

PRINCE

Beauty for Ashes

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

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

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

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

This narrative is a heartfelt homage to my sisters Bea and Tila, who during the 1994 genocide were in their late teens or early

twenties—a pivotal time of transition from youth to adulthood. I hope to cast a light on experiences and struggles unique to their generation, particularly among young Tutsis like themselves. It's a tale of tragedy, as my sisters' and other young Tutsis' bright futures were abruptly extinguished, echoing a painful reality that has touched many lives in our history.

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

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

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

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

A few notes on terminology:

- In these pages, I frequently utilize the terms *aliens* and *cockroaches*. These dehumanizing labels (in Kinyarwanda, *Imburagasani z'inyenzi*) were insidiously employed in Rwanda via propaganda prior to and during the Genocide Against the Tutsi. They were directed at Tutsis and intended to demean the Tutsi population. Used together, they amplified the effect of dehumanization. Their widespread use demonstrates how language can perpetuate hatred and violence.
- As I navigate one of the most challenging periods of my life, it is vital to address the 1994 Genocide Against the Tutsi with precision. While authoritative entities like the United Nations have appropriately named these atrocities, there remains a tendency among some others that still refer to it incorrectly as “the Rwandan Genocide” or “the Genocide in Rwanda.” This imprecise language not only dilutes the specific targeting of the Tutsi population but also undermines the historical record.

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

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

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

“Please forgive me;
I won’t be a Tutsi again.”

RECONCILING WITH MY CHILDHOOD

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Overwhelmed by the weight of this emotional uproar, I had to leave the room. I retreated to the sanctuary of the restroom, seeking solitude and a moment of respite to gather my thoughts and regain my composure. As I stood there, isolated from the outside world, the stark reality of my youthful horrors unfolded before my eyes in an unrelenting, vivid stream of consciousness. Each memory, each face, each moment from those dark days played out in front of me with crystal-clear precision. The ticking of the clock seemed to synchronize with the rhythm of my thoughts, and for what felt like an eternity but was in fact a mere fifteen minutes, I was completely and utterly engrossed in the past.

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

When it was all over and our son was on the road to recovery, I had time to reflect. Instinctively, I realized that there was no longer

an option to avoid confrontation with my younger self. I needed to muster the courage and take responsible, deliberate steps to face and reconcile with my past—not for just myself, but also for the legacy that I would leave my son and any other children we might have.

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

Come, join me on this journey.

