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TEN THOUSAND FRANCS FOR A BULLET

BY DICHO ILUMGA DISASHI

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Denise Rutindika wasn't one to sit back and wait for something to happen. She was the kind of girl who made things happen whatever the cost might be. At the tender age of sixteen, her forthright manner found expression in her love for dressing up like her favorite movie stars in the films she'd recently seen. Even so, I was surprised when this energetic and beautiful girl, who only days before had blatantly accused me of arrogance, talked her way past the doorman into the gymnasium where my basketball teammates and I were practicing.

As I saw her enter the building, my mind reviewed our previous brief encounter. "Why are you so full of yourself?" she had said. "You think you're a big man, a star who can ignore anyone he likes." It's true; I had pretty much ignored her. However, it wasn't intentional, and I didn't feel like "a star." I was too young for that—barely twenty-one. But I had done well since moving from Zaire to Rwanda . In just two years, I had advanced to a managerial position in the store where I worked. My earnings allowed me to eat well at least, and perhaps I did seem to parade around "like a proud peacock"—a label she also assigned to me that day.

I recall that I tried to reason with her. Of course, I couldn't. I doubt anyone could. She left. It was hours after she left that I realized how badly I'd behaved.

Apart from my daytime work, I spent my free time training with my basketball team. We called ourselves "Virungans." Virunga is a volcano in the eastern Congo close to Uganda . The name seemed appropriate. We played hard. When we had the ball in the midst of a game, we were nearly invincible. Yet, we were more than just a team. We were a group of "brothers" helping one another succeed in a strange new home. Most of us had recently immigrated to Rwanda from Zaire .

In 1989, at eighteen, I had left Goma, a district capital in eastern Congo . I left because of the crippling economic impact of the Mobutu Sese Seko regime. I saw no economic future for myself in Zaire . I left to seek work in Rwanda . Others, many others, were leaving Zaire in search of better jobs and a more hopeful life.

Leaving my homeland was not easy. Travel in the area was primitive. For three days, I walked and camped along the roadside, begging for a ride. Finally, I was picked up by two basketball players who recognized me. They not only let me ride with them, they let me share the room they leased in an apartment near Kigali , the capital of Rwanda .

In the evening after work, the three of us practiced basketball out behind our apartment house for as long as sufficient light remained. We were good, even as just a trio. Our practice began

to attract onlookers as well as other players.

I have always loved basketball, and it was close to this time that I adopted for myself Michael Jordan's surname as my own first name. Hence, I became known as Jordan Simaro instead of Jackson Simaro. The fans soon noticed this, and the theft of a prominent name seemed to lend strength to my game in some subjective way. For eight months we youths did little else in our spare time but practice in this way. Our lives seemed in near isolation from the lives of others around us. The team grew, and by the end of this *incubation period*, we had expanded to twenty-two members. We devoted ourselves to the development of teamwork, a cardinal element in this unusual sport.

On weekends, we were allowed the use of a large practice hall in a school gymnasium nearby. Here, the twenty-two of us would divide ourselves into well-balanced teams. Our quiet, skillful movements, and the incessant thump of the ball on the hardwood floor, continued to attract a steady crowd of onlookers.

Inevitably, a self-confident sixteen-year-old girl was among the crowd one evening. The doorman later told me that as she pushed past him she said, "Tell Jordan that I'm here."

Denise, by any standard, was a young beauty. She stayed about two hours that time. Our eyes met too often. I played badly. As practice ended, she got up and left without saying a word. I remember thinking, *what does this strange girl want of me?*

My teammates soon warned me that this girl's flirtation could lead to dangerous consequences. Her father and brothers were huge men whom everybody in the area feared. They were leaders among the Tutsi peoples of Rwanda. I had left my homeland partly to avoid overbearing men like these and I promised not to pursue her. Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, that promise lasted almost no time at all.

I was cooking myself a late lunch one afternoon when I felt someone's hand caressing my chest from behind. I grabbed the hand and turned around. Of course, it belonged to Denise.

Day after day, usually on weekends, Denise would find an excuse to visit me where I lived. My people say that life begins when you meet a woman and you know she was born for you—intended for you. That saying soon proved true for Denise and for me. We found ourselves overwhelmed by a love that blossomed far too soon.

One fateful day Denise's cousin, the man her family intended her to marry, came looking for her. The clever man wandered onto the apartment property and apparently took his time moving about the outside and peering into windows. Two lovers failed to hear him when he peeked through their window. We had neglected to draw the blinds.

In what seemed only minutes, Denise's entire family: father, mother, four brothers and a sister had gathered at our door. The father led the pack. Pounding on the door he shouted, "Foreigner, my respect! My honor!" One of the gigantic sons broke in the bedroom door.

Neighbors and friends eventually calmed down the dismayed father, pleading with him not to make a spectacle.

However, before he left, he launched a fearful threat. "Zairois," he shouted, "If you not pay money and marry my daughter, I will kill you. That you must believe!"

From that moment on Denise began living with me, and during this time Sandrine was born.

Six months and an eight-hundred-dollar dowry later, we were married. For many months thereafter she used to tease me and say, "My father do a good thing. I know you not marry me

otherwise.”

And I'd tease back with, “So that was your plan all along? Maybe you told him where to look for you.”

Denise's mother, even after we married, used to urge her to have children with Tutsi men instead of with a “worthless Zairois.” No doubt, her scheme was to bolster the Tutsis' numbers in Rwanda . Tutsi and Hutu friction was already on the rise. Oddly, the mother seemed genuinely serious; and this, too, became one of our little private jokes

During 1992, we bought a new house on a peaceful small lakeshore near Kigali . A year later, our happiness doubled with the birth of beautiful Bijoux. With the joy of a newborn child—with melodic sounds from the lake drifting through the open windows of our new home—life was indeed beautiful.

Denise was such a lovely mother. She nursed Bijoux and took exceptional care not only of the children but also of herself. She maintained for herself a strict diet which included lots of bread, vegetables, sweet potatoes, and milk. She wouldn't touch meat in spite of her Tutsi heritage. She felt that the vegetarian diet would be better for her children as well.

Sometimes I used to just stand and admire her. For some social occasions, she would dress up like a favorite movie star just as she had done in her adolescence. The clothes transformed her and would charm everybody around her. Our joys were simple, our bounty sufficient, and the years we shared were idyllic.

However, the events that followed brought incalculable change. On April 6, 1994 the basketball team stop playing, the neighbors bolted their doors. President Juvenal Habyarimana's plane had been shot down. At first, as I listened to the news, I didn't know what to think. Then, gradually, as the details began to sink in, I heard my mind warning that, *Oh my God, now they've really done it.* Within hours, prominent members of the government began calling for the death of all Tutsis.

Gangs of Hutu, armed with machetes and clubs and coaxed on by soldiers and government officials, began killing Tutsis by the hundreds, The Rwandan genocide had begun. Everyone of Tutsi heritage was in danger.

Each day brought more deaths than the day before as the news spread like a prairie fire throughout the nation. Hutu and Tutsi neighbors, who had lived side by side for generations, now eyed each other with contempt and suspicion.

Neighborhoods the length and breadth of Rwanda turned into killing fields as army units joined the militias in wiping out “the Tutsi problem.” There would be no middle ground. The numbers grew at an unbelievable pace.

Inevitably, four soldiers came one day to our front door. They stood with their AK-47s at ready, surveying the living room. “We are looking for the snake,” one said.

I was at home watching my children and the neighboring kids play a game when the soldiers entered. Again, one shouted, “We are looking for the snake.”

“There is no snake here,” I said. But just as I said it, Denise opened a door to see what was going on and their leader said, “There she is! There's the snake!”

They grabbed her and dragged her out the front door. She and I fought them all the way, but they were too strong. With every argument I could muster, I begged them not to hurt her. The children followed us outside and the neighbor kids fled. I hustled my two back into the house

and tried quickly to reassure them. When I returned to the scene outside, Denise was on her knees begging for her life. She had recently befriended a French couple, who had left Rwanda and had given her many of their belongings including a television, a stove, a fridge and a video recorder.

I offered them everything in the house but they just kept saying, almost chanting, “We must kill the snake.”

One of them drew a machete. Another held a heavy club. To my horror, I realized that they intended to butcher her as they were doing to others all over Rwanda . They couldn’t waste bullets on snakes They had to use knives and clubs. No! More than that! They *wanted* to use knives and clubs. It’s odd what the human mind does in a crisis. Mine turned to related instances about which I had read. Mobs gone mad with killing seem to choose to do their evil work up close-and-personal, hacking off limbs and smashing skulls. There are records in such times of tossing babies in the air and catching them on bayonets, or setting churches full of refugees on fire and shooting those who flee—their backs engulfed in flames. While in this helpless state, I begged “Please, not like this! If you must kill then shoot. Please, have mercy?” How could humans harbor such hatred? I tried one last time to play to their greed. “You want money? How much money?”

They agreed that if I gave them ten thousand Rwanda francs they would shoot her instead of butchering her. I rushed into the house, grabbed Bijoux and went to where I’d hid our money. I heard a shot When I came out, they were leaving.

They didn’t even wait for the money. Denise was lying in a pool of blood. What great crime had she done? Why would they call her a snake? For hours, I sat on the ground beside the body of my beloved Had I done the right thing to goad them into shooting instead of slaughtering? Was there some magical way I could have saved her? Three years ago, she had won my heart by her forthright manner. Perhaps she had angered some government official somewhere in Kigali with that same haughty behavior. But how had it come to this? True she was a Tutsi by heritage, but she was married to me, a citizen of Zaire . There was nothing now to be done. The love of my life was dead.

At the time, nobody was allowed to bury Tutsis without the express permission of the army. Instead, I was required to wrap her body in sheets and await permission. The neighbors would not help with this for fear of bringing the Hutu wrath on themselves. I dragged her body to the back of our house where she would be safe while I waited authorization

When I entered the house, my children were silent and trembling. They had witnessed images through their tear-filled eyes that would remain with them for the rest of their lives. I, too, was trembling I couldn’t think what to do to help my babies. I was still inside the house in this numb and near catatonic state when three more militia burst into the living room and found me. I could not even make myself protest when they told me to strip and made me kneel in front of them. One pulled out his machete and held it flat against my chest just above my heart as though to take a measure of where to strike a blow to the back of my neck. Bijoux began to scream and that brought me out of my stupor.

I closed my eyes. *God, it is finished. Now I will join Denise.* I spoke to the one with the machete as calmly as I could, “All I ask is that you take my children home when this is over.”

At that moment, a friend whom I knew only as Sylvain burst into the room. He also held an AK-47. He was a leader in the militia, but also a genuine fan of our basketball team.

Sylvain spoke quickly to the three. An argument over my fate ensued. The one with the machete turned the blade a quarter turn and cut me across the chest. Then they dragged me

outside, arguing all the way.

Once back on my knees outside, Sylvain and the other three then drew some distance away and cocked their rifles. I caught my breath. Nothing happened for maybe ten seconds. They began again to argue. I glanced up to see that Sylvain held an armed grenade.

"If you kill him," he said, "none of us will leave this place alive."

After a tense moment, the three lowered their weapons and backed off.

Before he left, Sylvain quietly warned me that there was more trouble coming. That I should flee to the Zaire embassy straight away. My greatest fear lay in the fact that Bijoux shared her mother's slender build and sharp features so characteristic of the Tutsis. She seemed in many ways a miniature of her mother.

"Sylvain," I said, "they killed my Denise. If only you had come an hour earlier. They will want to kill Bijoux. But if they do, I warn you that I will return and kill every Hutu I can find. I will kill you and all your family. You will all die."

Sylvain stepped back with a look of indifference. I suppose he chalked up my outburst to the ranting of a broken heart. I watched them for a long time until they were out of sight. Then I went inside to pack food and supplies and to prepare the children for the trip to the embassy.

Thousands of Zairians had fled to the embassy, creating a chaotic and desperate situation. In the madness of what was Rwanda, there seemed to be no respite, no "enough." Outside the embassy, the roads to the border were long and reportedly filled with Hutu predators. Even while temporarily safe in the embassy, we were far from out of trouble.

Elsewhere, scores of people, unable to reach the embassy, were streaming towards the nearest border with only what they could carry. The death toll along the way was enormous. In the fields, dogs fed on the carnage.

Rwanda was in flames. Foreigners from every nation were fleeing their embassies in Kigali, desperately seeking to avoid the killing fields around them.

Conditions in the embassy were poor. Close to four thousand crowded the gardens outside and the rooms and halls inside. Food was scarce. Thankfully, most had brought food with them. Sanitary facilities were hopelessly inadequate. Many people were ill. Medicine was not available. Some oldsters had died. Some babies were born.

By pooling resources, groups could hire buses to transport them to the border. The cost was one hundred and fifty thousand francs per trip. I found a group from our basketball team camped out behind the main building. Among ourselves, and with the help of a few others, we raised the money for the trip. More difficult was a requirement that we be accompanied by a government official, and that we have a letter from the government of Rwanda stating that we were Zairian refugees entitled to safe passage home. It was nine days before we could leave. We flew a huge flag from to bus as added protection.

All along the route we were stopped. In a town along the Mwogo River, they made everybody get out of the bus. They lined us up and examined us. They took Bijoux to one side. They ignored my demands that she was my daughter. They saw in her too many Tutsi characteristics to let her pass, and they placed her against a wall pockmarked with bullet holes while they searched for others with similar features. There were no others. The firing squad began loading their weapons.

I hurried to the wall to shield Bijoux with my body. In a moment of incredible self-sacrifice and

tremendous risk, a dozen of my basketball teammates joined me, some even with their wives and children. They refused to leave when the officer in charge accosted them. Unbelievably, the officer relented and we were allowed to continue on our journey. We were stopped repeatedly all the way to the Ruzizi border gate.

Zaire was a poor place of refuge at this time. The dictator, Mobutu Sese Seko, headed a government so rife with plundering, the nation's resources had been depleted to a point where there was little left to pay civil servants, much less military personnel. The country's economy was in free fall. Prices were surging. Supermarkets classified products by groups rather than pricing individual items. This apparently reduced their risk and allowed them to keep up with inflation. The value of money was dropping by the minute.

At the border, we were forced to fend for ourselves. Looting, bribery, and corruption prevailed as the soldiers from Zaire searched through our belongings for valuables to steal. Most of us were too tired and discouraged to complain. In the flight from Rwanda, I had packed the team equipment, a pair of expensive boots stuffed with some of Denise's jewelry, and a leather jacket. As I opened my bags for inspection, Bijoux by my side, one-by-one the vultures came to claim their due. A colonel made off with the boots and jewelry. Then a major took the team jerseys. A captain took five basketballs. A few from the lower ranks picked through the scraps.

I didn't say a word at the time, but as I left the line, my anger grew. I turned and went back to accosted them. *Why should I be frightened of my own people?* I thought. Standing over the pile of my confiscated belongings, I shouted, "I will kill you and your family. I have lost my wife, and this is all my babies and I have to start over with. You will all die." Then I went outside, sat down and cried."

One by one, without a word, the soldiers returned my possessions—first the boots and jewelry, then the jerseys, then the basketballs.

From across the border the full impact of what was happening in Rwanda became even more evident. Vehicles by the thousands crowded the streets of the border towns of Zaire, their progress hindered by tens of thousands of refugees on foot, many of them Rwanda citizens who had walked from their homes. Along with their meager belongings, these hoards brought tales of horror, the scale of which may never be fully known.

Three months after the start of the genocide, the composition of those who were fleeing Rwanda began to change. An angry and well-equipped army of Tutsi refugees and exiles had reinvaded Rwanda and was marching to recapture the capital. Now the Hutus, fearing retribution from Tutsis, began filling refugee camps all across eastern Zaire. Many of these were the same who had murdered only days before. Somewhere among them, no doubt, were the four that murdered Denise.

I found it hard to cope with my trauma. For a time, I searched refugee camps in the hope of finding the men who killed Denise. The hunter became the hunted. However, eventually I ceased this searching. I realized that it had to stop somewhere. I had to live on, even if only for the benefit of my children and to honor the memory of their mother.

I began to rebuild my life by working first as a security guard and then as a coordinator for the Red Cross. Ironically, some of my previous training equipped me to help other refugees—even Hutus—irrespective of their probable guilt. I felt that I had to rise above my losses. In my family background, there are Hutus, Tutsis, French, and Arabs. If I were to continue to hate the Hutus, I would hate a part of myself.

The genocide in Rwanda was not an incident in isolation. Deep hatreds remain in the border cities on both sides. Bijoux, almost daily, experiences incidents at school. Born in Rwanda, in the minds of the Zairian children, she is Rwandan. "Sometimes," she says, "I am accosted by

other kids at school. It makes me feel very bad, and I question my own nationality. I don't really know where I belong."

Once I asked, "Would you want to leave here when you grow up?"

"It is not a question of when I grow up," she said. "Even right now I would like to leave here and find a quiet place where there are not always the probing questions." Her hurt, even now at the age of fourteen, is far too close to the surface.

For a time, our basketball team—those who were left—came back together once again. Communicating in Mashi, Lingala, Swahili and Kinyarwanda, for a month or two, the team practiced in the evening near where we live. But the practice lacked the authenticity it had before. We each had a hurtful story too painful to retell. In some silent way, our togetherness stemmed the pain of wounds we feared would never heal.

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