

BENJAMIN SEHENE

Dead Girl Walking

I

In Kigali they call the hundred thousands of genocide survivors Bafuye bahagaze, the walking dead, because they suffer from behavior problems. At first glance they seem completely normal — friendly and pleasant. They welcome you warmly, chat, get into answering questions, until some detail reveals the flaw. For example, I remember the woman in Nyamirambo who could no longer tolerate physical contact with another person, even a simple handshake, because it made her systematically recall the cold blade of the machete. Or the young survivor who was always looking for his little brother.

Anna, “Afande Anna” (Commander Anna) to her friends, a young widow, belonged to this new category of Rwandan “single mothers, like it or not.” All by herself, she was very courageously raising her three children and an orphan. When the FPR invaded Rwanda in 1990, Anna, who was from Kigali, was arrested with her husband. They were penned up in a stadium in the capital before being transferred to the infamous prison in Ruhengeri, like ten thousand other Tutsis. They managed to escape to Uganda via Goma and then to Zaire, where their

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children joined them. Anna’s husband enlisted in the FPR and was killed in combat.¹

Warm and social by nature, Anna entertained a lot. She didn’t send specific invitations, because her daily life was a sort of ongoing social event. Anna was not a rich woman: she was not employed and had no aid from the government. Her impromptu evening gatherings served as her address book. In this way she occasionally managed to land a contract with one of her guests, like, for example, the official representative of an international body who later hired her to install curtains in a dozen villas or plan a cocktail party. To Anna’s parties everyone brought his bottle of Waragi, the Ugandan rum, or a few bottles of Primus, a Rwandan beer. As for Anna, she provided the place and especially the conversation. And since her home saw constant coming and going all day long, our hostess had no private life except when a young FPR officer retired with that lady of the house for a few hours of intimacy that were rigorously defended by his uniformed escort. In the sitting room with its broken windows and caved-in roof, Anna’s children sat at the table in pajamas, rubbing elbows with carefree partygoers of every social class, seated next to each other on an odd assortment of stools, sofas, and armchairs. Time went by, spent on conversation, laughter, and drink. People gathered there in the evening to flee the stress of a traumatized society in the process of trying to rebuild and also to listen to Anna talk about what was really going on. She prided herself on having more than one regime dignitary as a lover, and she knew all the Kigali and Kampala rumors, past and present. The juicy, salacious stories that filled her conversation were as much a refuge for me as alcohol was for others. I also took notes for the travel narrative I was preparing.

Anna had turned her gossip into an allegorical art form worthy of La Fontaine. There was almost always a moral to the story. Like, for example, the diplomatic incident that the former Rwandan head of

1. FPR: the Rwandan Patriotic Front, a Tutsi force that invaded Rwanda to combat the Hutu government, which had begun the genocide of the Tutsis.

state almost provoked when he was visiting in Asia: shortly after taking power, General Habyarimana was invited to an official dinner by an eastern country. Once the guests were seated, they were offered the traditional warm, rolled napkin, which the very gourmand Habyarimana attacked with his knife and fork. Hierarchy has its obligations, so his wife and the entire presidential entourage followed the example of the republic's new leader. The Asian hosts, transfixed by this cultural misunderstanding, did not dare unroll their napkins to freshen up, for fear of offending their guest of honor.

"Yemwe, ko bikomeye gukata da!" (My word, how hard this is to cut!) exclaimed Habyarimana, who kept juggling his silverware, passing it from right hand to left, to no avail. At first, his hosts just watched, flabbergasted by the spectacle served up by their Ubu guest. But when they saw him chewing his first mouthful of linen, they followed suit in order to ward off a diplomatic incident. Moral: one must always warn one's guests of the possibility of the unexpected.

2

Wrapped up in pajamas that were too big for her, the little girl was having dinner with Anna's three children.

"Wabonye akana keeza karokotswe disi we?" (Have you seen the pretty little survivor?), the hostess asked me. Her name was Mbabazi, and she was the sole survivor in her family. All by herself, by the simple force of her name, Mbabazi, meaning "pity," this child symbolized postgenocide Rwanda. She was barely five, the age of the civil war that ravaged the country from 1990 to 1994. Blessed with a fluting voice, Mbabazi appeared lively and mischievous. But at times a shadow crossed her little face, and one could see a veil of sadness in her eyes, which were as round and protuberant as two boiled eggs. She expressed herself haltingly in an adult Kinyarwanda that was vulgar and interspersed with curses, the way the peasant Hutus speak it.

Once the meal was over, the children began to play a macabre game that consisted of designating one of them to be "Gahutu" (mythical

ancestor of the Hutus), who had to catch the others so as to eliminate them from the game.

"Do you know who Gahutu was?" I asked them.

"A Hutu!" exclaimed Junior, the youngest.

"I know that," I retorted, "but which one?"

"Bene Sebahinzi" (son of the farmers' father), said Marie, the oldest.

I couldn't believe it! Bene Sebahinzi is a poetic-political allegory of the legend of the mythical ancestor of the Hutus, the "farmer's son." Language generally constitutes the soul of a people and the word the memory of a nation. From now on the Kinyarwanda language will be marked by hatred and genocide. This language shared by three ethnic groups makes Rwandans out of Hutus, Tutsis, and Twas and distinguishes them from their neighbors with whom they sometimes live in Uganda, Congo-Kinshasa, and even Burundi, the other country divided into Hutu/Tutsi groups.

Like slang, genocidal language is coded expression adopted by a social group turned in on itself with the intent of concealing activities that are either illicit or perceived as such by the rest of society. It was the same for the Nazis, who distorted the meaning of words to serve their destructive cause, or a bit differently today, for example, when dealers in a Western metropolis use a complicitous vocabulary among themselves. Semantic concealment reveals both a will for self-protection, a curtain drawn between us and the others, and a refusal, a negation of the crime, of the unspeakable act yet to be committed, in process, or already carried out. And so the Kinyarwanda language was perverted and transformed little by little to serve a genocidal regime. As the ethnic rhetoric intensified, there was movement from the old slogan "rubanda nyamwinshi" (literally, "the majority group") to seemingly innocuous expressions that were actually code words, disguises, double meanings. For example, "work" and "cleansing" were used to incite people to murder Tutsis, who were baptized "Inyenzi" (cockroach) or "snake," a cunning technique for dehumanizing them and engendering scorn. The nation's soul was perverted by the genocide, with the result that

contemporary Rwanda is now a land cut in two by an invisible but insurmountable dividing line. The Hutus and the Tutsis may inhabit the same hills, the same cities and neighborhoods, and speak the same language, but they remain partitioned, victims and executioners, into two zones opposed and demarcated by a semantic boundary. They have adopted two states of mind governed by a logic of reciprocal exclusion that is manifest even in the terminology used by children: the bad exterminators on one side, the nice victims on the other.

3

"I'm going to tell you the story of Gahutu and his two brothers," I said to the children, resolved to rectify things through catharsis. I then told the founding legend of Rwanda. They all listened with their mouths open. After about ten minutes, however, Mbabazi's attention wandered, and she lost the thread of the story. She wandered back and forth between a chair and a drum that was serving as a low table.

"So, Mbabazi, now do you know who Gahutu was?" She hesitated a moment, suddenly perplexed.

"Gahutu?" she repeated, as if she were stalling for time. She looked lost.

"Yes, I am Gahutu!" said Junior, helpfully.

"Ah, Gahutu!" said Mbabazi, as if suddenly enlightened.

I went back to the legend of Gihanga, that of the primordial challenge posed by the father of Rwanda at the time of his succession. To each of his three sons, Gahutu, Gatutsi, and Gatwa, he entrusted an earthenware jar of milk. Gatutsi alone succeeded in keeping it intact, thus earning the esteem of his father, who entrusted him with the management of his flocks, the foundation of Rwandan civilization. But there was nothing to be done: for Mbabazi, Gahutu was Junior.

I continued my narration, but in a few minutes Mbabazi tuned out again. Her memory was incapable of functioning more than a few minutes. After ten sentences or so, she no longer remembered the beginning of the story, and she was unable to concentrate for long. She seemed

to be unconsciously repressing her memories, both past and present, as if to protect herself. In the total privation that was rampant at that time, Mbabazi was not receiving regular medical care. It became my obsession to succeed in telling her this legend in a way that would make her remember it. Every day I improvised a new technique for recall — a drawing book or a stuffed animal, a headless doll or a pencil. In vain: she didn't even succeed in remembering my first name. As soon as I spoke a word, however, Mbabazi recognized my voice. If I could get her to recall my name, I could succeed in making her remember the legend.

One evening, the girl met me at the door.

"Who rang?" someone asked her.

"It's him."

"Him who?" I insisted. "I have a name." Suddenly inspired by her too-large pajamas, I tried a new technique: "Think of pajamas every time you see me: Benjamin Pajamas." Whenever she saw me in the next few days, she shouted joyfully: "Wait — I know you — you're Benjamin Pajamas!"

Encouraged by my pajamas victory, I tried twice as hard to dramatize the legend of Gihanga for Mbabazi. One evening, I made Anna's three children sit across from me at the dining room table. I picked Junior for the role of Gahutu, the Hutu ancestor, Marie played Gatutsi, ancestor of the Tutsis, and Jean ended up as Gatwa, forebear of the Twas. Then I handed each one a glass of water to represent the earthenware jar of milk that Gihanga entrusted to his three sons on the ancestral night. I put out the lights to signify the coming of darkness. In the morning, Gahutu found himself disqualified because he had gotten thirsty and drunk his water. In the dark, Gatwa had fallen asleep and spilled his, so only Gatutsi had managed to keep his tumbler of water intact. Thus far I had succeeded in keeping Mbabazi's attention, and she commented on the outcome of the primordial challenge, using her usual wording.

"Genda, wa gisambo kyumuhutu we, uzitwa ninda" (You lousy Hutu glutton, your belly will be your undoing!) she said, full of the joy of recognition, having discovered the origin of her habitual curse

words. She called Gahutu "igismbo" (glutton) and Gatutsi "infura" (elegant). These stereotypes came to her with such ease that I began to think that in the end I would be able to get some testimony from the little survivor.

4

Isabelle, Mbabazi's aunt (and now her adoptive mother since the girl was the only surviving member of a large family) was a languorous, graceful, bandy-legged woman. A native of Butare in the south, she now lived in Brussels, where she had found work.

"I was getting ready to bring my mother to Belgium when they launched the genocide," she told me in a sad tone of voice. "The night of the president's death, Mother called me, in fact: Butare was still calm, and yet it was then that I learned about the death of my sister and other members of my family in Kigali. By telephone I was already aware of the massacres in the capital, and I knew they would spread to Butare.

For several days that university city did in fact remain calm, because the prefect, Jean-Baptiste Habyarimana, a Tutsi with no family relation to the late president in spite of the identical name, was opposed to violence. The situation in that city changed on April 19, 1994, when the interim president, Theodore Sindikubwabo, gave an inflammatory speech that was broadcast on the radio. That same day they arrested the high official, who disappeared and was replaced by a military man, Colonel Alphonse Ntezilyayo. The massacres began immediately.

"My mother certainly tried to hide, but we never found her body," concluded Isabelle in a trembling voice. Of her entire family, only Mbabazi, her sister's daughter, and Stephan, her brother's little boy, age eleven, had survived. One afternoon in April 1994, the child was in the outhouse in the back of the garden when a group of militia burst into his parents' house in Butare. Hearing screams, Stephan remained crouched in the hut until the assailants left. When night fell, he left his improvised hiding place and saw that his whole family was dead. He

managed to find his way to a neighbor, who handed him over to the International Red Cross. Then he was included in a convoy of Tutsi child survivors escorted to Burundi.

Mbabazi lived with Isabelle, in the midst of the domestic anarchy that reigned at Anna's house. Every Sunday, however, as if out of duty, Isabelle took the girl to see the family of a Hutu neighbor in whose care her parents had left her before their disappearance. This Sunday pilgrimage began early in the morning. One weekend I accompanied them, curious to meet this good Samaritan: until then I had never met a Hutu who had sheltered persecuted Tutsis. The man in question is called Kanaka. Short, about forty, with a slight paunch, he lived in the Muhima section. A sorry villa with a very minimal garden in front, his house looked unfinished because of its cement block walls. Madame Kanaka, displaying an impressive pregnancy, spoke to her husband only in the third person, which made me stupidly answer her, since I thought she was talking to me.

"Welcome. Sit down," Kanaka invited, as he got us settled outside under the avocado tree growing behind the house, as in all Rwandan gardens. President Habyarimana had required that every Rwandan household plant this tree in the context of "communal labor," both to combat erosion and to benefit from balanced nutrition. In Kigali, certain wide avenues are completely lined with avocado trees, and all city restaurants have avocado on the menu.

Mbabazi, still restless in spite of her Sunday clothes, was already climbing in the avocado tree at her parents' former house. Swarming around her were the children of the Tutsi family from Burundi that was squatting illegally on the property. After ten minutes, Kanaka left to send the servant to buy beer for us in a nearby eating place.

"Did you notice the painting hanging in the sitting room?" whispered Isabelle.

"The portrait of the young woman above the glassed-in armoire?" I asked, in the same conspiratorial tone.

"Y-y-yes . . . it belonged to my sister!"

“What?”

“Yes, it was a gift I made her for her wedding,” she confided, with a knowing look.

“Really! — you painted it?” I asked, surprised.

“Shh-h! I don’t want him to know — but we have to find out how he got it.”

“You’re right.”

“Perhaps you could question him more easily than I,” she concluded.

“I can try.”

“Hey — tactfully, please,” Isabelle whispered as we heard Kanaka’s footsteps coming toward us.

“I’ve heard a lot about your heroic conduct during the genocide.” That’s how I approached Kanaka.

“Let’s not exaggerate. I only did my Christian duty,” stated our host.

“But what exactly were the circumstances when Mbabazi’s parents entrusted their daughter to you?”

“Everyone understood right away that we were about to witness wide-scale massacres of the Tutsis. People had been fearing that for a long time, so many couples likely to be in danger took their little ones to their Hutu friends,” asserted Kanaka. “I think it was the mother, Odetta, who brought the little girl to us the day after the president’s death,” he continued.

When the servant returned, Kanaka touched the beer bottles to check their temperature.

“You idiot, this beer is warm, . . .” our host said, amazed.

“But there weren’t any cold ones!” the servant answered.

“Too bad — take them back!” insisted Kanaka.

“It makes no difference to me,” I offered, trying to save the situation.

“No, no there’s no reason to drink warm beer because of this half-wit. She’s going back over there,” the man replied, irritated.

“No, I assure you, it’s not important.”

Terrorized by the crushing, authoritarian presence of her master, the servant poured our beer while Kanaka barked an order to the children

to chase down one of the chickens that were calmly pecking away in the squalid garden.

A cloud of dust flew behind the little troop chasing the bird to the back door of the house. Bursts of shrill screams mixed with the clinking of utensils marked their passage from one room to another. Then the bird flew away through a window, before landing at our feet. Kanaka jumped on it, grabbing it with astonishing agility. Then our host rolled up his sleeves, asked the maid for a knife, and went to a corner of the garden. He gathered the two wings in a fist before crushing them with his left foot, wedging the feet under his right one. He grabbed the bird’s neck and began to pluck it clean. Suddenly the man’s face took on a strange expression, one that was diligent and conscientious: his forehead wrinkled into a multitude of furrows, and he bit his lower lip. There was something ritualistic in his concentration and in the way the children had gathered in a semicircle around him, as if for a sacrifice. A primitive household ritual expurgated from modern life, with packaged chicken from the supermarket. Isabelle looked away in horror when Kanaka cut off the animal’s head with a single blow, to the applause of the children.

In the confusion that followed, the bird, headless but still alive, escaped from Kanaka. Provoking panic in the children and Isabelle, the hen flapped its wings every which way, while its headless neck sprayed blood everywhere it went.

The noon meal was served in the cluttered sitting room, with the background noise of the metal roof crackling beneath the merciless heat of midafternoon. Before sitting down, I walked around the room and stopped for a long time in front of the famous painting. It was a classic watercolor: the portrait dominated two-thirds of its height on the whiteness of the paper, which constituted a neutral background. The face, drawn in a single stroke with a tapered brush, accentuated the subject’s lively expression. The painter had captured the essence of that

face: a long nose, a full, sensual mouth, and an arrested gesture revealing the surprise of a woman caught in reflection.

"So she looks like you in this portrait?" I asked Isabelle.

"Huh?" Isabelle answered vaguely, as Madame Kanaka made one of her rare appearances from the kitchen. She offered curried chicken to Isabelle, who refused, no doubt shuddering at the idea that this was the same headless bird whose blood she had seen spurting in the garden. Isabelle did not answer my question, and to my disappointment we said no more about the painting.

The chicken curry was served accompanied by sweet potatoes and plantains.

"You must get your sister's house back," Kanaka advised Isabelle, briskly. "The rent could pay for the girl's education."

A big blue fly was buzzing against the invisible wall of a pane of glass in the door, and a shower of dust particles was falling slowly across a ray of sunshine.

"I would never dare to turn out the family that's there now," Isabelle objected.

"You don't have to — police headquarters will take care of it."

"Really?" I asked, amazed.

"Yes, the owner simply has to request an eviction at the prefecture," our host insisted.

"I was going to request it, but when I went to see the house, I changed my mind when I saw their mob of kids. Where would they go?" said Isabelle. The big blue fly came and put its hairy feet on the edge of my glass. It rubbed its head, smoothed its transparent wings before flying off, and then reappeared on my plate.

During the rest of our visit, I kept thinking about how I was going to reveal the source of the watercolor to Kanaka without seeming accusatory. In postgenocide Rwanda, generalization and blending were *de rigueur*. The slightest doubt about someone could incriminate him.

"Do you know that it was Isabelle who gave that painting to her

sister?" I was taking advantage of the momentary absence of the former to put that question to Kanaka.

"Oh really! Is that true?" said Kanaka, sounding surprised. The awkwardness of the revelation pushed him to compassion. "But listen, then I'm going to give it back to her." And he took down the painting, which he had the servant quickly wrap in newspaper, without even getting Isabelle's consent.

"You should have told me that the picture belonged to Odetta," he complained to the young woman when she had rejoined us in the room.

"I didn't dare!" she replied.

"I don't even remember how it got here," remarked our host, before adding: "I think it was one of the children who brought it here after the massacres."

On the way home, Mbabazi took the paper covering it off the frame that was lying beside her on the backseat of the car.

"Do you remember that picture?" I asked her.

"Yes, that's the picture that Kanaka took when he brought the militia men [Interahamwe] to the house." There was no ambiguity in the little girl's answer. Isabelle and I looked at each other but remained silent, because the enormity of what we had perceived went beyond our capacity to express it.

"What are you going to do?"

"With what she just said?" Isabelle asked.

"Yes."

"Nothing! After all, who's going to believe the testimony of a little amnesiac?"

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From Africa

NEW FRANCOPHONE STORIES

EDITED BY ADELE KING



University of Nebraska Press

LINCOLN AND LONDON

Publication of this book was assisted by a grant
from the National Endowment for the Arts.



Cet ouvrage, publié dans le cadre d'un programme
d'aide à la publication, bénéficie du soutien
du Ministère des Affaires Étrangères
et du Service Culturel
de l'Ambassade de France
aux États-Unis.

This work, published
as part of a program of aid
for publication, received support
from the French Ministry of Foreign
Affairs and the Cultural Services of the
French Embassy in the United States.

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the University of Nebraska. All
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in the United States
of America



Library of Congress
Cataloging-in-Publication Data

From Africa: new francophone stories /
edited by Adele King. p. cm. Includes bibliographical
references. ISBN 0-8032-2758-2 (cloth: alk. paper) —
ISBN 0-8032-7810-1 (pbk.: alk. paper) 1. Short
stories, African (French) — Translations
into English. I. King, Adele.

PQ3985.5.E5F76 2004

843'.0108096—dc22

2003053347

*For Bruce King
and in memory of
Nicole King*