

To the Man Who Murdered My Parents...

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A gentle breeze shuffled through the long grasses, and it was as if a thousand people had begun to whisper. The wind traced small ripples into the still surface of the lake, and the distant lilt of scarlet *erythina* trees was faintly perceptible. Overhead, the afternoon sun was relenting, as it began descending beneath Kigali's jagged mountain peaks. The entire community had gathered together in the clearing, and the air was heavy with anticipation.

In the effortless beauty of late afternoon, it was almost possible, Claudien thought, to forget the killings. But as he looked around, the divisions were clear; Tutsis still sat with Tutsis, Hutus spoke solely with Hutus, as if nothing had changed since the time of *kubaga*. But the children were all together. They ran barefoot through the clearing, their laughter unfiltered and free, playing games with no rules, and Claudien could not resist a small smile.

White spider lilies lined the edge of the lake, clambering in and out of crevices in the rocks. At the water's edge, some had broken off and lingered on the surface, their fragile frames like a thin protective blanket. At the front of the clearing, three elders sat at a simple wooden table. To their left, a group of women, proudly dressed in their *umushana* chatted, woven circlets on their heads. A hush settled over the people, as the elder seated in the middle of the table lifted his head from his papers and began:

'Bienvenue. We are all here today to witness the trial of Mihigo Nyiramilimo, a known génocidaire and commander of the Interhamwe militia. As is the nature of these gacaca courts, please do not consider it your role to judge or lay blame. Those who are tried here are judged, but it is God who will determine their fate. Please allow them this final dignity.'

The elder spoke slowly and with conviction. The people were silent, some even nodded in agreement. From where he was sitting, Claudien caught the expression of a teenage girl to the right of him. She wore a tattered red sash and her feet were filthy, but her scowl was one of pure hatred, as if glowing embers lay behind her eyes, threatening to spark. In her hand she held a crumpled piece of paper.

'Mr. Nyiramilimo is accused of the murder of more than four hundred and fifty Tutsis, and assisted in the murder of more than three hundred others.'

The group erupted in a thousand muffled conversations. Claudien watched the girl breathe sharply and clench her free hand into a fist. Her scowl deepened.

‘These deaths occurred by way of hand-held grenades, clubs, machetes, the *masu* and machine gun.’

Claudien remembered the grenades. The *Interhamwe* threw them with little regard as to whether you were Tutsi or Hutu. He remembered the momentary blindness from the explosion, the shunt in his chest, and the persistent ringing in his ears. People would stagger, dazed, from their houses only to be gunned down by the *Interhamwe*.

‘Mr. Nyiramilimo is also accused of countless instances of rape and assault.’

Claudien dropped his head at this.

He thought of Benitha. She would have been nineteen this year. When the *Interhamwe* had come for his neighbours, Claudien had listened to Benitha’s guttural screams as they brutally raped her, over and over again. She clawed at them, she cried, she screamed for help, but Claudien had stayed quiet and small while she struggled.

She was twelve when she died; spared at least the sentence of HIV, and her tormentor’s child.

‘First, Mr. Nyiramilimo will recall those names he remembers, and their families will have a chance to respond...’

At this announcement, all eyes turned to Nyiramilimo. He stood in the middle of the clearing, hands clasped behind his back as if he was to receive communion rather than be tried for murder. His cheeks were sunken and one eye was blackened, but his chin was up and his shoulders back, feet apart in a considered pose.

‘Jean-Phillipe and Alphonsine Habimana.’

The statement was like the puncture of gunfire. The people were quiet. No one spoke, but all eyes turned to the teenage girl with the red sash. She glared at Nyiramilimo, and got to her feet, smoothing out the piece of paper in her hand. It was silent as she walked to the table at the front. Clearing her throat, she began reading:

‘To The Man Who Murdered My Parents,

I have deep sorrow in my heart that I cannot explain to any other. It would pain me to see anyone suffer what I have.

In July 1994, you hacked my parents to death with your machete, while we were on our way to church. I was eight, so I don't remember much about it. They say that's the brain's way of protecting itself.

I remember trying to wake up Mawe and Dawe, but their arms were too heavy and their faces were slack.

Sometimes, I see people wearing the same clothes as my parents and I tap them on the shoulder. Not because I believe that it will be them, but just to see their faces in my mind for a moment. It is hard to remember them sometimes, but I'm determined not to forget what they looked like.

I will always cry when I see a couple with a baby girl.

I love only one thing now, and that is the first few moments of being awake, when the dew of sleep still lies heavy on my mind. And for those few moments I forget that I will never see my parents again. These are just some of the small things that have changed since you murdered my Mawe and Dawe. I know that when you meet God again, he will make things right with everyone.'

Here she took a long shaky breath, and looked Nyiramilimo in the eyes.

'You killed two of the best people I will ever know. They were kind, loved me endlessly, gave to others without a second thought, and lived their lives with honour and dignity. They taught me that a life lived in fear is not a life at all.

I will never hate you and neither will I fear you.

But I will always lament your choices and your actions. I like to think it is punishment enough that you will have to remember cutting their lives short, for the rest of yours. My only wish is that your life going forward be in the service of others.

Aridatha Habimana.'

The girl, Aridatha, walked from the table back to her place in the crowd, and sat down. The elder moved back to Nyiramilimo and prompted his account of the Habimana's murders. Claudien locked eyes with Aridatha. The profound way in which she talked about fear had struck something within him. He had been afraid for too long, letting his fear act like blinkers on his ability to see what was right.

Claudien watched the spreading web of fallen spider lilies on the water, as it moved across the dark lake. It was then that he realised he too had to speak, about Benitha and her parents, so that he would not have to live in darkness anymore.



