ONE

In the middle of Kigali there is a swimming pool surrounded by deckchairs and a score of tables all made of white plastic. And forming a huge L overhanging this patch of blue stands the Hôtel des Mille-Collines, with its habitual clientele of international experts and aid workers, middle-class Rwandans, screwed-up or melancholy expatriates of various origins, and prostitutes. All around the pool and hotel in lascivious disorder lies the part of the city that matters, that makes the decisions, that steals, kills, and lives very nicely, thank you. The French Cultural Centre, the UNICEF offices, the Ministry of Information, the embassies, the president's palace (recognizable by the tanks on guard), the crafts shops popular with departing visitors where one can unload surplus black market currency, the radio station, the World Bank offices, the archbishop's palace. Encircling this artificial paradise are the obligatory symbols of decolonization: Constitution Square, Development Avenue, Boulevard of the Republic, Justice Avenue, and an ugly, modern cathedral. Farther down, almost in the underbelly of the city, stands the red brick mass of the Church of the Holy Family, disgorging the poor in their Sunday best into crooked mud lanes bordered by houses made

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of the same clay. Small red houses – just far enough away from the swimming pool not to offend the nostrils of the important – filled with shouting, happy children, with men and women dying of AIDS and malaria, thousands of small households that know nothing of the pool around which others plan their lives and, more importantly, their predictable deaths.

Jackdaws as big as eagles and as numerous as house sparrows caw all around the hotel gardens. They circle in the sky, waiting, like the humans they're observing, for the cocktail hour. Now is when the beers arrive, while the ravens are alighting on the tall eucalyptus trees around the pool. When the ravens have settled, the buzzards appear and take possession of the topmost branches. Woe betide the lowly jackdaw that fails to respect the hierarchy. Birds behave like humans here.

Precisely as the buzzards are establishing their positions around the pool, precisely then, the French paratroopers on the plastic deckchairs begin putting on Rambo airs. They sniff all the feminine flesh splashing around in the heavily chlorinated water of the pool. Its freshness matters little. There is vulture in these soldiers with their shaven heads, watching and waiting beside a pool that is the centrepiece of a meat stall where the reddest, most lovingly garnished morsels are displayed alongside the flabby and scrawny feminine fare whose only diversion is this waterhole. On Sundays, as on every other day of the week at around five o'clock, a number of carcasses – some plump, some skeletal – disturb the surface of the pool, well aware that the 'paras,' as the paratroopers are known, are not the least daunted either by cellulite or by skin clinging to

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bones merely from habit. The women, if they knew what danger stalked them, would drown in anticipation of ecstasy or else get themselves to a nunnery.

This tranquil Sunday, a former minister of justice is warming up energetically on the diving board. He does not realize that his strenuous exercises are eliciting giggles from the two prostitutes from whom he is expecting a sign of recognition or interest before diving into the water. He wants to beguile because he doesn't want to pay. He hits the water like a disjointed clown. The girls laugh. The paras too.

Around the pool, Québécois and Belgian aid workers vie in loud laughter. The Belgians and Québécois aren't friends; they don't work together, even though they are working toward the same goal: 'development'. That magic word which dresses up the best and most irrelevant of intentions. The two groups are rivals, always explaining to the locals why their kind of development is better than the others.' The only thing they have in common is the din they make. There ought to be a word for the atmosphere surrounding these Whites who talk, laugh and drink in a way that makes the whole pool know their importance – no, not even that – just their vacuous existence. Let's use the word 'noisiness' because there's certainly noise, but it's continuous, there's a permanence to it, a perpetual squawking. In this shy, reticent and often deceptive country, they live in a state of noisiness, like noisy animals. They are also in continuous rut. Noise is their breathing, silence their death, and the asses of Rwandan women their territory of exploration. They are noisy explorers of Third World asses. Only the Germans, when they descend on the hotel in force like

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a battalion of moralizing accountants, can match the Belgians and Québécois in noisiness.

Important Frenchmen don't stay at this hotel. They dig themselves in at the Méridien with high-class Rwandans and clean hookers who sip whisky. The hookers at this hotel are rarely clean. They drink Pepsi while waiting to be picked up and offered a local beer, which may get them offered a whisky or a vodka later on. But these women are realists, so today they'll settle for a Pepsi and a john.

Valcourt, who is also Québécois but has almost forgotten it over the years, observes these things and notes them down, muttering as he does so, sometimes angrily, sometimes with tenderness, but always audibly. For all anyone knows or imagines, he's writing about them, and everyone wants someone to ask him what he's writing, and worries about this book he's been writing since the Project left him more or less high and dry. Sometimes he even pretends to be writing, in order to show he's alive, watchful and serious like the disillusioned philosopher he claims to be when he runs out of excuses for himself. He's not writing a book. He writes to put in time between mouthfuls of beer, or to signal that he doesn't want to be disturbed. Rather like a buzzard on a branch, in fact, Valcourt is waiting for a scrap of life to excite him and make him unfold his wings.

At the end of the terrace, walking slowly and grandly, appears a Rwandan just back from Paris. You can tell, because his sporty outfit is so new its yellows and greens are blinding, even for sunglass-protected eyes. There's sniggering at a table of expatriates. Admiration at several tables of locals. The Rwandan just back from Paris is afloat on a magic carpet. From

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the handle of his crocodile attaché case dangle First Class and Hermès labels. In his pocket, along with other prestige labels, he probably has an import licence for some product of secondary necessity, which he will sell at a premium price.

He orders a 'verbena-mint' at such volume that three ravens depart the nearest tree. Gentille, who has just completed her social service studies and is interning at the hotel, doesn't know what a verbena-mint is. Intimidated, she whispers – so softly she can't even hear herself – that there are only two brands of beer, Primus and Mutzig. The Rwandan on his magic carpet is not listening and replies that of course he wants the best, even if it's more expensive. So Gentille will bring him a Mutzig, which for some is the best and for everyone more expensive. Valcourt scribbles feverishly. He describes the scene with indignation, adding some notes about the outrageousness of African corruption, but he does not stir.

'You little slut!' the Rwandan just back from Paris yells when confronted by his Mutzig that is not a verbena-mint. 'I know the minister of tourism, you dirty Tutsi, sleeping with a White so you can work at the hotel!' And Gentille, whose name is as lovely as her breasts, which are so pointed they abrade her starched shirt-dress, Gentille, whose face is more lovely still, and whose ass is more disturbing in its impudent adolescence than anything else about her, Gentille, who is so embarrassed by her beauty she has never smiled or spoken an unnecessary word, Gentille cries. Just a few tears and a little sniff of the kind young girls still have in them before the smells of men take hold between their thighs.

For six months now Valcourt has thought of only one thing between the thighs of Agathe, who comes to his room

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when she has no customers rather than risk walking home to Nyamirambo in the dark. For six months now he has barely been getting it half up with Agathe because he wants to turn Gentille's breasts into a woman's breasts; six months in which the only thing that gets it up is seeing Gentille walking with those sweet breasts of hers among the tables on the terrace or through the dining room. Valcourt has but one plan in his head now – to thread Gentille, *enfiler* is the word he has in mind, a favourite of the writer Paul Léautaud whom he had discovered through a woman crueller than any of the words of that detestable writer, a woman who left him in pieces like a badly butchered carcass on a blood-smeared meat counter.

'I'm the president's nephew,' bawls the Rwandan just back from Paris.

No, he's not one of the president's nephews. Valcourt knows them all. The one who plays the political science student in Quebec but in Rwanda organizes death squads that go after Tutsis at night in Remero, Gikondo and Nyamirambo. And the one who controls the sale of condoms donated by international aid agencies, and another who has AIDS and thinks the way to get rid of his poison is by fucking young virgins, and the other three, Eugène, Clovis, and Firmin, who are soldiers and protectors of the hookers at the Kigali Night, the 'cleanest' of Kigali's hookers. The paras screw the clean hookers in the bush around the bar without condoms because the president's nephews tell them *they* fuck them without condoms and they aren't sick. And the rapacious French jerks believe them. As if they didn't know the Kigali Night belongs to one of the president's sons.

Gentille, who was shy already, now walks like a woman in mourning.

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Valcourt orders 'a tall Mutzig, *ma petite* Gentille.' He almosts says something to comfort her, but she is too beautiful and he feels stupidly inarticulate. And soon it will be six o'clock and around the pool all the actors in the daily cocktail-hour ritual will have taken their places on stage in the same production as yesterday. And Valcourt will play his role, like all the others. The Mont Blanc fountain pen moves: 'Now a fade-out to Blacks.'

There's Raphaël and his bunch of pals who work at the People's Bank of Rwanda. They'll leave at midnight when the fourth-floor bar closes. And there's Monsieur Faustin, who will be prime minister when the president bestows democracy upon the children of his republic. Other opposition members of the government will join him – Landouald, minister of labour, who went into politics to please his wife, a liberated Québécoise, and a few others who will bow and scrape to right and left as they go back and forth three times to the buffet table. A Belgian embassy counsellor stops for a few minutes, diplomatically affecting an air of discretion in order to avoid saying anything about the peace accord and the transfer of power that the president accepts every six months and never signs, claiming he can't because it's the rainy season, or his wife is in Paris, or the last arms shipments have not arrived from Zaïre, or his secretary's husband is sick.

Every day for the past two years there has been endless talk around the pool about the change that is brewing; it's going to come tomorrow or Tuesday, Wednesday at the latest, they say. But this time it's true and the regulars are caught up in a great ripple of excited whispering. The husband of the president's secretary died of AIDS two days ago in Paris, where

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he had been in hospital for six months. Émérita, taxiwoman, businesswoman, who pays the best black-market rate for the Rwandan franc, came to tell Monsieur Faustin. A doctor from Val-de-Grâce Hospital had arrived this morning and told the first secretary at the French embassy, who repeated it to Émérita – who runs little errands for him – knowing full well she would waste no time announcing the news to Monsieur Faustin. The late husband was a perfect fool, content just to make money with his exclusive Michelin tire import licence, but rumour has it that his wife does not owe her stunningly fast rise through the civil service ranks to her typing skills. The intelligence branch of the embassy, contacted by a brother of Madame La Présidente a few months ago, reassured this 'neutral enquirer' that these things were all malicious gossip originating in the camp of the opposition.

No matter. In half an hour, when Émérita has finished her Pepsi after talking to Zozo the concierge, a swarm of taxi drivers will leave for the city. Tonight, from Gikondo to Nyamirambo, not forgetting Sodoma, the well-named hookers' quarter, they'll be imagining – then saying outright – that the president is dying of AIDS. Tomorrow they'll be saying it in Butare and the day after in Ruhengeri, the president's own fiefdom. In a few days when the president is the last to hear he's dying of AIDS, he'll fly into a rage and heads will fall. Here, rumours kill. They're checked out afterwards.

On the same plane with the doctor and his fatal news there arrived ten copies each of *L'Express* and *Paris Match* which will be swapped around for a month, and French cheeses in slightly over- or underripe condition which will be consumed amid great trimestrial pomp and circumstance in the hotel dining room.

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Around the pool, two important subjects are being discussed. The Whites are consulting the list of cheeses and writing their names on the reservation sheet. People will come from as far away as the Gorilla Sanctuary on the Zaïrean border for the traditional cheese tasting, at which the first wedge will be cut by the French ambassador himself. At the tables occupied by Rwandans, the majority of whom are Tutsis or Hutus of the opposition, the tone is hushed. The subject of conversation is the president's illness (which is already taken as acknowledged fact), the probable date of his death, and who will succeed him. André, who distributes condoms for a Canadian NGO and as such is an expert on AIDS, calculates busily: according to rumour, the president has been fucking his secretary for three years; if he's been doing it often and his secretary's husband is already dead from AIDS, and the gods are with us, then President Juvénal has at most a year left. His listeners applaud wildly.

Only Léo is not joining in the applause. Léo is a Hutu who says he's a moderate so he can get to screw Raphaël's sister. Léo is a journalist at the television station that doesn't exist yet, that Valcourt was supposed to set up. Léo is not a moderate, it's just that he's got a bone on for Immaculée, Raphaël's sister. Though he comes from the North, where the president was born, Léo recently joined the Social Democratic Party, the party of the South. At the pool bar this act of courage has impressed quite a few and Léo is making the most of it. Mind you, the very thought of undressing Immaculée would instill conviction in many small minds. But Léo is also a Tutsi through his mother. With the simmering conflict in mind, Léo is seeking the camp that will save his precious skin and let

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him realize his dream of becoming a journalist in Canada. Rwandans are good at putting on a front. They handle concealment and ambiguity with awesome skill. Léo is a caricature of all this: Hutu father, Tutsi mother. Tutsi body, Hutu heart. Social Democratic Party cardholder and speechwriter for Léon, the Hutu extremist ideologue, known as the Purifier or Avenging Lion. Country talk, clothes of a fashionable Parisian. Skin of a Black, ambitions of a White. Fortunately, thinks Valcourt, Immaculée feels only scorn and disdain for Léo though he zealously plies her with flowers and chocolates.

Valcourt has not joined his Rwandan buddies as he normally does in the evening. Gentille's distress is keeping him at his own table. The stupidity of the Rwandan just back from Paris disgusts him. But he has become a bit weary of the obsessive conversation of his friends and even more of their overblown, florid, pretentious, often old-fashioned language. They do not speak, they declare, declaim, not in verse but in slogans, formulaic dicta, press releases. They talk of massacres they foresee with the certainty of weather forecasters, and of the AIDS eating at them as if they are prophets of the Apocalypse. Valcourt knows plenty about massacres, brutality and AIDS, but sometimes he'd like to talk about flowers or sex or cooking. He hears Raphaël announcing, 'We have come to the end of time, eaten away by two cancers, hatred and AIDS. We are a little like the Earth's last children . . .' Valcourt covers his ears.

The Canadian ambassador arrives and without so much as a nod to anyone goes and sits at the table nearest the buffet; Lucien is wearing his favourite T-shirt again, the one sporting the legend, 'Call Me Bwana'. Lisette, the consul, is in despair since having her golf bag stolen and is in a grouchy mood.

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Imagine her distress. She is left-handed, the only left-handed player among the members of the Kigali Golf Club, whose ill-kept fairways wend through the little valley overlooked by the arrogant high-rise of the National Council of Development, the luxurious villas of the regime's favourites, the Belgian Club, and the ambassadors' residences. Golf is her only pleasure, her only civilized activity in this godawful country she abhors. An appointment to Kigali when one has been in the Canadian Service for seventeen years is an invitation to hand in one's resignation. But some people are blind, deaf and pigheaded. The embassy here is only a branch, in fact, a dependency of Kinshasa, which is an even more unbearable city than Kigali. But when one doesn't know anything but the art of lying politely, one is better off living in Kigali than answering the phone in departmental offices in Ottawa. Lisette suffers in luxury.

The laughter from Raphaël's crew is short-lived. The president's three brothers-in-law appear, followed by the hotel's Belgian assistant manager and five soldiers of the presidential guard. But all the tables are taken. The former minister of justice scurries, still dripping water, to invite them to sit with him, but his table is in the sun and the gentlemen wish to sit in the shade. All the suitable tables are occupied by Whites, or by Raphaël's friends, who of course will not budge. For the assistant manager, a tricky situation. It is saved miraculously by the manager, who happens along at this moment and displaces his own wife and in-laws to make way for the three pillars of the Akazu.†

† Meaning 'house' or 'family'. At this time, the word designated the family of the president, especially his wife Agathe's three brothers who controlled most of Rwanda's wealth, both legitimate and ill-gotten.

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And now Canada's presence is complete: the commander of the UN troops has just arrived. The major general is a miracle of mimesis, a perfect incarnation of his country and his employer too, rather the way masters who adore their dogs end up looking and behaving like them. Unassuming, apprehensive, ineloquent and naive, like Canada. Meticulous, legalistic, a civil servant and exemplary bureaucrat, as virtuous as 'le Grand Machin' itself (as General de Gaulle was pleased to call the United Nations). What he knows of the world is airports, the grand hotels of Brussels, Geneva and New York, and strategic studies centres. Of war, he knows what he has seen on CNN, read in a few books and experienced through military exercises he has directed, and invasions of several countries he has conducted on paper. About Africa finally, he knows its colour and several of its smells to which he has still not become accustomed, although he dexterously wields canisters of 'Quebec spruce' deodorant and douses himself with Brut, an eau de cologne highly prized by the military and the police. Yet behind his salesman's moustache and sad eyes, the major general is an honest man and a good Catholic. He is deeply touched by the obvious piety of the dictator and his family and the frequent company they keep with bishops. These are upright people. Their few excesses ought to be ascribed to a certain African atavism rather than the insatiable venality and bloodthirsty cruelty they are so maliciously accused of by all those ambitious Tutsis who pretend to be playing by the rules of democracy but in fact aspire only to set up a new dictatorship. This was explained to the major general at length by the archbishop of Kabgaye one morning after the solemn high mass which Canada's UN commander

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had attended with his new personal secretary, a nice young man named Firmin who had studied in Quebec and who enjoyed the valuable advantage of being a nephew of the dictator. On the way back, Firmin confirmed what the archbishop had said, forgetting to add that the rotund representative of His Polish Holiness was personal confessor to the dictator's family, the Habyarimanas, as well as a member of the executive committee of what had been the only political party before the international community imposed the Arusha peace accord, and with it an official opposition.†

A man of duty, the major general is an unprejudiced man, and he is not displeased about being in central Africa. He could have been sent to Somalia or Bosnia. Here there's no peace but at least there's no war, for all the sporadic fighting on the Ugandan border. It's almost as restful as a posting to Cyprus. In fact, he views this mission as eighteen months of well-deserved rest, far away from all the UN paperwork and bootlicking. In New York they ordered him to interpret his mandate as narrowly as possible. He has been given minimal military resources, in case he should be tempted to show too much initiative. On account of which the major general has

† In 1990, the Tutsi-led Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) launched a military campaign against President Juvénal Habyarimana's government. After protracted negotiations, with the support of countries of the Organization of African Unity, the Arusha peace accord was signed in August 1993. It called for a Transitional National Assembly with a predetermined number of seats per party and a transitional government, pending elections. To help achieve national reconciliation, the UN Security Council created the UN Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR) to ensure respect of the terms of the peace accord. Despite the negotiated peace, a Tutsi-led rebel force remained across the border in Uganda to the north, and sporadic cross-border fighting continued.

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already forgotten – or almost – that the United Nations forces are expected not only to ensure respect of the peace accord but also maintain order in the capital.

A grenade explodes. Just far enough from the pool for it to be somewhere else. Only the major general is startled. He is not yet used to this peace that kills on a daily basis. He has spilled a little soup on his uniform and looks anxiously around him. No one has noticed his nervousness. Reassured, though sweating profusely, he dips his spoon back into his black bean soup.

Twelve French vultures dive into the pool all at once; three women have just slipped into the water. Sometimes vultures turn into crocodiles.

Valcourt closes his notebook. The vaguely surrealistic play being acted out at the pool day after day ceased to interest him some time ago. The plot is heavy-handed and the characters behave as predictably as in a TV soap opera. He wonders if he hasn't put in enough time here in Kigali. He wanted to live somewhere else; he's done it. He feels this evening as though he's swimming round and round in an aquarium.

He orders another beer from Gentille whose head is still bowed, though the Rwandan from Paris is no longer there.

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TWO

One tenth of April, when Montreal had begun to celebrate spring but was still buried under forty-five centimetres of snow, all Bernard Valcourt knew of Rwanda was where it was on the map and the fact that two ethnic groups, the Hutus, the majority by far, and the Tutsis, about fifteen per cent of the population, were locked in an undeclared civil war. He was drinking in the bar of a hotel after attending a conference on development and democracy in Africa. The snow might stop after a few beers and he could walk home. And then, there was nothing to go home for. Since his daughter had left, the way all daughters do when they fall in love, and since Pif, his cat, so named because he was the brother of Paf, had died like his sister of simple, stupid old age, loneliness was all his apartment had to offer him. A few nice women had unhooked their bras, one or another had slept over and had breakfast, but none had passed the morning test. Since his wife died five years ago, he had known only one great passion – and it was so mad, so all-consuming and magnificent that he hadn't known how to handle it. Passion feeds on abandon. He had not yet reached that state of total freedom that obliterates fear of the unknown and allows one to soar. As for his work

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as a Radio-Canada producer, it was looking increasingly like a monotonous chore, a tedious burden.

A tall, good-looking man with a beard, who had babbled some platitudes about the media in Africa, came over and introduced himself.

'Claude Saint-Laurent, director of democratic development for the Canadian International Development Agency. May I sit down?'

And he ordered two beers. He explained that Canada, a country of small importance in the concert of nations, nevertheless exerted an influence in certain regions of the world that could determine their future and above all their access to democracy. This was the case with Rwanda. With other partners, the Canadian government had agreed to finance the establishment of a television station in Rwanda. Its primary mission would be educational, particularly in community health and AIDS.

'We begin with hygienic necessities, with programs on prevention, on dietary matters, then the information gets into circulation, and information is the beginning of democracy and tolerance.'

Bullshit, thought Valcourt.

'Would you be interested in being co-director of this television station?'

Valcourt said yes without thinking it over even two seconds.

He gave his furniture to the St. Vincent de Paul Society and his pictures to his daughter, sold his apartment and all but two of his books, keeping only Camus' *Essais* and the *Oeuvres complètes* of Paul Éluard, the Pléiade edition. Two months later

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he was drinking a Primus beside the pool in the middle of Kigali.

He had been living two years now in this heterogeneous, excessive city. He no longer had much faith in the television station project. The government kept finding reasons for putting off its launch. When closed-circuit programs were shown there was always the same complaint: 'There's not enough stress on the government's role.' When the government was satisfied with the propaganda inserts, it was the donor countries, Canada, Switzerland and Germany, that balked. Valcourt and the station had come to a dead end. But one thing had impassioned Valcourt. He had discovered with horror that over a third of Kigali's adults were HIV positive. The government was denying its own statistics. Those stricken with AIDS were living in infamy, shame, concealment and delusion. Only a few people were trying to face up to the disaster and, paradoxically, they were parish priests and nuns. Devout, virginal nuns from Lac-Saint-Jean, Quebec City and the Beauce were gathering in prostitutes and teaching them about the virtues of condoms. Parish priests, and lay brothers too, had the pockets of their cassocks bulging with plastic packages, which they handed out beneath the photograph of the Pope watching protectively from the walls of their offices. In his spare time on weekends and holidays, when he could quietly bring out a camera, Valcourt was making a documentary film on AIDS and these heroic, pious transgressors.

From the moment of his arrival in Kigali he had been deeply moved by the landscape, the hills sculpted by thousands of gardens, the mists caressing the valley floors, and by the challenge he was being handed. At last he was going to be

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useful, was going to change the course of things. My real life is beginning, he said to himself.

But Gentille's life? When does that really begin?

The story of Gentille – who still has her head bowed and is drying her tears, watched inquisitively and lustfully by the barman – has two beginnings.

The first was in a time when her country was called Ruanda-Urundi. Germans had settled there, but a war that no one in her country had heard of changed the Germans into Belgians. Kawa, Gentille's great-great-grandfather, had been told that these soldiers, these civil servants, these teachers and these priests gowned all in white were coming to the land of a thousand hills to make it a protectorate. An important league, which no one had heard of either, a league of kings, ministers and other powerful people, had asked the Belgians to protect Ruanda-Urundi. They had brought with them the Great Protector, a mysterious and invisible god divided into three, one of which was a son. To shelter their god, the Great White Robes had built huge houses of red brick and smaller ones for themselves, and other houses too where people could learn to read and also learn about the life of the son of the Great Protector. Kawa, who was Hutu and wished to obtain a position for his eldest son at the court of the Tutsi king, enrolled his son at the school but would not have him baptized because the king, the mwami Musinga, was resisting the pressure from the Great White Robes. However, the Belgians did not want a mwami who believed in Imana the creator and in Lyangombe, and who practised *kuragura*, or divination and

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ancestor worship. Monseigneur Classe, the head of the Great White Robes, arranged for the son of the mwami, Mutara III, to become king on condition that he abandon his old beliefs. Mutara III was baptized on a Sunday in 1931. On Monday Kawa went to the school with his son and asked the priest to baptize him Célestin, which was the name of the Belgian burgomaster of his commune. This was how Célestin, several days before his death, had recounted the story of his conversion to his own son, Gentille's grandfather.

Once enrolled at the university in Butare, Célestin began to read all that the Great White Robes had written. These people must truly have been communicating with God, for in their books one could discover the story of all humanity. He learned of course that the Earth was round. He was not surprised. If the Sun and Moon are round, why would the Earth be flat or square? Célestin was intelligent and was soon making use of what he learned. From being with them as much as from reading their books, he quickly understood that the Belgians considered themselves superior. He was not upset by this discovery. From the beginning of time, individuals, clans, tribes had paraded their superiority, proclaimed it on the hills and in the valleys. Some used force and others used trade to assert themselves, but always, each in his own way and each on his own hill, the Hutu and the Tutsi had stayed polite but distant, garnering a little of each other's wisdom and carrying on their business with respect for one another.

Célestin was Hutu, and only the haste of his father to have him baptized had opened the doors of the university to him – this conversion plus the two cows that Kawa, a prosperous farmer, had promised to give the mission every

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year in thanks for its generosity. Célestin asked his father if his own generous offer had been made first. No, his father replied slowly after reflecting several minutes, the two generosities were born simultaneously.

This was how Célestin received his daily lesson in concealment, a kind of half-lie practised by men of the hills since life began. He who lives on a hill distrusts strangers. He lives in isolation and knows neither friend nor enemy. So he gives himself time to understand and, in the meantime, he pretends. Often he takes a whole lifetime and only says what he thinks on his deathbed. In this country this is sometimes how, after years of keeping company, of cheerful conversation, gifts and being kowtowed to, a White can learn that he has never been liked. Whites say that Ruanda-Urundi is the kingdom of liars and hypocrites. They do not understand the first thing about the permanent insecurity of the men of the hills. The Whites have guns. The Blacks have secret thoughts.

Kawa wanted Célestin to know another life than life on the hill. He wanted him to be an 'intellectual'. This is what someone is still called today who can read and pile up paper instead of milking a cow or goat. He would go and live in Astrida,† the capital, and become rich trading with the colonials. A legitimate plan, which did honour to a loving father, but one whose full complexity was still beyond his grasp. It was Célestin, an insatiable reader, who made it possible for his father to get an inkling of the difficulties that lay ahead in his advance toward prosperity and social prominence.

† Butare today.

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Célestin had brought home a big book written by a Belgian doctor who was a specialist in indigenous cultures. In his country he was considered a great Africanist. The Belgian king, queen, ministers, high and low civil servants, all learned everything they knew of the mysterious continent from this book. There was no greater authority on Rwanda than this doctor. He knew the history of all the kingdoms of Africa and the characteristics of each of its peoples. He described each scientifically, applying the leading theories of morphology and anthropology, as they had recently begun to do in Europe, particularly in Germany. Célestin's teacher, Father Athanase, had explained all this to him when placing the precious volume in his hands. If Célestin wanted to become an intellectual, he said, it was time for him to discover which were the pure races so he could model his attitude and behaviour on them. This would do much for his social advancement.

Reading this book disrupted his entire life and the lives of his family, his children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, of whom the most beautiful and most intelligent would be baptized Gentille.

He learned that the Hutus had inhabited the region of the Great Lakes since time immemorial and that they were probably descended from the Bantus, who were savage warriors from Lake Chad and had founded great kingdoms, like those of the Monomotapa and the Kongo, as well as the great Zulu chiefdoms in South Africa. It was they who, long before the birth of Jesus, introduced metallurgy to the region as well as a pottery technique still being practised today.

The Tutsis, who had reigned over Ruanda-Urundi for centuries, had come from the North, from Egypt or Ethiopia.

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A Hamitic people, they were not true negroes but probably Whites darkened by centuries of sun. Their tall stature, the paleness of their skin and the fineness of their features attested to this noble ancestry and their distant relationship with the civilized peoples.

'The Hutu, a poor farmer, is short and squat and has the nose characteristic of the negroid races. He is good natured but naive, coarse and unintelligent. The Hutu is deceitful and lazy, and quick to take offence. He is a typical negro.

'The Tutsi, a nomadic cattle grazier, is tall and slender. His skin is light brown on account of his northern origins. He is intelligent and skilful at trade. He has a sparkling wit and a pleasant disposition. Colonial administrators in Ruanda-Urundi would do well to obtain the assistance of Tutsis for tasks which in their judgment they may entrust without danger to natives.'†

When Célestin read these words to his father, Kawa uttered a fearful cry. All was crumbling around him: his pride as a Hutu patriarch and the ambitions he had been harbouring for Célestin. He himself no longer existed and his son was worth no more than a leper. On the hill, he was already being looked on with suspicion. Yes, now he realized why. For Kawa was very tall and his nose was neither large nor flat like the noses of his six brothers and forty-nine cousins. His skin was darker than the skin of Tutsis he knew, but when you saw him from behind or far away, or in a dark place, you could not tell the difference. He did raise cows like the Tutsis, but only chance and a crazy bet his father had made a long, long

† Sasserath, *Le Ruanda-Urundi, étrange royaume féodal*, quoted by Jean-Pierre Chrétien in *Burundi, l'histoire retrouvée,* Karthala, 1993.

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time ago had put him on that course. He was neither lazy nor stupid. People complimented him on his humour and admired his instinct for trade, and certain Tutsis of rank readily took him into their confidence.

If the doctor who had written this book was right – and who could doubt it? – Kawa and his parents and grandparents and children were neither Hutu nor Tutsi. Unless some ancestor had been mistaken and, throughout all these seasons past, they had been Tutsis without knowing it. If they really were Hutus, on the other hand, they were deformed, bastards of some kind, and their future held only obstacles and disappointments. Kawa asked Célestin to pray to his new god, and for good measure invoked his own, Imana. One can never be too careful. Neither seemed to have a solution for his dilemma. He would have to consult the ancestors, even though the practice, *kuragura*, had been forbidden by the bishops and burgomasters.

Kawa did not sleep a wink all night. Ten times at least he rose and went to walk in the banana grove, hoping for a sign from the sky or a sudden inspiration that would spare him from having to go and consult his distant cousin, one of the most venerated *umumpfumu*† of the Kibeho district. In vain. The stars were deaf that night, the sky blind and silent.

His cousin's name was Nyamaravago, in honour of the queen mother who at her baptism later had taken the name Radegonde. She had been practising divination since the death of her husband, he too a diviner, who had transmitted to her all the secrets of interpreting saliva, and pats of butter

† Witch and diviner combined.

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dissolving in boiling water. The too easy and unreliable sacrifice of chickens they left to lesser diviners.

He set out long before the first ray of sunshine lit up the eucalyptus trees. He had brought his finest cow as a gift for his cousin to make sure she would be favourably disposed. When he arrived at her house the sun was already announcing the end of the day. A dozen or more worried, ill or wounded people were patiently waiting, sitting in the shade of the rugo hedge surrounding the big round hut decorated with abstract motifs. The urgency of his case, or perhaps the ties of blood, or even more the cow which uttered a piercing moo of fatigue on arrival, ensured that Kawa waited only a few minutes.

Without speaking, but his eyes brimming with questions, he took his place on the mat woven with a black arrowhead design. Nyamaravago, seated facing him, had not even raised her head when he entered. She was humming almost inaudibly, her eyes closed, breathing slowly. A serving girl presented him with a large bowl of water. He washed his hands and face. He was offered banana beer, which he drank slowly, and then rinsed his mouth with water. He closed his eyes and prepared himself to listen.

His cousin spoke of the rains which had fallen very heavily, and of the buzzards which were more and more numerous, meaning that people were throwing away a lot of food, then of her husband who had visited her three nights before. She enquired after Kawa's stomach, which had been ill and which she had treated several months before. Yes, the cramps had disappeared as soon as he had returned home to his hill. An oil lamp, a gift from a rich patient, was lit. The cousins talked for at least an hour. Five minutes of words

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followed by meditative silences. At last, she who communed with the spirits invited him to state the reason for his visit, the more important, it would seem, for the fineness and fatness of the cow. Kawa had not come for himself but for his children and the children of his children. He feared that great misfortunes would fall upon them and that all his descendants were cursed. And if he was in such despair, it was because a big book written by a White diviner confirmed his anxieties.

'It seems we are not what we are, nor what we appear to be,' he concluded, 'and the future of my children will be bearable only if they become what they are not.' Even with the gods and ancestors, caution and discretion are permissible. A man who tells all is a naked man. A naked man is weak.

He spat into a small calabash. His cousin soaked a strip of wood in his saliva and added a little goat's grease. She heated the strip over the flame of the oil lamp. She examined the forms created by the heat and closed her eyes. The serving girl brought a big bowl filled with boiling water. Nyamaravago put two little dabs of butter into it. Once the butter was melted, she closed her eyes once more and said, 'Your children and the children of your children, as long as they live in the land of the hills, must change their skins like snakes and their colour like chameleons. They must always fly in the direction of the wind and swim with the river. They will be what they are not, otherwise they will suffer from being what they are.' Silence fell. Kawa trembled. Ants could be heard walking on the mat. The cousin slowly raised her right hand. Kawa, without his cow, took the path back to his hill.

Here is where the story of Gentille, who is yet to be born, begins a second time.

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When he reached home, Kawa said not a word of his journey and even less of his worries or the painful decision he had taken in order to save his progeny and their yet unborn descendants.

In the land of hills, the father's origin determines the ethnic group of the children. A Hutu father has Hutu children, a Tutsi father has Tutsi children, regardless of the origin of the mother. Kawa's daughters would need only to marry Tutsis for their children to be part of the race chosen by the gods and admired by Whites. This ought to be easy to bring about. Kawa was rich and knew many less well-endowed Tutsi families who would gladly agree to improve their lot by a few cows in exchange for a son. But for the males of the family, fate condemned them to remain Hutus in Tutsi bodies. And their origin and that of their children would forever be written on their identity papers. What a nightmare. What a tragic fate. Schools forbidden, scorn from Whites, careers and ambitions blocked. Kawa would not allow his sons and the sons of his sons to be officially inferior beings forever, negroes among negroes.

Father Athanase confirmed his darkest fears when he reminded him that God loves all his children equally, that the true greatness of man is within and that the first shall be the last, implying, Kawa understood, that the Batwas† would enter heaven first, followed by the Hutus, then the Tutsis. He did not dare ask the holy man why the children of God did not love the Hutus and Tutsis equally, why true greatness in this country was physical and why, here on earth, the first are always first. The man of the hills, who does not like to lose face,

† Pygmies.

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takes care to save face for the person he is talking to. Which is why he never revealed his transaction with the burgomaster.

To the burgomaster he offered several cows, several goats and his most beautiful daughter, who had just turned fourteen. The White refused to issue new identity papers transforming Kawa's Hutus into Tutsis. However, he would take the girl in exchange for the silence he would keep forever regarding Kawa's improper and shameful proposal. This is how Clémentine (whose buttocks and breasts nourished fantasies in the men of the hill, whatever their ethnic group) became the property of a very ugly, pimply-faced Belgian who came and abused her from behind every time he was in the neighbourhood. She died at seventeen from a blood disease that came, it was whispered, from the cocks of unwashed men.

Kawa's other five daughters married Tutsis, thus saving their descendants from shame and infamy. Kawa still had enough cows to find Tutsi wives for his four sons. He chose his daughters-in-law for their stature and paleness of skin. He wanted them slimmer and taller than average, as long and sinuous as snakes, hoping that the Tutsi blood would kill the Hutu blood. Now there was only Célestin left in the house. Célestin was looking after his father, who was wasting away with illness and melancholy since the death of his wife several weeks after Clémentine had died. All the children had left the hill, fleeing the disapproving looks of uncles, aunts and nephews who felt betrayed by this family that had decided not to be what it was. By now Kawa possessed almost nothing. Not even goats. To arrange the last marriage he had had to give up the banana grove. All he had left was the big house and a small field of beans. He and Célestin had been eating beans for a year.

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Célestin was not married. He was going to the seminary at Astrida, walking ten kilometres every day there and back, even though he had been offered room and board. He could not leave his father alone on the hill. As an exceptionally gifted student, he had been allowed to continue his studies in spite of his origin. Of the three hundred seminarists, thirty were Hutus, which was how it was in all the country's schools. Célestin was hesitating between the priesthood and teaching. But the bishop decreed that the country was not yet ready to accept a priest of the inferior ethnic group; he could be a brother or a teacher. Kawa's decision was final. Célestin would become a teacher in the city, which would allow him to have profitable associations. And Kawa set out to find him a wife. Célestin was his heart of hearts, the repository of his hopes. Of all his children, he was the tallest and palest. The Belgian doctor who wrote the big book, learned as he was, would never guess that Célestin was a Hutu, if not perhaps for his nose which was a little wide. Kawa finally found the nose he needed on the neighbouring hill. A nose so fine one would have thought it had been cut with a razor. A nose with skin so pale that her family thought Ernestine was sick. A nose so straight on a body so long and thin that the wind had nowhere to catch. If the superior blood did its job, the children of Célestin and Ernestine would be more Tutsi than the Tutsis. And with Célestin's massive, solid body, they would be as strong and handsome as gods. Before making his request, he returned to his old cousin. Without either cow or goat, he was entitled only to the saliva, but even that cost him the little bean field. Nyamaravago said, 'You have travelled too far and the little strength left to you is

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waning. You think you have found the key to all your dreams. Open the door and die happy with your hopes.'

The marriage cost the house. Ernestine and Célestin made their home in Astrida, and Kawa settled under the fig tree that shaded what had been his house. Ernestine's father allowed him to live there. He was brought a handful of beans every day. He died a few weeks after the marriage, saying to a distant cousin who happened by, 'The children of my children will be white, but will they recognize me?'

This was the story told by Célestin, Kawa's grandson, to Gentille, who told it piecemeal to Valcourt. As Valcourt listened, he sat in the only armchair in the little red-mud house she shared with a girlfriend in the Muslim quarter of Nyamirambo, several kilometres from the hotel. A single room, the floor partly covered by two mats. A rickety armchair he had fled to so as not to be standing too close to Gentille. A table and two chairs. Two cardboard suitcases containing all the girls' possessions. On the wall, three colour lithos: the Virgin, the Pope and the president. What was he doing here, still trembling and sweating from every one of his pores, billions of inexhaustible little fountains?

He had just spent another worthless Sunday at the pool. When all the ravens and then the buzzards were perched and the sun had disappeared suddenly behind the wall of eucalyptus trees, when there was no one left but him – as happened every Sunday – and he was growing despondent at the thought of starting another worthless week, Gentille approached his table.

'Monsieur, I beg you, Monsieur,' she whispered rather than said, 'the governor must be told that I'm not a Tutsi. I

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don't want to lose my job. I'm a real Hutu. I've got papers to prove it. I'm afraid of being taken for an *inkotanyi*.'†

Valcourt pooh-poohed racist theories that claimed to deduce a person's origin from the shape of a nose or a forehead, or the slenderness of a body. But, unwittingly a prisoner of these stereotypes himself, he was surprised to find he didn't really believe her. She was crying softly, resolutely, avoiding his eyes as Rwandans often did. Shyly she came a few tiny steps closer, repeating, 'Monsieur, Monsieur, help me.' And then suddenly he caught her scent. He was overcome, knocked askew, invaded from every quarter, fingers trembling, legs jellylike, body wet, as if hit by an attack of malaria, but with an erection so sudden and painful he let out a low moan. Whatever held all his body parts together to make a human being of him had dissolved. All that was left was an uncontrollable mass of enzymes, glands and molecules.

No, he was not sick, he heard himself say. Yes, he would like a glass of water. No, she mustn't go and get anyone. He just had to be left alone. She promised to come back after tidying up the bar, to show him her identity card. Too much life racing through rusty veins and muscles, too much blood in a heart that had forgotten how to handle sudden ecstasies, too much air in lungs accustomed to breathing stingily.

Gentille really was Hutu according to her identity card. But he still didn't believe her. She wanted to talk to him, but not at the pool or in his room either. Just going to his room would mark her as a hooker and only worsen the constant harassment, for which her beauty alone was responsible; for

† 'Cockroach', in Kinyarwanda.

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there was no more silent, cautious, self-restrained woman than Gentille. It was getting late. Valcourt knew she would have to spend half her day's pay to take a taxi. Otherwise, she would have a good hour's walk through a city that the curfew transformed every night into a hunting ground for soldiers and their usually drunken militia acolytes who dispensed HIV like parish priests their indulgences.

He drank a Primus that was as warm as his burning forehead. What could he do for Gentille? Nothing. Sophisticated as he was, a man of the left and an enlightened humanist who knew all about mixed marriages and the transmission of ethnic origin in Rwanda, he didn't really believe her. If an anthropologist needed a photograph to illustrate the archetype of the Tutsi woman, he would have shown him Gentille's. If he, a White who considered himself unprejudiced and free of any preconceived hatreds, did not believe her, what Rwandan would take this piece of cardboard seriously when it declared the opposite of what she showed to such perfection? An accommodating, high-placed lover, a relative or a lecherous civil servant, must certainly have obtained forged papers for her. As for the president's phony nephew who had planted this anxiety in her, Valcourt promised, if ever he saw him again, to swear to him that Gentille was a real Hutu. In any case, danger was on all sides. A discontented Belgian, a drunk and infatuated German, a passing soldier, a love-struck civil servant. All of them possessed her potentially, and all of them could kill her. Increasingly, in Kigali and even more in the countryside, life hung on a word, a whim, a desire, a nose too fine or a leg too long.

And her legs, partly revealed by the way she had hitched

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her blue skirt onto her knees, were perfect, her ankles smooth and graceful. Valcourt ran his eyes slowly over every part of her body, grateful for the semi-darkness that allowed it undetected.

'You're nice with me. You listen to me and you've never asked anything of me. You're the only White who's never asked me . . . to . . . you know what I mean. You can stay here tonight if you want. I'd like it.'

No, she was not afraid to stay alone. She wanted to thank him, and then, there was something else, but she would rather not talk about that now. Thank him for what? What she had just said, for his respect, for never having touched her on the sly, or as if by accident. Especially for not having done what all the other customers did when signing their chits, saying, 'I'll be in my room all evening,' showing her their key to make sure she memorized the room number.

'Gentille, I'm not completely different from the customers around the pool. I . . . I want . . . I want you too, you know.'

Valcourt felt trapped by his own frankness. For he was firmly convinced that if he did have a chance to lift Gentille's blue skirt up to her navel, it was because he was not like the others who never hid the way they ate her up, sucked at her with their eyes, touched her on the hand or hip as if by accident, called her over and offered her a drink, protection and all the money she wanted.

'You want to be with me? You want to sleep with me? As much as all the others?'

That was it. All her fears were confirmed. Now she understood everything. Like all the others she mistrusted and avoided, he was undressing her, fucking her every time he

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looked at her. That was it, Valcourt told himself. So why not tell the whole truth? Why keep in what had been tormenting him for these months he had been looking at her?

Her breasts, her mouth, her ass (this was the word he now used, certain to offend her modesty), her dewy-morning, café-au-lait skin, her eyes, her shyness, her sculptural legs, the way she walked, her scent, her hair, her voice, yes, everything about her drove him a little crazy, even if he'd never dared approach her. Yes, like all the others, he wanted to fuck her. There it was, and he was sorry and swore never to talk about it again and he was leaving now, not just saying he was sorry but asking her to forgive him. He went toward the door without conviction.

Again the scent of her washed over him. Paralyzed him. A pornographic smell. Not titillating perfumes or powerful and exotic spices, but a dark smell of flesh, heavy hair and warm, moist sex.

'And I thought you didn't like me and didn't want anything to do with me. You can have me whenever you want. I'd like to be loved by a nice White like you.'

Exactly what she should not have said. She wanted a White, a White like any other. A promise of wealth, maybe a visa for somewhere else; and if the blessed Holy Virgin answered her prayer, marriage with a White and a house in a cold country, a clean one. He could hear Raphaël this afternoon at the pool, saying, 'Anything to leave this shitty country.'

Temporary or permanent mating was a salutary transaction, according to Raphaël. 'Forget your White man's love language,' he kept telling Valcourt. 'Sex with a White man

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is a lifebuoy. A dress from Paris or from Lévis' – Raphaël had done a financial internship at Quebec's Mouvement Desjardins – 'a duty-free piece of jewellery, a little money so you can leave the Muslim quarter and move up the hill into a house with a hedge and a guardian. Then, God willing, liberation, paradise, a shack in Canada or Belgium or France or Tashkent, as long as there are no more Hutus and Tutsis, just Whites who look down on Blacks. Intolerance doesn't kill. Buy me a beer, I'm broke.'

'Gentille, I don't want to be a White who gives gifts,' Valcourt said. 'If you want to leave, I can help you get a visa, but you don't need to sleep with me. Even if it seems ridiculous, all I want is for you to love me a little.'

He left without looking back, surprised by his own confession. Love was the only feeling he had ceased to hope for and he had been doing fairly nicely without it. And here he was asking for it.

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