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THE WORLD ENDS: SCENES FROM A GENOCIDE

—*Kigali. Rwanda, 1994*

Scene One, April 1:

I answer a ringing phone. A woman asks for The American. Slams down the phone when she hears my voice. I tell him.

“Another woman trying to make me give her money. Her father was just out of jail and needs medicine.”

A change in character from a man who never bought anything for anyone. I let it slide.

Scene One, April 2:

USAID provides a house and watchmen for The American. He’s responsible for his maid, a village girl. She approaches him.

“Sir, I would like to have time off in the day to continue my English classes at The American Club. My previous employer allowed me to go.”

He glares at her. She turns her gaze down to the floor and walks away.

“That incapable, stupid baboon, she’s crazy, a waste of money.”

That nag in my chest, like an invisible hand, squeezes my heart, and I think of booking a return flight to Germany.

Scene One, April 3:

I visit to the Canadian Embassy and see old friends. The bosses are now both women. Fond remembrances, veiled warnings from Tutsi colleagues.

“Have you listened to Radio Milles Collines?”

“No.”

“You must. You must.”

Feeling unsettled, tired, and overwhelmed, I begin calculating when and how to visit my parents.

Scene One, April 4:

Saturday morning. Two young women at his door. Very young, very beautiful, obviously very poor.

“The American invited us to swim. He says he’ll teach us.”

I tell him.

“She’s the girlfriend of a colleague. He asked me to teach her. I’m doing him a favor.”

Back to the door, she’s disappeared.

Strange and conflicting moments, my emotions are tied up with anxiety, desire and guilt about my parents. Nagging fears overload my memory with deep blanks. No faith or belief can change my destiny.

Scene Two, April 4:

More parties. Each one bigger and more elegant than before, an unending celebration with those who don’t care. Huge villas. Classic French cuisine. Blue skies out glass windows. Distant mountains.

“Come one, come all. Monsieur has a wonderful story to tell.” This Monsieur manages the Hôtel Méridien.

“My staff, those black baboons are so ignorant and tacky, I could bring a cow, a whole, living, shitting, cow into the lobby and none of them would notice. Imbeciles.”

“This is a story?” I glare at him with distaste. “You are talking about my people.”

He drops his gaze. The crowd breaks away.

Scene Three, April 4:

A knock on the door. The American’s only USAID friend, a diplomat—hair disheveled, unwashed, uncombed. Eyes red, shirt buttoned wrong with food stains. He was recently caught

trafficking a ring of young women to French soldiers. He cries, “I am ruined, my family, my career, my life destroyed.”

The American laughs in response to his friend’s pleas.

Scene One, April 5:

I listen to Radio Mille Collines. “Tutsis are cockroaches, rats, snakes. What do we do with venom, cockroaches, rats and snakes? We must eliminate. We must eliminate, eradicate, destroy.”

Radio Nazi. My chest locks, heart pounds, breath cuts off. I keep listening.

Scene Two, April 5:

Five days and I haven’t seen Victor. I ask The American, “Where’s Victor? He’s always around. Can we visit him?”

“We’ll meet Victor’s friend Matt, a fine businessman, very brilliant. Much more competent than Victor.”

That night, Victor bangs on the door. Drunk, he acts lost and desperate. His eyes crazy, his arms shaking. We sit beside the pool. The American offers him nothing. Victor’s eyes are hollow, he trembles in fear. His wife’s brother was a mastermind of the Habyarimana regime. He created that vile propaganda. How would it feel to have your family speaking publicly against you? I try to ascertain Victor’s purpose. What could The American, his best friend and brother, do to help?

The American catches me staring.

Victor stands up, long arms fighting with the air. “My wife, Monique, makes much, much more money than you!” The American offers no reassurance, no safety, no offer of protection.

I am stunned. When Victor leaves The American says, “He’s lost, crazy, a mad man, not worth it.”

“Your brother?”

“That was just a fantasy in his insane mind.”

Scene One, April 6:

I wake, dive into the pool, and swim with healing intensity. In league with the water, driving my arms through the blue, smacking my legs together. Lap after lap, giving my muscles all my fear and confusion.

I shower, dress, and tell him, “I need to see my parents.”

“I’ll drive you on my way to USAID and pick you up after work.”

Scene Two, April 6:

Early morning, I enter my family home, clean and smelling sweet. Mother chastises me, “Where have you been? We’ve waited days and not a word. Every day I cook for you, yet not even a message to let us know if you’re safe.”

I recall her response when I left for Germany, not getting up to wish me goodbye. And Father speaking out against my choice, “Find a good man and stay here with your people.”

“There are no men here, Father, and you know that.”

Father enters the kitchen, opens boxes of sweets and pastries. He pours tea, acting animated and delighted. Anger melts like sugared frosting. We listen to BBC radio. *The UN and French soldiers are keeping Rwandan peace. They report negotiations are beginning between Habyarimana, the Rwandan president and the RPF.*

Mother, grown thinner and frailer while I was away, does a happy dance. “My cousins will be soon coming from Uganda. My family will return at last.”

We eat a wonderful lunch—squash, beans, meats with her luscious seasonings. We anticipate celebrations to come. Everyone naps. My beautiful bedroom, my king-size bed with soft sheets, my closets with fine clothes, my jewelry arranged. I feel peace. Nothing has changed. Everything was waiting for me.

Mother comes to the bedside, arranges my pillows, shows me love, like when I healed from Congo. I sleep a beautiful dreamless sleep. She awakens me with warm milk. In the

living room, Father and I read French papers. I don't want it to end. My parents' home, despite Mother's illness and Father's joblessness, has a clear sense of peace.

I give my parents gifts and money. I tell Mother, "While in Germany I visited Assumpta. It's tough with two small babies, divorced and alone in England. She called Adele's son in South Africa to ask for money. He told her he'd send it to her bank. She bundled the babies and braved the snow, but when she got to the bank, there was nothing. I'm sick of our relatives' empty promises. He's a doctor! He lived with us as a boy, like our brother in Ruhengeri. You paid his school fees."

Mother's eyes well with tears. "I gave all this to my family—my home, food, and money—so my family would help my children if they were in need. I'm through with them now. They have no grace, no memory."

Near dark, a knock on the door. The American stands there, his car running in the street.

"Time to go. Come on."

He doesn't step inside, speak to Father, or ask his blessing.
"Hurry up."

Torn, I don't want to leave.

Father looks skeptical.

Mother speaks to me in Kinyarwanda, "Don't go with this man. He has issues. He is possessed by evil."

"I am possessed by evil, too," I answer.

The American demands, "Come now. Time to go."

I look at my beloved parents. I turn away.

Scene Three, Night of April 6:

We hear: *Tonight, the plane carrying President Habyarimana and President Cyprien Ntaryamira of Burundi to peace negotiations was shot down by surface-to-air missiles. Both leaders are dead.*

Scene One, April 7:

The walls shaking. Grenades, bombs, gunfire. Radio Mille Collines playing only Mozart's *Requiem*. The American

excited, raping me to the beat of bombs and heavy, classical death music.

White expats talking over fences. Dogs going wild with barking, then silenced.

My parents' neighbor appears, trembling. "Can I have a beer? My nerves. My family, everyone killed. Be ready. Get ready to leave."

Scene Two: April 7

Numb and confused I pack. I try to remember the evacuation instructions I typed for the embassy personnel and tell The American, "Gas your car. Have cash ready. Pack only necessities." I gather all my photos—Father holding me as a toddler, so tender, such love; Uncle Charles and Aunt Josephine, looking beautiful and healthy; Mother proudly pregnant with me; Assumpta and I, young and pretty.

Bombs shake the walls. We hear word: *Even whites are being executed.* More gunfire. Mozart playing over and over—the cymbals, the huge, crashing drums.

Another knock on the door. My heart races, throat choking, *they've come for me.*

Outside the window, an American Embassy car.

"Mademoiselle, they're on their way. Be ready to leave any moment. Hide your documents. Play ignorant. Play you don't understand French or Kinyarwanda. Be silent. Do not respond. Save yourself."

The American's car has no gas. There's no cash, and no food to bring. I think this man doesn't want to leave. The long auto brigade arrives. We drive by soldiers with machetes and gallons of gas, waiting to kill, loot and burn these elegant villas, this whole neighborhood of wealthy elites.

I remain silent, the soldiers glare at me. I remain unresponsive. *Will this car ever make it?*

Scene Three, April 7:

We arrive at a Catholic school filled with white expats from

NGOs and embassies, along with refugees, outreach workers, and some household staff. Everyone looks blank-eyed, terrorized, paralyzed, lost.

“We have no more gas, how will we drive?” I ask.

A young white woman wearing a white T-shirt and jeans wanders by, looking lost. She has a small Suzuki filled with gas. The American asks her for a ride. She nods to us. We get in her car. She becomes our savior.

Scene Four: April 7:

Leaving the capital, we drive through the city center by all the places I’ve lived. Columns of poor villager Hutu, with machetes, grenades and gasoline cans line the roads. They look so poor—some with no shoes, some with mismatched shoes, or shoes with holes. They wear ragged thrift shop clothes, look drunk and hungry. Some wear a uniform cap, shirt, or vest to make them important. They’ve been nothing, but now they feel elevated, and ready to do the work required by the Requiem. “Time to work. Time to clear the city,” they chant.

We pass the French Cultural Center. We pass The American Club where this man once showed me horror films and raped me. The possibility of gang rape and a slashing execution haunt me. I watch, drowning in PTSD. My city, my memories, my life passing before my eyes. We are close to my parents. I can’t go to see them. An emptiness fills me. They were at the top of every list. Certain they’re already dead, I send them love. I fill with guilt and try to imagine them freed.

Scene Five, April 7:

We’re outside the city, heading south towards Butare. There are no soldiers here. The women work the fields, the men play cards in the shade of porticoes, a small girl, missing school, tends to babies and toddlers. The crush of village life goes on, unaware of what is coming. I don’t say goodbye, sure I’ll be returning.

Scene Six, April 7:

We stop at a coffee shop to eat and drink. I remain silent, invisibly observing. A journalist from BBC approaches us.

“How is Kigali?”

Only The American speaks, “Kigali is burning.” Always loving the spotlight, The American agrees to be interviewed.

Scene One, April 8:

The Burundi border. The Rwandan frontier. Rivers of refugees making the crossover.

A Burundi man calls out, “You’re so beautiful. Why would they want to destroy such beauty?”

Epilogue

—*Nairobi, Kenya 1994*

I found myself by walking. As I walked, my courage and pride returned. Walking gave me clarity. It was my form of prayer. My brain reawakened and gave me a vision. I saw myself on a mission to secure my parents’ legacy, to restore and celebrate their memory.

I began to carry myself with pride and dignity. I decided to forgive those poor and deluded Hutu genocidaires who’d live forever with blood on their hands and mortal sin on their souls. They’d still return to their poverty and suffering.

I would devote myself to my parents’ legacy, write books about the other evils in my country, explore how families enslaved their own families, extorting money, bleeding their loved ones dry. I’d share the evil inside families. I wanted to truly understand the root of this evil, born in colonization, but deeper and more personal than white evil. I wanted to understand the evil of neighbor against neighbor.

I walked taller, holding my head high. I thought about myself and my girlfriends, dancing in the home of wealthy Hutus, eating and attending parties in the homes of people who

later chose to kill us. How can one kill their friends, family, wife, husband, and neighbors? What possessed them to kill babies and their mothers, gang rape daughters in front of their parents, or kill whole families, leaving the frail grandparents as living witnesses?

I knew my country. I did not want to give these killers my power. With my parents as my angels, I chose to forgive, and walk tall with dignity. I'd continue the love and compassion my parents created, build a foundation, and help the orphans and traumatized children left behind in this war.

I heard of a Rwandan refugee camp nearby. I mentioned it to The American. When I told him about the camp, he asked the Kenyans where to find it.

“Saturday we’re going to the refugee camp. You’ll be acting as my translator.”

“Translator?”

I had a gift for languages, knew Kinyarwanda, Swahili, French, German and a hint of English. A translator had meaningful work. I hadn’t slept much since we left Kigali. Anxiety and nightmares plagued me, but the night before the interviews, I didn’t sleep from excitement. My vision was becoming a reality.

I saw my parents’ spirits lifting from the cross. They were assassinated. I would carry their torch, fulfill their mission, and take on their legacy. With my mission my parents’ resurrection, I felt freedom. Despite becoming a refugee, I felt strong. I must be stronger than ever because a huge responsibility awaited me.

I was Hope. I would not let these terrors take my power. I would not give it away.

Despite my unknown future, I felt my heart and spirit rise.

I began each interview sincerely asking the questions filling my mind, “Where is your family? How did you escape?” Again and again, I heard stories of fear, loss, and valiant struggle.

I spoke to an older man, who stared at the wall. Defeated.

“Where is your family?”

“I don’t know.”

How did you escape?

“White priest brought me with a girl from Congo who was gang raped. Did this happen to my wife too?” He turned from me, facing deep into the wall.

I met a preteen boy, tall and athletic. He told me, “I ran when they were killing my family. I ran fast as the wind with my dog. I ran and ran, far from the killing. I lost my dog. I lost my dog.” He didn’t cry when he mentioned his parents, but he sobbed and sobbed for his dog. “They are taking me to America!”

His eyes grew bright as he said “America”. I’d never felt anything special about America, and yet this beautiful boy, fast enough to escape, glowed every time he said “America”. He made me wonder how a place could bring such light to one in great grief.