hotels, hospitals, cabarets, maternity wards, barracks, restaurants, hair salons and orphanages.

I wonder where they put the portraits of the former president? Did they throw them away? Or perhaps there's a place where they're kept in case he decides to come back one day?

This is the first time we've had a president who isn't a military man. I think he'll have fewer headaches than his predecessors. Military presidents always have migraines. It's like they have two brains. They never know whether to make peace or war.

Gaby

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The reptile lay sprawled in the grass at the back of the garden. Using ropes and bamboo poles, about ten men had unloaded the beast from the van. The news spread quickly through the cul-de-sac, drawing a crowd of onlookers around the dead crocodile. Its yellow eyes, still open, slashed vertically by black pupils, gave the unsettling impression of watching the onlookers. A wound on the top of its skull, resembling a rosebud, marked the impact of the fatal blow. Jacques, who had come expressly from Zaire, had killed the animal with a single shot. A week earlier, a Canadian tourist walking along the lake on the beach of the holiday resort had been snatched by a crocodile. As always in such cases, the local authorities had dispatched a punitive expedition to kill a crocodile in retaliation. Dad and I were part of the spectacle, merely privileged spectators. Jacques had been leading these operations for years with a team of a few white men passionate about big-game hunting. We had boarded at the Yacht Club with ammunition and scoped rifles, and the motorboat had followed the coast to the mouth of the Rusizi River, where the muddy water meets the turquoise waters of Lake Tanganyika. Slowly, we made our way up the delta while the hunters, fingers on the trigger, watched the scattered groups of hippos, fearing at any moment the charge of a lone male. The sound of the engine was drowned out by the chirping of a colony of weaverbirds whose nests hung limply from the branches of the acacia trees. The men, Winchesters at the ready, their eyes squinting against the sun, scanned the surroundings with binoculars. Through the scope of his rifle, Jacques spotted the crocodile on a sandbar.

With his mouth wide open, he was enjoying a sunbath in the early afternoon.

AND

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An Egyptian plover was meticulously cleaning its teeth. When Jacques fired, a flock of whistling ducks took flight over the reeds lining the bank. The shot made a sharp, cracking sound. Cut down in its rest, the beast barely had time to move. Its jaws closed in slow motion. The plover hopped around its friend for a few moments, as if paying him a final tribute, and flew off to tend to another crocodile's mouth.

After the onlookers had left, the animal was laid on its back and Jacques methodically skinned the crocodile. He put the pieces of meat in plastic bags, which Protheé then stored in the large freezer in the garage. Meanwhile, night was falling quickly and nothing was ready yet. The gardener was helping Donatien bring out the tables and chairs. Innocent brought the charcoal for the barbecue. Gino lit the lanterns hanging from the ceiling, and Papa unrolled an extension cord to set up the stereo in the garden. Ana was in charge of placing mosquito-repellent incense coils under the tables. The evening was special; we were celebrating my eleventh birthday!

When the music started to spill from the speakers, it once again drew the neighborhood. The drunks, attracted by the prospect of free drinks, unusually deserted the cabaret down the cul-de-sac. Very quickly, the garden was filled with the hubbub of conversations, mingled with the rumble of the subwoofer. I was overflowing with joy amidst this incessant coming and going, this impromptu gathering under the moon where the mood was festive and tears flowed with laughter.

It was the start of the summer holidays and they were off to a great start. I'd received news from Laure: "Hi Gaby! I'm having a fantastic time at the beach with my cousins and my little brother. Thanks for your letter, it's funny what you wrote. Don't forget me during the holidays. See you soon. Kisses. Laure."

On the back of the postcard was a composition of miniature photos of the Vendée region: a castle in Noirmoutier, apartment blocks in Saint-Jean-de-Monts, a beach in Notre-Dame-de-Monts, a row of rocks in the sea at Saint-Hilaire-de-Riez. I had read and reread this postcard dozens of times, always with the peculiar feeling of being someone special to Laure.

She asked me not to forget her; not a single day went by without me thinking of her. In my next letter, I wanted to tell her how much she meant to me, that for the first time in my life I had

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the feeling of being able to express my feelings to someone, that I hoped to write to her all my life and even come to see her one day in France.

The other good news at the start of the holidays was that my parents were speaking to each other again, after months of cold war. They congratulated me together on moving up to sixth grade. They said, "We're proud of you." A "we" of a couple, of reunion. All hopes were possible!

Pacique had called from Rwanda to wish me a happy birthday. He said the peace accords had resumed, that he was doing well, that he missed us, and that he wished he could have been with us for this big celebration. He had just gotten engaged to a girl he had fallen madly in love with upon arriving in Rwanda. He couldn't wait to introduce her to the family. Her name was Jeanne, and Pacique described her as the most beautiful woman in the Great Lakes region.

On the phone, he had confided in me: when the war was over, he would embark on a singing career, to write his own love songs and celebrate the beauty of his future wife.

Things were getting better around me, life was gradually returning to normal, and that evening, I savored the happiness of being surrounded by those I loved and who loved me.

Settled on our large terrace, Jacques recounted his crocodile hunt to a stunned audience. He strutted about, puffed out his chest, and exaggerated the "r"s of his Walloon accent. With the gestures of a movie star, he pulled his silver Zippo from his pocket as one might draw a revolver from a holster, lighting cigarettes which he then let dangle carelessly from the corner of his lips. This had quite an effect on Mrs. Economopoulos, who seemed captivated by his charisma and his sharp wit. She showered him with compliments, which he accepted with relish, and Jacques' jokes sent Mrs. Economopoulos into fits of laughter that made her look like a lovestruck teenager. Both surprised that they hadn't met sooner, they talked for hours about the good old days when Bujumbura was still called Usumbura, about the Grand Hotel, the dances at the Paguidas and the jazz orchestras, the Kit Kat cinema, the beautiful American cars, Cadillacs and Chevrolets, in the city streets, their passion for orchids, the good wine from distant Europe, the enigmatic disappearance of the French television presenter, Philippe de Dieuleveult, and his crew near the Inga Dam, the eruptions of Nyiragongo, its splendid lava flows, the mild climate of the region, the beauty of the lakes and the springs...

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Prothé circulated among the guests, offering beers and grilled crocodile steaks. Innocent rejected the plate he offered with a grimace of disgust: "Yuck! Only white people and Zairians eat crocodiles or frogs. You'll never see a Burundian worthy of the name touch bush animals! We are civilized, we are!" Donatien, laughing, his mouth full of crocodile fat, replied: "Burundians simply lack taste and white people waste food."

The French, for example, don't know how to eat frogs; they only eat the legs!

Planted in front of the stereo, Armand was teaching Ana a few soukous steps. The little girl was doing well; she'd removed a loincloth from around her buttocks and managed to move them without moving the rest of her body. The drunks applauded. In the middle of the dance floor, under the glare of a spotlight swarming with insects, the twins' parents danced languidly, cheek to cheek, just like when they first met, back in the days of the legendary Grand Kallé orchestra. The twins' mother was much taller and stronger than their father. While she led the dance, he, with his eyes closed, moved his mouth like a dreaming puppy. Sweat plastered their shirts to their backs and formed stains under their armpits.

Dad radiated cheerfulness and good humor. Unusually, he was wearing a tie, a touch of cologne, and combing his hair back, which accentuated his seductive green eyes. As for Mom, she was radiant in her muslin dress. Desire sparkled in the men's eyes as she passed by. A few times, I even caught Dad looking at her. Sitting at the edge of the dance floor, he was discussing business or politics with Armand's father, who had just returned from Saudi Arabia and seemed eager to make up for the long month of abstinence he had just endured. Beside them, Armand's mother, dressed like a devout churchgoer, nodded her head and raised her eyebrows at regular intervals. It was impossible to tell whether she agreed with her husband's comments about the stabilization of Burundian coffee prices on the London Stock Exchange or whether she was reciting her rosary for the umpteenth time that day.

I was lying on the hood of the van, surrounded by Gino and the twins, when Francis showed up. We couldn't believe our eyes! He'd barely entered the yard when Mom put a Fanta in his hands and invited him to sit on a plastic chair under the big roof. Gino started fuming.

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– Gaby, you see what I see! You have to get rid of that jerk! He's got nothing to do! Happy birthday!

– I can't, old man. My father said the party was open to everyone in the neighborhood.

– Not Francis, damn it! He's our worst enemy!

"Perhaps this is an opportunity to make peace with him," the twins said.

"You bunch of idiots," replied Gino. "We don't make deals with that woodlouse! We smash his fucking face in, that's all he deserves!"

"For now, he's not hurting anyone," I said. "Let him drink his Fanta while keeping an eye on him."

We didn't take our eyes off him for a single moment. He pretended not to see us. Yet his eyes swept over, analyzed, dissected the evening. He looked at the audience with a shifty eye, nervously shifting his left leg.

He got up to get another drink and started a short conversation with Mom, who turned towards me and pointed at me as if to signify that she was my mother. He flitted from group to group, finding ways to spontaneously strike up conversations with everyone, and even with Gino's father.

"I can't believe it, he's talking to my old man! What could they possibly be talking about? I'm sure he's gathering information on us, Gaby. He's pretending to be our friend!"

From a distance, we watched his little game. Innocent invited him to share a beer with him. After a few minutes, they were slapping each other on the back like old friends.

It was now past midnight. The alcohol and the night were mixing their effects.

A group of young French volunteers, shirtless, played leapfrog in front of the cabaret's drunken patrons, who were amused by the spectacle. A young man rummaged through his girlfriend's bra while she chatted with a friend about her ethics classes at Stella Matutina. An old Burundian man with a white beard, nicknamed Gorbachev because of a birthmark on his forehead, stood on one leg reciting poems by Ronsard in front of the parrot's cage.

A group of children were playing with the pet monkey belonging to an effeminate Fleming, a resident of the dead-end street who called himself Fi, and who wore only pagne shirts and African boubous. Stacks of empty crates were piled up on the kitchen steps. Prothé and Donatien were going back and forth to return the deposit bottles to the kiosk.

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The moment was perfect to find a quiet spot with friends, away from our parents' watchful eyes, in the unlit part of the garden. We sat on the grass to share a few cigarettes and surreptitiously watched the dance floor under the lanterns of the garden shed. Armand brought two bottles of Primus beer that he had discreetly hidden in the fern pots.

"Damn, I stepped on something!" said Armand.

– Yeah, watch out, that's the crocodile's corpse, I replied.

When the music stopped between songs, we heard chewing and swallowing noises. Mrs. Economopoulos's dachshunds were feasting on the remains of the dead animal. They were munching away in the dark, and my friends raised a toast to my eleven years.

"The dachshunds will show off in the cul-de-sac when they tell the other dogs they ate a croc!" said Gino.

We all burst out laughing, except for Armand who had noticed someone approaching us. I put out my cigarette and blew out the smoke with my hand.

"Who goes there?" I asked.

– It's me, Francis.

"You have no business being here," Gino replied instantly, jumping to his feet. "Get out of here!"

"It's a neighborhood party and I live in the neighborhood! I don't see what the problem is," said Francis.

– No, this is my friend's birthday party, and you're not invited. So get lost, I said!

– Who's speaking? I can't see you. Is that Kodak's son? The Belgian with the rotten hair! What's your name again?

– Gino! And you're going to watch your language when you talk about my parents.

"Your parents? I only mentioned your father. Where's your mother, anyway? I've seen everyone's parents except your mother..."

"So, you've come to spy on us?" said Armand. "Conducting your own little investigation, Inspector Columbo?"

"We don't want you here," Gino continued. "Get out!"

– No! I'm staying!

Gino charged headlong into Francis's stomach. In the dark, they stumbled over the gutted crocodile. The dogs started barking. I ran to warn the adults while Armand hid the cigarettes and beers.

Jacques and Papa arrived with a flashlight. When we managed to separate Francis and Gino, who were covered in crocodile entrails,

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Francis was accused of starting the fight. Dad grabbed him by the collar and threw him out of the yard, and Francis, humiliated, yelled that he'd get what was coming to him while throwing stones at the gate. He and his friends gave him the finger and dropped our trousers to show him our backsides, to the cheers of the group of French volunteers. Everyone was laughing, until Jacques started shouting: "Damn it, where's

my Zippo? Where's my Zippo?"

We all thought of Francis.

"Catch that bastard!" shouted Gino.

Dad sent Innocent to look for him, but he came back empty-handed.

Once the incident was over, the party resumed with even more gusto. It was in full swing when, suddenly, the power went out. The hundred or so guests stopped dancing in their tracks, letting out a disgruntled "Oooh." Covered in sweat, they demanded the music back, clapping and stomping their feet and shouting my name: "Gaby! Gaby!" Everyone was ready for the big party, and an unexpected power cut wasn't going to dampen their furious desire to have fun. Someone suggested continuing the party with real instruments. So, without further ado, Donatien and Innocent quickly went to find drums in the neighborhood, the twins brought their father's guitar, and one of the Frenchmen pulled a trumpet out of the trunk of his Renault 4L. A pleasant little rainy breeze was starting to pick up. In the distance, on the shores of the lake, a low rumble could be heard; thunder was approaching. This worried some, especially the older folks, who anticipated the downpour and suggested bringing in the tables and chairs. Donatien cut the debate short by improvising a brakka tune on his guitar. Tentatively, people began to move again in the night, streaked with lightning. The crickets fell silent as the drunks started clinking their beer bottles with forks and spoons to accompany the melody. The trumpet joined the guitar, greeted by whistles and shouts of joy.

The guests were dancing again with renewed enthusiasm. The dogs, startled, tails between their legs, cowered under the tables for seconds before the sky exploded—sounds, light, gusts, crackling. The drums entered, accelerating the rhythm. No one could resist the call of this frenzied music that seized our bodies like a benevolent spirit. The breathless trumpet tried its best to keep up with the percussion. Prothé and Innocent struck the taut drumheads together, their faces contorted with effort, thick with perspiration.

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flowing down their glistening foreheads. The guests' hands tapped out the rhythm and their feet pounded out the offbeat, raising the heavy dust of the courtyard. The music was as fast as the pulse in our temples. The beats piled up one after another. The wind blew, stirring the treetops in the garden; we could feel the leaves vibrating and the branches rustling. Electricity crackled in the air. The air smelled of damp earth.

A warm rain was about to fall upon us, so violent that we would start running to gather up the tables, chairs, and plates, before taking shelter under the barza and watching the party dissolve in the roar of the downpour. Soon it would be the end of my birthday, and I was savoring this minute before the rain, this moment of suspended happiness where the music joined our hearts, filled the void between us, celebrated existence, the instant, the eternity of my eleven years, here, under the cathedral roof of my childhood, and I knew then, deep down, that life would eventually work itself out.

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Summer vacation is worse than unemployment. We stayed in the neighborhood for two months, just hanging around, looking for ways to fill our dreary days. Even though we sometimes laughed, we were bored stiff. With the dry season, the river was nothing more than a trickle, impossible to cool off. The mangoes, shriveled by the heat, were unsellable, and the Yacht Club was much too far away for us to go there every afternoon.

I was so happy when school started again. Dad dropped me off at the entrance for the older kids. I was in middle school, in the same class as my friends, and a new life was beginning. We had classes some afternoons during the week, and I was discovering new subjects like science, English, chemistry, and art. The students who had spent their holidays in Europe or America came back with fashionable clothes and shoes. At first, I didn't pay any attention. But Gino and Armand kept talking about it, their eyes shining. This desire turned into an obsession, and I was soon infected. From then on, it wasn't about marbles and caps anymore, but about clothes and brands. Except that to get them, you needed money. Lots of money. Even if we sold all the mangoes in the neighborhood, we still wouldn't have been able to afford the shoes with the little swoosh on them.

Those who had returned from there, from Europe and America, told us that the shops stretched for kilometers and overflowed with sneakers, T-shirts, sports jerseys, and jeans. In Bujumbura, there was nothing, except for the bare window of the Bata store in the city center, or the stalls of the Jabé market offering a few worn-out Reebok Pumps and other well-known brands.

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with spelling mistakes. We were sad to be deprived of these things we had managed without until then. And this feeling changed us from within. We silently hated those who possessed them.

Donatien, who had noticed my newfound interest in designer brands and my tendency to gossip about some of the rich kids at school, told me that envy was a deadly sin. His moralizing went right over my head, and for once I preferred to chat with Innocent; he had a knack for getting me the accessories I dreamed of at bargain prices. At school, groups were now formed based on new criteria: those who had things stayed among themselves.

Armand was an exception. He had neither fashionable clothes nor designer perfumes, but he made people laugh. This allowed him to cross the invisible barriers that separated us and to be accepted into fashionable groups. Gino felt bitter when he saw Armand in the courtyard, near the refreshment stand, chatting with his new acquaintances.

One evening, while we were chatting under the frangipani tree, lying on the sentry's mat and dipping slices of green mango in coarse salt, he said to me: – Armand is a traitor. He hardly ever speaks to us at
school, but as soon as he's in a bind, we become his best friends again.

– He's showing off, that's normal. Since the beginning of the year, he's been invited to all the parties. The twins even told me he kissed a girl on the mouth!

– Swear! With your tongue?
– I don't know, but at least he's having fun while we're stuck in a dead end.
If I could follow him, I wouldn't hesitate.
– Are you ashamed of the group too?
– That's not it, Gino. You guys are my best friends for life! But at school, nobody pays any attention to us, the girls couldn't care less about us, so you understand...

– One day, they will come to see us, Gaby, and they will all fear us.
– But why do you want us to be feared?
– To be respected. Do you understand? That's what my mother keeps saying. You have to be respected.

It surprised me to hear Gino mention his mother. He never spoke of her. On his bedside table, there were envelopes with blue-white-red borders, which he sent her every week. But he never went to Rwanda, which

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It was only a few hours' drive away, and she wasn't coming to Bujumbura either. He said the political situation didn't allow them to do so right now, but that one day, when peace returned, he would go live in a big house in Kigali with his father and mother. It saddened me to think that Gino was ready to leave me, to leave the gang, to leave the dead end.
Like Mom, Grandma, Pacique and Rosalie, Gino dreamed of the great return to Rwanda, and I pretended to dream with them so as not to disappoint them. Yet, secretly, I prayed that nothing would change, that Mom would come home, that life would go back to what it was, and remain so, forever.

I was still thinking about all this when a rumble rang out. Gino's father came running out of the house like a frightened sheep, shouting at us to move away from the walls and come with him to the middle of the garden.
We got up, amused; it was as if he'd seen a ghost. We followed him, not understanding what had just happened. It was only a few minutes later, when we discovered the thick crack running the entire length of the garage wall, that we understood. The earth had moved beneath our feet, imperceptibly. It did this every day in this country, in this corner of the world. We lived on the axis of the Great Rift Valley, at the very spot where Africa is fracturing.
The men of this region were like the land itself. Beneath the apparent calm, behind the facade of smiles and grand pronouncements of optimism, subterranean, shadowy forces worked tirelessly, plotting violence and destruction that returned in successive waves like ill winds: 1965, 1972, 1988. A grim specter appeared at regular intervals to remind the men that peace is but a brief respite between wars. This venomous lava, this thick ooze of blood, was once again ready to erupt. We didn't know it yet, but the hour of the inferno had struck; the night was about to unleash its horde of hyenas and wild dogs.

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I was sleeping lightly when I felt someone touch my head. At first, I thought rats were nibbling at my hair curls, like they used to before Dad set traps all over the house. Then I heard a whisper: "Gaby, are you asleep?" Ana's voice finally woke me up.

I opened my eyes. Our room was plunged into darkness. With my left hand, I drew back the curtain. A ray of moonlight pierced the window screen, illuminating my little sister's frightened face. "What's that, Gaby?" I didn't understand. The night was quiet. I only recognized the hooting of the owl perched in the false ceiling above our room. I sat up and waited, until several sharp, rapid noises rang out. "It sounds like gunfire..." Ana slipped into my bed and snuggled up to me. An agonizing silence followed the sounds of explosions and machine-gun fire. Ana and I were home alone. Dad had been staying out all night lately; Innocent said he was seeing a young woman who lived on the street behind his house, in the working-class neighborhood of Bwiza. This saddened me because, since they had started talking again, I had hoped that Mom and Dad would get back together.

I pressed the button that lit up my watch; the dial read two in the morning. With each explosion, Ana pressed herself a little closer to me.

– What's going on, Gaby?

- I don't know...

The shooting stopped around six in the morning. Papa still hadn't come home. We got up, dressed, and then packed our schoolbags. Prothé wasn't there either. We set the breakfast table on the terrace. I made the tea. The parrot was doing somersaults.

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in its cage. I looked for someone in the yard. There wasn't a soul in sight. Even the zamu had disappeared. After eating, we cleared the table. I helped Ana comb her hair. Still no one in the house. I kept an eye on the gate; it was the time the employees were supposed to arrive. But nothing was happening. We sat on the front steps to wait for Innocent or Papa to arrive. Ana took her math notebook out of her schoolbag and started reciting her multiplication tables. On the road in front of the house, there were neither pedestrians nor cars. What was going on? Where were they all? We could hear classical music playing in the neighborhood.

It was a Thursday, but the neighborhood was quieter than on a Sunday morning.
Finally, a car approached. I recognized the Pajero's horn and rushed to open the gate. Dad looked grim and had dark circles under his eyes. He got out of the car and asked if we were alright. I nodded, but Ana was sulking; she was angry with him for leaving us all night. Dad walked quickly to the living room and turned on the radio. We heard the same classical music playing outside. He put his hand to his forehead and kept repeating, "Damn! Damn! Damn!"

Later, I learned that it was a tradition to play classical music on the radio when there was a coup d'état. On November 28, 1966, for Michel Micombero's coup d'état, it was Schubert's Piano Sonata No. 21; on November 9, 1976, for Jean-Baptiste Bagaza's, Beethoven's Symphony No. 7; and on September 3, 1987, for Pierre Buyoya's, Chopin's Bolero in C major.

That day, October 21, 1993, we were treated to Wagner's Götterdämmerung. Dad locked the gate with a heavy chain and several padlocks. He ordered us not to leave the house and to stay away from the windows. Then he set up our mattresses in the hallway because of the risk of stray bullets. We lay on the floor all day. It was rather funny; it felt like we were camping in our own house.

As usual, Dad locked himself in his room to make calls. Around three o'clock, I was playing cards with Ana and Dad was on the phone in his room when I heard scratching in the kitchen. I went to see what was happening. Gino, out of breath, was standing behind the bars of the door, and I whispered, "I can't open it for you; my father has double-locked the house."

How did you get into the plot?

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– I climbed over the fence. Anyway, I'm not staying long.
Are you aware of this?

– Yes, I know, there was a coup d'état, we heard classical music.

– The military killed the new president.

– What? I don't believe you... Swear it.

"I swear! A Canadian journalist called my father to tell him. It's the military. They also killed the Speaker of the National Assembly and other high-ranking government officials... Apparently, massacres have started all over the country. And you know the best part?"

– No? What now?

– Attila has escaped!

– Attila, the Van Gotzen family's horse?

– Yeah! It's crazy, isn't it? During the night, a shell landed near the stables of the Equestrian Club, behind the presidential residence. A building caught fire.
The horses panicked, Attila went mad, he reared up and neighed like a madman, he started kicking against the door of his stall, he broke the lock and then he jumped over the barriers before disappearing into the town... You should have seen Mrs. Von Gotzen this morning... She arrived at our house in her nightgown, with curlers in her hair and her eyes swollen with tears.
So funny! She wanted my father to use his connections to find his horse. And he kept repeating, "There's been a coup, Mrs. Von Gotzen, I can't do anything for you, not even the President of the Republic could do anything for himself." And she kept insisting, "We have to find Attila! Contact the United Nations! The White House! The Kremlin!" She didn't give a damn about the President's assassination; all she talked about was her horse, that racist old hag. They're killing me, those colonists!

Their animals' lives are more important than human lives. Okay, I'll leave you now, Gaby, I have to go. More to come in the next episode.

Gino ran off again. He seemed completely energized by the situation, almost pleased that something serious was happening. I, on the other hand, was lost, struggling to grasp it. The president's assassination... I thought back to what Papa had said on the day of Ndadaye's victory: "They will pay for this affront sooner or later."

That evening, we went to bed early. Dad was smoking more than usual.
He had also brought his mattress into the hallway, and he listened to the small radio while stroking Ana's hair; she was already fast asleep. A single candle lit the room, softening its outline.

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Around 9 p.m., the classical music stopped. A news anchor spoke, in French. He cleared his throat between each sentence; his monotonous voice contrasted sharply with the gravity of the situation. It sounded as if he were announcing the results of a local volleyball tournament: “The National Council of Public Safety has made the following decisions: curfew across the entire country from 6 p.m. to 6 a.m.; border closures; movement between municipalities is prohibited; gatherings of more than three people are prohibited; the Council calls on the population to remain calm…” I fell asleep before the end of the list. I dreamt that I was sleeping peacefully, suspended in a cozy little cloud formed by the sulfurous fumes of an erupting volcano.

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We spent several days sleeping in the hallway, without leaving the house all day. A gendarme from the French embassy called Papa to advise him to avoid going out. Mama, who was staying with a friend in the hills above the city, called us every day to check on us. The radio was reporting major massacres in the center of the country.

The school reopened the following week. The town was strangely quiet. A few shops had reopened, but civil servants hadn't returned to work, and ministers were still holed up in foreign embassies or in neighboring countries. Passing the presidential palace, I glimpsed the damaged perimeter wall. It was the only sign of fighting visible in the city. In the schoolyard, students were recounting the night of the coup: the gunfire, the sound of shells, the president's death, the mattresses in the hallways. No one was afraid. For us, privileged children of the city center and the residential neighborhoods, war was still just a word. We had heard things, but hadn't seen anything. Life went on as before, with our stories of parties, love, brands, and fashion. The domestic workers in our homes, our parents' employees, those who lived in the working-class neighborhoods of Bujumbura Rural, in the interior of the country, and who received no security instructions from any embassy, had no sentries to guard their homes, no drivers to take their children to school, who traveled on foot, by bicycle, by public bus—they were the ones who truly grasped the gravity of the situation. When I returned from school, Prothé was shelling peas at the kitchen table. I knew he had voted for Ndadaye, that his joy had been immense at his victory. I barely dared to look at him.

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– Hello, Protheé. How are you?
"Mr. Gabriel, you'll excuse me, but I don't have the strength to speak. They've killed hope. They've killed hope, that's all I can say. Truly, they've killed hope..."

When I left the kitchen, he was still repeating that phrase.
After lunch, Donatien and Innocent accompanied me to school. On the way, near the Muha bridge, we passed an army armored vehicle.
"Look at these soldiers, they're lost," said Donatien wearily.
First they stage a coup, they kill the president, and now that the population is angry, and the interior of the country is ablaze, they back down and ask the government to return to put out the fire they started. Poor Africa... May God help us.

Innocent said nothing, he drove, looked at the road, straight ahead.
From now on, the days passed more quickly, because of the curfew which forced everyone to be at home at six o'clock, before nightfall.
In the evenings, we ate our soup while listening to the radio and its alarming news. I began to wonder about the silences and unspoken words of some, the innuendo and predictions of others. This country was made of whispers and enigmas. There were invisible fractures, sighs, glances I didn't understand.

The days passed and the war continued to rage in the countryside.
Villages were ravaged and burned, schools were attacked with grenades, and students were burned alive inside. Hundreds of thousands of people were fleeing to Rwanda, Zaire, or Tanzania. In Bujumbura, there were reports of clashes in the outlying areas. At night, gunfire could be heard in the distance. Protheé and Donatien often missed work because the army was conducting numerous sweeps in their neighborhood.
From the quiet heart of our home, it all seemed unreal. The dead-end street dozed as usual. At siesta time, we could hear the chirping of birds in the branches, a breeze rippled the leaves of the trees, and gigantic, venerable cus trees offered us welcome shade.
Nothing had changed. We continued our games and explorations. The heavy rains had returned. The vegetation had regained its vibrant colors.
The trees were bending under the weight of the ripe fruit and the river had resumed its full flow.
One afternoon, while the five of us were wandering around barefoot, poles in hand, looking for mangoes, Gino suggested we go further because we

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We had already raided the dead-end street. We found ourselves in front of Francis's fence. I had a bad feeling.

– Let's not stay here, we're going to have problems.

"Come on, don't be a scaredy-cat, Gaby!" replied Gino. "This mango tree, it is..." for us.

Armand and the twins looked at each other, hesitant, but Gino insisted. We advanced slowly down the driveway, our steps discreet on the gravel. It was easy to enter the property; there was no gate. At the top of a small hill stood the house, sinister, with crumbling walls and damp stains that warped the plasterboard of the veranda's false ceiling. The mango tree spread its branches over the entire garden. We approached. The dirty mosquito nets behind the window bars prevented us from seeing inside the house. The doors were closed; the place was too quiet. We stopped at the foot of the tree, and Gino knocked down a mango, then two, then three. His pole stirred the foliage like a flock of hornbills. I remained alert.

Suddenly, I thought I glimpsed a shadow, furtive, behind the dusty mosquito nets. "Wait!" We all froze and scanned the house. Silence reigned. The only sound was the murmur of the Muha River at the bottom of the garden. Gino started picking mangoes again.

Armand encouraged him and danced the soukous every time a piece of fruit landed in the grass. The twins and I were on our guard. Behind us, a bird flew off with a rustle of wings. We turned our heads. Armand and the twins bolted first, at lightning speed, towards the road. Then Gino started off and I followed him without hesitation. We went around the house, hurtling down the slope that led to the Muha. I felt like prey. I wasn't sure if Francis was chasing us, so I turned around to check. That's when his fist struck my face, and I crashed into the stones. Then a hail of blows rained down on me like a swarm of wasps. Gino was shouting and trying to protect me. I saw him fall too, just inches from me. A hand dragged us to the edge of the river, and Francis plunged our heads into the brown, silty water of the Muha.

I couldn't breathe. My face was rubbing against the stones at the bottom of the water. No matter how hard I struggled to free myself, Francis's hand was a vise crushing my neck. When he pulled me back to the surface, I could hear snippets of his words. "It's not nice to steal from people's gardens. Didn't your parents teach you that, huh?" Then he'd make me dive back in, headfirst, with a rage

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which paralyzed my bones. Everything was where. My hands thrashed desperately, searching in vain for something to grab onto: a branch, a buoy, a glimmer of hope... I clawed at the ground with my nails as if searching for another way out, a hidden trapdoor at the bottom of the river. Water seeped into my ears, into my nostrils. And the voice continued in a low hum. It was so gentle compared to this embrace that held me underwater. "You spoiled brats, I'm going to teach you some manners." Besides suffocating me, Francis was trying to knock me unconscious. My forehead pounded against the ground. My only instinct was to find air as quickly as possible. Where was it? My lungs were suffocating, shrinking in on themselves. My heart pounded with terror, trying to escape through my mouth. I could hear the distant echo of my stifled cries. I called for Mom and Dad. Where were they? Francis wasn't playing. No doubt about it, he'd decided to kill me. So this was violence? Fear and astonishment captured in the moment. He'd suddenly pull my head out of the river, and I'd hear, "Your mothers are white men's whores!" And again I'd swallow water. I was losing the fight. Slowly, my exhausted muscles relaxed, I accepted the situation in those ten centimeters of water, with Francis's voice to lull me, I let myself slide, imperceptibly. Fear and submission for me, violence and strength for him.

But Gino refused to drown. With all his might. He refused the water and the words. He saw further. He still wanted to pick mangoes in November and build frigates out of long banana leaves to float down the river. He wasn't paralyzed, nor even fascinated by this new violence. He defied it. At Francis's mercy, he nevertheless behaved as an equal. He answered, replied, retaliated. I caught fleeting glimpses of the veins in his neck bulging like an inner tube. "Don't insult my mother! Don't insult my mother!" I felt the pressure on my neck ease. Francis was trying to contain Gino's growing energy. He needed both his arms, both his hands, his knees resting on his back. I found a little air to crawl on all fours, first, before collapsing onto my back. I gasped for air. It was drizzling. There was a lot of light in that blue sky. I closed my eyes, blinded by the sun, and crawled to rest my head against a banana tree trunk lying on the ground.

One of my ears was plugged.

"No one has the right to insult my mother!" Gino repeated.

– Yes, I have the right if I want to. Your mother's a whore.

Francis was plunging Gino's head back into that brown water where I had wanted to give up. It was nap time. The hottest part of the day. The street

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It was empty. Not a single car, out there on the bridge. The banana tree's bark was spongy flesh in which to bury my dazed head. I spat out water before coughing out panicked words. Francis continued relentlessly, like washerwomen plunging their laundry into the water while chatting about the weather. At the end of each of Francis's sentences, Gino's head disappeared into the river's foam. "So where's your whore of a mother? We've never seen her in the neighborhood..." Gino would gulp a few breaths before sinking like a hook settling a fish. He screamed underwater. It churned around his head. "Where's your whore of a mother?" And the more Francis repeated it, the more Gino choked, and the more I yelled for him to let go, and the more Francis started again, with the same question. Gino was losing his strength. He was giving up.

When I got up, when I had regained enough sense to try to stop Francis, Gino stammered "dead". I heard the word, distinctly.
He said it a second time, with a slight sob. "My mother is dead."

Over there on the bridge, an old man stood against the railing, a black hat on his head and a rainbow umbrella open above it, its metal tip shining like a Christmas star. Old men like to watch children playing in rivers. They know they'll never be able to play like that again. Francis waved to him. The old man didn't respond. He continued to watch us for a moment before moving on, taking small steps, with his black hat and brightly colored umbrella. Francis passed in front of me, and I stepped back. But he didn't even look at me; he just left. I went over to Gino. He was crying by the riverbank. His head between his legs, he was hiccuping in his wet clothes. And everything seemed even calmer. The water flowed past us, cruelly indifferent. I wanted to comfort him and put my hand on his shoulder. Gino pushed me away, got up abruptly and walked off towards the road.

I sat by the water's edge. My ear popped. Gradually, the sounds of traffic returned. The bells of Chinese bicycles, sandals scraping the hard-packed earth of the sidewalk, the squeal of minibus tires on the hot asphalt. Everything was coming back to life. There was movement on the bridge. A cold anger rose within me. My mouth was bleeding, and I had scrapes on my hands and knees. I rinsed my wounds in the Muha River.

Anger told me to confront my fear so it would stop growing. This fear that made me give up on so many things. I decided to face Francis. I went back to his garden to retrieve our poles. He was on his doorstep.

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He opened the door and threatened me when I approached. I kept going. I could taste the blood on my tongue; it tasted of salt. I froze and stared straight into his eyes. For a long time. He didn't move, behind his arrogant smile. He stayed on the front steps. My head in the river, I had been afraid of him. Not anymore. I had that taste of blood in my mouth, and it was nothing, nothing compared to Gino's tears. You just had to swallow the blood, and then you forgot the taste. But Gino's tears? Anger replaced fear. I was no longer afraid of what might happen to me. I took our fishing rods and left the mangoes behind. No one would ever pick them. I knew it. But I didn't care. With this anger growing inside me, I didn't care that mangoes were rotting in the fresh grass.

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Since then, Gino had been avoiding me. Armand and the twins didn't know what had happened down there in the river. I had let them believe that we had fled like them. Gino's tears still haunted me. Was his mother really dead? I didn't dare ask him. Not yet. We were living through uncertain times. The weeks resembled a rainy season sky. Each day brought its share of rumors, violence, and security orders. The country still didn't have a president, and part of the government was living underground. But in the bars, people drank their beer and ate their goat kebabs as if to resist the anxiety of tomorrow.

A new phenomenon had gripped the capital. It was called "dead city" days. Leaflets were distributed throughout the city with messages urging residents to stay home for one or more specific days. When these operations began, gangs of youths, with the tacit approval of the police, took to the streets, erected barricades on the main thoroughfares of various neighborhoods, and attacked or pelted cars or passersby who dared to leave their homes. Fear then descended upon the city. Shops remained closed, schools shut down, street vendors disappeared, and everyone barricaded themselves inside their homes. The day after these days of paralysis, the bodies in the gutters were counted, the stones were cleared from the pavement, and life resumed its usual course.

Dad was distraught. He, who had tried to keep us out of politics, found himself utterly unable to hide the country's situation from us. He looked drawn, worried about his children and his business. He had halted his construction projects in the interior of the country because of the massacres taking place.

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continued on a large scale, there was talk of fifty thousand dead, and he had had to lay off a large part of his workers.

One morning while I was at school, an incident occurred on our property in front of Dad. A violent argument broke out between Prothé and Innocent. I don't know what it was about, but Innocent raised his hand to Prothé. Dad immediately fired Innocent, who refused to apologize and was threatening everyone.

The constant tension made people nervous. They became sensitive to the slightest noise, were on their guard in the street, constantly checking their rearview mirrors to make sure they weren't being followed. Everyone was on high alert. One day, during geography class, a tire blew out behind the fence on Independence Boulevard, and the entire class, including the teacher, threw themselves flat under

the tables. At school, the relationships between the Burundian students had changed. It was subtle, but I noticed it. There were many mysterious allusions, unspoken messages. When it came to forming groups, for sports or to prepare presentations, a sense of unease was immediately apparent. I couldn't explain this sudden change, this palpable discomfort.

Until that day, during recess, two Burundian boys got into a fight behind the large covered playground, out of sight of the teachers and supervisors. The other Burundian students, angered by the altercation, quickly split into two groups, each supporting one boy. "Dirty Hutus," some shouted, "Dirty Tutsis," others retorted.

That afternoon, for the first time in my life, I entered into the true depths of this country. I discovered the Hutu-Tutsi antagonism, an impassable dividing line that forced everyone to belong to one side or the other. This side, like a name given to a child, was something you were born with, and it haunted you forever. Hutu or Tutsi. It was one or the other. Heads or tails.

Like a blind man regaining his sight, I then began to understand the gestures and the looks, the unspoken words and the manners that had always escaped me.

War, without being asked, always finds us an enemy. I, who wished to remain neutral, could not. I was born with this history. It flowed within me. I belonged to it.

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We discovered an even more violent reality in Rwanda when we went there at the end of the February holidays with Maman and Ana to attend Pacique's wedding. He had told us the news a week earlier. The growing insecurity in Kigali had accelerated events.
Ana, Maman and I were supposed to represent the family. Mamie and Rosalie stayed in Bujumbura; their refugee status prevented them from traveling.
In the hall of the Grégoire-Kayibanda airport, Eusébie, Maman's aunt, barely older than her, who had always refused exile, was waiting for us.
My mother thought of her as the big sister she'd never had. She had skin as fair as mine. Her long face resembled those of the women in the family, her forehead was broad and rounded, her ears tiny, her neck slender, her gap-toothed teeth slightly protruding, and freckles speckled her nose and eyelids. She wore a pleated black skirt that fell to her feet, and the wide shoulder pads of her jacket gave her a scarecrow-like appearance. Ana had spent a week at her house, but I was meeting her for the first time. Deeply moved, she hugged me tightly against her soft skin, which smelled of shea butter.

A widow, Eusébie lived in a house in downtown Kigali where she raised her four children alone, three girls and a boy aged five to sixteen: Christelle, Christiane, Christian, Christine.

Aunt Eusebia's daughters rushed towards Ana and wouldn't leave her side. They had made her their guest of honor, the doll they wanted to pamper for a few days. They vied for her company and fought over who got to style her smooth hair, so exotic to them. On the

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On the walls of their room, they had hung photos taken with Ana a year earlier, during the Christmas holidays.

Christian was the same age as me, and his laughing eyes gazed at me with joy. Almost as talkative as the twins, he was incredibly curious. He asked a thousand and one questions about Burundi, my friends, my favorite sports. He was proud to be the captain of his school's soccer team and had insisted on showing me the trophies and medals he had won in the interscholastic championship, prominently displayed on the large chest of drawers in the living room. He was bursting with excitement for the upcoming Africa Cup of Nations, to be held in Tunisia. His favorite team, Cameroon, hadn't qualified, so he had decided to support Nigeria.

During dinner, Aunt Eusébie told us all sorts of funny anecdotes that sent Mom into fits of laughter. She recounted, with great humor, the holidays she and Mom spent as teenagers with the Girl Scouts in the Burundian countryside. She transformed our family's misfortunes and hardships into a series of funny stories and outlandish adventures, with the loving complicity of her children. They applauded her, encouraged her, sometimes finished her stories for her, or helped her find the right words in French. After dinner, Aunt Eusébie told us to get ready for bed, and the children immediately complied in a joyful commotion. In the bathroom, the girls used their toothbrushes as microphones, sang, and danced in front of the large mirror. Christian had taken off his Roger Milla jersey as pajamas. Before going to sleep, he liked to juggle his ball against the wall of his room, which was covered with posters of footballers. After that, he said, he was sure to dream of himself, victorious, in the World Cup final.

Christian fell asleep barely two minutes after Aunt Eusebia turned off the light. I was about to drift off myself when I heard Pacique's voice. I rushed into the living room. I'd expected to see him in fatigues, but he was dressed in a simple polo shirt, jeans, and white sneakers. He lifted me off the floor, holding me at arm's length above his head. "Look at you, Gaby! You're a man! You'll soon be taller than your uncle!" He still had his angelic face and his nonchalant poet's air, but his gaze had changed; it had become serious. Aunt Eusebia, a large bunch of keys in her hand, was busy double-locking the doors of the house. She came back from the kitchen and turned off the light in the living room. A lighter's blade appeared a second later to light a candle on the coffee table and

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Pacique settled into an armchair, facing Mom. She told me to go to bed, that they needed to talk like adults now. I obeyed reluctantly, but instead of going back to my bed, I stayed in the hallway, just behind the door, where I could watch them without them seeing me. When Aunt Eusebia came to sit down, Pacique turned to face Mom.

“Big sister, thank you for coming so quickly. I apologize for the slightly rushed arrangements. I couldn’t wait for the wedding. You know, Jeanne’s family is very religious, very attached to traditions, to doing things in the right order. So we had to get married before announcing the baby to them. Do you understand?” he said, punctuating his question with a wink.

Mom paused for a moment, as if to make sure she had heard correctly, then she let out a cry of joy before hugging Pacique tightly.
Aunt Eusebia, already aware of what was happening, wore a radiant smile. Very quickly, Pacique freed himself from Mama's embrace. Looking concerned, he said, "Please sit down, I still need to talk to you."

His face darkened. He nodded to Aunt Eusebia, who immediately went to the window, glanced out quickly, then closed the shutters and drew the curtains. She returned to sit next to Pacique, beneath a rococo plastic frame displaying a beautiful black-and-white studio photograph of her with her husband and children.

Curiously, in this photo, she was the only one smiling. The rest of the family remained stiff and awkward in front of the camera.

Pacique moved his chair closer so that his knees touched Mom's. He began to speak in an almost inaudible voice.

"Yvonne, you must listen to me carefully. What I'm about to tell you is very serious. The situation is more grave than it appears. Our intelligence services have intercepted disturbing messages and detected signals that lead us to believe something terrible is brewing here. The Hutu extremists don't want to share power with us, the RPF. They are prepared to do anything to sabotage the peace agreements. They plan to eliminate all opposition leaders and all moderate Hutu figures in civil society. Then they will deal with the Tutsis..."

He paused, looked around, his ear straining, listening for the slightest unusual noise. Outside, the toads croaked in a regular rhythm.
Despite the closed curtains, a pale orange light from a streetlamp had managed to find its way into the living room. He resumed, still in

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whispering: "We fear mass killings all over the country. Killings that will make the previous ones look like mere rehearsals."

The candlelight cast its shadow on the wall. The darkness blurred her facial features. Her eyes seemed suspended in the shadows.

– Machetes have been distributed in all provinces, there are large arms caches in Kigali, militias are training with the support of the regular army, lists of people to be assassinated are being distributed in every neighborhood, the United Nations has even received information confirming that the government is capable of killing a thousand Tutsis every twenty minutes...

A car drove by in the street. Pacique fell silent. He waited until it had moved away and then continued in a whisper.

– The list of what awaits us is still long. Our families are on borrowed time. Death surrounds us, it will soon fall upon us, then we will be trapped.

Disturbed and lost, Mama looked for confirmation from Aunt Eusebia, whose gaze sadly fixed on a point on the ground.

“And what about the Arusha Accords? And the transitional government?” Mom asked, her voice filled with panic. “I thought the war was over, that things were getting better. This massacre you’re talking about, how could it possibly happen in Kigali with so many UN peacekeepers? It’s impossible…”

– It will be enough to kill a few of them and all the white people in this country will be evacuated. This is part of their strategy. The major powers are not going to risk the lives of their soldiers for those of poor Africans. The extremists know this.

– What are we waiting for to inform the international press? The embassies? The United Nations?

“They know perfectly well. They have the same information as we do. They don’t care. Let’s not expect anything from them. Let’s rely only on ourselves. I came to see you because we need your help, big sister. As the only man in our family, I have to make a decision quickly. I’m asking you to welcome Aunt Eusébie’s children, as well as my future wife and the baby she’s carrying, to Bujumbura.”

They will remain in Burundi for as long as necessary. They will be safe there.

"But you know very well that there is also a war in Burundi," said Mama.

– Here, it will be much worse than a war.

"When do you want to send them?" replied Mum, without wasting any time.

– Everyone will join you for the Easter holidays so as not to arouse suspicion.

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– And you, Eusebia? What are you going to do?

– I'm going to stay, Yvonne, I have to continue working for the children. Without them, I'll feel less vulnerable. We can't all run away, anyway. I'll be fine, don't worry, I have contacts at the United Nations; if there's a problem, I'll manage to get evacuated.

We heard the sound of an engine in front of the house. Eusebia rushed to the window and slightly opened the curtains. Someone was flashing their headlights. She turned around and nodded to Pacique. When he stood up, I saw a revolver tucked into his waistband.

"I have to go, they're expecting me. See you tomorrow for the wedding. Be careful on the road. I won't be able to travel with you to Gitarama; I'm under close surveillance by the secret service, and I don't want anyone to connect us. The families of RPF soldiers are at the top of their assassination lists. I'll meet you at the time of the ceremony."

Then he slipped out. I came out of my hiding place and joined Aunt Eusebia by the window. A motorcycle was driving away. We could see the red lights of its taillight as it braked over the potholes. Gradually, the engine noise faded away. Eusebia closed the curtains.

Nothing was moving anymore. Everything was silent everywhere in the world.

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The first rays of dawn chased away the anxieties of the night. Ana and my cousins' laughter in the garden woke me. Aunt Eusebia and Mom hadn't slept a wink; I'd heard them whispering until dawn. Right after breakfast, we hit the road. Christian and I were in the trunk, sitting on the suitcases containing our wedding clothes. Aunt Eusebia preferred that we get dressed upon arrival to remain as inconspicuous as possible in case of a police check. The girls were crammed together on the back seat of the station wagon. Mom, sitting in the front, put on her makeup in front of the sun visor mirror. The car first drove through bustling working-class neighborhoods filled with the sounds of car horns, then, after the bus station, the landscape gradually cleared. The city gave way to papyrus marshes stretching as far as the eye could see. Aunt Eusebia was driving fast to get to Gitarama, fifty kilometers from Kigali, as quickly as possible. We were stuck for a long time behind a truck whose exhaust pipe was belching thick black smoke. The girls quickly rolled up the windows, holding their noses because of the rotten egg smell.

Mom turned on the radio, and the catchy rhythm of Papa Wemba's song immediately filled the car. The cousins started fidgeting, and Christian looked at me mischievously, raising his eyebrows and moving his shoulders like an Ethiopian dancer. Aunt Eusebie quickly turned up the radio. From the trunk, I could see heads swaying from side to side to the music. During the chorus, the girls sang, "Maria Valencia, hey hey hey!" This amused Mom, who turned around to give me knowing winks. A radio DJ was clowning around, singing over the music. I only understood some of it.

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Words in his Kinyarwanda sentences: "Radio 106 FM! Radio Sympa! Papa Wemba!" In a cheerful tone, he would repeat the chorus, talk, joke, a real clown on the air. I got caught up in it, even though I hated dancing. I was wiggling, clapping my hands haphazardly, and singing "Hey hey hey" enthusiastically, when suddenly, I noticed that no one was moving anymore. The cousins' faces had changed expression. Christian was stunned. Aunt Eusebie abruptly turned off the radio. No one was talking in the car. Without seeing Mom's face, I could sense her discomfort. I looked at Christian: "What's wrong?"

– Nothing. Nonsense. It was the radio host... What he was saying...
– What was he saying?
– He said that all cockroaches must perish.
– Cockroaches?
– Yes, cockroaches. The Inyenzy.
...
– They use that word to talk about us, the Tutsi.

The car slowed down. Ahead of us, vehicles were stopped on a bridge.

"A military roadblock," said Aunt Eusebia, panicking.

When they reached the soldiers, one of them signaled to Aunt Eusebia to turn off the engine and asked for her identity card. Another, with a Kalashnikov slung over his shoulder, was inspecting the vehicle, circling it menacingly. When he passed the trunk, he pressed his face against the window.

Christian turned his head to avoid his gaze, and so did I. The soldier then approached Mom. After staring at her, he curtly asked for her papers. Mom handed over her French passport. The soldier glanced at it quickly, then, sneering, said to her in French: "Good morning, Madam Frenchwoman."

He leafed through the passport with an amused expression. Mom didn't dare speak. He continued: "Hmm... I

don't think you're a real Frenchwoman. I've never seen a Frenchwoman with a nose like yours. And that neck..."

He then ran his hand down Mother's neck. She didn't move. She was frozen with fear. Aunt Eusebia, meanwhile, was negotiating with the other soldier. She was doing everything she could to hide her anxiety.

– We are going to Gitarama to visit a sick relative.

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I watched the barrier behind them, their weapons swinging on their shoulders, I heard the creaking of the strap and the ochre-red river, squeezed between papyrus banks, flowing under the bridge with its fleeting eddies on the water's surface. It was strange to understand the soldier's allusions, the fear in Aunt Eusebia's gestures, Mama's fear. A month earlier, I wouldn't have understood any of it. Hutu soldiers on one side, a Tutsi family on the other. I had a front-row seat to this spectacle of hatred.

"Get out of here, you bunch of cockroaches!" said the soldier suddenly, throwing the identity card in Aunt Eusebia's face.

The second soldier handed Mama her passport and roughly pushed her nose with the tip of his index finger.

"Goodbye, female snake! And since you're French, give a big bow to our friend Uncle Mitterrand!" he said, sneering again.

When Aunt Eusebia started the engine, one of the soldiers kicked the bodywork. The second, using his rifle butt, smashed one of the rear windows, sending shards of glass flying at Christian and me. Ana let out a sharp scream.
Aunt Eusebia left in a hurry.

When we arrived at Jeanne's house, we were still in shock, but Aunt Eusébie asked us not to say anything so as not to spoil the party.

Jeanne's family lived in a modest red brick house surrounded by a euphorbia hedge, high in the hills above Gitarama. Her parents, brothers, and sisters were waiting for us, and we were treated to a long ritual of coded greetings as a welcome, with this very particular way of feeling each other's backs and arms, accompanying these gestures with appropriate phrases. Ana and I were lost, our bodies clumsy, unable to answer the questions our hosts asked us in Kinyarwanda.

Jeanne then appeared in her wedding dress, tall, almost as tall as Pacique, strikingly beautiful. She held a bouquet of pink hibiscus flowers, which she offered to Ana. Mama gently approached her, cupped her face in her hands, whispered a few blessings in her ear, and welcomed her into our family.

After removing our formal attire, we walked to the town hall. We took a shortcut – a narrow dirt path that ran alongside small mud and cob houses huddled together.

I led the way with Christian, Jeanne and Maman were holding arms, in

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careful not to slip. The track opened onto the main paved road leading to Butare. As we passed, onlookers turned around, cyclists stopped, and curious people came out of their houses to watch us. Their stares were intense, they practically pierced us, dissecting us on the spot. Our procession was the town's main attraction.

Dressed in an ill-fitting gray suit, Pacique was waiting for us in the ceremony room. He had regained his naive and carefree expression. The registrar, on the other hand, seemed rushed and slightly drunk. In a monotonous voice, he recited articles of law for several long minutes, outlining the rights and duties of spouses. There were only a few of us in the town hall, just close family. No one was smiling; some were yawning or watching the tall eucalyptus trees swaying in the sun outside. Pacique and Jeanne, however, made no attempt to hide their emotion and seemed amused to already be husband and wife. They never took their eyes off each other, smiling at the happiness to come, and brushed against each other whenever they could. They had said "I do" beneath the portrait of the president—the very same one Pacique had fought against before the peace accords.

After the ceremony, we went back up to Jeanne's house. The sky was grey, it was almost dark in broad daylight and a violent wind was raising red clouds of dust over the town, tearing the corrugated iron sheets off the roofs of some of the huts. Aunt Eusebia told Pacique that we had to return to Kigali before the end of the afternoon; it was safer that way, and he didn't insist we stay. He knew the risks and was glad we were able to make the trip despite everything.

A quick downpour that washed the sky clean and restored the lost sunshine delayed us, and then finally it was time to leave. Jeanne thanked us by giving each of us a gift. I received a terracotta statue of a mountain gorilla. Mom wouldn't let go of Jeanne's arm, repeatedly telling her how much she was looking forward to her joining us in Bujumbura to get to know us better. Discreetly, she slipped a small envelope of cash into Jeanne's old father's pocket. He thanked her by lifting his funny cowboy hat. Aunt Eusébie walked away with Jeanne to the back of the small garden, said a few prayers for the child, placing the palms of her hands on the young bride's lower belly. Everyone said their goodbyes, astonished to be parting so soon, surprised to have celebrated a wedding so quickly, almost secretly. Christian and I returned to our places in the trunk. As he closed the car door, Pacique leaned into the car.

– We'll have a proper party again, and this time I'll bring my guitar!

We all approved in unison.

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– But what happened to your window, Auntie?

"Oh, nothing, just a minor accident," Aunt Eusebia said evasively.

She started the engine and maneuvered out of the small courtyard. Before going through the gate, I turned to say goodbye. Jeanne and Pacique were in the foreground, hand in hand, in their wedding attire. Jeanne's father, beside them, waved his hat above his head. Behind them, Jeanne's family stood motionless. The scene was like a painting, with the rosy light of late afternoon illuminating them from the side. The car bumped from side to side, slowly descending the small dirt road. They didn't disappear, swallowed up by the slope.

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At the corner of the kitchen table, I was finishing my homework. Prothé, lost in thought, was doing the dishes. The radio was broadcasting a speech by the new Burundian president, Cyprien Ntaryamira, a member of Frodebu, elected by Parliament after several months of a power vacuum.

That morning, a murder had taken place in the street, not far from the school. Afternoon classes had been canceled. Since my return from Rwanda and the start of the school year, I hadn't gone back to see my friends in the cul-de-sac. I closed my notebooks and decided to go to Gino's to put an end to the awkwardness between us. He wasn't home, so I went to the twins' place. He and Armand were sprawled on the sofa, mesmerized by a kung fu movie. I lay down on the living room rug. The images faded before my eyes while my mind wandered. I must have fallen asleep for quite a while, because when I opened my eyes, the credits were slowly rolling on the screen. We decided to head to the hideout to play cards. As we opened the sliding door of the Volkswagen van, we came across Gino and Francis sharing a cigarette. It took me a moment to understand what I was seeing.

"What's he doing here?" I asked, furious.

– Calm down. I asked Francis to join the gang. We'll need him to protect the dead end.

Francis, sprawled on the bench, relaxed, as if he were at home, was smoking a cigarette by its glowing edge. Armand and the twins didn't react.

So I slammed the door shut with all my might. I felt betrayed. I was leaving the vacant lot when Gino caught up with me.

– Come back, Gaby! Don't go away!

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"What's wrong with you?" I shouted, pushing him back. "He's our worst enemy, and you want to bring him into the group?"

– I didn't know him well. I was wrong about him. He's not who you think he is.

– And what did he do in the river? Have you forgotten? He wanted to kill us, that madman!

– He regrets it; he came knocking on my gate a few days later to apologize...

– And you believe that? Don't you see that this is just another one of his tactics. Like he did on my birthday.

– No, no Gaby, you're mistaken. He's a stand-up guy. I've talked to him a lot. He's not a bad guy, it's just, you see, he hasn't had much luck in life. He lost his mother too. You... you can't understand, you have your own. But losing your mother can make you different at times, tough and all that...

Gino lowered his head and began digging in the earth with the tip of his shoe.

– Gino... I wanted to tell you... I'm sorry about your mother. But why didn't you ever tell me?

"I don't know. And you know, my mother isn't really dead. It's hard to explain. I talk to her, I write her letters, I even hear her sometimes. Do you understand? My mother is here... somewhere..."

I wanted to hug him, to say comforting words, but I didn't know how, I didn't know what to say. I never did. I felt so close to him, I didn't want to lose Gino. My brother, my friend, my other half. He was the person I wanted to be. He had the strength and courage I lacked.

– Gino, am I still your best friend?

He looked me in the eyes, then walked over to an acacia bush behind me. He broke off a thorn, sucked on it to remove the dust, and then pricked his fingertip. A little blood appeared, like when you do a thick blood smear test for malaria. He took one of my fingers and pressed the same thorn into it until I bled. Then he stuck our fingers together.

– That's my answer to your question, Gaby. You're my blood brother now. I love you more than anyone.

His voice was trembling slightly. I started to feel a tingling in my throat. We avoided looking at each other; we could have cried. We went back to the van hand in hand.

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Francis was deep in conversation with the twins and Armand. They listened to him with the same rapt attention they had shown earlier during the kung fu movie. He told the stories almost better than the twins, peppering his sentences with invented words, mixing Swahili, French, English, and Kirundi.

When the heat outside subsided, we suggested he come and cool off with us in the river.

"If you want to go swimming, I have something much better than Muha," said Francis. Follow me!

On the main road, he hailed a blue and white taxi. The driver initially made a fuss because he didn't want to pick up a bunch of kids, but Francis shoved a thousand-franc note under his nose and the guy drove off immediately.
We couldn't believe it, it was like magic! Suddenly, we were all excited to get out of the dead end together. The twins kept repeating: "Where are we going? Where are we going? Where are we going?"

"That's a surprise," replied Francis mysteriously.

A blast of hot air rushed into the car. Armand had his arm hanging out of the taxi, waving his hand in the breeze like an airplane. The city was bustling, the area around the market noisy, the bus station a tangle of bicycles and minibuses. You wouldn't have thought the country was at war. Heavy mango trees lined Prince Louis Rwagasore Avenue. Gino honked the taxi horn when we passed children from another neighborhood, busy picking mangoes with long poles. The taxi climbed into the hills above the city. The air was getting cooler. We passed the Prince's mausoleum, its large cross and three pointed arches in the colors of the national flag. On it, in capital letters, was the country's motto: "Unity, Work, Progress." We were already high enough to see the horizon. Bujumbura was shaped like a deckchair by the water. Like a seaside resort sprawling between the mountain ridge and Lake Tanganyika. We stopped in front of the Collège du Saint-Esprit, a large white building overlooking the city. We had never been so high up in Bujumbura. Francis gave the taxi driver another thousand francs, telling him to wait there.

When we entered the college grounds, large drops of warm water began to rain down, creating small craters in the dust and splashing our calves. A smell of damp earth rose from the ground. Because of the rain, the students were running for shelter in the classrooms and dormitories. Very quickly, we found ourselves alone in this

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Large, empty courtyard. We continued to follow Francis along the paths. I walked with my mouth open, and raindrops fell on my tongue, refreshing my palate. Behind a low wall, we discovered the swimming pool.
Unreal. A real Olympic-sized pool, with its large concrete diving board.
Immediately, Francis undressed completely and rushed into the pool.
Gino followed suit. Then we all stripped naked, even the modest Armand, and dove in, curled up with our knees drawn up to our chests. The rain lashed down in furious bursts on the surface of the water, occasionally pierced by a ray of sunshine. We were as happy as on the first day of love at first sight. In a frenzy of laughter, we exhausted ourselves swimming laps and silly races, pulling each other's legs underneath, and playfully drowning. Francis would stand on the edge of the pool and do backflips. The others were mesmerized, Gino most of all. His eyes shone at these physical feats. I felt a pang of jealousy.

"Are you capable of doing that from the high diving board?" asked Gino, overcome with admiration.

A crackling rain lashed our faces. Francis raised his head, then replied: – Are you

crazy! It's easily ten meters! I'm going to kill myself.

I didn't hesitate for a second. I wanted to show Gino that I was worth much more than Francis. I got out of the water and walked purposefully towards the tall ladder. It was slippery and its top was lost in the mist.
During my climb, water streamed down my face, preventing me from opening my eyes. I clung on with all my might, praying I wouldn't slip. The others stared at me as if I'd gone mad. When I reached the top, I stepped to the edge of the diving board. Below, my friends were incredulous. Their little heads floated on the water like balloons. I wasn't dizzy, but my heart began to pound abnormally fast. I wanted to turn back.

But then, I could already see Francis's reaction, his snickers, his sarcasm about the mother's children falling apart. And Gino would be disappointed, would side with him, would turn away from me, would forget our friendship and our blood pact.

From the top of the diving board, I could see Bujumbura, the vast plain, and the ancient mountains of Zaire on the other side of the blue expanse of Lake Tanganyika. I was naked above my city, and a tropical rain slid over me in heavy curtains, caressing my skin. Patches of silver rainbows fluttered in the soft clouds. I could hear my friends' voices:

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"Go on, Gaby! Come on, Gaby! Come on!" The fear returned. The one that had always delighted in paralyzing me. I turned my back to the pool. My heels were now dangling in mid-air. I peed myself with fear, the yellow liquid wrapping itself like ivy around my leg. To give myself courage, I let out a loud Sioux yell over the cascading downpour. Then my legs buckled like springs and propelled me backward. My body spun in mid-air, the movement perfect, controlled by some mysterious force. Afterward, I simply felt myself falling like a ridiculous puppet. I no longer knew where I was when the water surprised me, welcoming me into its cottony arms, enveloping me like a hare in the warmth of its eddies and ticklish air bubbles. Having reached the bottom of the pool, I lay down on the tiles to savor my achievement.

When I came back up, it was a triumph! My friends rushed towards me, chanting, "Gaby! Gaby!" The surface of the water had become a drumbeat. Gino raised my arm like a victorious boxer, Francis kissed my forehead. I could feel their bodies gliding against me, brushing against me, squeezing me, embracing me. I had done it! For the second time in my life, I had conquered this damned fear. I longed to shed this grotesque shell.

The old school caretaker came and chased us out of the pool. We gathered our soaking wet clothes, ran away with our bare bottoms hanging out, laughing until we were breathless. The taxi driver also burst into laughter when he saw us climb into his vehicle, stark naked. Night had fallen, and it was raining. The car, headlights blazing, began its slow descent down the winding roads of the Kiriri neighborhood. To see the city, we had to wipe the condensation off the windows with our underwear. Bujumbura was now a plantation of lights, a field of fireflies illuminating the opacity of the plain. On the radio, Geoffrey Oryema was singing "Makambo." His voice was a moment of pure grace, melting like sugar into our souls, soothing us from our overwhelming happiness. We had never felt so free, so alive, from head to toe, in perfect harmony, connected by the same veins, nourished by the same voluptuous fluid. I regretted what I had once thought of Francis. He was like us, like me, a simple child doing the best he could in a world that gave him no choice.

A veritable deluge was pouring down on Bujumbura. The gutters overflowed, carrying muddy, garbage-laden water from the city's highest point down to the lake. Windshield wipers were practically useless, their breaths spinning futilely across the windshield. In the pitch-black night, the headlights of the cars

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They swept across the road, coloring the raindrops yellow and white. We were heading back towards the dead end, to the starting point of this crazy afternoon.

We were on the Muha Bridge when the taxi suddenly braked. No one expected it, we bumped into each other, thrown forward.

Francis's head hit the dashboard. When he got up, a little blood was running from his nose. Before we could even collect ourselves, the taxi driver's demeanor chilled us to the bone. He was frozen in place. His hands were paralyzed on the steering wheel, his terrified eyes fixed on the road, and he kept repeating: "Sheitani! Sheitani! Sheitani!"
The devil.

Ahead of us, in the darkness, a little beyond the light of the headlights, we saw the shadow of a black horse pass by.

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On the morning of April 7, 1994, the telephone rang unanswered.
Dad hadn't come home during the night. I didn't answer: –
Hello?

- Hello ?

– Is that you, Mom?

– Gaby, put your father on the phone.

– He's not here.
– Comment ?

She paused. I could hear her breathing.

- I'm coming.

As in the aftermath of the coup, there was nobody in the plot.
Neither Prothé, nor Donatien, nor even the sentry. Everyone had disappeared.
Mom arrived quickly on her motorbike. She still had her helmet on as she raced up the steps of the barza four at a time to embrace Ana and me. Mom's movements were frantic. She made tea in the kitchen, then came and sat down in the living room. She held her cup with both hands, blowing on the fragrant steam rising from it.

– Does your father often leave you alone?
The moment I answered no, Ana said yes.
"Papa wasn't there on the night of the coup," Ana blurted out, as if settling scores.

"Bastard!" shouted Mom.
When Dad arrived and walked into the living room, he didn't say hello to anyone. He simply seemed surprised to find Mom sitting on the

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couch.

– What are you doing here, Yvonne?

– Aren't you ashamed to leave your children alone all night?

– Ah, I see... You want to talk about it? Really? You left the marital home, so you are certainly the least qualified to make accusations.

Mother closed her eyes. She lowered her head. She began to deny everything before wiping her nose with her blouse sleeve. Father glared at her, ready to fight. When she turned to us, her eyes were red with tears. She said, "The presidents of Burundi and Rwanda

were killed last night. The plane they were on was shot down over Kigali."

Dad slumped into an armchair. Dazed.

Jeanne and Pacique aren't answering. Neither is Aunt Eusébie. I need your help, Michel. In Bujumbura,

the situation was calm despite the news of the attack and the death of the new president. Papa contacted the gendarmes at the French embassy while Mama desperately tried to reach her family in Rwanda. Late in the afternoon, Aunt Eusébie finally answered. Papa followed the conversation on the phone's receiver.

“Yvonne!” exclaimed Eusébie. “Yvonne, is that you? No, I’m not well at all. We heard the plane explode last night. A few minutes later, on the radio, they announced the president’s death, accusing the Tutsis of being responsible for the attack. The Hutu population was called upon to take up arms in retaliation. I understood that this was their signal to eliminate us. They wasted no time setting up roadblocks everywhere. Since then, the militias and the presidential guard have been roaming the city, combing through the neighborhoods, entering the homes of Tutsis and Hutu opponents, massacring entire families, sparing no one. Our neighbors and their children were killed this morning at dawn, right there, behind the fence. It was awful, my God…”

We watched their agony, powerless to do anything. We are terrified. Lying on the floor inside the house. We can hear machine gun fire all around us. What can I possibly do, alone with my four children? Yvonne, what will happen to us? And my contact at the United Nations isn't answering. I have little hope...

Her voice was breathless. Mother tried to reassure her as best she could:

"Don't say that, Eusebia! I'm with Michel, we're going to contact the French embassy in Kigali. Don't worry. I'm sure Pacique is already on her way."

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to recover. If you can, try to take refuge at the Holy Family Church. The killers don't attack churches; remember the pogroms of 1963 and 1964. We survived that way; they are sanctuaries they don't dare desecrate...

"Impossible. The neighborhood is surrounded. I can't risk going out with the children. I've made my decision. I'll pray with them, then I'll hide them in the false ceiling, then I'll go get help. But I'd rather say goodbye now. It's better this way. We have little chance of getting out of this this time. They hate us too much. They want to kill us once and for all. They've been talking about eliminating us for thirty years."

It's time for them to put their plan into action. There is no more pity in their hearts. We are already underground. We will be the last Tutsi.
After us, I beg you, invent a new country. I must leave you.
Goodbye my sister, goodbye... Live on for us... I take your love with me...

When Mom put the receiver down, she was in a state of shock, her teeth were chattering, her hands were trembling. Dad took her in his arms to calm her down. She quickly recovered, asked Dad to dial another number, then a
another one, and yet another...

For days and nights, they took turns on the phone, trying to contact the United Nations, the French embassy, and the Belgian embassy.

"We are only evacuating Westerners," their interlocutors replied coldly.

"And their dogs and cats too!" Mama yelled in response, beside herself.

As the hours, days, and weeks passed, the news reaching us from Rwanda confirmed what Pacique had predicted a few weeks earlier. Throughout the country, Tutsis were being systematically and methodically massacred, liquidated, and eliminated.

Mother wasn't eating anymore. Mother wasn't sleeping anymore. At night, she would quietly get out of bed. I could hear her pick up the living room phone. Dialing Jeanne's and Aunt Eusébie's numbers for the thousandth time. In the morning, I would find her asleep on the sofa, the receiver next to her ear, the line ringing unanswered.

Every day, the list of the dead grew longer; Rwanda had become a vast hunting ground where the Tutsi was the prey. A human being guilty of being born, guilty of existing. Vermin in the eyes of the killers, a cockroach to be crushed. Mama felt powerless, useless. Despite her determination and the energy she expended, she couldn't save anyone.

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She witnessed the disappearance of her people, her family, without being able to do anything. She was losing her grip, drifting away from us and from herself. She was being eaten away from the inside. Her face was becoming contorted, heavy bags were encircling her eyes, and wrinkles were deepening her forehead.

The curtains in the house remained permanently drawn. We lived in silhouette. The radio blared loudly in the large, dark rooms, broadcasting cries of distress, calls for help, unbearable suffering amidst sports results, stock market reports, and the minor political commotion that made the world go round.

In Rwanda, this thing that wasn't war lasted three long months. I no longer remember what we did during that time. I don't remember school, my friends, or our daily lives. At home, the four of us were together again, but a huge black hole swallowed us and our memories. From April to July 1994, we experienced the genocide unfolding in Rwanda from a distance, within four walls, next to a telephone and a radio.

The first news arrived in early June. Pacique called Mamie's house. He was alive. He hadn't heard from anyone. But he knew that his army, the RPF, was going to take Gitarama and that he could be at Jeanne's house within the week. This information gave us a little hope.

Mother managed to find a few distant relatives and a handful of friends. Their stories were always harrowing, and their survival seemed nothing short of a miracle.

The RPF was gaining ground. The Rwandan Armed Forces and the genocidal government were in disarray, forced to flee the capital. The French army had launched a large-scale humanitarian operation called "Turquoise" to stop the genocide and secure part of the country. Mama said it was a final, underhanded move by France, which was coming to the aid of its Hutu allies.

In July, the RPF arrived in Kigali. Mama, Mamie, and Rosalie left immediately for Rwanda, searching for Aunt Eusébie, her children, Jeanne and Pacique, their family, and friends. They were returning to their country after thirty years of exile. They had dreamed of this return, especially old Rosalie. She had wanted to spend her days on the land of her ancestors. But the Rwanda of milk and honey had vanished. It was now a charnel house in the open air.

open.

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The school year was drawing to a close. In Bujumbura, the first departures linked to the country's political situation were beginning. The twins' father had decided to return to France, for good. The news had hit them like a ton of bricks, overnight. We said goodbye in front of their house. Too quickly. Their car left the cul-de-sac in a cloud of dust. So Francis had the idea of taking a taxi to the airport to say a final goodbye. We arrived just before they boarded.

We kissed. I made them promise to write to me. They swore: "In the name of God!"

The twins left a void behind them. In the beginning, when we'd all hang out in the Volkswagen van in the vacant lot, we felt the absence of Armand's laughter and stories in our afternoons. Their departure mostly gave Francis more space. Talking was all we knew how to do now. We'd sit for hours on the van's bench seat, listening to an old Peter Tosh cassette, smoking cheap cigarettes, and sucking on the beers and Fantas Francis bought us at the kiosk. When I suggested a fishing trip, a ride in the river, or picking mangoes, the guys would tell me to get lost; it had become child's play, we were too old for that.

"We need to find a real band name," said Gino.

– But we already have one! The Kinanira Boyz.
Gino and Francis snickered stupidly.

– That name is pathetic!

"I remind you that it was you who found it, Gino," I said, annoyed.

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“Anyway, we shouldn’t say ‘band’ anymore. We talk about ‘gangs’ now,” Francis said. “Buja is the city of gangs, like Los Angeles or New York. There’s one in every neighborhood. In Bwiza, it’s the ‘Sans Défaite’ (Without Defeat), in Ngagara the ‘Sans Échec’ (Without Failure), in Buyenzi the ‘Six Garages’…”

– Yeah, yeah, there are also the “Chicago Bulls” and the “Sans Capote,” said Gino, as if he were starting to rap.

"We will be Kinanira's gang," said Francis, taking a drag.
Let me explain how it works. The gangs are armed, structured, and hierarchical. They control the roadblocks during the ghost towns. Everyone respects them. Even the military leaves them alone.

"But we're not going to participate in the ghost towns, are we, guys?" asked Armand.

"We have to protect the neighborhood," replied Gino.

"With my father, if I go outside on a day when the city is dead, it's not just the city that will be dead, my friend," Armand smiled.

“Don’t worry, we’re not going to set up roadblocks right away,” said Francis, who was starting to think he was our leader. “I just want us to be on good terms with the ‘Without Defeat’ who are blocking the Muha bridge. We have to show them we’re with them, lend them a hand from time to time, so we can continue to move around the neighborhood without any problems and they’ll protect us if necessary.”

"I want nothing to do with all those murderers," I said. "The only thing they know how to do is kill poor boys coming home from work."

"They kill Hutus, Gaby, and the Hutus kill us!" Gino replied. "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, you know? It's even written in the Bible."

– The Bible? Never heard of it! I know the ndombolo song: “An eye for an eye, One hundred percent! One hundred percent! Oh! Oh! Oh!”

"Stop it, Armand!" I said, annoyed. "There's nothing funny about it."

"Did you see what they did to our families in Rwanda, Gaby?" Gino continued.
If we don't protect ourselves, they're the ones who will kill us, like they killed my mother.

Francis was blowing smoke rings over our heads. Armand stopped clowning around. I wanted to tell Gino he was wrong, that he was generalizing, that if we took revenge every time, the war would be endless, but I was disturbed by what he had just revealed about his mother. I thought to myself that his grief was stronger than his reason. Suffering is a wild card in the game of argument; it sweeps aside all other arguments. In a way, it's unfair.

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"Gino is right. In war, no one can be neutral!" said Francis with a know-it-all air that irritated me to the highest degree.

"You can talk, you're from Zaire," said Armand, bursting into laughter.

– Yeah, I'm from Zaire, but a Tutsi from Zaire.

– Well, here's something else!

– They call us the Banyamulenge. – Never heard of that either, said Armand.

"And what if we don't want to choose a side?" I asked.

"We have no choice, we all have a side," said Gino, with a hostile smile.

These discussions bored me, this violence that fascinated Francis and Gino. I decided to go to the hideout less often. I even started avoiding my friends and their war-mongering. I needed to breathe, to clear my head. For the first time in my life, I felt trapped in the dead end, this familiar space where my worries went around in circles.

One afternoon, I happened to run into Mrs. Economopoulos in front of her bougainvillea hedge. We exchanged a few words about the rainy season and the good weather, then she invited me into her house to offer me a glass of passion fruit juice. In her large living room, my gaze was immediately drawn to the paneled bookcase that covered one entire wall of the room. I had never seen so many books in one place. From floor to ceiling.

"Have you read all these books?" I asked.

– Yes. Some of them several times, even. They are the great loves of my life. They make me laugh, cry, doubt, and reflect. They allow me to escape. They have changed me, made me a different person.

– Can a book change us?

– Of course, a book can change you! Even change your life. Like love at first sight. And you never know when that encounter will happen. You have to be wary of books; they are sleeping geniuses.

My fingers ran along the shelves, caressing the covers, their textures so different from one another. I silently recited the titles I read. Mrs. Economopoulos watched me without saying anything, but when I lingered particularly on one book, intrigued by the title, she encouraged me.

– Take it, I'm sure you'll like it.

That evening, before going to bed, I borrowed a flashlight from one of the drawers of Dad's desk. Under the covers, I began to read the novel,

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The story of an old fisherman, a little boy, a big fish, a gang of sharks... As I read, my bed transformed into a boat, I could hear the lapping of the waves hitting the edge of the mattress, I could feel the sea air and the wind pushing the sail of my sheets.

The next day, I returned the book to Mrs. Economopoulos.
– You've already finished it? Well done, Gabriel! I'll lend you another one.
The following night, I could hear the sound of horseshoes crossing, the galloping of horses, the rustling of knights' capes, the rustling of a princess's lace dress.

Another day, I was in a cramped room, hiding with a teenage girl and her family in a war-torn, ruined city. She let me read over her shoulder the thoughts she wrote in her diary. She spoke of her fears, her dreams, her loves, her life before. I felt as if she were writing about me, as if I could have written those lines myself.

Every time I brought her a book, Mrs. Economopoulos wanted to know what I thought of it. I wondered what it mattered to her. At first, I would briefly tell her the story, a few significant events, and the names of the places and characters. I could see she was pleased, and above all, I wanted her to lend me another book so I could read it in my room and devour it.

And then, I started telling her what I was feeling, the questions I had, my opinion about the author or the characters. That way, I continued to savor my book, I extended the story. I got into the habit of visiting her every afternoon. Thanks to my reading, I had broken down the barriers of the impasse; I could breathe again, the world stretched further, beyond the fences that had confined us to ourselves and our fears. I no longer went to the hideout; I no longer wanted to see my friends, to listen to them talk about the war, the dead cities, the Hutus and the Tutsis. With Mrs. Economopoulos, we would sit in her garden under a jacaranda mimosa tree. On her wrought-iron table, she would serve tea and warm biscuits. We would discuss for hours the books she placed in my hands. I discovered that I could talk about an infinite number of things hidden deep inside me, things I hadn't known I knew. In this verdant haven, I learned to identify my tastes, my desires, my way of seeing and feeling the universe. Mrs. Economopoulos gave me confidence, never judged me, and had a gift for listening and reassuring me. After a good chat, as the afternoon faded into the light of sunset, we would wander around her garden like a pair of strange lovers. I had

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The feeling was of walking beneath the vault of a church; the birdsong was a whisper of prayers. We paused before its wild orchids, strolling among the hibiscus hedges and the budding of the common cus. Its flowerbeds were sumptuous feasts for the sunbirds and bees of the neighborhood. I gathered dried leaves at the foot of the trees to make bookmarks. We walked slowly, almost in slow motion, dragging our feet through the lush grass, as if to hold back time, while the dead-end street gradually became shrouded in night.

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Mom returned from Rwanda on the first day of school. It was the day after a "ghost town" day. The road to school was littered with the charred remains of cars, blocks of stone on the road, and melted or smoking tires. Whenever a body lay on the side of the road, Dad ordered us to look away.

The school principal, accompanied by gendarmes from the French embassy, gathered us under the large covered playground to explain the new security instructions. The bougainvillea bushes surrounding the school had been replaced by a high brick wall to protect us from stray bullets that sometimes found their way into the classrooms.

A profound anxiety had descended upon the city. Adults sensed the imminence of new dangers. They feared the situation would degenerate as it had in Rwanda. So, people barricaded themselves in ever more, and this season of violence resulted in a proliferation of fences, security guards, alarms, barriers, gates, and barbed wire. A whole array of reassuring measures persuaded us that we could ward off violence, keep it at bay. We lived in this strange atmosphere, neither peace nor war. The values we were accustomed to no longer held sway. Insecurity had become as commonplace as hunger, thirst, or heat. Fury and bloodshed mingled with our daily lives.

One day, during rush hour, I witnessed the lynching of a man in front of the main post office. Dad was in the car. He'd sent me to get the mail from our mailbox. I was crossing my fingers, hoping to hear from Laure. Three young men walking past me suddenly attacked a man, for no apparent reason. They threw stones at him. At the corner of the street, two

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The police officers watched the scene without moving. Passersby stopped for a moment, as if to enjoy some free entertainment. One of the three assailants went to retrieve the large stone from under the frangipani tree, the one on which cigarette and chewing gum vendors used to sit.
The man was trying to get up when the large rock smashed his head. He collapsed full-length onto the asphalt. His chest rose and fell three times beneath his shirt. Quickly. He was gasping for air. And then nothing. The attackers left, as calmly as they had arrived, and passersby continued on their way, avoiding the corpse as one might steer around a traffic cone. The whole city stirred, carrying on with its activities, its shopping, its daily routine. Traffic was heavy, minibuses honked their horns, small vendors offered sachets of water and peanuts, lovers hoped to find love letters in their postbox, a child bought white roses for his sick mother, a woman negotiated cans of tomato paste, a teenager left the barber's with a fashionable haircut, and, for some time now, men had been murdering others with impunity, under the same midday sun as before.

We were at the table when we saw Jacques' car enter the property. Mom got out of the Range Rover. We hadn't heard from her in two months. She was unrecognizable. She had lost weight.
A loincloth was crudely tied around her waist, she was wearing a brownish shirt, and her bare feet were covered in grime. She was no longer the elegant and refined young city girl we knew; she looked like a muddy peasant woman returning from her bean field. Ana darted down the steps and jumped into her arms. Mama was so unsteady she almost fell backward.

I saw her drawn features, her yellow and dark-circled eyes, her thin skin. The open collar of her shirt revealed patches of pimples on her body. She had grown old.

"I found Yvonne in Bukavu," said Jacques. "I was on my way to Buja and I bumped into her by chance, on the outskirts of the city."
Jacques didn't dare look at her. As if she repulsed him. He talked to relieve his embarrassment while pouring himself shots of whiskey. The heat caused large beads of sweat to appear on his forehead. He dabbed his face with a thick cloth handkerchief.

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– Normally, Bukavu is already a right mess, but now you wouldn't believe your eyes, Michel, it's beyond unthinkable. A human dumping ground.
Miserable squalor on every square inch. One hundred thousand refugees in the streets! It's total suffocation. Not a single patch of sidewalk available. And the exodus continues, thousands arrive every day. A real hemorrhage. Rwanda is dripping down our throats, two million women, children, old people, goats, Interahamwe, former army officers, ministers, bankers, priests, cripples, innocents, guilty parties, and so on and so forth...
Everything humanity can bear, from ordinary people to the most despicable. They left behind scavenging dogs, mutilated cows, and a million dead on the hillside to come and feed on our famine and cholera. It makes you wonder how Kivu will ever recover from this goddamn mess!

Prothé was serving Maman mashed potatoes and beef, when Ana asked the question that concerned us all: – Have you found Aunt Eusebie and the cousins?

Mom shook her head. We hung on her every word. She didn't say anything. I wanted to ask Pacique the same question, but Dad waved me off to wait a bit. Mom chewed her food slowly, like a sick old woman. With tired movements, she took her glass of water, swallowed small sips. She kneaded some breadcrumbs, made little balls, and placed them methodically in front of her plate. She didn't look at us; she was absorbed in her food. When she belched loudly, we all stopped to stare at her, even Prothé, who was starting to clear the table. As if nothing had happened, she took another sip of water and then swallowed a piece of bread. This demeanor, this attitude—it couldn't be her... Dad wanted to make contact but didn't know how to do it without upsetting her. He didn't need to. Mother began to talk about herself, in a calm and slow voice, like when she used to tell me legends to help me fall asleep when I was little: – I arrived in Kigali on July 5th. The city had just been liberated by the RPF.

Along the road, an endless trail of corpses littered the ground. Sporadic gunfire could be heard. RPF soldiers were killing hordes of dogs that had been feeding on human flesh for three months. Dazed survivors wandered the streets. I arrived at Aunt Eusebia's gate. It was open. When I entered the property, I wanted to turn back because of the smell. I nevertheless found the courage to

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I continued. In the living room, there were three children on the floor. I found the fourth body, Christian's, in the hallway. I recognized him because he was wearing a Cameroon national football team jersey. I looked everywhere for Aunt Eusébie. No trace of her. No one in the neighborhood could help me. I was alone. I had to bury the children myself in the garden. I stayed in the house for a week. I kept thinking Aunt Eusébie would come back. When she still hadn't returned, I decided to go looking for Pacique.
I knew his first act would be to go to Gitarama to find Jeanne. When I arrived at her house, it had been looted, but there was no sign of Jeanne or her family. The next day, an RPF soldier told me that Pacique was in prison. I went there, but they wouldn't let me see him. I returned for three days. On the morning of the fourth, one of the guards took me behind the prison, to a football field at the edge of a banana grove. RPF soldiers were guarding the area. Pacique was there, sprawled in the grass. He had just been shot. The guard told me that upon arriving in Gitarama, Pacique had discovered his entire in-law family and his wife murdered in their courtyard. Tutsi neighbors who had escaped the massacre accused a group of Hutus, still in town, of having committed the crime. Pacique found them in the central square. Jeanne's father's hat was on one of the men's heads. A woman in the group was wearing the florin' dress that Pascale had given Jeanne for their wedding. My brother felt himself going mad. He emptied his gun's magazine into the four people. He was immediately court-martialed and sentenced to death.

When I found Mamie and Rosalie in Butare, I lied to them. I said he had fallen in battle, for the country, for us, for our return. They wouldn't have accepted the idea that he had been killed by his own people. An acquaintance who was returning from Zaire told us that she thought she recognized Aunt Eusébie in a camp near Bukavu. So I hit the road again and searched for her for a month. I walked, always further. I wandered through refugee camps. I nearly got killed dozens of times when people guessed I was Tutsi.
By some miracle, Jacques recognized me on the side of the road; I had lost all hope of finding Aunt Eusebia.
Mother fell silent. Father had his eyes closed, his head thrown back, and Ana was sobbing in his arms. Jacques poured himself another large glass of whiskey. He grumbled, "Africa, what a waste!"
I ran and locked myself in my room.

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From walking barefoot in the dead end, I had picked up a chigger under the sole of my foot. Prothé brought a small stool on which he placed my heel while Donatien burned the tip of a needle with a lighter: – You're not going to cry, Gaby?

said Donatien.

"No, Mr. Gabriel is a man now!" said Prothé, gently teasing me.

"Gently, Donatien!" I shouted when I saw him approaching with the needle. glowing red.

He removed the larva on the first try. The pain was sharp but bearable.

"Look at the size of that thing! I'll give you some disinfectant, and then you promise me you won't walk barefoot anymore. Not even in the house!"

Donatien dabbed my foot with antiseptic, and Prothé made sure I didn't have any more chewing gum. I watched these two men tending to me with a mother's tenderness. The war was ravaging their neighborhood, but they came to work almost every day and never let their fears or anxieties show.

"Is it true that the army killed people in your hometown of Kamenge?" I asked.

Donatien gently placed my foot back on the stool. Prothé came and sat beside him, crossed his arms, and watched black kites circling in the sky. Donatien began to speak in a weary voice.

– Yes, that's how it is. Kamenge is the epicenter of all the violence in this city. Every night, we sleep on burning embers and watch the suns rise above the land, suns so high they obscure the stars we loved to admire. And when the

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In the morning, we're amazed to still be here, to hear the rooster crow, to see the light on the hills. I wasn't quite a man when I left my parents' Zaire to flee our miserable village. I found my corner of happiness in Bujumbura; that city became mine. I lived my best years in Kamenge without realizing it, because I was constantly thinking about the next day, hoping that tomorrow would be better than yesterday. Happiness is only seen in the rearview mirror. The next day? Look at it. It's there. Crushing hopes, rendering the horizon meaningless, crumpling dreams. I prayed for us, Gaby, I prayed as many times as I could. The more I prayed, the more God abandoned us, and the more I had faith in his power. God makes us go through trials so that we prove to him that we don't doubt him. He seems to be telling us that true love is made of trust. We must not doubt the beauty of things, even under a torturous sky. If you are not amazed by the rooster's crow or by the light above the mountain ridges, if you do not believe in the goodness of your soul, then you no longer fight, and it is as if you were already dead.

"Tomorrow the sun will rise and we will try again," said Prothé, in conclusion.
The three of us were silent, lost in our dark thoughts, when Gino arrived.

– Gaby, come over! I need to show you something.
He was feverish. He pulled me off my stool and started running ahead of me. I followed him, limping, without asking any questions. I ran up the dead-end street as fast as I could and arrived at his house completely out of breath. Francis and Armand were sitting at the kitchen table. Gino went over to the refrigerator.
In the living room, you could hear the clattering of his father's typewriter.
"Go ahead now, open the freezer," said Gino, looking at us.
Armand and I.

Francis was in on it, you could tell. He was looking at Gino with a knowing look that made me fear the worst. Armand pulled the freezer handle. I didn't immediately understand what it was. I took one of the two objects in my hand.

– Shit! A grenade!
I immediately put it back, closed the door and moved back to the far end of the room.

“Guess how much we got the two grenades for?” Gino said excitedly, before continuing without even waiting for our answer. “Five thousand!” Francis knew the guy from “Sans Défaite.” He explained that we were also taking care of our neighborhood, and he gave us a discount. Normally, it’s twice as much.

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"But damn it, Gino, you've got some damn grenades in your fridge!" said Armand. You've gone completely crazy, I swear.

"What's your problem?" asked Francis, grabbing him by the collar.

"You bunch of lunatics!" Armand repeated, panicked. "You bought grenades to put next to a frozen beef stew and you're asking me if I have a problem?"

– Shut your mouth, Armand, my father might hear us. Let's go to the hideout.

Gino took the grenades out of the freezer, put them in a plastic bag, and we loaded them onto the Volkswagen van. Once inside the wreck, Francis took out the two explosives and hid them in the storage compartment under the back seat. When I lifted the seat, I saw a telescope.

"What's that thing doing here?" I asked Francis.

– I have a buyer. With the money, we can save up to buy a Kalashnikov. You can find them second-hand at the Jabe market.

"A Kalashnikov?" said Armand. "And why not an atomic bomb?"
Iranian?

– I know that telescope, it belongs to Mrs. Economopoulos. Did you steal it from her?

"Don't be a pain, Gaby," said Francis. "We don't care about that old hag. She probably didn't even realize it, with all the knick-knacks she hoards in her shack."

"We have to give it back to her right away!" I said. "She's a friend, I don't want her stolen."

"Spare us your emotional outbursts," said Gino. "You were stealing mangoes from her garden to resell them to her. You really fooled her, that Greek girl."

– That was before! And besides, mangoes aren't the same...

I wanted to take the telescope, but Gino pushed me back. When I came back for it, Francis grabbed me from behind and put me in an armlock.

"Leave me alone! I don't want to hang out with you anymore anyway. What's wrong with you, Gino? I don't recognize you anymore. Do you realize what you're doing?"

What about what you're becoming?

My voice was trembling, I was crying with rage. Gino replied, annoyed:

"Gaby, this is war. We're protecting our dead end. If we don't, they'll kill us. When are you going to understand? What world do you live in?"

– But we're just a bunch of kids. Nobody's asking us to fight, steal, or have enemies.

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“Our enemies are already here. They are the Hutus, and they don’t hesitate to kill children, that gang of savages. Look what they did to your cousins in Rwanda. We are not safe. We must learn to defend ourselves and fight back. What will you do when they back down? Will you offer them mangoes?”

“I’m neither Hutu nor Tutsi,” I replied. “That’s none of my business. You’re my friends because I love you, not because you’re from this or that ethnic group. I couldn’t care less about that!”

While we were bickering, we could hear the distant sounds of AMX-10 tanks firing from the hills. Over time, I learned to recognize their notes on the musical staff of the war that surrounded us. Some evenings, the sound of weapons blended with birdsong or the muezzin's call to prayer, and I sometimes found this strange soundscape beautiful, completely forgetting who I was.

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Since her return, Mom had been living at home. She slept in our room, on a mattress at the foot of my bed, and spent her days on the barza, staring into space. She didn't want to see anyone and didn't have the strength to go back to work. Dad said she needed time to recover from everything she'd been through.

In the morning, she would get up late. In the bathroom, you could hear the water running for hours. Then she would go to the sofa on the terrace and sit there, motionless, staring at a mason wasp nest on the ceiling. If anyone passed by, she would demand a beer. She refused to eat with us. Ana would prepare a plate for her and place it on a stool in front of her.
She didn't eat, she just nibbled. When night fell, she stayed alone on the terrace, in the dark. She would come to bed late, long after we had all been asleep. I couldn't accept her condition, couldn't stop looking for the mother I had once had in her. Genocide is an oil spill; those who didn't drown in it are coated in oil for life.

Sometimes, when I came back from Mrs. Economopoulos's house with my stack of books under my arm, I would sit down beside her and read to her. I tried to find stories that were neither too happy, which might remind her of the beautiful life we had lost, nor too sad, so as not to stir up her grief, that stagnant swamp of filth that lay dormant deep inside her. When I closed my book, she would give me a vacant look. I had become a stranger. So I would flee the terrace, terrified by the emptiness in her eyes.

One evening, returning to our room late at night, she woke me up by stubbing her toe on a chair. I saw her shadow stagger in the darkness.

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She was groping around, looking for Ana. At the edge of the bed, she leaned over my sister, whispering:

– What?

– Yes, Mom.

– Are you asleep, my darling?

– Yes, I was asleep...

My mother had the slurred voice of a drunkard.

– I love you, my baby, you know that?

– Yes, Mom. I love you too.

– I thought of you when I was there. I thought of you a lot, sweetheart.

– Me too, Mom, I thought of you.

– And your cousins, have you thought about them? The nice cousins you used to have fun with.

– Yes, I thought of that.

– That's good, that's good...

Then, after a short silence: – Do
you remember your cousins?

- Yes.

– When I arrived at Aunt Eusebia's house, they were the first thing I saw. Lying on the living room floor. For three months. Do you know what a body looks like after three months, my baby?

...

– It's nothing anymore. Just rot. I tried to pick them up, but I couldn't, they were slipping through my fingers. I gathered them up. Bit by bit.
They're now in the garden where you used to play. Under the tree, the one with the swing. Do you remember? Answer me. Tell me you remember. Tell me.

– Yes, I remember.

“But in the house, there were still those four stains on the floor. Big stains where they'd been for three months. With water and a sponge, I scrubbed and scrubbed and scrubbed. But the stains wouldn't come off. There wasn't enough water. I had to find some in the neighborhood. So I looked in the houses. I should never have gone into those houses. There are things you should never see in your life. For a little water, I had to do it.”

When I finally managed to fill a bucket, I would come back and continue scrubbing.
I was scratching at the ground with my nails, but their skin and blood had soaked into the cement. I carried their scent on me. That scent that will never leave me. No matter how much I wash, I'm still dirty, I smell of their death, always. And those three stains in the

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In the living room, it was Christelle, Christiane, Christine. And that stain in the hallway, that was Christian. And their handprints, I had to remove them before Aunt Eusebia came back. Because you understand, my darling, a mother can't see her children's blood in her house. So I scrubbed and scrubbed those stains that will never come out. They're still in the cement, in the stone, they're... I love you, my love...

And Mama, leaning over Ana, continued to tell this dreadful story in a long, breathless whisper. I crushed the pillow over my head.
I didn't want to know. I didn't want to hear anything. I wanted to curl up in a mouse hole, take refuge in a den, protect myself from the world at the end of my dead end, lose myself among beautiful memories, inhabit sweet novels, live deep within books.

The next morning, the first rays of sunlight beat against the windowpanes. It wasn't even six o'clock, and the heat was already unbearable. It promised a heavy storm later in the day. I opened my eyes; Mama was breathing heavily, sprawled on Ana's mattress, her feet hanging off the end of the bed, dressed in her faded loincloth and brownish shirt. I shook my sister awake. She was exhausted. We got ready for school with difficulty. In silence. I pretended I hadn't heard anything the night before. Mama was still asleep when Papa drove us to school. When I got back, I found her on the barza (a traditional Provençal garden). Her gaze was fixed on the wasps' nest.
Her eyes were red, and her hair was disheveled. Bubbles were rising in the glass of beer on the stool opposite her. I greeted her without waiting for a reply.

We ate dinner earlier than usual. The sky was threatening. The air thick with humidity. The heat unbearable. Dad and I were shirtless. On the table, next to my soup, I was squashing blood-engorged mosquitoes. We could hear bats flying overhead. They were leaving the kapok trees in the city center for a nighttime raid on the papaya trees bordering Lake Tanganyika. Ana was nodding her head, asleep standing up, exhausted from her short night. Behind the glass door of the living room, in the darkness, I could see Mom's somber figure, motionless, on the sofa on the terrace.

"Gaby, go turn on the neon light outside," Papa asked.
The little things he sometimes did for Mom warmed my heart. He still loved her. I pressed the switch, the light flashed rapidly, and then Mom's face appeared. Expressionless.

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The storm broke during the night, a torrential downpour drumming on the tin roof. The potholed road of the cul-de-sac transformed into a giant puddle. Water engulfed the gutters and drains. Lightning streaked across the sky, illuminated our room, and traced the shape of Mama above Ana's bed. She had woken her to tell her again about the stains on the floor. Her voice was sinister. Cavern-like. The stench of alcohol on her breath wafted through the room, reaching me. When Ana didn't answer her questions, Mama shook her violently before apologizing and whispering sweet nothings in her ear. Outside, an army of flying termites had emerged from the ground and were swarming hysterically around the white fluorescent lights.

We live. They are dead. Mother couldn't bear the thought. She was less mad than the world around us. I didn't blame her, but I was afraid for Ana. Every night now, Mother asked her to walk with her through her nightmares. I had to save Ana, to save us. I wanted Mother to leave, to leave us in peace, to rid our minds of the horrors she had lived through so that we could still dream, still have hope for life. I didn't understand why we had to suffer too.

I went to find Dad to tell him what had happened. I lied, exaggerated Mom's brutality to get a reaction out of him. He was beside himself, ferocious, when he went to confront her. The argument escalated. Mom regained a vigor we thought had vanished. She transformed into a fury, foaming at the corners of her mouth and her eyes bulging. She ranted and raved, insulting us in every language, accusing the French of being responsible for the genocide. She rushed at Ana, grabbed her arms, and started shaking her like a palm tree.

– You don't love your mother! You prefer those two Frenchmen, the murderers of your family!

Dad tried to snatch Ana from Mom's clutches. My sister was terrified. Mother's nails dug into her flesh, tearing at her skin.

"Help me, Gaby!" shouted Papa.

I didn't move, I was frozen. Dad gently separated Mom's fingers one by one. When he finally managed to make her let go, she turned around, grabbed an ashtray from the coffee table, and threw it in Ana's face. Her eyebrow split open, and blood began to flow. There was a moment of shock, then everything became a blur. Then Dad carried Ana to the car and rushed her to the emergency room. I

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I escaped on my own and took refuge in the VW van, waiting for nightfall to return home. When I came back, Mom was gone, vanished.
Dad and Jacques spent days scouring the city to find her, calling her family, her friends, hospitals, police stations, morgues. All in vain. I felt guilty for having wanted her gone. I was a coward, and a selfish one at that. I built my happiness into a fortress and my naiveté into a chapel. I wanted life to leave me untouched, while Mom, at the risk of her own life, had gone to the gates of Hell to find her loved ones. She would have done the same for Ana and me. Without hesitation. I knew it. I loved her. And now that she was gone, her wounds and all, she left us with ours.

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Dear Christian, I

waited for you for the Easter holidays. Your bed was ready, next to mine. Above it, I had pinned up some pictures of footballers. I had made some space in my closet so you could put your clothes and your ball there. I was ready to welcome you.

You will not come.

There are many things I haven't had time to tell you. I realize, for example, that I've never told you about Laure. She's my eldest daughter. She doesn't know it yet. I'm planning to ask her to marry me. Very soon. Once there's peace. Laure and I talk by letter. Letters sent by plane. Paper storks traveling between Africa and Europe. It's the first time I've fallen in love with a girl. It's a strange feeling. Like a knot in my stomach. I don't dare tell my friends; they'd laugh at me. They'd say I'm in love with a ghost. Because I've never even seen her, this girl.

But I don't need to meet her to know that I love her. Our letters are enough for me.

I've been slow to write to you. I've been too busy lately trying to be a kid again. My friends worry me. They drift further away from me every day. They bicker over grown-up things, invent enemies and reasons to fight. I understand better now why my father forbade Ana and me from getting involved in politics. He seems tired, Dad. I find him distant. Aloof. He's built up a thick iron shell so that the meanness bounces right off him. But deep down, I know he's as tender as the pulp of a ripe guava.

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Mother never came back from your house. She left her soul in your garden.
She has locked her heart. She has gone mad, like the world that has swept you away.

I've been meaning to write to you for a while. I've been listening to a cacophony of voices telling me so many things... My radio was saying that the Nigerian team—the one you supported—won the Africa Cup of Nations. My great-grandmother said that the people we love never truly die as long as we keep thinking of them. My father said that the day men stop waging war, it will snow in the tropics. Madame Economopoulos said that words are truer than reality. My biology teacher said that the earth is round. My friends said that we had to choose sides. My mother said that you're sleeping soundly, wearing the football jersey of your favorite team.

And you, Christian, you will never say anything again.

Gaby

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Lying on the tiled patio, her felt-tip pens and colored pencils scattered around her, Ana drew burning cities, armed soldiers, bloodied machetes, and torn flags. The smell of pancakes filled the air. Prothé cooked while listening to the radio at full blast. The dog slept peacefully at my feet. He woke up from time to time to frantically nibble at his paw. Green flies buzzed around his muzzle. Sitting in the spot Mama liked to occupy on the patio, I was reading *The Child and the River*, a book lent to me by Mrs. Economopoulos. I heard the iron chain on the gate snap. When I stood up, I saw the five men coming back up the driveway. One of them had a Kalashnikov. He was the one who told us to leave the house. He gave his orders from the barrel of his rifle.

Prothé raised his arms in the air, and Ana and I imitated him. The men ordered us to kneel, with our hands behind our heads.

"Where's the boss?" asked the man with the Kalashnikov.

"He is traveling in the north of the country for a few days," said Prothé.

The men stared at us. They were young. Some of them were familiar to me. I must have seen them at the kiosk.

"You, the Hutu, where do you live?" the man continued, addressing Prothé.

"I've been on this plot of land for a month," said Prothé. "I sent my family to Zaire because of the insecurity. I sleep here."

He pointed to the small corrugated iron shack at the back of the garden.

"We don't want any Hutus in the neighborhood," said the man with the Kalashnikov. "Is that understood? We'll let you work during the day, but in the evening you go home."

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– I can’t go back to my neighborhood, chief, my house burned down.

Don't complain. You're lucky to still be alive. Your boss is French and, like all Frenchmen, he prefers Hutus. But this isn't Rwanda; they're not going to come and impose their will. We're the ones who decide.
He stepped towards Prothe and shoved the barrel of his gun into his mouth.

"So by the end of the week, either you leave the neighborhood, or we'll deal with you. As for the two of you, tell your father that we don't want you French in Burundi. You killed us in Rwanda."
Before taking the weapon from Prothé's mouth, the man spat on us. Then he nodded to the rest of the group, and they left the property. We waited a long time before getting up. Then we sat on the steps of the house. Prothé said nothing. His dejected gaze was fixed on the ground. Ana went back to drawing, as if nothing had happened. After a while, she looked up at me: "Gaby, why did Mama accuse us of killing our family in Rwanda?"

I had no answer to give my little sister. I had no explanation for the deaths of some and the hatred of others. Perhaps that was what war was: understanding nothing.

Sometimes I thought of Laure, I wanted to write to her, and then I gave up. I didn't know what to say; everything seemed so confusing. I was waiting for things to improve a little, so I could tell her everything in a long letter and make her smile like before. But for now, the country was a zombie, walking bare-tongued over sharp stones. We were getting used to the idea of dying at any moment. Death was no longer something distant and abstract. It had the banal face of everyday life. Living with this lucidity finished off the childlike part of ourselves.

The city-wide shutdowns were multiplying in Bujumbura. From dusk till dawn, explosions echoed through the neighborhood. The night glowed with the light of fires that rose in thick smoke above the hills.
We were so used to the bursts of gunfire and the rattle of automatic weapons that we didn't even bother sleeping in the hallway anymore. Lying in my bed, I could admire the spectacle of tracer bullets in the sky. In other times, in other places, I would have thought I was seeing night stars.

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I found the silence far more terrifying than the sound of gunfire. Silence breeds knife violence and nocturnal intrusions that you don't even sense coming. Fear had taken root in my spine, and it wouldn't budge. At times, I trembled like a wet puppy, shivering with cold. I stayed holed up at home. I no longer dared venture into the dead end. Sometimes I would cross the street, very quickly, to borrow a new book from Mrs. Economopoulos. Then I would immediately return to the bunker of my imagination. In my bed, deep within my stories, I searched for other, more bearable realities, and books, my friends, repainted my days with light. I told myself that the war would eventually pass, one day I would lift my eyes from my pages, I would leave my bed and my room, and Mama would be back, in her beautiful eurie dress, her head resting on Papa's shoulder, Ana would draw again red brick houses with smoking chimneys, fruit trees in the gardens and big bright suns, and the friends would come to get me to go down the Muha River like in the old days on a banana tree trunk raft, sail to the turquoise waters of the lake and spend the day on the beach, laughing and playing like children.

No matter how much I hoped, reality stubbornly clung to my dreams. The world and its violence drew ever closer. Our dead-end street was no longer the haven of peace I'd hoped for ever since my friends decided we couldn't remain neutral. And even in my bunker-like bed, my friends and everyone else couldn't find me.

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The city was dead. Gangs blocked the main roads. Hatred was on full display. Another dark day was beginning in Bujumbura. Just one more.
Everyone was ordered to stay home. Confined. Rumor had it that anger had risen even further among the young Tutsi gangs that controlled the city because, the day before, Hutu rebels had burned Tutsi students alive at a gas station in the interior. The Tutsi gangs had decided to take revenge on any Hutu who dared venture outside. Papa had stocked up on supplies for several days. We were preparing for long days of waiting. I had gone to get my stash of books from Mrs. Economopoulos and was pouring myself a large glass of curdled milk before burying myself in bed to devour my stories, when I heard Gino scratching at the kitchen door.

"What are you doing here?" I whispered as I opened the door. "It's crazy to be out today."
– Stop constantly pinging, Gaby! Come over, something serious has happened.

He wouldn't tell me anything more, so I quickly took off my shoes. In the living room, I could hear Dad and Ana laughing as they watched cartoons.
I slipped out silently and followed Gino, who was dashing along like a rocket. We took a shortcut by climbing the fence and cutting across the international school's football pitch. Through an opening in the wire mesh, we entered Gino's property and crossed his garden. I heard the constant clatter of his father's Olivetti printing press. We jumped over the gate and turned right towards the end of the cul-de-sac. It was deserted. We walked up the driveway. There wasn't a soul in sight.

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We passed the closed kiosk. Then the cabaret. We turned left onto the vacant lot. The vegetation had grown and, from the road, we could no longer see the Volkswagen Combi.

Before opening the door to the hideout, I had a bad feeling, something telling me to go home, to go back to my books. Gino didn't give me time to think, he slid the door shut.

Armand was slumped on the dusty seat of the VW van, his clothes covered in blood. Sobs violently shook his chest. Between spasms, he let out a high-pitched groan. Gino, his brow furrowed, gnashed his teeth, and small bursts of anger twitched his nostrils. "His father was ambushed last night in the dead-end street. Armand just got home from the hospital."
He succumbed to his injuries. That's it.

My legs gave way, I grabbed onto the passenger seat headrest as best I could. My head was spinning. Gino, looking nasty, got out of the van and went to sit outside on an old tire filled with stagnant water.
He hid his face in his hands. Dazed, I watched Armand sobbing, his clothes stained with his father's blood. This father he feared as much as he revered him. People had come to murder him in our dead-end street. In our haven of peace. The last vestiges of hope I had left had just vanished. This country was a death trap. I felt like a panicked animal in the midst of a raging bushfire. The last barrier had been breached. War had burst into our home.

– Who did this?

Armand gave me a hostile look.

– Hutus, of course! Who else would it be? They had planned their attack.
They had been waiting for him for several hours in front of our gate, with a basket of vegetables. They pretended to be market gardeners from Bugarama. They stabbed him in front of the house, before calmly leaving, joking.
I was there, I saw everything.

Armand started sobbing again. Gino stood up and began punching the vehicle repeatedly. Enraged, he grabbed an iron bar and smashed the windshield and mirrors of the van. I watched him do it.
Haggard.

Francis arrived, looking grim. He was wearing a bandana like Tupac Shakur. He said: – Come back, they're
waiting for us.

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Gino and Armand followed him without saying a word.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"We're going to protect our neighborhood, Gaby," replied Armand, wiping his snot with the back of his hand.

Normally, I would have turned back. But the war was now in our midst, a direct threat to us and our families. With Armand's father murdered, I had no choice. Gino and Francis had often criticized me for wanting to believe these problems didn't concern me. Events proved them right. Death, insidious as ever, had come right into our dead end. There is no sanctuary on earth. I lived here, in this city, in this country. I couldn't do otherwise. I moved forward with my friends.

The dead-end street was silent. The only sound was the crunch of gravel under our shoes. The residents huddled in their homes like toads in their burrows. There wasn't a breath of wind. Nature had fallen silent. At the end of the road, a taxi was waiting, its engine purring. Francis signaled us to get in. The driver wore sunglasses and had a scar on his left cheek. He was smoking marijuana. Francis greeted him, fist bump, in the Rasta manner. The car started slowly. We had barely gone a few meters when it stopped at the entrance to the Muha Bridge. There stood the main roadblock for the neighborhood, manned by young men from the "Sans Défaite" gang.

Behind a row of barbed wire blocking the road, tires were burning.
Thick black smoke obscured what was happening in the middle of the bridge. A group of young people were shouting, attacking a lifeless, black mass on the ground with baseball bats and large rocks. They seemed to be enjoying themselves. When they saw us, some members of the gang came over. Francis called them all by their first names. I recognized the man with the Kalashnikov, the one who had come to our house and pointed a gun at us. When he saw Gino and me, he said, "What are these two white guys doing here?"

"It's all right, chief, they're with us, their mothers are Tutsi," said Francis.

The man examined us skeptically, hesitated. He gave a few instructions to the others and got into the back of the car, next to us, his Kalashnikov between his legs, the magazine covered with stickers of Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King and Gandhi.

"Drive on, driver!" he said, hitting the outer metal of the door.

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A young man removed the barbed wire from the road. The car carefully zigzagged between the stones scattered across the asphalt. The fumes of burning plastic stung our eyes and made us cough. When we reached the group milling about on the bridge, the man with the Kalashnikov ordered the driver to stop. The gang members stepped aside, laughing. A shiver ran through me. At their feet, on the hot tarmac, lay Attila, the black horse that had been traversed by the one stormy Von Gotzen family. He was in the very spot where we had glimpsed his shadow night, stretched out on the ground, his legs broken, his body crisscrossed with bloody wounds. The youths had let off steam. The horse raised his head and looked in my direction. His remaining eye stared intently at me.

The man with the Kalashnikov extended the barrel of his weapon through the car window, and the youths scattered. He shouted, "Bassi! That's enough!" and a burst of gunfire erupted. I jumped. Armand grabbed my shorts. The car drove off as the youths watched, clearly disappointed to lose the highlight of their day so quickly.

In the Kabondo district, the vehicle turned onto a bumpy track that ran alongside the river.

"Are you the son of the ambassador who was just killed?" asked the man with the Kalashnikov.

Armand nodded without looking at him. The taxi arrived at a laterite promontory overlooking the river. Huge kapok trees surrounded the area.
We got out of the car. Other young people from the neighborhood were there. Some well-to-do kids, whom I took for nice students, were armed with sticks and stones. A man, badly beaten, lay on the ground. Red dust covered his face and clothes, mingling with the clotted blood that was flowing from a wound on the top of his skull.

The man with the Kalashnikov, whom the others called Clapton, took Armand by the arm and said to him: –

This Hutu is one of your father’s assassins.

Armand didn't move. Clapton struck the first man, and the others followed suit. Blows rained down. Gino and Francis, caught up in the excitement, joined the fray. At that very moment, a motorcycle sped up, and two men wearing helmets with visors jumped off.

"He's the boss," said Clapton, and the whole band stopped hitting.

Francis turned to Armand and me to announce: – Hey, guys, hold on tight, it's the leader of the "Without Defeat" himself!

You're going to be blown away!

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The motorcycle passenger took off his helmet and gave it to the driver. When he saw me there, among the young men of his gang, in the middle of a dead-end town, next to that man groaning on the ground, I imagine he couldn't believe his eyes, Innocent.
He smiled.

– Hey, Gaby. Glad to see you among us.

I didn't answer. I was standing there, clenching my teeth and fists.

Then, the gang members tied the man to the ground, binding his arms behind his back. He struggled as best he could; it took several of them to finally restrain him. In the confusion, his ID slipped from his pocket and fell into the dust. After tying him up, the men carried him into the taxi. The driver, with the scar, took a can of gasoline from the trunk and poured it over the car seats and hood before closing the doors. The man screamed incessantly, cowering, begging us to spare him. Innocent pulled a lighter from his pocket. I recognized Jacques' Zippo, the one that had been stolen from him on my birthday, some time before the war, the silver one with the deer engraved on it. Innocent held out his hand to Armand.

– If you want to avenge your father...

Armand recoiled, making a terrible face, shaking his head in protest. Then Clapton stepped forward: "Boss,

let the little Frenchman prove to us that he's one of us."

Innocent smiled, surprised he hadn't thought of it himself. He approached me, the Zippo lighter still lit. My temples and heart were pounding. I looked my head right, left, searching for help. I looked for Gino and Francis in the group. When I met their gaze, I saw they wore the same deathly look as the others. Innocent clamped my hand over the lighter. He ordered me to throw it away. The man in the taxi was staring intently at me. My ears were ringing. Everything was blurring. The gang members were shoving me, hitting me, yelling near my face.

I could hear the distant voices of Gino and Francis, the cries of wild beasts, bursts of drunken hatred. Clapton was talking about Papa and Ana. I could barely make out his threats amidst the calls for murder and the surrounding hubbub.
Innocent got angry, said that if I didn't do it, he would go to the dead end himself and take care of my family. I saw the peaceful image of Papa and Ana lying on the bed, in front of the television. The image of their innocence, of all the innocences in this world struggling to walk on the edge of the abyss. And I felt pity for them, for myself, for the purity ruined by consuming fear.

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which transforms everything into malice, hatred, death. Into lava. Everything was around me, the shouts growing louder. The man in the taxi was a nearly dead horse. If there is no sanctuary on earth, is there one elsewhere?

I threw the Zippo lighter and the car burst into flames. A huge blaze shot up into the sky, licking the high branches of the kapok trees. Smoke billowed over the treetops. The man's screams ripped through the air. I vomited on my shoes and heard Gino and Francis pat me on the back and congratulate me.

Armand was crying. He was still crying, curled up like a fetus in the dust, long after everyone had left the site. We found ourselves alone in front of the charred wreckage. The place was calm, almost serene. The river flowed below. It was nearly dark. I helped Armand to his feet. We had to get home to the cul-de-sac. Before leaving, I searched through the dust and ashes. I found the identity card of the man who had just died.

That I had killed.

Machine Translated by Google

Dear Laure, I

no longer want to be a mechanic. There is nothing left to repair, nothing left to save, nothing left to understand.

It has been snowing in Bujumbura for days and nights.

Doves wander in a milky sky. Street children decorate fir trees with red, yellow, and green mangoes. Peasants hurtle down the hillside to the plain, racing down the main avenues on sleds made of iron and bamboo.

Lake Tanganyika is an ice rink where albino hippos glide on their soft underbelly.

It has been snowing in Bujumbura for days and nights.

The clouds are sheep in an azure meadow. The barracks of the hospitals are empty. The prisons of the schools are dusted with whitewash. The radio broadcasts the songs of rare birds. The people have unfurled their white flag, engaging in snowball fights in cotton fields. Laughter echoes, triggering avalanches of powdered sugar in the mountains.

It has been snowing in Bujumbura for days and nights.

Leaning against a tombstone, I share a cigarette with old Rosalie at Alphonse and Pacique's grave. Six feet under the ice, I hear them reciting love poems for the women they never had time to love, humming songs of friendship for comrades fallen in battle. A mist of blue-green escapes my lips, transforming into a myriad of white butterflies.

It has been snowing in Bujumbura for days and nights.

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The cabaret's drunken patrons drink warm milk in broad daylight from porcelain goblets. The vast sky fills with stars, twinkling like the lights of Times Square. My parents fly over a Eucharistic moon, on the back of a sleigh pulled by frosted crocodiles. As they pass, Ana throws handfuls of bags of humanitarian rice at them.

It's been snowing in Bujumbura for days and nights. Have I told you that already?

The ocons settle delicately on the surface of things, cover the infinite, permeate the world with their absolute whiteness down to the depths of our ivory hearts.

There is no longer heaven or hell. Tomorrow, the dogs will be silent. The volcanoes will sleep. The people will cast blank ballots. Our ghosts in wedding dresses will depart into the frosty streets. We will be immortal.

It has been snowing for days and nights.

Bujumbura is immaculate.

Gaby

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The war in Bujumbura had intensified. The number of victims had become so high that the situation in Burundi was now making international headlines.

One morning, Papa found Prothé's body in the gutter in front of Francis's house, riddled with stones. Gino said he was just a boy; he didn't understand why I was crying. When the army attacked Kamenge, all trace of Donatien was lost. Was he killed too? Did he flee the country, like so many others, in Indian style, a mattress on his head, a bundle in one hand, his children in the other, mere ants in the human tides that flowed along the roads and tracks of Africa at the end of the twentieth century?

A minister sent from Paris arrived in Bujumbura with two repatriation planes for French citizens. The school closed overnight. Papa registered us for departure. A host family was waiting for Ana and me there, somewhere in France, a nine-hour flight from our dead-end street. Before leaving, I went back to the van to retrieve the telescope and return it to Mrs. Economopoulos. As she was saying goodbye, she went to her bookshelf and tore a page from one of her books.

It was a poem. She would have preferred to copy it out, but we no longer had time to copy poems. I had to leave. She told me to keep those words as a memento of her, that I would understand them later, in a few years. Even after closing her heavy gate, I could still hear her voice behind me, offering endless advice: beware of the cold, guard your secret gardens, become rich through your reading, your encounters, your loves, never forget where you come from...

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When you leave a place, you take the time to say goodbye to the people, things, and places you loved. I didn't leave the country; I fled it. I left the door wide open behind me and left without looking back. I simply remember Papa's little hand waving from the balcony of Bujumbura airport.

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I have lived for years in a peaceful country, where every city has so many libraries that no one even notices them anymore. A country like a dead end, where the sounds of war and the fury of the world reach us from afar.

At night, the scent of my childhood streets returns to me, the calm rhythm of the afternoons, the reassuring sound of rain drumming on the tin roof. Sometimes I dream; I find myself back on the path to my big house by the Rumonge road.
She hasn't moved. The walls, the furniture, the flowerpots, everything is there. And in these dreams I have at night of a vanished country, I hear the song of the peacocks in the garden, the call of the muezzin in the distance.

In winter, I sadly observe the leafless chestnut tree in the square below my building. I imagine in its place the powerful canopy of mango trees that cooled my neighborhood. During my bouts of insomnia, I open a small wooden chest hidden under the bed, and fragrances of memories overwhelm me as I look at the photos of Uncle Alphonse and Pacique, that picture of me in a tree taken by Dad on New Year's Day, that black and white beetle picked up in the Kibira forest, Laure's perfumed letters, the ballot papers from the 1993 election collected in the grass with Ana, an identity card stained with blood... I wrap one of Mom's braids around my fingers and reread the poem by Jacques Roumain given to me by Mrs. Economopoulos on the day I left: "If you are from a country, if you were born there, as they say: native-born, well, you have it in your eyes, your skin, your hands, with the hair of its trees, the flesh of its earth, the bones of its stones, the blood of its rivers, its sky, its flavor, its men and women..."

I'm torn between two shores; my soul suffers from this affliction. Thousands of kilometers separate me from my former life. It's not the distance that makes the

Machine Translated by Google

It was a long journey, but so much time has passed. I belonged to a place, surrounded by family, friends, acquaintances, and warmth. I found the place again, but it is empty of those who inhabited it, who gave it life, substance, and flesh. My memories are superimposed uselessly on what I see before me. I thought I was exiled from my country. In retracing the steps of my past, I understood that I was exiled from my childhood. Which seems even more cruel.

I found the dead-end street again. Twenty years later. It had changed. The neighborhood's large trees had been razed. The sun beat down relentlessly. Cinder block walls topped with broken glass and barbed wire had replaced the colorful bougainvillea hedges. The dead-end street was now nothing more than a dreary, dusty corridor, its inhabitants anonymous and unremarkable. Only Armand still lived there, in the large family home made of white brick, at the end of the cul-de-sac. His mother and sisters had scattered to the four corners of the world, from Canada to Sweden, by way of Belgium. When I asked him why he hadn't followed them, he replied, with his legendary humor: "To each their own asylum! Political for those who leave, psychotic for those who stay."

Armand had grown into a big, strapping fellow, a senior manager at a commercial bank. He'd filled out and taken on more responsibility. The evening of my return, he insisted on taking me to the cabaret down the dead-end street. "We'll go to the trendy spots later," he said, "I want you to immerse yourself, without stopping, in the real world first." The little shack was still there, with its withered amboyant tree planted out front. The moon cast its shadow on the hard-packed earth. Its small wings moved gently in the evening breeze. The cabaret was a haven for both the talkative and the taciturn, weary of the daily grind and its disillusionments. In the same darkness as before, the patrons emptied their hearts and their bottles. I sat down on a beer crate next to Armand. He gave me vague news of Francis, who had become the pastor of an evangelical c
The twins and Gino? They're somewhere in Europe, but he's not trying to find them.
Neither am I. What's the point?

He insists I tell him about the life Ana and I had when we first arrived in France. I don't dare complain, imagining what he must have gone through during the fifteen years of war that followed our departure. I only confide, a little embarrassed, that my sister never wants to hear about Burundi again. We fall silent. I light a cigarette. The flame illuminates our faces with a fleeting crimson. Years have passed, and we avoid certain subjects. Like the death of my father, killed in an ambush on the road to Bugarama, a few days after we left. We don't

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Don't even mention the murder of his family and everything that followed. Some wounds never heal.

In the darkness of the cabaret, I feel like I'm traveling back in time. The customers have the same conversations, the same hopes, the same daydreams as in the past. They talk about the upcoming elections, the peace agreements, the fear of another civil war, their failed romances, and the rising prices of sugar and fuel. The only new thing is the occasional ring of a cell phone, a reminder that times have indeed changed. Armand opens a fourth bottle. We laugh under a reddish moon, reminiscing about our childhood pranks and happy days. I rediscover a bit of that timeless Burundi I thought had vanished. A pleasant feeling of being home washes over me. In the darkness, drowned out by the rustling of customers' whispers, I struggle to make out a strange voice in the distance, an auditory memory that seeps into my mind.

Is it the alcohol? I concentrate. The memory fades. We open more beers. Armand asks me why I came back. I tell him about the phone call I received a few months earlier, on my birthday, informing me of Mrs. Economopoulos's passing. She breathed her last during her nap, one autumn afternoon, facing the Aegean Sea, a novel on her lap. Was she dreaming of her orchids?

"I came to collect trunks of books that she left for me here in Bujumbura."

“So you came back for a pile of books?” Armand bursts out laughing. I do the same; the absurdity of my plan strikes me for the first time. We continue our conversation. He tells me about the coup that followed my departure, the embargo the country is under, the long years of war, the nouveau riche, the local Maas, the independent media, the NGOs that employ half the city, the evangelical churches that are springing up everywhere, the ethnic conflict that has gradually disappeared from the political scene. His voice hums in my ear again. I grab Armand’s arm. I stammer, “You hear…” I bite my lip. I’m trembling. Armand puts his hand on my shoulder. “Gaby, I didn’t know how to tell you. I preferred that you discover it for yourself.” "She's been coming here every night for years..." The voice, a voice from beyond the grave, pierces my bones. It murmurs a story of stains on the floor that won't come off. I jostle shadows, stumble against beer crates, grope in the dark, approaching the back of the cabin.

Huddled on the floor in the corner of the room, she sucks on homemade alcohol through a blowtorch. I find her again twenty years later, fifty years that have been counted on her body

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Unrecognizable. I lean towards the old lady. I have the feeling she recognizes me, from the way she stares at me in the light of the lighter I bring close to her face. With infinite tenderness, Mother gently places her hand on my cheek: "Is that you, Christian?"

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I still don't know what I'm going to do with my life. For now, I plan to stay here, take care of Mom, and wait until she gets better.

The day is dawning and I feel like writing it. I don't know how this story will turn out. But I remember how it all started.

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