I remember looking out onto the next hill. We could see people burning the houses there. They were killing people. My mother was so desperate. She didn't want to leave this place.

They started shouting and making a lot of noise, saying that we were escaping and that they had to hurry, to come and get us before we could leave. I remember, apart from the burning houses, people running down that hill toward us.

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You Can't Just Pretend Nothing Happened

Everything important in Rwanda happens on a hill, so it was logical for Paul Kagame's mother to take him out onto a hillside to be murdered. She had spotted an armed mob advancing toward her house, and it took her only a few moments to realize that the family could not escape. With great dignity, she shepherded her two small sons and three daughters outside to face death in the open air.

"Instead of being killed in the house," she told them, "I would rather it be out in the open."

The gang was barely a mile from its prey when an astonishingly unexpected sound echoed from the nearby dirt road. An automobile was approaching. King Mutara III Rudahigwa owned one of the few in that area, and it had come on a lifesaving mission. The queen, who was a cousin of Kagame's mother, had learned of the day's spreading violence, guessed that the Kagame family would be in danger, and sent the royal chauffeur to rescue them. When the attackers saw him approach, they charged ahead ever faster, hoping to reach and kill their victims before he could arrive. They were closing in as the chauffeur screeched to a halt, pulled the intended victims into his car, and sped away.

This "practice genocide," the first in Rwandan history, had been launched three days earlier, on November 3, 1959. "In the morning the grim, blood-curdling cries began about 9 AM," wrote an American missionary who found himself in the midst of it. "Suddenly down the hill and across the site came pouring a motley host of hundreds of men and boys, shrieking and dancing, waving knives and spears." It was a mob like this one that attacked Kagame's home in the heartland district of Tambwe on November 6.

After plucking Paul Kagame from imminent death, together with his mother, brother, and sisters, the terrified chauffeur drove them to safety at the royal palace, a European-style residence overlooking the nearby town of Nyanza. The raid they survived set the rest of Rwandan history in motion. From it grew decades of impoverished exile, a far-reaching conspiracy that ranks among the most audacious plots in the annals of covert action, an insurgent army that deposed a dictatorship, and a new order determined to rebuild a shattered nation.

The family stayed at the palace for eight weeks, until the killing spree ended and Kagame's mother, Asteria, decided it was safe to take her children home. Six months later, after another spree erupted, she brought them back to the palace. This time she found its grounds packed with refugees. As soon as she could, she spirited her children to the sparsely populated northeast of the country, near the border with Uganda, where she had relatives. There she was reunited with her husband, Deogratias, who had been away at the time their home was attacked. The father quickly concluded that even this remote corner of the country was unsafe and took his family into Uganda. All they carried with them were a few bags stuffed with children's clothes.

Death squads that rampaged through the countryside during 1959 and 1960 were the vanguard of a new political movement that asserted "Hutu emancipation." One of its tactics was to terrorize the old Tutsi aristocracy, to which the Kagame family belonged. Both the Belgian colonial authorities and their Rwandan clients supported this bloody campaign. The police did not intervene to

stop it. Marauders killed openly and with absolute impunity. After each attack, more Tutsi fled their homeland.

Tens of thousands sought refuge in Uganda, and there they were caught up in a swirl of human misery. After they crossed the border, Ugandan officials rounded them up, packed them onto trucks, took them to remote regions, and dumped them. Every week or two after that, a relief truck came by with rations of beans and flour. For the rest of their sustenance, the refugees were left to their own devices. They began by planting whatever seeds they could find and building crude huts from mud, grass, and branches. Many were uprooted after a year without explanation and brought to another place where they had to start over. Kagame's parents found relatives in Rwanda who agreed to raise two of their daughters—both later made their way to Europe—but their two other daughters and both of their sons remained with them in destitution. They spent much of their childhood searching for firewood and water.

At the refugee camp where the family first landed, in the southwestern Uganda district of Ankole, Paul met another Rwandan boy named Fred Rwigyema, whose parents had also fled the first wave of killings. They became fast friends and remained so after their families were moved to Toro district, farther north. So rarely were they apart that many who met them thought they were brothers.

Paul and Fred explored the strange new world of their camps with the wide eyes of children. One of their favorite things to do was to sit at the feet of an older refugee who had thrilling war stories and wild dreams about reclaiming Rwanda. This man was a veteran of the *inyenzi* raids, a series of cross-border attacks on Rwandan government posts that Tutsi refugees launched in the early 1960s. The army easily repulsed these attacks and in response unleashed murderous repression against Tutsi civilians. Paul and Fred, however, never tired of hearing stories about this mini-insurgency. On Saturdays, with sticks wrapped in banana leaves to stand in for guns, they played at being *inyenzi* fighters.

They were already rehearsing the war to come. The spark of an idea was passing from one generation to another.

Some thought the friendship between Paul and Fred was perfectly balanced, but to others it seemed just the opposite because the two were different in so many ways. Paul was highly intelligent but sullen and withdrawn, liable to explode and fight at any moment. He rarely smiled and projected such an air of seriousness that even older people curbed their rowdiness and rough language when he entered a room. Fred, by contrast, was exuberant and charismatic. His ready grin and outgoing manner won him many friends. He was handsome, suave, and seductive, unlike his thin, gangly friend. Girls flocked around him and boys wanted to be like him.

The children of Rwandan refugees attended outdoor schools that their parents organized amid the squalor of their camps. Paul proved an eager pupil, and after finishing the equivalent of third grade, he was accepted into the well-regarded Rwengoro Primary School. It was a ten-mile walk from his camp, but he seized the chance. He applied himself single-mindedly to his studies and was so successful that in his final year of primary school, he won the highest grades of any student in the district. This was no easy feat. There were many Rwandan students there, and nearly every one had been sent to school with the same challenge: study hard, because your generation must find a way to end our exile.

You're a child when these things happen, but you grow up in an environment that affects you in such a fundamental way. There is a lot of thinking, and raising questions in your mind. As you grow, you discuss the whole history with your parents and friends and others. Later you come to comprehend that with the terrible life you're living, you are actually somebody with very little, if anything. Things are difficult because of that. You come to ask why. . . . You hear this history, you see that the life you are living is so terrible, and you ask: Why did this happen to us? It starts shaping something, maybe more so when you're very young.

Propelled by his excellent grades, Kagame won a place to study at the Ntare School, one of the best secondary schools in Uganda.

Soon after arriving, he surprised everyone by falling into surly indifference. He became distracted and lost his academic concentration. After his early burst of achievement, he had stopped to consider his station in life, and what he saw pained him.

Then, as he was brooding ever more deeply about the injustices that had been visited upon him, the person he most revered began collapsing under the weight of their shared tragedy.

Kagame's mother drew on deep reserves of inner strength to absorb the shocks of exile and loss. She put away memories of privilege and devoted herself to farm labor, toiling alongside other refugees to feed her children. Her husband proved less resilient. He was a hereditary noble who had been a subchief, a confidant of the king, and the owner of many cattle. The blow fate had dealt him proved unbearable.

"If I dig, I will die," he told his wife. "If I don't dig, I will also die. So let me die."

Over the next few years, this broken man fell from melancholy into despair. He spent the little money he found on cigarettes. Finally he faded from life behind a curtain of smoke.

Paul was fifteen when his father died, and the loss deepened his unfocused anger. He let his grades slip and became a troublemaker in school. At first he rallied his Rwandan schoolmates to fight back against Ugandan kids who taunted and insulted them. Then he went further, actively picking fights with the locals. Whenever the headmaster sent him home, his mother punished him without bothering to ask his version of events. She presumed he was guilty, and he always was.

"He was a measured person," one of his school friends later recalled. "He didn't react quickly. He wasn't quick to get involved or embroiled. He would stand aside and assess the situation. He was always intent on listening. But he was also a fighter. We always had someone insulting us, and he wouldn't stand for that. I remember vividly the time when some Ugandans were calling us names and assaulting us. We were living in quarters with forty kids in each one, and he organized ours to fight against them. They were bigger than he was, but he was always saying, 'We can't give in to these

guys. We can't let these guys call us whatever they want. We can't be submissive.' He was into this thing of surviving. Life was very difficult. We all knew that if you wanted something, you would have to fight for it. No one would give it to you."

In 1976, when Paul was midway through secondary school, he suffered another loss when his closest friend suddenly disappeared. Both young men had become restless as they searched for ways to channel their angry energy, and both were increasingly aware of the revolutionary currents surging through East Africa. Paul suspected that Fred had embraced some kind of clandestine mission, perhaps in opposition to Uganda's despotic leader, Idi Amin. His disappearance increased Paul's sense of isolation. It also led him to begin wondering whether the wider world might have a place in it for him as well.

Without the steadying influence of Fred's friendship, Paul became more disruptive than ever. Finally he was suspended from school. He found a place at the Old Kampala Secondary School, but there he remained hostile and aggressive, ready to fight whenever he heard an anti-Rwandan remark. In the end he managed to graduate, but without distinction.

I started feeling, in my thinking and whole being, very rebellious. I wanted to rebel against everything in life. I felt some kind of undefined anger. There was something I wanted to overcome, but I didn't know what it was.

You were always reminded, in one way or another, that you didn't belong there, that you were not supposed to be there. You have no place that you can call yours. You have no right to speak, so you keep quiet. Everything reminds you that you're not where you belong. It had almost become normal, but nothing anyone would get used to.

After his lackluster years at secondary school, this troubled young man brooded for a time but then began to regain his energy. He resolved to take advantage of whatever Uganda had to offer him. All of his efforts to integrate himself into Ugandan society, however, failed painfully.

The rebuffs he suffered helped shape one of his most fundamental beliefs: that it is folly to rely on the help of others.

In the months after he graduated from the Old Kampala Secondary School in 1976, Kagame realized that mediocre grades left a poor refugee with few prospects. He decided to return to school and repeat his final year, concentrating fully this time. That would cost money. He had none and decided to approach a well-to-do relative, "a kind of aunt" who lived in Kampala, for help.

She dismissed me. I left her office in anger. My revolt was against depending on anyone else to help me do something. It was anger inside of anger.

Not long after that disappointment, Paul learned that another relative of his in Uganda had become influential in selecting African students for scholarships to study in Switzerland. He visited the man and asked to apply, but nothing came of it. Part of the reason, by his own account, was his reluctance to plead his case.

He sent three other people to study there. It was not because they had better academic credentials, but he related better to them. Maybe if I had insisted and continued begging, he would have done it. It's part of me—I don't like begging or insisting.

The third opportunity that attracted this young man came literally out of the air. In 1977 East African Airlines placed an announcement in Ugandan newspapers that caught his eye. The airline needed new pilots and was offering to train ten qualified young men at its famous flight school in the Ugandan town of Soroti. Kagame had been fascinated by aviation since childhood, and he jumped at the chance. He took the entrance exam along with more than a hundred others, and when the results were posted, he was thrilled to see his name among the top ten. Flushed with excitement and believing that he had finally found a path toward normal life, he strode into the school director's office, announced that he was one of the successful applicants, and declared

himself ready to enroll. The director looked up. Immediately he could tell that the young man in front of him was no Ugandan but a refugee from Rwanda.

"You?" he cried out incredulously. "Get out of here, you Rwandan!"

Paul Kagame was hardly the only child of Rwandan refugees who faced slights like these. Waves of pogroms drove more than three hundred thousand Tutsi to flee Rwanda between 1959 and 1964. Most landed nearby, in Uganda, Kenya, Burundi, Tanzania, and the Congo. Others made their way to Europe or North America. Many among them, especially the young, never accepted the sentence of eternal exile that Rwanda's new masters had imposed upon them. They lived without a country and from their ordeal drew a deep sense of purpose. With an almost mystic focus, they came to believe fate and history had assigned them a transcendent task: to find their way back to a homeland many of them barely remembered, but all idealized.

One child of Rwandan refugees who went on to a career in medicine and diplomacy, Richard Sezibera, later concluded that the experience of exile and discrimination had a strongly positive aspect. "It can do either of two things," he said. "It can crush you or strengthen your sense of self-worth. For many of us, it reaffirmed our sense of self-worth. Somehow it spurred us to do more."

Some of these young exiles wanted to visit the country for which they were preparing to sacrifice so much. Paul Kagame, who had been away since the age of two and remembered nothing other than his brush with death there, was among them. Like other refugees, he had no way to obtain a passport, since Rwanda no longer recognized him and Uganda would not grant him citizenship. He managed, however, to persuade a Ugandan official to issue him a "travel document," and with it, late in 1977, he crossed into his homeland.

At the border crossing, the twenty-year-old Kagame hired a taxi and took it to Kigali, the Rwandan capital. One of his relatives, "a kind of uncle," had been part of a celebrated group of young leftists who accepted an offer to study in Czechoslovakia,

only to find after graduating that the government had decided not to allow the Tutsi among them to return home. All returned together anyway, setting off a tumultuous confrontation after which several of them, including Kagame's uncle, were imprisoned for more than a year. He became the young man's first friend inside Rwanda. The two of them spent many hours talking about the worldwide clash of ideas, their country's situation, and what was to be done.

Kagame had entered the country legally, but his travel document said nothing about his Rwandan origin, and he was afraid of trouble if the police stopped him in Kigali. Only after dark did he dare venture onto the streets. Once out, he walked endlessly, slowly absorbing the reality of a city that had until then existed for him only in dreams and stories. He relied on the shadows and his instincts to keep him safe.

On one of his forays, Kagame discovered that the bar at a mid-size hotel called the Kiyovu attracted a clientele of politicians, civil servants, and police officers who liked to gather after work for beer and conversation. He became a regular. His routine was to slip in as unobtrusively as possible, sit at a table by himself, speak to no one, and nurse one orange soda after another. He seemed to be lost in his own world, but actually he was listening intently to conversations around him. What he overheard was mostly gossip and news of the political rialto: who loses and who wins, who's in, who's out. It fascinated him.

Kagame stayed in Rwanda for six weeks. A year later he returned for a second trip, this time traveling through the countryside. He watched, listened, and assimilated a torrent of impressions. These experiences shaped him in two important ways. First, they were his introduction to the "homeland" he had never known. From his observations he drew valuable insights into Rwandan life, especially a renewed sense of outrage at the country's apartheid-style political system. Perhaps even more important, Kagame's missions to Rwanda, which were essentially those of a self-employed spy, whetted his interest in the culture of intelligence gathering. He was already devouring James Bond novels and Nick Carter detective stories, and like many restless idealists of his generation he was captivated by

the revolutionary image of Che Guevara. In Rwanda, he assigned himself a classic intelligence mission: to make sense of a complex situation by analyzing many scattered clues. Without realizing it, he was moving into the world of subversion and covert action.

Kagame's visits to Rwanda sharpened the conundrum that defined his life and the lives of most Rwandan refugees. Two warring realities tormented them. Exile in hostile countries was intolerable, but return home was impossible. What, then, should they and their people do? This question obsessed the rising generation of exiles. It was the labyrinth that imprisoned them: can't stay, but can't go home.

Around 1977 or '78, I began wondering what it was that could be done. I started talking about it with friends. I wasn't agreeing with many things. We were many who talked about this, but I had contempt for some of them. They were only talking and not translating it into something that was doable. It was an exercise that seemed to be an end in itself: talk, lament, talk about when to meet next, but not about how all this could culminate into some action.

As Kagame was wrestling with the question of what he and his generation could do to bring their people back home, he heard a startling piece of news. His childhood friend, Fred Rwigyema, had surfaced in the Ugandan town of Fort Portal and was looking for him. Paul quickly made his way there and found Fred with a dramatic story to tell. He had left home after being recruited by followers of Yoweri Museveni, then a Ugandan rebel determined to overthrow Idi Amin's bizarre tyranny. For more than a year, he and other rebels had trained at a semisecret base in Tanzania. Now the rebels, supported by a large force of Tanzanian soldiers, were launching their invasion. Fred was part of the force. He had left Uganda as an aimless and impoverished refugee and returned as an ambitious, self-confident soldier. This was a reunion that would change the course of Rwandan history.

There were emotions that are not easily expressed. I don't know how exactly to explain it, but it was very warm. It was something unique. It

was something that had not been expected by either of us. Maybe he thought he'd find me dead. Maybe I also thought I would never see him again. So it was some kind of very exciting reunion. We spent most of the time together, talking of all sorts of things, even sleeping in the same room. There was a lot to talk about.

The military training and experience that Fred Rwigyema had accumulated opened a new path for Rwandan exiles. He was the first of his generation to turn himself into a soldier. Paul Kagame and others quickly followed.

It was in this period, without the world noticing, that Rwandan exiles began learning how to fight.

Rwanda's government remained stable during these years, counting as always on unconditional support from its colonial patrons in Belgium and France. No one except a few utopian exiles imagined it could be deposed by force. The Europeans who designed this regime, however, had planted within it the seeds of its own destruction. They imagined Rwanda as a colonial success story. In fact, they had set in motion forces that would propel it beyond the edges of imaginable horror.