

The Revenge of Blood-Red Rivers

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THE REVENGE OF BLOOD-RED RIVERS

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Chapter 1: The calm before the storm; March 1994.

When I close my eyes, I can still envision those distant days in March '94, albeit my memory has faded over the years.

“Samantha, come and play soccer with us.” My brother always joked. Sometimes I obliged, and he always laughed in glee at my clumsiness with the soccer ball, as he was running laps around me. This took place in the soil field next to the river where the children of our village met.

“Yuhi, stop being mean to me!” I remember shouting at my brother. I remember the look of the old worn-out ball, the earthy mud fields and warm rivers, but I cannot remember the face of my brother, just glimpses of a happier time. When I think of my dear brother, I only remember his happy smile, his cute innocence and thundering laughter whenever he scored a goal. It was always a debate between us whenever someone scored a goal, as we didn't have proper goal posts to determine who was the real winner. We used our worn-out shoes as goal posts and played barefoot instead. This was crucial not to break our old and much-loved shoes any further. They were the only ones that we've got, and we needed the shoes for when we helped our parents ploughing the farmlands, to avoid stepping on rocks, or walking on venomous animals. Our school's sports field was clear of sharp rocks, so why would we wear out our shoes when playing barefoot worked just as well?

I remember coming home after a day in school, which was followed by fishing in the muddy warm river with my dad. We ate umitsuma, a mixed of cassava and corn for lunch and dinner. This was our daily staple. We rarely ate meat, except when one of us were lucky enough to catch a fish or a bird. Our days were joyful; we were poor but at least our poverty brought us together. It was not at all like the cool and modern suburbia I am now living in, after I escaped to Australia as a Rwandan genocide survivor.

Occasionally, my father would gently whisper to us about the current news from the rest of Rwanda. Our family didn't have a TV. We did not even have a radio, but we did know how to read, so we followed the headlines in the newspapers that they sold in a nearby town. Sometimes me or my brother would run to the neighbouring town and pick up old newspapers and books from the

rubbish bins. It was too wasteful to buy today's newspaper when old newspapers gave us the same opportunity to read and learn about the world in different languages. On a good day, I found old newspapers or books in Kinyarwanda, French, or English. I loved learning different languages of the world, and I often would imagine myself travelling to these places that they spoke about in books. My brother Yuhi found my fascination with languages to be silly. "How often do you ever speak to someone who doesn't know Kinyarwanda? The white man never comes here anyway."

"Don't be ignorant, Yuhi. Samantha's desire to amass knowledge will make our village proud one day. We are the Nyamwasa family, and we have always valued knowledge." My father, Mutara Nyamwasa, replied kindly.

"I guess books are good for her since she won't be a professional footballer when she grows up," Yuhi smirked and ran off to play some more football, as usual.

When Yuhi had ran away, I spoke to my dad about something that I read in the newspaper. "Father. The newspaper said that President Juvénal Habyarimana is facing difficulties with the peace treaty. Why is that? Why can't people live in peace?"

Mutara gave me a worried expression and explained, "That is because the devil and evil spirits influence people to want discord. It's the way of the world. You can only make things better by helping the good spirits around you."

"But will we be safe?" I asked innocently.

"Man cannot know his fate. Only our God Jesus Christ knows. To speculate on these matters is a waste of energy. We must pray that God will save us and things will work out." My father said with a kind but worried voice.

Looking back at our talk, I believe that our father had a lack of foreboding suspicion of what was about to happen. While a part of me is blaming him for not taking precautions, another part of me understands him. We cannot let fear govern our lives. My father's lack of preparation is also understandable, as our part of the country was never involved in the civil war that ravaged the northern parts of Rwanda between 1990 to 1993. Yet, after the short-lived peace, the worst was about to come.

Looking back, I also recall a conversation I had with my mother, Junema, a short while before everything fell apart.

“Why can’t I have another sibling, mother? Ours is the smallest family in the village.” I pleaded.

“I am not sure, my dear child. We have been praying to Jesus Christ every night for another child, but we have not been blessed.” My mother replied solemnly. I joined my mother in praying for another sibling that night, but nothing happened. In retrospect, I have realised that my mother and I were genetically predisposed to the same condition, with one dissimilarity. She had two children before she got old enough for the condition to appear.

Chapter 2: Blood-red rivers; April 1994.

I remember the day it all started. It was a Sunday morning, and I wanted to go to the neighbouring town and get some old newspapers after having attended Sunday Mass. My father had reprimanded me with a fit of surprising anger. “No, Samantha. I forbid you from leaving the village. Go catch a fish in the river. I am hungry.”

My father’s anger had puzzled me. He had always said that the hunger for knowledge was more important than the hunger of the flesh. Why had he changed his mind? I didn’t want to anger my father in my pursuit of knowledge, so I decided to grab a fishing net and try to catch a fish in the nearby muddy river instead.

As I stood in muddy waist-deep water, I reflected over how the colour of the water was gradually changing, from a brown reddish hue, ever so-slowly to bright alarming red. I assume this was a minor concern at a time, as I was so young and innocent, but in retrospect, I wish I had warned everyone there and then. After several fruitless hours, I finally caught something big and heavy in my fishing net.

At first, I felt instant joy. A fish this big could feed the whole village, I thought to myself. But then I felt something strange. Why wasn’t the fish struggling when I reeled in the net? I knew that we were not supposed to eat fish that was already dead when we caught it, but I wanted to make my dad happy and proud of me.

As I pulled in the motionless “fish”, I was hit with a horrific image of what was to be the worst incidence in my life which I remember till this day. I had caught the dismembered head of a man. I recognised the man, it was Kagabo from the neighbouring village. I panicked and ran away in terror, and the net which encapsulated the motionless head flowed downstream.

I ran to my father and screamed: “Father!! I caught Kagabo’s head in the river. He is dead, Papa!”

My father gave me a disbelieving stare and replied. “Stop talking nonsense, Samantha. I know you are angry about having to fish on a Sunday, but it’s unfair to the other children in this village if you don’t do your part of the chores.”

“Please papa. Come with me to the river and I’ll show it to you.” I pleaded. My dad sighed and followed me to the river, while muttering some grumbles.

As we got to the river, he gave me a stern look and asked: "Where is the fishing net, Samantha?"

"I dropped it and it followed the stream." I snivelled and I saw how my dad held back his anger.

I felt ashamed. My father wasn't a mean man, but we were poor, and we couldn't afford to lose the fishing net. "Sorry, papa. I will follow the river until I find the net." I apologised.

"Good. Be home before nightfall. There won't be dinner for you unless you bring the net back." My father scorned me.

I looked at him with teary eyes and started walking downstream. In retrospect, I realise that the reason why I have father issues is because our last encounter was so negative. Yet, it was this encounter that saved my life as I was away from the village when the massacres began.



MANY HOURS LATER, I was on my way back to the village. I was tired and hungry, and my eyes were droopy and teary. I hadn't been able to find the lost fishing net, and I worried that my father would hit me. Getting scolded on an empty stomach was not the ideal way to spend a night, especially since I was only twelve years old.

As I approached the village, I heard loud screams and a group of men chanting. I didn't recognise their voices, which felt odd as we rarely had outsiders visiting our village. As I walked towards my hut, a man grabbed me from behind and put a hand on my mouth.

"Sssshh, be quiet if you want to live!" The man hissed sternly. I felt petrified, and despite my efforts, I couldn't break free from the strong hold of the man. I looked at the man's outfit, he wore military pants with a large blood-soaked machete hanging by his side. After a while, a group of army men led a group of women in chains past us, not knowing that we were there. I saw the leader of the group sitting in a jeep that moved in walking pace. "That's Colonel Patrick Bagosora. He is the commander of our unit and the one who ordered us to attack your village."

I don't know what got into me, but I tried to memorise Patrick's face and uniform as hard as I could. I guess that I already back then, in my terrified state,

wanted to get revenge on the man who was responsible for the murder of my entire family.

As the army group moved away, my captor took his hand off my mouth and spoke. "We need to go to the village and look for supplies. We have a long walk ahead of us."

I nodded, sobbed, and said "Where are we going, and what's your name?"

The man gave me a cold stare and replied. "Don't ask questions, stupid girl. I am the one in control."

"Sorry. I'm Samantha Nyamwasa, and I just need a friend." I stuttered.

"Okay. My name is Phillippe, and I am taking you to safety far away from here." Phillippe replied.

"I need to see my family. We must help them." I pleaded.

"I'd rather not take you," Phillippe said sternly.

"Please. Otherwise, I won't go with you." I begged.

After muttering some profanities, Phillippe agreed to my desperate pleas. As we reached my hut, I saw my father dead outside the entrance. They had chopped him many times with machetes. My brother was the next family member I saw. They had tied him around an electricity pole, and used him as an archery target. I entered inside the hut, where I saw my mother lay naked on the ground with her eyes gouging out in terror. She was bleeding from several deep cuts to her legs, and someone had shattered a glass bottle and stuffed it into her vagina.

"Samantha, I am so glad to see you alive. You must get yourself to safety." Junema spoke in agony while gasping for the last breath of air. "Mama, who did this to you?" I cried.

"Patrick Bagosora, the nephew of Théoneste Bagosora. He murdered your father, and he made me watch as his men shot arrows towards your brother. After that, he raped me. He finished by shoving a broken glass bottle up my vagina." Junema whispered while falling in and out of consciousness.

I turned to Phillippe and cried: "We must get my mother to the hospital!"

He shook his head and replied. "No. The closest hospital is 30 kilometres away and she would bleed out on the way there. Besides, there is no help for someone like her at the hospital. President Juvénal Habyarimana is dead. Interim President Théoneste Bagosora has ordered the elimination of all Tutsis in this region. You can choose to let her bleed out or end her suffering right now."

I looked at my dear and pitiful mother, who was shaking in extreme agony and pain while passing in and out of consciousness. I could not let her die like this. "I'll do it," I said as I grabbed my mother's pillow while crying wildly. I placed it over her head, applied pressure with one hand while holding her hand until her weak pulse was gone.

I took the pillow away from her head. At the age of twelve, I had put my mother out of her misery and as I heard her last dying breath, I vowed to avenge my family. Patrick Bagosora would have to suffer for what he had done to the people of my village and my family.

Chapter 3: Rapists on the forest path; April-May 1994.

We were walking eastwards along the Lake Muhazi. I had done this walk once before, precisely two years earlier when my family had wanted to hike around the lake as a fun family experience. Back then, it had been a beautiful stretch of lush green grass mixed with welcoming rural villages and its warm and friendly people. I remember my papa telling me that the hiking track used to be even better before the civil war started, however, when I did the walk the first time it was still enjoyable.

My walk along the lake in April 1994 was anything but enjoyable. I was spending many days walking in the extreme heat with the curt and temperamental Phillippe, whose real motivation for bringing me along I hadn't figured out yet. Phillippe still wore the uniform of Théoneste Bagosora's Interahamwe Hutu militia that had pledged to exterminate my people. Yet his desire to murder people of the Tutsi tribe seemed to have subsided and had been replaced by the desire to take me to an undisclosed location.

The last day we walked along the lake before turning southeast, I had an episode of sickness that I will never forget. I was severely dehydrated as we hadn't been able to find a water source that wasn't contaminated with blood and human remains. I collapsed, and I yearned to drink from the pool of water that was only a few meters away from me. Yet the thought of drinking water contaminated with human remains sickened me even further, and I vomited violently.

"What's wrong, little girl?" Phillippe taunted.

"I need water. I am so weak." I replied meekly.

Phillippe gave me a sour look, threw his empty canteen bottle at me, and shouted, "I don't even have water for myself. We got to keep moving. There is an untainted water source a few hours walk away."

"How do you know?" I asked softly.

"I was with Interahamwe. I know where I can get water. Do you think we are stupid enough to contaminate our water source? Do you think we are stupid monkeys?" Phillippe taunted.

"I didn't. I am just thirsty." I mumbled.

“You’ve implied it, you rotten Tutsi cockroach. Apologize now!” Phillippe demanded.

“I am sorry, Phillippe.” I sobbed.

“Get up. We need to move.” Phillippe ordered.

I tried to get up on my feet, but my legs would not carry me, and I collapsed to the ground like an abandoned sack of corns. Phillippe swore and started kicking violently towards a tree, presumably instead of kicking me. Eventually, he made a fire, filled a cooking pot with unclean water, and started boiling it.

“The contaminated water won’t kill you if you boil it first,” Phillippe explained coldly.

“Thank you, Phillippe,” I whispered weakly.

As Phillippe was boiling the water, two militiamen approached us. The taller of them spoke: “Hey soldier, why are you here, and why are you boiling this filthy water? There is freshwater an hour away.”

“The girl. She is weak and refuses to get up unless I give her water.” Phillippe replied.

“Bullshit. Why are you going alone with a girl in the forest anyway?” The militiaman asked.

“I am taking her to a buyer in Nyakasanza for Colonel Patrick Bagosora,” Phillippe replied.

“Bullshit. The Colonel and his troops are leading a group of captured women to Kigali, to entertain our president. Why would he send you alone with this girl to Nyakasanza?” The shorter man disputed. “I don’t know, dog. Why don’t you ask him?” Phillippe mocked.

The taller man walked up to me, lifted me to a standing position, and inspected me. As he stared into my eyes with his black evil eyes, I knew that he was going to rape me. He pushed me to the ground and spoke. “I like this girl. If you let me take a ride on her, I will give you fresh water from our spring. How about that?”

“No. I won’t let you damage the merchandise. The girl is worthless to me if you spoil her.” Phillippe exclaimed.

The man showed Phillippe an evil grin and replied. “So, you haven’t raped this girl yet? Even better, I’d love to be the first.”

“No, I won’t let you,” Phillippe exclaimed and chested up against the taller man.

“Try to stop me,” The man said and punched Phillippe, who fell backwards and hit his head.

The two Interahamwe men kneeled next to me and laughed. The taller man said: “Don’t be afraid, little girl. You’re about to become a mature woman, and that’s a good thing. It would be a shame for a pretty thing like you to die a virgin.”

After saying this, the man started pulling my clothes and undressing me. I felt very frightened but I was cold and frail, so I was powerless to resist. I punched the man a few times, but my arms lacked strength and the man didn’t flinch. Quite the opposite, the more I resisted, the more excited he became, and I knew that he would soon enter me as they had done to my poor mother. Time slowed down, and I prayed to Jesus that I would die a quick and painless death. I had seen how my mother suffered after Patrick Bagosora raped her, and I didn’t want that to happen to me. The man pulled off my panties, and my body stiffened from the dreadful sensation of the man forcing his manhood upon my frail and skinny body.

The rape was never completed. Instead, blood splashed all over my body as a terrifying scream of shock filled the forest. I looked up, and I saw Phillippe decapitate my rapist’s head, then chopping the other man to pieces with his machete. I closed my eyes in horror of the image that I just saw, but felt relieved that the rape ordeal has ended, pushed the dead man away and passed out instantly.



“DID HE MANAGE TO BREAK your virginity?” Phillippe asked with a cold and distant voice.

I shook my head. Phillippe smiled and replied: “Good, so you are still pure.”

I took a deep breath. The thirst that had seared my throat before was now becoming more tolerable, and I felt that my collapse and unconsciousness had somehow replenished my energy.

Phillippe spoke, “You should drink and eat. I gave you some water while you were delirious, but we waste less water if you drink while conscious.”

“So, do we have food and water now?” I asked softly.

“Yes. Those men that I killed had brought some supplies. We have enough food, water, and money for our trip to Tanzania now.” Phillippe replied.

“So, why did you kill those men?” I asked.

“It was not me that killed them, it was God that killed those men. Why else would he had put them on our path?” Phillippe replied.

I didn’t reply to Phillippe’s statement. If there was a God, why had he allowed this terrible plight to happen on my people in the first place? We had walked past several Tutsi villages in the last week. They were all destroyed, with their inhabitants slaughtered and left to rot in the sun. Why would God allow such reckless hate to take place in this kind and loving world?

“We need to get moving. It’s still many days walk to Nyakasanza in Tanzania.” Phillippe stated.

“What’s awaiting us in Tanzania?” I asked.

“For you, a clean and warm place in United Nations refugee camp. For me, a reward for bringing you there.” Phillippe replied.

“Thank you for looking after me,” I said and sought eye contact with the lone militiaman, who risked his life to keep me safe.

Phillippe didn’t reply. Instead, he looked away and started walking on the path that took us to the southeast, in the direction of the Tanzania border. In retrospect, I have understood that Phillippe felt ashamed about his real intentions towards me. While I could hate him as much as I hate Patrick Bagosora, I never have. Because although Phillippe’s intentions towards me were to trade me for money, they ended up being what brought me out of Rwanda alive.

Chapter 4: United Nations peacekeepers, a false hope; May 1994.

We were outside the town of Rusumo, located in south-eastern Rwanda, when I tried to escape from Phillippe. I ran towards a group of United Nations peacekeepers, who were handing out supplies to the throngs of refugees. We were following the path of countless others, we were following the highway to the Tanzanian border, just 20 kilometres to the south.

I had almost reached the soldiers wearing the blue helmets when Phillippe grabbed me from behind. He covered my mouth with one hand and growled: “What are you doing, stupid girl? Is this how you reward me for saving your life?”

Phillippe shook me and gave me a death stare. Once he had ascertained that I wouldn't scream, he took his hand off my mouth.

“You told the Interahamwe men that you would sell me to a buyer in Tanzania...” I sobbed.

“I also killed those men to stop them from raping you. Keep that in mind, that I am capable of murder.” Phillippe warned.

I didn't reply and I sobbed in silence, while Phillippe was muttering an array of curses towards me.

We got back to our senses when we heard a loud ruckus nearby. Interahamwe soldiers had arrived in the town and I saw how they walked up to the UN soldiers. A line of militiamen walked up to within a metre of the UN camp and gave the peacekeepers a stare-down. A few minutes of tense silence ensued.

I felt surprised when I saw a limousine that carried the seal of Rwanda's presidential office drove up the UN outpost. The car stopped, and I saw a familiar face that stepped out of the car. Out of the car came Patrick Bagosora and a slightly older man, who I later recognised as Théoneste Bagosora, the architect behind the Rwandan genocide. Patrick walked up to the United Nations peacekeepers and spoke into a megaphone.

“Why are you here, foreign white dogs? Why are you objecting to the Hutu race reclaiming our country from our ancient Tutsi enemies? Go home!”

The UN commander replied something that I couldn't hear, and Patrick turned to the crowds. “Why do you turn to the disgraceful UN dogs for support?”

They are cowards and won't do anything for you. Soldiers and my fellow Hutu people, witness how I force my manhood upon these Tutsi whores."

A few soldiers dragged a screaming woman to Patrick's side. They held her down over a table, while Patrick stripped her bare naked through cutting her clothes with his machete.

"We need to go now; this will turn ugly." Phillippe whispered and dragged me towards the scrublands at the edge of the village.

"Hey, where are you taking that girl?" an Interahamwe officer shouted as he intercepted us close to the edge of the town.

"I claim this Tutsi whore for myself. I will give her the best and the last fuck of her life." Phillippe said to the man.

The officer gave Phillippe a look of disgust and replied, "You are claiming this skinny kid when the town is full of mature women. You're a sick bastard."

"My preferences are none of your business. At least I can get it up, which is why I am claiming what I deserve instead of guarding the perimeter." Phillippe mocked.

A tense moment ensued, and in my mind, it seemed to drag on forever. What was Phillippe doing? He was either brave or insane to insult an officer. I feared that I would be the next unlucky woman to be dragged to the UN camp where Patrick was raping a woman in front of the crowd to mock the UN peacekeepers.

The soldiers cheered as Patrick lifted the severed head of the woman he had raped to the sky.

Phillippe used the distraction and dragged me away from the militiaman who impeded our progress. As we reached the forest, he whispered "Run," and we ran to the south, away from the town where the screaming and gunfire intensified.

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"BLOODY LIMP DICK!" Phillippe mumbled as we were having a break a few kilometres from the Tanzanian border.

"Huh?" I asked.

"The officer that tried to stop us in Rusumo. I knew that he was a limp dick. I could tell from watching him." Phillippe taunted.

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