

The Weaver's Scar: For Our Rwanda

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*To my students,
past, present, and future:
Believe in humanity.*



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Author's Note

This novel is a work of fiction. Though the 1994 genocide and its perpetrators were real, as was—and is—the suffering they engendered, the story told here is a product of the author's imagination. Aside from the names of certain high-profile political groups, leaders, and celebrities, which are all used fictitiously, any resemblance between characters and real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

As much as possible, the story follows the timeline of the actual events, though readers may notice that certain dates and geographical details have been altered for the purposes of the narrative.

*You can outdistance that which is running after you
but not that which is running inside you.*

~ Rwandan Proverb

Prologue

Maryland, U.S.A., 1999

If Papa hadn't been cut in 1959, I wouldn't have survived in 1994.

Because that spring, I was the one made to run—me, because Papa couldn't run anymore. Running first through my hills and rivers, running away from my village, running across the ocean to a new home in America, where, unless they'd been watching the news, no one had even heard of my country. Of the few Americans I spoke to, almost none knew that Rwanda was in Africa. And even if they knew that much, how could they ever really know who I was?

In fact, by the time I got to D.C. that summer, I was used to hiding from everyone outside of my family—and this, in my own hilly district of Ndiza in central Rwanda. Why, then, tell my new classmates, friends, and teachers that I was, more specifically, Tutsi?

Of those who knew me, only my principal knew my tribe, my high school counselor knew, and my naturalized uncle and aunt-in-law knew. It was because I was Tutsi, after all, that they took me in.

And it was because the first line of Papa's Rwandan ID card read:

Ethnicity: Hutu, Tutsi, Twa, Naturalized

that I'll never again call Rwanda my home. For those Tutsis I knew back in my thousand hills, it is only a grave.

I'm now nineteen and one of the students in the Lincoln High class of 1999. During the past three years, my English has become fluent, I've found an American girlfriend, and I've become "Faust" to my new friends, who think "Faustin" is too hard to pronounce (not to mention Faustin Kazubwenge). Some even call me "F-daddy," pounding my fist or slapping my shoulder; I'm one of the *boyz*. I eat fries; I drink Coke; I go to movies and parties. Those who see me would never know that I'm the son of a banana farmer, that I used to run to school on dirt roads, that my first language was Kinyarwanda, and that I also speak English and French and understand Kirundi.

No one thinks about what else I am, or used to be. No one asks about it or cares. Why should they? I'm just one of thirty or so immigrants at LHS. My story can't be any more interesting than Diego's from the Dominican Republic or Fatima's from Syria. To the parents, friends, and relatives in Lincoln High's football stadium on this June evening, I'm just one of 236 seniors about to get a diploma.

What I'm not is one of the million who died.

I. A New Scar

Rwanda, 1993

“Watch out!”

A flash, a crack, and then silence, followed by ringing in my ears and the roar of voices. I’m on my back, and blood is trickling over my forehead and nose. Dust clouds around me as my classmates’ feet and hands brush my shoulders, arms, and legs.

“Faustin, Déo, *umuze neza?* Are you okay?” The boys’ shouts echo over me, their chatter clapping off the concrete walls.

“Monsieur Kugambana!” some of the students cry out. Some run away; some run closer. “Go get the teacher!”

The sun pries through my eyelids as two muscular arms lift me from the dirt. There’s jostling and shouting, and the breeze on my wet forehead cools me as I’m carried across our red dirt compound to our one-room schoolhouse. Monsieur Inkoramutima, our school’s director, sets me on a wooden chair underneath the corrugated metal awning outside of our classroom. Wiping a thin layer of blood from my hand and forehead, I squint and wonder where our teacher is.

“Faustin, can you look at me?”

Monsieur Inkoramutima is kneeling close, his deep eyes peering into mine. Students crowd behind him, whispering, standing on toes, snickering. Back in the courtyard, the boys have picked up the ball and started playing again, making the most of the last few minutes of recess. *He'll be fine*, they're probably thinking. *Just took a hit, and now he's out. Won't be the first time.* But off in the corner, Monsieur Kugambana, our teacher, watches me with arms crossed. He hasn't moved from the spot since our soccer game started—not even when he saw that I was cut and bleeding on the ground.

“Here.” Monsieur Inkoramutima presses a cloth against my head. “Hold this in place. Judging from your cut, it's not too serious, but you may have a scar.”

“What happened?” I ask.

Monsieur Inkoramutima chuckles, glancing over his shoulder at a boy who shuffles in place. I recognize Déo, an older student I've seen in class and in the courtyard but to whom I've never spoken. Since I began at the Collège Albert Premier two years ago, all I've known about him is that he's a good player, but I also know that he's absent a lot, and no one knows why, so he doesn't really play much.

“Let's just say that you and Déo should be on the same team from now on. Who ever said soccer wasn't a contact sport?” Monsieur Inkoramutima explodes in laughter, causing me to jump. “You were playing, and you were about to score, but you both ran for the ball and BAM!” He smashes his two fists together. “Cracked heads and went to the dust—only you, Faustin, got the worst of it.”

“Serves him right!” shouts Amdou, one of the oldest boys in the school. “We don’t need blind players anyway!”

“Amdou!” Monsieur Inkoramutima cuts him off, but I just shake my head. Amdou has always spoken like this—to me and everyone else. What’s one more insult?

“Are you okay?” Déo asks. His voice sounds squeaky and high but much softer than Amdou’s.

“Yes. *Urakoze*, thank you.” I wince as I place the cloth back on my cut. Eyes closed, I listen to the noises around me and bite my teeth against the pain. *Bomp, shhh, bomp, bomp*. The boys’ feet scrape and shuffle as they shout for a pass, while at the other end of the courtyard, the girls chirp away, weaving one another’s hair and watching the boys. Higher up, the branches of the *umuhumbo* tree rustle from the tussling weaver birds, while beyond the school walls, the cluck-cluck-clucking of a chicken is drowned out by the buzz of a moped.

“Let’s see that,” Monsieur Inkoramutima says, placing his hand on mine and uncovering my eye. He leans in to look, and as he does, I smell his breath—bad coffee, sweat, and stale porridge. His eyes dart over my forehead before he leans back and looks me in the eye. “So you have a choice.” He wipes his mouth and stands. “You may stay here outside, go home now, or go to class. If that were my head, I’m not sure I could stand lessons!” He laughs again, squinting at his own joke.

Déo glances back and forth between the two of us.

“It’s okay,” I answer. “I can go to class.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“Okay, if you feel that you can. As for me, I’ll leave you two to talk and make up. I need to make sure we don’t have any other injuries today.” Chuckling once more, he strides back into the courtyard, his broad shoulders swinging under the weight of his arms.

“Sorry about your head,” Déo says. “Sometimes I get carried away. Hope this isn’t a sign for how the rest of this year will go.”

I smile weakly. “Don’t worry about it. It was an accident.” I lift the cloth and look at him.

Déo is watching the boys playing but turns back to me. He shrugs. “Maybe he’s right. Maybe you and I should just play on the same team from now on,” he laughs. “No broken heads then.”

“Maybe,” I answer, but just then Monsieur Kugambana steps away from the courtyard wall and begins to beat the *inzogera*, the bell, to call everyone back to class. A little earlier than normal, I think. What’s his hurry? I glance over and see that he’s still watching me and Déo.

Déo looks back at our teacher, but he shakes his head and gives me his hand. With a gentle tug, he helps me to my feet, walking with me as the others come stampeding in for our history lesson.

Lips tightly closed, Monsieur Kugambana never takes his eyes off of us as he follows us in.

2. Who's Who

“HUTUS, RAISE YOUR HANDS!”

Feet stomping, our teacher thunders into the room as the students rustle to their seats, still chatting and laughing from recess. At the sound of his voice, we fall quiet. Some of us look around at one another, confused, while some ease their hands up but then jerk them down as if embarrassed.

Monsieur Kugambana faces us, arms folded. “Was I not clear? If you are Hutu, raise your hand.”

Like trees in a banana grove, hands reach upward, while mine remain in my lap. *Why is he asking this?* I wonder. We’ve always known one another’s ethnicities—who’s Hutu, who’s Tutsi. “You can tell the Hutus because they’re darker and have wider noses,” my brother used to joke, “and we Tutsis are taller and have narrower faces.” But I’ve never listened to him. My uncle is married to a Hutu, and she doesn’t look like that at all. And several of my cousins are much darker than me, and they’re all Tutsi.

Still, everyone knows.

“Three, four, five, six...thirty.” Our teacher counts the raised hands while his eyes flit around the room and his finger bounces up and down as he points out the Hutus.

“*Murakoze*,” he says, picking up his chalk. “Hands down. And now, Tutsis, raise your hands.”

I stretch my arm up but keep my head down; I know who the other four Tutsis are. No need to look. But when I hear the chalk tapping and scraping across the blackboard, I lift my eyes and see Monsieur Kugambana scrawling out in large letters:

Tutsi
.....
Agathe
Emmanuel
Faustin
Céleste
Jean

“Well, *la classe*,” he continues in French. “Five out of thirty-five. One-seventh. Fourteen percent. The same ethnic proportions of our country, excepting, of course, the Twa—the pygmies who make up only about one percent of Rwanda’s population.” He straightens his back and puts his hands on his hips. “Can anyone tell me why I am doing this? Why I want you to see what tribes are in the class? Think about what important events have been happening recently.”

A pause.

“Yes, Pacifique?”

We turn to look at a boy in the back of the room who has raised his hand.

“Is it because of Arusha?”

“Yes, that is right,” Monsieur Kugambana says, nodding his head. “The Arusha Accords, just signed in Tanzania, are meant to bring peace between the Inkotanyi rebels up north and our government. Who can tell us who the Inkotanyi are? Charles?”

“They’re the rebels who invaded Rwanda from Uganda three years ago, until our president beat them back.”

“That is correct, Charles. *Murakoze*. What else? Claudette?”

Claudette speaks. “Since then, they’ve been held up north behind, on the other side of...the dematari...no, the demilirazized...the...what do you call it?” She wrinkles her forehead and looks around as some classmates giggle, while others mouth something to her.

Monsieur Kugambana interrupts. “Yes, Claudette. The government has set up a DEMILITARIZED ZONE.” He writes this in block letters under the list as some students copy down the words. “And the rebels may not cross into the central part of the country. Not far from here, really.” He steps to the map and draws a gentle U-shaped line across the northern part of Rwanda, as if trying to slice off a crescent-shaped piece of pie. “And who can tell me what this conflict has really been about?”

Silence. I look up, remembering hearing Papa talking one night about the rebels. But I don’t think it’s ever come up in school.

“It is because the rebels are TUTSI.” Monsieur Kugambana’s words are choppy as he stresses every

syllable. “And they’ve been saying since 1959 that the Hutu government won’t let them in. But what they don’t realize....” Here, Monsieur Kugambana leans forward, placing one fist on his desk and waving his other hand, finger pointed. “There simply is no room. Even our president knows this. They cannot come. What would happen to Rwanda? Who can give them land to farm? Resources? And why attack? Why sneak in during the night and cause terror? It cannot be.

“But in many ways,” he pauses, looking straight at me, “and this is what you should remember: Rwanda’s history—especially during this century—has been one defined by Hutus against Tutsis. And now these Tutsis have chosen to... how shall we say it? Knock heads with our Hutu president. But,” he takes a deep breath and lets out a smile, “maybe Habyarimana thinks that we can all be on the same team after all.” He chuckles.

I glance over at Déo, who is watching our teacher with wide eyes. Perhaps seeing my head move, Déo looks at me, and we grin, but we immediately look back to Monsieur Kugambana, who steps over to the map and slashes a large X over the Demilitarized Zone. My cut burns, and I close my eyes against the pain, massaging my forehead. Off to my right, Amdou snickers. I glance over, and he jabs his finger at me, mouthing *Inkotanyi* before drawing his hand like a knife across his throat.

“Monsieur, what ethnic group do you belong to?” Claudette asks, cutting the silence.

“I am Hutu.”