AWE (A Woman's Experience)

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Grace

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I received Grace's telephone number from a Christian missionary woman in Rwanda. "She might need volunteers," the woman prompted. "Call her." That evening I did.

We arranged to meet downtown in Kigali at a hotel called Okapi. My friend, Innocent, knew the way and he agreed to take me, and we set out just after ten in the morning. The windows were down the entire way into the city, our faces covered in dust when we stopped in front of the hotel. I first saw Grace outside the hotel doors on the side of the road. She was beautiful, tall and curved with hair in long rope-braids woven tightly to her scalp. I don't remember what I said when I stepped from the car. I'm sure it was rehearsed and awkward. Most likely I spoke too loud, too fast, and was friendly but distant. I don't recall her response, but somehow we came to a basic understanding that I would like to visit her shop and that she would lead the way.

In the taxi, we had little to say to each other. Grace gave Innocent directions to the sewing shop where she worked. In Kinyarwandan the shop is called *Amahoro ava Hejuru*, meaning "Peace from Heaven" because it opened after the genocide as a place where widowed women might find work. To find the shop we had to drive away from Kigali's center. Seventeen years ago the city was on fire and covered in blood, home to a genocide that put Rwanda on world news. Innocent fled Kigali just before the genocide erupted, but he returned soon after and observed that no one could imagine a space as forlorn as Kigali in 1994. Now the city is very much alive, so alive that it sweats. On our necks, even while we rode in the car, big tears of dusty perspiration hung. From the car window, I spotted fabric shops up and down the sidewalks, fruit stands, and men with outstretched arms dangling beads. "You wanna buya necklace?" they said with wide grins. Flies thrived. Shops stacked on each other like old, crooked teeth. The roads revolved in roundabouts and

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hills: cement hills in the city's center and green, wet hills of tea and bean fields in the outskirts. The city stirred. Its hum came largely from a transportation phenomenon known as "taximotos": dirt bikes driven by sixteen year old boys at a fraction the cost of regular taxis. The bikes revved up like a dozen bullets shot through the air. The ricochets spun in our eardrums, vibrated our feet. The whole ground pulsated underneath the taximoto wheels. Ten-year-olds grasped cages of chickens; women rode with trunks of bananas strapped to their backs; men hauled five-gallon buckets of brown eggs as they sandwiched cell phones between ears and shoulders; entire families flapped away at 50 mph with goggles over their eyes. *We are alive*, they seemed to say with their livelihoods fastened to their bodies, zipping through the city as if they were antelope on wheels.

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I stepped into Rwanda the summer after my freshman year of college. I knew only one person there, Nancy, who worked for an AID organization and offered me a home in Kigali if I ever wanted to meet Africa. Looking for any excuse to go, enamored with exotic *Rwanda*, and wide-eyed for everything, I developed a project that earned some grant money and flew to Kigali the day after my last final. I would write about Rwanda's post-genocide women, I told my family and Nancy. I was eighteen, barely a woman, if even.

I was two years old, a baby in rural Utah, when Rwanda's genocide commenced. The assassination of Rwanda's president, Juvenal Habyarimana, kicked off the 100-day killing spree that led to nearly one million Rwandan deaths. It was a hot topic then, nearly twenty years ago, when the horror of a modern-day holocaust and outrage of international indifference were fresh. I was fourteen—a freshman in high school—before I even knew that the Rwandan genocide occurred, and by that time most of the shock had subsided. I remember hearing of the genocide for the first time in my speech and debate class, where an enthusiastic upper-classman gave a graphic depiction of the film *Hotel Rwanda*. "The one part that really got me," he said, "was when the car was driving over the piles of bodies."

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The genocide tore through Rwanda a world and lifetime away from me. I have no reportage to add about the disturbance in 1994; that story sailed before I entered elementary school. What is left now is the aftermath of the genocide and all its living witnesses.

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There were nine women who worked in Grace's sewing shop, nine widows: Mirab, Pascaline, Festy, Florence, Terez, Betty, Rosemary, Jane, and Grace. Inside an iron fence they sat at sewing machines, some with babies attached to their breasts,

some too old to have babies. Their feet rocked along the treadles of manual machines with cups of Rwandan tea next to their round hips. They laughed in both high and low tones, and commenced work with a prayer.

In the morning, the ladies sat in a circle for prayer and Bible study. Grace said, "When I found Jesus, I [realized I] was not alone." The other ladies nodded in agreement, their hand-sized Bibles open on their laps. Verses of the New Testament followed them like shadows: "His sweat was as it were great drops of blood." On the wall hung a small print of Jesus Christ bowed on the cross. After prayer, sometimes they danced.

I was no fascination to the ladies. I didn't speak Kinyarwandan, but instead relied on Grace to interpret and translate. Even Grace didn't really know who I was, and I was clumsy in explaining myself. I learned their names right away, but I didn't know much more beyond what to call them. I could guess their ages and how old they might have been when they witnessed the genocide. They knew, perhaps, less of me. They knew my name, but they'd never heard of a place called Utah, where I was from, where there was snow. I tried to explain snow: cold and soft, like cotton ice, covering the entire ground. That distanced us more.

I asked about their children and about being a mother while we cut squares of fabric. They quizzed me on Kinyarwandan words: mother, father, how are you, white girl. I once baked chocolate chip cookies for them, and they pulled off bites with their teeth very slowly, clapping when they swallowed their last mouthfuls. We were silent for a long time while we aligned tiny pieces of cloth in rows before the sewing needle, which darted at a sprint and pierced through. Even when we had nothing to do, we were silent. Words do not necessarily help you see someone.

I danced with them once. We pushed aside a large cutting table and stood in a semi-circle. On the right was Betty, short and supple in traditional clothing. Green, orange, and purple prints hugged her hips and her brittle hair was tied back in a matching head wrap. Her quietude reminded me of a mother or an older sister. Although when she sang, her voice was round and full, like warm water. Next to Betty were Mirab and Terez, who were the oldest of the ladies and both grandmas. They didn't dance with the other ladies, but they beat the drum and clapped their hands. Next to Terez was Festy with her baby, Daniel—only two months old, with cheeks like mangos. Then followed quiet Pascaline with beautiful eyes and Jane who had recently recovered from malaria. Beside Jane was Rosemary, just a few years older than myself with a new baby and a chipped tooth. Florence, at the end, was thin as a tree branch and the tallest of the group. She had a long forehead and wide smile with short teeth. She poked fun at nearly everything: "I'm not going to dance unless you bring more cookies!"

There was no choreography, but they stepped and spun to the same beat. They made fun of my dancing because it was terrible. I couldn't find the beat with my feet, even though my hands clapped it. I moved gracelessly; my arms were in the

air and my eyes on everyone else. Now, as I imagine myself in the sewing shop, I remember this scene. We all watched each other and laughed.

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My first week in Kigali I met and spoke with a man named Fabian who served on Rwanda's supreme court. He'd been a justice since 1979 and watched the entire genocide unfold. I asked him when the ethnic rivalry began, to which he responded: "When did Cain begin to hate Abel? No one can say; it started slowly, with jealousy."

Like most Americans in Rwanda, I was familiar with the basic history of the genocide and a handful of individual stories to accompany the overarching political horror. I knew that the longstanding ethnic competition and tensions between the Rwandan military and Hutu militia groups resulted in their systematically setting out to murder all the Tutsis they could reach, regardless of age or sex. Even political moderates among the Hutu were not spared. I also knew that estimates of the death toll have ranged between 500,000 and over 1,000,000. I spent hours in the Kigali Institute of Education reading books and accounts of the genocide. I knew a lot of facts, and I'd talked to some people.

Although the ethnic categorization instituted by Belgian colonizers established the rivalry, the 1994 genocide was itself a government-sponsored extermination. In the early 1990s, genocide was being rehearsed. The "Hutu Ten Commandments" were published in an anti-Tutsi magazine called *Kangura*, which included commandments like:

- Every Hutu should know that a Tutsi woman, whoever she is, works for the interest of her Tutsi ethnic group. As a result, we shall consider a traitor any Hutu who marries a Tutsi woman, befriends a Tutsi woman, or employs a Tutsi woman as a secretary or a concubine. (Green)

- Every Hutu should know that our Hutu daughters are more suitable and conscientious in their role as woman, wife and mother of the family. Are they not beautiful, good secretaries and more honest? (Green)

- The Hutu should stop having mercy on the Tutsi. (Green)

Radio stations blared government propaganda meant to stir up hatred against the Tutsis. In one broadcast, a reporter told listeners: "Do not kill those cockroaches with a bullet—cut them to pieces with a machete" ("Rwanda Jails Journalist"). Tutsi families with any money would pay their killers to kill them with a gun. Propaganda on the radio portrayed women as temptresses, meant only to ruse and trick Hutu men. Such women must be silenced and killed. Sexual atrocity was

public and encouraged. The instruction for annihilation was graphic, justifying killing and persuading Hutus to violence against their family and neighbors.

People fled to churches for safety, and entire chapels of refugees would be slaughtered under a Hutu priest's instruction. One community—Kibuye—was reduced from 250,000 people to 8,000. On May 10, 1994—the same day 2,500 journalists covered South Africa's victory at the inauguration of Nelson Mandela—over five thousand Rwandan bodies were dumped into the Akagera River.

Death, in many cases, moved in more gradually rather than in a wild blow; cholera and dysentery infected hundreds of thousands. Droves of barely-living bodies were piled onto one another in empty churches, and infection spread in nearly every living thing.

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Women knew they must prepare their children to either be killed or orphaned. They held their sweet children by the shoulders and the cheeks and had those unearthly conversations under beds, in closets, or in shrubs. At the end of the genocide, an approximate 55,000 children were heads of households and more than 300,000 children were orphans.

The pictures scare me. I visited, only once, the Rwandan Genocide Memorial Museum in Kigali. I was there alone, just before closing. The memorial sits on a hill where over 200,000 Rwandans once laid. The man at the lobby desk told me that their souls sank into the soil where we stood, and their bones were only a few feet below us. After only half of the exhibit, I chose not to look anymore, skipping the second half.

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It is impossible for me to tell these stories accurately. My understanding of the genocide is overgeneralized, pared down to the skeleton of the conflict, the facts, the statistics. I am largely ignorant of the deeper implications: the horror and sorrow that followed the genocide like a sweeping cloud, the burden of witness, the inability to comprehend. Grace said once that the genocide isn't an event one can understand. She, who had been slapped with living it and hearing the statistics, couldn't make sense of it. She and the rest of those to whom the genocide bore its hellish face most nakedly cannot understand.

But there is an irony in the conversation of the genocide. In Rwanda, I interacted with many American expatriates and diplomats who spewed fact and story as if they had the genocide figured out. I, too, have been eager to organize fact and story into meaning. However, in my brazen, factual wade through the events of 1994, I missed the essentially human aspect of the genocide: the toxic hearts

of perpetrators, the millions of seared survivors, the sharp, perfect depth of forgiveness. My own words are insufficient; they reach to understand. But Rwandans, the very witnesses, do not speak of the genocide so flippantly. They do not claim to understand. How do you make sense of madness? When the event is organized into a curt timeline and statistics, the madness is inevitably diminished. Information presented this way is understandable. But there are no words sturdy enough to carry the fear of being raped or the soul possessed and dissolved in brutal anger.

Grace once showed me pictures of her husband and father, who were murdered at the top of a hill near her house. She pointed up the hill marking the spot where they fell, just a few feet from us, and all she uttered was "good man."

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In the months immediately following the genocide, Rwanda faced not only a crushed infrastructure, but also millions of displaced citizens and a state made up of women who had endured much. At the time, women made up 70% of Rwanda's living population. In addition to being rife with sexual diseases, Rwandan women bore the stigma of being the mothers of illegitimate children, and they held legally vulnerable positions with fragile claims to their late husbands' land and property.

Beginning in the 1960s, millions of Rwandans had escaped for Uganda, Tanzania, or the Congo in an exodus that climbed exponentially in the early 1990s. Thousands died in refugee camps during disease epidemics. Most living refugees returned to Rwanda after their camps were attacked in the 1995 and 1996 retaliations, but a period of reconciliation began in late 1994 when the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda was established and traditional village court systems were reintroduced.

A tradition called *Umaganda* was instituted, which is a day of work that takes place the last Saturday of each month. From 9:00 am to 12:00 pm, all stores, businesses, and restaurants shut down so that all Rwandans (in the city and village alike) can stop everything to clean and repair their communities. I participated in one *Umaganda*, in which I helped rebuild a road. People trade off using community tools, and they work on whatever needs repairing. Regardless of ethnic group, they work side by side.

In the early 2000s, Rwanda joined the East African Community and the Commonwealth of Nations. Rwanda's economy, which was nearly decimated during the genocide, grew rapidly. Rwanda's new government and its peacekeeping strategies replaced the flag, anthem, and constitution. Rwanda was, almost literally, reborn.

The sewing shop where I worked with Grace and the ladies was one of many cooperatives that began after the genocide. In the midst of Rwanda's rebirth, the

government encouraged Rwandan women to "rebuild" their lives by learning a vocational trade, participating in income earning activities, and counseling with other women. Co-operatives and NGOs headed and run by Rwandan widows or foreign aid groups sprouted in Kigali and the Rwandan countryside. In bakeries, crop fields, factories, sewing plants, ranches, pottery shops, mills, and farms, women met other women, and on the sides of hills, they talked.

Today, only seventeen years after genocide, more than 50% of Rwanda's parliamentary members are female, the world's highest percent of women in a national governing body. The majority of Rwandan babies ride on the backs of the women who work the land and care for the cows. Women walk kilometers down and up the hill in the early morning to get water for their children. Women prepare the food; it is because of women that people eat. Women take care of sick children. They take care of everybody. And still they have time to dance.

Though they cannot understand the genocide, Grace says, they cannot forget. Remembering is how they heal; the cry of a baby can remind them, the slam of a door, the whites of eyes. Their bodies are symbols that will not let them forget—they bleed, shedding their own blood once a month like a tithe, they nourish their babies with their own milk. Rwanda is called "The Land of a Thousand Hills." The ground is complex, like a woman lying on her side, the curve of earth like shoulder, waist, hip. In the early morning, mothers trudge down the hill for water, with sleeping babies on their backs, and again in the afternoon, the barefaced sun on their chests. They sweat. They are familiar with blood and sweat alike. Verses of the New Testament follow them like shadows: "His sweat was as it were great drops of blood."

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One Sunday, Grace invited me to her home. I took a taxi to a steeped corner of the city where Grace lived with her family. Their neighborhood climbed up the side of a hill. Concrete mud houses hung on slants, and dirt roads were chiseled with canals from months of running rainwater. It was May and because of the rain, the car couldn't make it up the slick incline, so Grace met me on the side of the hill. There were no cars in that neighborhood, and naked children crowded the car's side doors. They tapped the windows, pressed their faces to the glass, and said "*Muzungu! Muzungu!*" which means, "*White girl, white girl!*"

In the dark I could see only the flicker of fire and shadows. Grace greeted me, and we walked through ankle-deep mud alleyways to her house, past a chicken coop with 400 chickens. Each house was strung to another on a continuous laundry line.

Grace lived with her widowed mother and sister and all of their children in the same two rooms where they had lived through the genocide. Her mother sat by us while we cut fat, firm potatoes into wedges on the dirt floor and boiled isombay leaves with nuts and oil. With Grace's daughter, Kiri, and niece, Vanissa, we peeled green plantains, scrubbed beans, and poked beef. Over charcoal in a blackened closet we let the food turn soft. Sitting on a bench by the water bowl, Grace told me of 1993 and 1994, the years when she had her first baby, Kiri, and the years when Rwanda's genocide took speed.

"I do not like to talk about it so much," she began.

She gave birth to Kiri in January, just months before the genocide erupted. She hid and prayed for weeks under a bed. Their neighbor was a good friend of Grace's father, who had recently been killed, and he let Grace and Kiri live under the bed in his house even though he was Hutu. He left the house at night to kill other Tutsi and then came home and slept in the bed above their hiding place. Grace was under the bed with Kiri for three weeks, eating only what food was snuck to her, nursing Kiri with a loose hand over the baby's face to keep the sucking quiet. "Please God," she had prayed, "let me die by a bullet and not by a knife."

Grace was under the bed with Kiri for three weeks...nursing Kiri with a hand over the baby's face to keep the sucking quiet.

She continued: *Other men tried to use sex as a weapon. Not so many Tutsi women were killed as men. They killed brothers and fathers, and then husbands and children. When a woman was left alone—no husband or child—she wasn't killed because they said her soul would kill her from pain. At night, groups of Hutu men broke into the homes of these widows and raped them.*

And what happens when she gets pregnant--pregnant with the baby whose father murdered her husband and other children? What happens when she is its mother? Women were sad. We made sadness in our bellies and held life behind our breasts. And we were in a war with ourselves, between hating and loving our illegitimate babies who were born sad, with no choice, and in a place of dying women and other children who could not be loved by their mothers. Neighbors killed neighbors, fathers betrayed their children and wives in inhumane ways. The city was burning, and dogs were eating human bones and meat from the piles of bodies in the road. Still, I was only hiding and praying. Oh, God, I prayed. Do you smell this?

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I never asked Grace if any of her own children were conceived through rape, though her daughter and nieces, just younger than me, fit into that generation. The other ladies also had children who would have been about that age. I don't know all of the ladies' stories in detail, but I know they are similar to Grace's.

One Hutu widow, Mirab, described the hollowness she knew when her husband climbed into bed in the dark with blood on his clothes. And she remembered her own silence.

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I have struggled to remember Grace's face. It is difficult to conjure up an image of her without a photo. I have a few recordings of her speaking, but beyond those brief scraps of time, the sound and rhythm of her voice are gone as well. There is one voice, however, that I recall. I heard it one night in particular, and it came from a woman who worked across the street from where I lived with Nancy. The woman cared for a bean field. During the day, she picked and hoed with her baby tied to her back, and I saw her when I left the house. After the entire neighborhood was dark, I heard her through my window, singing. I can still hear her, singing and splashing water.

Now the water is pouring, I am listening to it slap against the ground. In the morning, if it has not already dried up, there will be a puddle outside the gate where she sat. The woman is giving her child a bath. If I looked out the window, I would see only their shadows, the elongated arms of a woman drying off her baby, the sway of dim water, and her silhouette as she opens her shirt to nurse. Finally it is night when the naked baby is cleaned and unstrapped from her sweating back, when she can hold him next to her breast in the crook of her elbow. She is glad to be invisible in the darkness with her child. They are still, and grace can find her.

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