

Treasure your mothers and fathers – Beata Uwazaninka

Before the genocide

My name is Beata and I was born in Rwanda in 1980. At the time of the genocide, I was 14 years old. My father's name was Joseph Nemeye and my mother's Devotha Uwimana. My father was a farmer and my mother used to help him in the fields or looking after our cows. On the day I was born, our neighbour gave us a cow to celebrate. I was born at 6pm behind our house and my father gave me the name 'Uwazaninka' – it means 'if you bring a cow, you'll get the bride' because in our culture when a man asks for a girl's hand in marriage, he has to give cows. So my father definitely wanted a cow from any man who married me! My mother told me that. My father had two boys by his first wife and he was very happy when I was born. He loved me so much. I cried every night when I was a baby and stopped my parents sleeping, so my Dad gave me the nickname 'Shobya'. Later on, my Grandma changed my nickname to 'Kiki' because I made her laugh.



My father died naturally when I was two years old, so my mother had to raise me on her own. We went to live with Grandma in Bugesera. Then my mother remarried when I was five. I was hurt, but my Grandma loved me so much and that was somehow enough for me. From then on, I stayed with her. She used to treat people who were ill; she was very good at using herbs. I wish I could remember all that knowledge now.

I started primary school in 1987. I didn't know anything was wrong in Rwanda because Grandma never told me anything – although she was always saying that she wanted to go and live with her sons in Uganda. One of her sons, my uncle Gahima, lived in Mutara and used to buy her clothes. I can only remember seeing him twice because he lived a long way away.

I remember when Grandma came home one evening and a woman who lived nearby came and told her that a dead man had been found in the road. Grandma knew him – he was killed just because he was a Tutsi. My Grandma said, '*Mungu wanjye*,' (That's awful) and from then on, she planned to move to Uganda. She sold the land and I was

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very happy at the thought of going to Uganda. I was looking forward to seeing people in other countries.

On New Year's Eve in 1987, Grandma was getting ready to go to church next day. I remember I went to pick a few green beans to put in the basket in church – that was our custom. Grandma asked me, 'Shall we cook rice tomorrow for your mother?' And I said yes because it was my favourite food as well. Then she told me to make sure we came home straight after mass; I had to hurry her up if people started talking to her after the service and making her late.

Then we had our dinner and made a fire because it was the rainy season. That night, we climbed into our hammock bed and Grandma fell asleep soon after. Later, I heard some people push the door open and come into the house. They killed my Grandma with a hammer. It all happened so quickly. When the killers saw me, they said, 'She's only little, leave her.'

In the morning, I went to the neighbours. I told them I was very scared, but for some reason I didn't know where they had put Grandma. They had taken her outside, perhaps because they wanted to throw her in the river. But she was too heavy for them. That's when my dreams all went up in the air. We found Grandma in a ditch. It still gives me a headache when I think about it. It makes me angry because by that time I loved her more than anyone else.

Nobody was punished for doing that because it wasn't a sin if the person killed was a Tutsi. That was how I found out I am a Tutsi, but to be honest, I had no idea what it meant. I went to live with my mother and started a new life as an eight-year-old. In time I recovered, but my life had changed forever.

The genocide

The genocide in Rwanda that everyone knows about happened in 1994, but before that, there was another one that the world didn't hear about. That was in 1991 when all the Tutsis who lived in the north – the Abagogwe clan – were killed. I remember it very well. I was eleven years old then. We used to get water from the river Nyabarongo and at the time the river was full of Abagogwe bodies. And in 1992 many people were killed at Bugesera when Mugesera said, 'We'll send the Tutsis back to Ethiopia via the short cut' – meaning via the river which flows to Lake Victoria in Uganda. All this was already happening to the Tutsis.

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In March 1994, we were all getting ready to go home from school for the short break at Easter. I remember telling my mother that I didn't want to go home for such a short time. I hated the place anyway because they were killing people for no reason; I was scared. I asked my mother if she should have moved there after a woman had been killed. I can't remember the woman's name because it's a long time ago, but I can still picture her face in my mind. I remember her son was called Welarice; he was married to Nyiramasare and they had four kids. She was killed at midday in the sunlight. They said she was a witch – but it was only because she was a Tutsi.

My mother said in her letter that I could stay in Kigali if I wanted. She also said she was very concerned about me in Kigali because of the grenade that had gone off and the violence that was taking place... but it was better than being killed by people who knew me. There was a man called Nyarihanga, local area head of the *Interahamwe* [Hutu militia], who always used to say I had long fingers... and it bothered his mind. He used to call me *Muntu Kazi* (Tutsi female) and say I scared him to death.

I stayed in Kigali and things were tense: in the first week there was a grenade at the bus station. They said it was the 'cockroaches', meaning the Tutsis, but in reality it was *Interahamwe* who used to play around with grenades on the road. Some people were killed and all the Tutsis felt less secure. The week before the genocide began, they announced in Kinyarwanda on *Radio Mille Collines* that something big was going to happen the next week (*Mube maso rubanda nyamwishi kuko icyumwerugitaha hazaba akantu!*). That's what led to the genocide of 1994.

On 6 April when the President's aeroplane was shot down, I knew nothing until morning when we heard the news. They said the President had been killed – and the Tutsis did it. We were told to stay at home and roadblocks appeared all over the city. I was at my uncle's house with his four daughters, his son and his wife, and our house girl, Umutoni.

Nothing happened on 7 April, but you could hear people outside asking to be forgiven. I remember hearing on the news about a man whose body was found on the road. His face was smashed and his nose had been cut off. That terrified me. Everybody was so afraid.

The next day, I felt ill, as if I had a fever. When I woke up, I found everyone was drinking tea. I remember one girl saying that she didn't have to make her bed, she didn't know if she would ever sleep in it again. She told us she could feel something bad was going to happen. 'Don't be foolish,' her mother said. Then the girl said loudly, 'Whatever happens, nobody's going to rape me.' I think that was her real concern.

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Uncle was just replying, 'This will never happen,' when we heard a loud bang at our gate. Suddenly, one of the killers came in and said, 'If your daughters don't want to marry Hutus, we're going to have them for free now – and we'll kill them as well.' They hacked my uncle and he collapsed. The girls ran outside but were caught near the gate and killed as well. The young boy and I ran through the gate at the back of the house that we shared with our neighbours. That's how I survived that day. From that moment, I never saw my cousin again – or anyone else. I went to stay with a family who were friends of my uncle's. They took me in and one of their daughters-in-law made lunch for me.

I was so tired and confused in my mind. I felt far away from everything. Then I became the family's housemaid and was sent out every morning to fetch water and food. It was very dangerous because of the roadblocks. I was nearly raped and sometimes had to hide among the corpses, pretending to be dead.

Yahaya and Aisha

Yahaya lived next door to the house where I was staying and was a very good Muslim. I can't remember how many children he had, but he was hiding a lot of people in his house – Desiree, Shududu, Antoine and his pregnant wife, Kdafi. They lived nearby and he used to take them in if the *Interahamwe* came - they would jump through the window into his house. I remember his wife always stayed at home. She was his second wife and around eight months pregnant; his first wife had died.

One day I didn't go to fetch water but to buy firewood instead. I remember I bought myself some sugar cane. When I got home, the woman who was head of the house told me to stay outside and see if anyone was coming. She said, 'Don't say I'm here'. Everyone was inside except me. I sat outside and started to eat my sugar cane. Suddenly, I looked up and saw a man with gun. He asked me where everyone was and – without thinking – I said they were in the house. He wanted the head of the household. He pulled my collar and said, 'Come here, you rubbish, show me where she is'. My heart was pounding hard as I knocked on the door. But I knocked with a kind of signal to tell them not to open the door.

All of a sudden I ran very quickly under the man's legs and took off. Then I knocked on the door between Yahaya's house and ours. Aisha, Yahaya's daughter, opened the door very quickly. She called her Dad because the killer was already there, telling her to open

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the door or he would kill everyone. The day before, that same killer had shot a man from the house called Innocent. Now he was going to shoot me.

Yahaya told his daughter to open the door and let the killer in. Yahaya came and took my hand. He said, 'Come out, little girl'. I thought he was going to give me away, but he said to the killer, 'Yesterday you came and killed someone in my house and now you want to kill this little kid. Why? Don't you think God will punish you for this? You'll surely pay for it. I'm not going to give her to you. You'll have to kill us all.' Then the killer left, but he said, 'I'll make sure I clean up all this mess.' By 'mess' he meant the Tutsis – that's how we were dehumanised, like little insects.

That's how I survived that day. The rest is a long story: every one of those hundred days was dangerous – but some of them I will never forget.

A day I will never forget

On the morning of 15 April, they sent me to see one of their daughters who lived at Iryanyuma. I had to walk for about half an hour, but I passed through Nyamirambo market because I wanted to avoid the roadblock. It was terrible to see life going on as normal, people buying and selling, while other people were being raped and killed. I passed through the market with my head down, then I heard a woman's voice calling my nickname. 'Kiki, did you know your mother was taken to the river with the others?' I looked at the woman; she was talking as if it was good news. There was a kind of mocking in her voice. I looked at her and said, 'Oh, really.'

I disappeared in the crowd and thought that maybe she wasn't telling the truth. But I went back home and cried. I couldn't think about anything but my own life at the time. I didn't know if I would survive. But I also felt a kind of guilt about my mother. How did she feel as she sank in the river? Why didn't I go home and be with her? I was going to be killed anyway and dumped in the road. If anybody was going to survive, I thought it would be my mother. I never thought they would kill her. I started imagining her on the way to the river. I wished someone would tell me what she had said with her last breath. I hadn't seen her for three months and now I would never see her again. I hated her for leaving me. I felt sadness mixed with anger.

A boy called Hassan was hiding in the same place as me. I remember him saying that he was going to take photos of us – but he was only pretending.

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We posed for a shot and he said he would give us the photos after the war if we survived. But he was only trying to raise our spirits. Then he said, 'If God put his legs down here on Rwandan soil, people would cut them off. How could he abandon us like this?' He started crying and then one of the girls said, 'I've got a feeling you will survive, Hassan. Don't cry.' Then he answered, 'The Tutsis are a bad tribe...' but before he could finish the word, there was a loud knocking outside. We took our shoes off and ran away as fast as we could...

My finger

'Oh look, her finger's funny!' my school friends used to say. I would always tell them I'd cut it with a broken bottle when I was 12 – because I didn't want anyone to keep asking me about the genocide.

It happened when I went to look for water and came across an *Interahamwe*. 'Oh, look at this one,' he said. 'That's what I wanted.' He told me to sit down under a tree where another girl was waiting to be killed as well. We saw a lot of people killed as we sat there. It made me go numb. The girl next to me was wetting herself. After four hours, one of them came and said, 'Look, she's wetting herself. You know what? We're going to finish all the Tutsis off. Does anyone want to taste a virgin Tutsi girl?'

Before anyone answered, he kicked the girl low in her stomach and she started screaming. To this day I can't remember how I stood up and ran away – but I suddenly found myself at the bottom of the hill near Nyiranuma medical centre. When I looked at my finger, it was bleeding... I ran home and they put salt on the wound. It hurt, but it stopped the blood flowing...

After the genocide

On 3 July, three months after the genocide began; they wanted to make sure there were no Tutsis left in the city. On the road to Nyamirambo, someone was using a loudspeaker in a car, announcing that even people who looked like Tutsis, or Hutu women married to Tutsis, would be killed the next afternoon. He was saying '*Rubanda nyamwishi bavandimwe*, (Majority brothers and sisters), from tomorrow you have to wipe the city clean. Anyone who looks like a Tutsi has to be killed. Our Father will be buried tomorrow, so we'll make a bed and blanket for him' – meaning that the President's body would be buried and they would make a bed for him by wiping out the Tutsis.

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Everyone was scared at this news. There was no hope of surviving. I'd seen how people were being killed and had no doubt that he meant it. I remembered three men I'd seen a few days before, digging their own grave at Gitega. They were looking around as they dug, hoping for someone to save them, but when one of them saw me, I worked very fast and didn't look at him. I felt guilty, then I thought to myself, 'Anyway my mother is dead and I'll definitely be killed, so why am I angry with myself?'

We all waited to be killed next day. Many Tutsis were taken from their hiding places in Nyamirambo and killed. There was no hope from anywhere, but I said a short prayer. Two months earlier, I had started to follow Muslim ways because I wanted to be treated well in the house where I was staying. But I couldn't say my prayer in Arabic or really pray like the Muslims. So I said different prayers. I said, 'God, if you save me this time, I'll love you and be good after the genocide'. I remember vividly saying those words. I made lots and lots of promises to God...

That evening there were quite a lot of bullets being fired as the RPF [Rwandan Patriotic Front] fought with the *Interahamwe*. I still remember seeing the bullets going in a line from Mount Jali to Mount Kigali and back again. I thought the way they crossed over in the sky was rather nice...

Morning came and it was 4 July. No one was going to survive. One of the women, who was dying of HIV, told us she had dreamt that the RPF took us to the top of the hill and we were saved. She didn't know her dream would come true next morning.

I looked at the gate and suddenly, I saw this tall soldier with a hat. He looked different. He asked me if anyone else was there with me and I said no, because I didn't know if he was a killer or not. 'Do you know who I am?' he asked. 'I'm an *Inkotanti!* [RPF soldier]'. Then he told everyone in the house to get out because the war wasn't over yet.

Searching for my mother

The RPF took us all to St. André School. I remember that all you could see on Mount Kigali was people with mattresses on their heads, leaving to go to Congo. We got to the school and there were a lot of people, but I couldn't see anyone I knew. The next day, I saw two children from my village. Their mother was married to a Hutu and their young auntie was my godmother. I asked them if anybody from their mother's family had survived, but they told me there was nobody. When the killers went to get the family, the head *Interahamwe* in our village took them and made them work for him.

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When I heard that, I couldn't think properly. I wish I had stayed with the children till they found their relatives, but I left them. I had nowhere to sleep myself, but I was thirteen – they were only seven and eight. I had nothing there. For lunch or dinner I would join any group that was having food and sit down to eat.

As I moved around in that crowd of people, I met a man called John. He had loved my cousin Goleta before the genocide, but she wasn't interested in him. He treated me like a brother or relative and asked me if I had anywhere to sleep. I told him I slept anywhere I could. I said I was fine; I was looking for my mother. Even though I'd heard how she was killed, I still couldn't believe it. John gave me a spare mattress, but I lost it after a while; someone else must have picked it up.

I went around, asking everyone if they'd seen my mother and met a man called Nyarihangwa. 'Have you seen my mother, please?' Of course I knew he was a killer, but I didn't have time to think. 'She's behind,' he said. I didn't see him again, but I carried on searching for her. She was nowhere to be found. Then, on 7 July, I went to Butamwa where my mother lived. Everybody told me there was still war there, but I went all the way just the same. There was no one on the road apart from soldiers – and dogs running with people's bones. I was scared of those big dogs, but none of them touched me.

I reached a place where you could see Gitarama. We used to pass that way going to my mother and father's relatives. Evode, my mother's brother-in-law, lived near the river, but when I looked for the house, there were only trees. I carried on, but the place was scary. When I reached where my mother lived, there was no one there. As I stood there, I looked over the valley between our house and my godmother's family. There was nothing standing. The houses had been demolished.

I couldn't think at all. My head and shoulders went heavy as tears started to roll down my face. I saw a lady coming towards me, although I didn't recognise her. I started wiping my eyes so I could see better. She was wearing my mother's skirt and sleeveless blouse. I felt so heavy; I could feel my weight. I was near to collapsing, but I put my arms on top of my head and walked away.

What was I going to do on my own? My mother had been everything to me. She loved me and wanted the best in life for me. She looked after me and raised me, but now it was my turn to look after myself. Suddenly, I heard her voice saying, 'What will become of you without me?' She used to say that before, especially when I couldn't wake up to go to school. She would say, 'I don't know what will become of you when I'm not there.'

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I thought about my mother in the river, probably in Uganda now or stacked up somewhere in the trees. I couldn't help thinking about it, perhaps because I'd seen so many bodies in the river in 1992 and could imagine it. I started to think how she must have swallowed water as they watched her drown. She must have been wearing that skirt. What did she say? How many killers had come to take her all the way from home to the river? The river where I washed and drank! It was the place where my mother had been killed. How could they do that to her? What on earth had she done to them?

How I see Rwanda today

Today Rwanda is rebuilding and for some, life is going on. There are night-clubs, bars, restaurants, swimming pools, basketball and volleyball grounds, tennis, golf, beautiful cars, lovely houses and so on. All these are in Rwanda. It's a beautiful green country, a wonderful place. I love it and have hope for my country. It's only 12 years since the genocide and Rwanda has been reborn.

But although life might seem good for some people, for survivors it's still hard. I can say this with all my heart. They live a different life with bad conditions – from a house of eight people, perhaps only one survived – or sometimes none. Many live with physical wounds and broken hearts. And they live alongside the people who killed their families...

Before the genocide, every Friday people would go to the villages to see their parents and relatives. School holidays were full of laughter as we all went home to our mothers, uncles and aunts... Today, some kids hate school break because they have nowhere to go. The weekends are not the same; the forest has taken over the villages and there are only trees where once there were houses. Where children used to play, there are no sounds; and where cows used to pass going to drink water, the roads have disappeared. And when survivors go back, there's the added sadness that their neighbours are still there and won't even tell them what happened. There's no time of happiness for survivors. When they finish school, there's no relative to attend their graduation. When they get married, there's no family to be with them. There's nothing left for survivors; it has all gone and our life has changed forever.

Justice

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After the genocide, the UN established an international court, but to be honest, all it did was mock survivors. This was in 2000 when most survivors who were going to testify were mocked, especially by those talking about rape.

Then the Government introduced *Gacaca* courts (traditional local courts). But how on earth can we try in the local courts someone who killed one person, then another, then another...? This used to be for arguments between neighbours – cows trampling crops, kids fighting and so on. How can we talk about murder and rape there? Since the *Gacaca* trials started, 58 survivors have been killed. We are paying a high price to make Rwanda a better place, but I do think there's hope for the future.

Life today

For myself, yes, I'm rebuilding, but what about survivors who are still broken, emotionally and physically? Those who haven't got the means to get started again? I remember some times when I would only get food once in three days, when I had to mend my shoes five times. But still I kept my pride. The genocide was a very bad time for me, but afterwards my life was worse.

Today I'm fine, but I feel sad when I think of the children who have to grow up by themselves and the women who used to live with their husbands and children in nice houses. Now they're on their own in houses where they can't even buy a candle for light. I remember visiting one of the widows in the Avega [Association of Genocide Widows] village. When I got there, she was eating in the dark. She told me that she had no money for a candle or paraffin. And she went on, 'I know where my lips are. Besides, I'm all alone here.' She spoke as if there was no reason for light in her house now. That made me feel very angry. And many survivors live like that today.

Can I forgive?

I don't know what kind of forgiveness people mean. If you kill someone, you take his or her life away and it's impossible to mend it. It has gone forever. Those people have gone and cannot give forgiveness. Even if I forgive the man who killed my mother, she's no longer there to forgive him. I may forgive, but I won't ever forget. How can you forget that you once had parents? How can there be forgiveness when the impact of genocide is still with us?

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But there is a new generation coming now and I hope there will be forgiveness among them. If we can teach them, there is hope. Our hope for a better future has to be with those being born today.

I feel sad that my mother never had the chance to see me grow up. To see me grow into a young woman and get married, to see her first grandchild. She missed so much in my life. But I'm always grateful that she gave me the foundations of life, taught me how to behave. I remember on my first day at secondary school, she took me into the room and told me never to drink, never to go to night-clubs (this wasn't part of our culture then), and so on. She told me I was there to study. After I left home, I could still hear her voice... then after the genocide she was no longer there. But I always remembered what she told me and followed her rules. That's why I feel so grateful to her – otherwise I wouldn't be here today.

All children should know how important parents are and be thankful to have them. They should treasure their mothers and fathers because they have something that others long to have – something they lost when they still needed them.

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