The Lovely Spectacle

Before he stopped speaking, mon père called me ntawé: no one. I was born unformed, with a screed of white over the center of my left eye. La cataracte. A kiss on the eye from the Imâna who knit me in my mother’s womb. But He had time only for my eye. This life was calling, and so the rest remains, like you, black as the sooty chat that glides above, singing sweetly to the sky of dying.

When I was born they were frightened by this white. They took me straight from my mother’s collapsed womb to that place where the Nyabarongo and Akanyaru meet, where our Tutsi kings die and their heirs are created. They held me under the silted current, but the white would not be stained black and I would not drown. Today they are still frightened. His kiss is what has saved me.

I am the second of two daughters. My sister and her children were killed by her husband’s family that day in April. My father now has ntawé; he is childless. When he is dead, there will be none.

There is a woman here in Kibungo whose five children were also killed by a Hutu. His name is Emmanuel. He confessed this to her, but only after they had met and become friends at Ukuri Kuganza. He looked changed after admitting his guilt – he became taller, as though his spine were able to straighten after the large, heavy block that comprised his sin was lifted. He said that to admit guilt is a heroic act. And yet it was Valerie Batamuliza, the mother whose children were killed, who lifted this heavy block from him and carries it still. I have heard that Emmanuel has a collection of small fingers, strung together with twine woven from grass from the shore of Lake Kiva. He keeps them in a wooden box under his bed. They are the fingers of the children he has killed. I have heard that he wore them as a necklace after all the Tutsi were killed and they celebrated in the village with iragwa and a newly slaughtered cow. Because they were so small, all of the fingers fit around his neck on a single piece of twine.

But that was long ago. We are told to forgive and not forget. There are some here who say it never happened, who refuse to believe, even though many had participated. We call them the genocidaire. My father is one, even though he is Tutsi, even though he only observed, with me, at our terre-tôle, when the Hutu were frightened and would not enter. They went instead to the church to find the women and children and my sister and her sons. After mon père proclaimed what he did not believe his voice took leave of his body. His lungs still contract and the air vibrates through his throat and lips that are moving, but now there is no sound. Sometimes I think he accuses me; that I have cursed him and stolen his voice, though I hear it still, whispering ntawé and asking me why I am living.

And so this morning datá will not eat. Again he will not open his stubborn mouth, and he twists his old grey head left then right to avoid my spoon. He wants Christine to feed him; he is waiting for her. She takes care of my father the days I work as la bonne for muzungukazi in Kigali. A few times I am able to grasp his head with my left arm, wrapping it around the shell of his skull to hold it steady and pinch his nostrils closed. Then I scrape the matoke across his closed, pursed lips until he opens them to gasp in anger and I push it inside with my fingers. Once he bit my finger, and I had to twist the wide spoon against his old teeth and bleeding gums until he would release it. My finger was crushed but did not bleed. I could not understand why he preferred
Christine to me, so one day I watched them. They did not know I was there. Christine bent at the waist in front of my father, peering up into his eyes, offering matoke heaped high on the tarnished spoon. The scarf she always wore had slipped, and the raised welts encircling her neck were visible. His mouth dropped open, and she gently pasted la banane on his tongue. He would nod as he swallowed. His eyes asked for more until the dish was empty. Then he slept, his head fallen to one side, exposing the old artery slowly beating under the skin of his neck. My father refused to believe she could cut it, as her people had done to the others they hunted before she fled to the Congo, as she was surely capable. I told her this, to warn her. She stood then with her hand on her hip, worn pagne with faded blue flowers stretched tight over the opal bone, and said datá would not allow me to feed him because he knew it would be poisoned. I told her never to return, but she would not listen and did not stay away.

Today Christine is late. I leave him with his stomach grumbling, staring out the window. Outside, the red clay of the slippery, rutted road clings to my sandals and stains my feet, so I step in the wide, level prints of someone who walked before me. I balance my basket with my left hand and hold the edge of my pagne out of the mud with my right. In my basket are skeins of wool, in pink and light blue. I knit small blankets on the matatu to and from Kigali, blankets for le bébé, to sell to the abazûngu there. The blankets must remind them of a home that they miss, where there is cold, because many of the expatriates who buy do not have children. I purchase the wool from a merchant in Kigali. He first tried to sell me each skein for twenty francs, when they were only worth ten. I let him notice my eye, and he cowered behind the counter and begged for my forgiveness. Now I buy them for five. I was taught to knit by an umubikíra – la Catholique. She did not mind my eye and taught us to pray. She left when the killing began.

The large footprints stop in front of Marie-Lauré’s cabaret. The outside of the red clay walls are plastered with a paper advertisement for Primus. I call it the beer that saved many Tutsi, even though it is du Belge, because the Interahamwe would drink it all morning and be drunk by noon, too drunk to pursue those hiding in the eucalyptus grove at the top of the hill. Everyday the hidden Tutsi watched as the Hutu approached, singing their work songs and swinging their machete lazily by the wrist as though the metal blade was too heavy to lift. The Tutsi would run the moment they smelled the foamy, yeasted stench of beer on their breaths, to draw the Hutu after them so the others would not be discovered. The Hutu would try to follow, but would stumble and fall into each other, laughing and singing still, and then cut only what lay directly in their path and required little effort: the husks of thin trees or those who remained because they were too old or too young to run or had been cut the day before. There were some who could still run but refused to move. They would assist the attackers by throwing their heads back and lowering their shoulders to expose the long, smooth cord of their neck. They spread their limbs wide in an open embrace to be easily removed in three or four smart blows rather than many that were inefficient and flailing, though because the Interahamwe were drunk, they most often were.

Now I stand in the last set of footprints and search for a new path through the clay. The cabaret is dark – the kerosene lamps burnt out hours ago – but I hear voices inside. I peer through the doorway. There is a sharp hiss demanding instant silence. I can see Marie-Lauré in the dark, wrapped in her gaudy pagne. She leans with one fat
elbow propped onto the bar, a plank of wood balanced on two dirty, scuffed jerry cans filled with the iragwa that she makes herself, in a pit behind the cabaret. She would sell my father sips directly from the yellow cans because he could not pay for a glassful. Now she holds her finger over her mouth and looks directly at me. I hear her breathe through her finger:

“La sorcière…”

“Witch. Evil witch! Va háno--” a man’s voice shouts that is slurred and then muffled as he tries to say more, grasping at the wide, flat hand another holds over his mouth. Three pairs of shining eyes watch me from the dark, but I refuse to show them my eye and turn quickly, almost running now because I am nearly to Bill Clinton road, the smooth black lash of highway where I catch the matatu to Kigali. I do not want to be late. My feet slip in the wet clay and pink and blues yarns tumble from my basket. They are caught by a wide, soft hand, whose mate has grasped the bone of my left upper arm and keeps me from falling. Denis Munyankore releases my arm. He stands blinking heavily as his eyes adjust to the light of the morning from the dark of the cabaret. Denis is the youngest brother of my sister’s husband, a Hutu. When he was twelve years old he used his father’s machete to cut open my sister’s womb. He removed her daughter and smashed the gasping, unborn baby against the stone wall of the church. The stain remains, I have seen it. He was forgiven by others at the gacaca because they said he was just a boy and we are all Rwandans now. I knew better, and refused.

He walks slowly ahead of me now, creating new prints for me to follow. He cradles the soft skeins of my yarn in his hand. I carefully step around each wide, flat footprint and keep my eyes on the treacherous earth until I reach the paved road. I stop under Bill Clinton light, suspended from wires out of reach above our heads. It used to flicker red, yellow, green, but now is dark. Bill Clinton gave us this light and this road because the lives of one million Tutsi were not worth the life of one American soldier. Some children believe he built the road himself, carefully removing his suit jacket and tie, then stabbing and placating the churning earth with his brilliant magic shovel. I try to tell them this is not true but they refuse to believe me.

I stand now and wait for the matatu, and watch the mules clop by, pulling wooden carts filled with ibango or grasses for thatch. Denis Munyankore stands just behind me. His head is bowed, but I know he watches me. When the matatu arrives, veering freely across the pavement, lingala music blaring, it is already packed with passengers. The door swings open and Denis takes my hand. He slowly opens the fingers of my clenched fist with the tips of soft, scarred fingers. He places the skeins of wool in the center of my palm, then closes my hand back over the wool. I climb onto the matatu, clutching the skeins warmed by his hands against my stomach so that I will not drop them. They make room for me in front as they always do, scattering to the back when I arrive. When I lift my eyes Denis Munyankore is gone, and I am jyêniné: alone.

We arrive in Kigali. I have finished my blanket. Its color is the sweet, soft blue of the morning when only I am awake. I carefully knot the thread. I hold the wool to my face, over my face, to be assured of its softness, and detect a new scent entwined in its fiber, something warmed and earthen that I cannot name before I am jostled out of the matatu. I fold the blanket into my basket and protect it under the remaining skein as I slip through the crowded market to the wide, quiet streets of Kacyiru, where the houses are large enough to hold three Rwandan families, but are only for one expatriate. The
houses are built from concrete, with roofs of tile and glass windows. The tops of the walls that surround them are embedded with broken bottles to slice tiny, curious hands.

The door to the house is open when I arrive, and so I enter. The woman who lives there is Umunyameriká, from a place called Wiskonsin, a home she is sick for, where they make foromaje that is yellow like the color of her hair. Her eyes are like small, open mouths filled with watery blue. Before I worked as la bonne I had never seen a person with these colors; they are fragile and quivering and seemed lightly washed, as though she were only quickly dipped in that vat that creates us. Some who are older thought she was a ghost and were frightened, and others stare with jaws slack and eyes panting and claim she is La Madonna. When she welcomes me, she clasps my hands and looks directly at the space between my eyes, and her voice is sad when she asks about my people. I have learned not to laugh, and when she has left I shave a piece of yellow cheese from the block in her refrigerator and enjoy its sourness on my tongue.

Today when I enter she is still here, sitting at the table in her kitchen with a man named Phillip. He is thin, like those wasting with SIDA, and has small, darting eyes. He came to Kigali from Angland many years ago, to also work for the United Nations. I have seen the children that he claims are not his – they are light brown and wrinkled and have yellow eyes. The table is scattered with empty bottles and sticky with beer. Cigarette butts are ground into saucers overflowing with ashes. She sits close to him, and his thin arm lies heavily on top of hers, on the table amid the bottles. They have not heard me enter. I watch his large red hand clasp hers, small and white. Her shoulders are visible through thin fabric, and knobbed like bedposts. He kisses one knob with dry, splintery lips. I drop my basket to the floor to startle them. She turns her face to me, and for a moment I think it is not her because the eyes are red and ringed with thick black, and the blue is solid as metal. Philip lightly touches both sides of her face with the flat of his hands. He swivels her head back to him and stares at her lips as though he wants to eat them. He smiles to me. His teeth are edged in brown.

“Excusez-nous, madame.” He pushes back his chair and stands. He pulls her arm off the table and leads her to the bedroom. She does not resist. He does not close the door. Moments later I hear him, grunting and heaving like ingurube searching for its mother’s teat, but I ignore the sound and unfurl a large plastic bag from a cardboard box. I drop the empty bottles into the bag and sop up the beer and cigarette ash with the arm of a sweater he has left slung over the chair. I slowly rinse the saucers in the sink, making the water that flows from the tap as hot as I can stand. The morning sunlight pours through the window, and a glint of light flares from the bedroom. There, on top of the bureau next to the door, is an exquisite shimmer of gold. I look closer: it is a small, fluted tube of shiny yellow metal. Unwound from its base, thrusting above the glistening rim, is a carved column of blood red lipstick. I cradle it in my hand. The metal is cold and the red stains my palm. There is a gasp in the room and a voice pants get the hell outta here, and now those flat eyes watch me run.

It is still early and datá and Christine are surprised to see me. I go directly into the bedroom and close the door. I can hear the fierce wind issue from his lips, so I set the chair against the closed door and sit on the chair. I slowly unwrap my newly knitted blanket so that it lies flat on my lap. The golden tube of lipstick glows there, at the center of the blanket. I hold the lipstick in my right hand, and with my left I tap the crease of my upper lip. I trace the gentle slope of its rise, probe the center impression (the tip of
my finger rests in the deep divot) and ascend to the opposite peak. I increase the pressure of my finger over this soft skin until I reach its downward corner, then I sweep my finger over the puffed parchment of my lower lip. This skin is thin and irritable and demands notice, so I unwind the lipstick and paint it red. To appease and conceal. To appeal. The lipstick clings to my lips like thick wax and its taste is sweet tin. I press the heel of my hand against my lips, my mouth. I feel the sharp bone of my teeth against my lips, my hand, my palm is blood red and now I remember that wide, flat hand, and I imagine its taste, of red earth or black soil, of that which gently stirs sleeping seeds to wake what is luminous and undying. I wind the lipstick back into its case and fold my blue blanket around it. I lower myself onto the woven mat and wrap my arms around the blanket. The flat pillow cradles my head. I close my eyes and dream of sleep.

The next morning, slashes of red stain my pillow. When I wash myself I study every inch of my dark skin. I note each lesion, each hatch of worn skin, every scar, and I remember its history, why it became, and if it persists. Then I rub this skin with cassava oil until it glows like the umunzenze stripped of its bark, like pulp softly beating beaten brown. I slowly dress, wrapping the pagne sewn through with gold threads tightly around my thinned hips. The pagne belonged to my mother, and then my sister, and now me. They wore it on the day they were given in marriage. I shuffle on my old plastic sandals, they cannot be helped, and I sit again in the chair that is propped against the door. I unwrap the lipstick from its blanket and find my lips, using my left hand as a guide, and coat them thickly with vivid red. I wind the lipstick back into the gold tube and wrap the blue blanket around it. I store the blanket in my basket, under the skein of pink wool, and place the basket on the floor. When I exit the bedroom, both Christine and datá stare – Christine holds the full, tarnished spoon aloft, in mid-air, and datá’s jaw hangs open – but they say nothing, there is no heated rush of thorny air, so I step outside, into the soft blue of morning.

I pass the Memorial Gardens next to the church. Cassius is there, standing guard over bones he has arranged as playmates. He is the caretaker of the garden. This morning his machete flashes like silver as he trims the pyrethrum growing over the graves dug there. The severed flowers and leaves drift to the ground in dunes of white and green. It is said that Cassius sleeps with his machete on the bench of a wooden pew inside the church, cradling it like a woman. His family was killed in this church. Cassius survived by pretending to be dead. He was seven years old. He hid in the swamp for fifty days as the rest of the killing took place. The whites of his eyes were stained red by the swamp water, made bloody by those who were cut and died there. At night Cassius would wade back through the floating, bloated bodies to sleep on dry land below the manioc tree. One night the Hutu discovered him there and cut his head with a machete. A Tutsi woman named Mathilde found him after they had left, and each night would bring him food and water. Cassius said he could feel his head roting and worms gnawing next to his brain, but Mathilde put some leaves and medicine over the wound and finally it healed. Her husband, who was Hutu, learned that she was caring for a Tutsi child. He took her to the edge of the pond at Rwaki-Birizi, three kilometers away, and killed her with one thrust of his knife. Sometimes now I see Cassius in the garden, cradling his head or rolling his eyes and pounding his skull with his fists to rid himself of the worms he still feels crawling inside. I leave him alone then, chattering with ghosts and howling to the sky.
This morning I stop and pick up a small, severed flower. I tuck it above my ear, into the scarf wound tightly around my head. Cassius smiles when he sees me. He cuts a much larger, intact flower. He bows as he presents the flower to me, and I laugh. Cassius says that when I laugh the angels of Heaven are singing. He is one of the few that have heard them.

The gacaca has started when I arrive. I stand in back, where no one can see me. I search through the crowd for Denis Munyankore. I do not see him, though he is required by law to be here. I feel the blood pulse through my veins until I hear a clap of laughter and see Denis there, with a group of men, bent double and swiping at his eyes. I think he has seen me. I hope that he sees me. The laughter stops abruptly when the prisoners arrive, wearing dirty pink robes, shackled hands clasped before them. The first prisoner is directed to approach his accuser. She is seated on the dried grass beneath the umunzenze tree. His crimes are recounted, and as I watch Denis I remember the smell of the children that burned, the smell of roasted meat. The woman who accuses the prisoner boasts that she is still living, he could not kill her, perhaps she will never die, perhaps she is immortal. She slowly unwinds the long, colorful scarf tied around her head, then tilts her head so that the sun illuminates a deep, lightening-white streak across one side and over her remaining ear. The prisoner cries out when he sees it. He snatches a rock off the ground and tries to scratch this same passage over his own head, but is constrained by the shackles he wears. He is then told to ask for forgiveness, and he does. Her eyes are blank as she watches his shoulders heave and the shackles are undone. He will live in Kibungo now, again; he will be her neighbor.

I wait as each prisoner is forgiven and unshackled, and as the crowd starts to disperse I raise my arm and call to le magistrat. The crowd pauses, and as I make my way forward they fall back, away, clearing a passage for me, marveling at the red of my lips and the white of my flower and my limbs entwined in gold. I stand under the umunzeze. Now, I am ready. Le magistrat calls to Denis Munyankore, who hesitates until he is pushed forward by his friends. He is required by law to be here. I hear a muffled cough as he stumble toward me, and I do not recognize the wide, flat hand clamped over that mirthful, mocking mouth or those streaming eyes. I search frantically through the crowd – he has gone? Or he is there, behind the tree, hiding, ashamed – but I look again, and now he is here, kneeling before me. I recognize this bowed head and again I detect the scent of fused earth. But I cannot see his eyes, and I hesitate until he grasps my hands with his – wide, soft – and holds them firmly against his intact head. I can feel the throb of his thoughts, their pulse matches mine, and now I want to see them, to understand how they are created from just meat, meat that he has seen, that can be stripped away or devoured until all that remains is bleached white bone. He whispers: “Pardonnez-moi, madame,” and so I do. He nods in response, an abrupt dip. My hands slip from his head and fall loosely to my side. When he stands he turns his back to me and approaches his friends, and again I hear that clap and he is rubbing his eyes as though crying. They depart, the crowd drifts away and I remain, standing under the umunzeze tree. I wait until it grows dark, and then I scratch the wax off my lips with my fingernails. Now the red is real. I walk home alone.

When I enter our terre-tôle, datá is watching. His lips move and his throat contracts as he points to my lips, my dress, my flower, and again I hear ntawé, so I storm to him. He tries to cover his head when I snatch the white flower from behind my ear and
grind it into his mouth and clamp my flat, wide palm over it so that he must chew, he chews, and chews. He is red and wheezing. He swallows. I leave him cowering there and storm to the bedroom: my woven basket is gone. My blanket, the skein of pink wool, the fluted tube of gold. I search every corner – it is nowhere to be found. But I know who has taken it, so I storm out of our house and leave datá with his lips scratched red and the tang of soil on his tongue.

I stand outside Marie-Lauré’s cabaret. It is well-lit inside by the flickering flames of kerosene lamps. Music jumps through the clay walls and climbs out the windows. I enter. The first to see me are suddenly silent, because I have never before set foot in this place, though it is where my father would stay, clutching his straw while his daughters at home cried from hunger. I make my way to the bar and sit, searching through the crowd until I see Christine there, red lips flashing, my red lips, narrow hands clasped in dance with the wide, flat hands of Denis Munyankore. I watch them move closer, and so I stand and I declare injustice, thievery, there, her, she, she has stolen what I possessed – And the music stops and the dancing halts, and they watch me again. It is silent, and then there is a cough, a clap, and Denis Munyankore’s hands clasp his knees. He shakes and swipes his eyes, and this time the laughter becomes a contagion that sweeps through the cabaret and rumbles the clay walls that I demand bury all as I run from the light into darkness.

I go to the Memorial Gardens to sit with the bones of my sister buried there. Cassius sits with me, and asks me why I am crying. I tell him, and he explains to me that the universe is not just. It is our responsibility, the living, those knit to life by lmâna, to seek justice: we must rectify the wrongs implicitly woven into the matter of things. But I don’t understand, and I am again crying, so he gives me his blanket to sleep on and I am grateful for his kindness. Cassius stands guard at the gate. The shimmering steel of his machete is like a flickering flame that banishes dark. I close my poor eye and sleep.

The next morning Cassius gently wakes me. He shows me the golden flute of my lipstick, nestled in his red-stained palm. He tells me that justice has been served, and he no longer feels worms crawling in his head, nor gnawing at his brain. He now shall sleep only peacefully. He smiles an exhausted smile and cradles his machete on the wooden pew. His eyes flutter closed. His machete drips with blood. I stumble out of the church now, because I need to know which justice he has served, whose justice, what is just – and I find myself on the narrow dirt road that winds below the eucalyptus grove. The road ends at the poor wooden shack where Christine has lived since her return from the Congo. I pause before I open the door because I hear the languid buzz of fat, black flies and I see them, sated, flying in lazy black circles inside and then out of the bare window. Now I smell it, wet red soil, and my hands are shaking when I push open the door.

Inside, Christine and Denis Munyankore lie unclothed on the mat spread over the floor. I do not avert my eyes. Their limbs are entwined and their necks are cut. Small baubles of blood have pooled along the simple, clean slice of the machete, of the color still smeared on her lips. I approach them now, slowly, but can no longer stand. I sit on the drenched, packed earth. I lean over Christine and pick up her hand. I hold it to mine, they are similarly sized. I examine the wrist connected to this hand, then the arm and then Denis, woven there, and as I carefully separate these plaited inches of dark skin I note each scar, each hatch of worn skin, and I imagine its history, the violence of its birth, the slow seeping poultice of healing, and here, now, the end. The buzz of black flies subsides. I hear a sound like the cry of a kitten and I see you there, inside my woven
basket, lying on top of my knitted blue blanket. Strands of pink wool twine through your tiny dark fingers. Already you resemble Christine, I can see the tall, proud slant of her forehead and those small pursed lips, and your smell is of the earth awaiting creation. I lift you from the basket and hold you to my breast. You stop crying instantly, and watch me with ancient, expectant eyes. I pull the blanket from the basket. The fluted tube of lipstick tumbles to the ground. I leave it there, tarnished in bloody soil, and wrap the blanket tightly around you. Now, we start. I hook the basket under my arm and carry you home.

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