

WHEN LIGHT FADES AWAY HOPE REMAINS

**Illuminating the Path
Through Life's Dark Moments**

Willy Gakunzi



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Foreword

In the tapestry of human experience, there are threads woven from moments of joy and sorrow, love and loss, triumph, and defeat. Life, like a canvas, reveals itself through myriad shades of light and darkness, and it is within these interplays that your story finds its purpose. *When Light Fades Away, Hope Remains* delves deep into this intricate tapestry, inviting you to embark on a journey that explores the profound resilience of your human spirit.

In an era where uncertainty and challenges often cast their shadows, Willy's words become a beacon of light, guiding you through the labyrinthine corridors of your own emotions. This book is not just a collection of anecdotes; it's a sanctuary for the heart, a place where pain is acknowledged, hope is nurtured, and the beauty of perseverance is celebrated.

Throughout the pages of *When Light Fades Away, Hope Remains*, Willy takes you on a pilgrimage through the highs and lows of life. With each chapter, a new facet of the human experience is unveiled. The raw vulnerability with which Willy shares personal stories will be an intimate bond between the two of you. The universal themes of loss, heartache, and adversity are met with courage, wisdom, and an unwavering belief that even in the darkest of moments, a glimmer of hope remains.

Willy's narrative voice is a soothing balm for your wounded soul. With eloquent prose and a compassionate spirit, the author traverses the

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landscapes of grief, allowing you to not only witness the pain but also to find solace in the recognition that you are never alone in your struggles. The stories shared here are not meant to dwell solely in the realm of sorrow; rather, they kindle a flame of resilience that dances brightly against the backdrop of life's challenges.

As you turn the pages of this book, be prepared to confront your own vulnerabilities and aspirations. Allow Willy's words to wash over you, reminding you that even when faced with adversity, hope is an indomitable force that can illuminate even the darkest corners of your existence. *When Light Fades Away, Hope Remains* is an ode to your spirit's capacity to endure, to transform, and to rise above the shadows. Through these pages, Willy extends a hand, inviting you to embark on a shared journey toward healing, strength, and the unwavering belief that hope is a constant companion, guiding you through life's most challenging chapters.

In a world that often feels fragmented, this book serves as a poignant reminder that you are part of a collective story, woven together by threads of experience, emotion, and the enduring power of hope. So, as you embark on this transformative voyage, allow yourself to be captivated by the stories within and discover, as Willy has, that even in the midst of fading light, hope remains your greatest source of strength.

Raymond Aaron
***New York Times* Bestselling Author**

Genesis

Why I Chose to Write This Memoir

I am lost. I am in complete darkness. I have just heard the news that my light had been rushed into the hospital in a paramedic ambulance car. Little did I know that five hours after that call I received on that Thursday, at 3:53 p.m., on November 8, 2018, I was about to go through excruciating pain and agonizing hours that I would never wish anyone to experience.

My mind is frozen, I am numbed, and I haven't realized that my life is to be altered in a way that I did not think. I was not prepared to go through what was happening.

I am on a freeway, driving from North York, a neighborhood north of Toronto, and I am driving south to downtown Toronto. I am listening to a song called "You Made a Way," by Travis Greene. I hear a voice calling from the back seat of my car—but I am by myself in the car. The voice asked me a strange question, with multiple sub questions: What if today is the last day you will see your wife alive? What will you say and how will you behave? How about the dreams and the plans you have, yours and hers combined? Will you allow them to be silenced with her?

I entered into a conversation with the voice, without a physical person talking to me, and my answer was very clear and with confidence: I will be strong for her and for our little princesses. I will boldly pay tribute to her.

I started playing out in my mind what I would say as my farewell speech as I drove (I will share that speech later in the following chapters). I continued to answer those questions and finally said, “I will not allow my dreams and our dreams to be silenced with her.”

This conversation happened as though I was watching a live movie on the screen. It felt surreal but, at the same time, I was calm and peaceful. I did not think or realize that it was an actual preparation and rehearsal of what was about to happen in real life. I continued my drive as I listened to the same music that was on repeat: “You made a way when our backs were against the wall, and it looked as if it was over; you made a way.” This song, without realizing it, was to become my life story and testimony in the hours, days, weeks, months, and years that followed till today.

I continued my ride through rush hour traffic, not fully comprehending what was happening. Since that day, I made an unequivocal decision that, as long as I still have life in me, I will empty myself with all the riches and potential that the creator has endowed with me. I will empty myself through achieving and accomplishing the plans and dreams I shared with my light, as I do not believe in hazardous life encounters.

This book is one way to empty myself and share my light and dreams with you in the hope that you will gain value and strive to live a life that is result-driven, a life with a purpose. As I write these pages, it has been 4 years, coming to five years in a few months, since the light of my life was physically dimmed and her voice silenced, but as I promised in my conversation with the invisible interlocutor, the light continues to shine and illuminate my world through memories and work we do.

This book is one of the many initiatives I have undertaken in the journey of emptying myself before I join the myriads of those who have

gone ahead of us. It is also a testament of hope we have that comes from the true light that transforms our lives and empowers us to live with hope and peace, even when life denies us the right to do so. I encourage you to find ways and means to not leave this part of eternity with books, songs, businesses, projects, etc. unfinished. And I hope and pray that everything you were endowed with will serve the humanity in your lifetime, and through those you will have illuminated in the course of your life journey.

Stay with me!

Chapter 1

Humble Beginnings

Thank you for staying with me this far. It's just the beginning of a journey that, through the next pages of this memoir, will take you through my love, losses, grief, and healing and self-discovery. I am humbled and excited that we will have an honest and deep conversation, and hopefully get our lights rekindled to shine for many lives to hope again.

You might be wondering how the story of meeting my light started in the Netherlands and in a refugee camp. How did she and I end up in that situation? This chapter will give you a glimpse of my early years that will shed light on how I found myself in the Netherlands. I believe our lives are orchestrated by and through life events that, in many cases, we do not have control over. Without knowing it, these events usher us into the next chapters of our lives.

Villager at Core

I was born in Zaire, currently the Democratic Republic of Congo. The area where I was born was, and still is to some extent, a remote area away from the civilized world, and it is virgin land with greenery, nature, rich biodiversity, and people that live a very modest, authentic, and primitive lifestyle, at least they did until early 2000.

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When I was growing up, in the 80s, my life could be summarized as a very positive and trouble-free life. My childhood wearies I can recall were when calves went missing when we got distracted by our village boys' games, running off hills, swimming in the rivers, and playing football (soccer). As a young man in my culture, my primary duty, before and after school hours, was to look after calves, to make sure they were taken to get water, slept under shade and were returned in the compound around sunset, before their mothers returned from grazing.

I did not worry about watching TV or playing video games, simply because this was unknown to me. My gadget was playing football (soccer) barefooted, swimming in rivers, climbing trees for nature and wild fruits, and herding my family's herds. These were my activities until I reached the age to go to school, which was between 6 and 7 years.

There was a measuring stick for knowing that you were ready to go to school. As long as you could not touch your other ear by stretching your arm across your head, you were deemed too young to go to school. The day you could touch your other ear, that was the day you were school aged. I wonder if some kids went to school early and others late, depending on their height. With fading memory, I do remember going to school the first year, but then I wasn't, and I was not sure what the reason was. It might have been the case that when I got to school, the teacher tested me using that measuring stick and decided that I was still too young to attend school. This was good news for a boy at that time as it meant more time to play in nature without an adult's control. The next year, I did return and started school, and if I remember correctly, it was in 1987 that I started primary 1.

Yes, primary 1; not kindergarten. I did not go to daycare or kindergarten. These are concepts that did not exist, and they still do not exist in my mother high land of Mulenge in the Democratic Republic of

Congo. I will cover my study journey in more detail in later chapters. However, for the sake of this early introductory discussion, the years that followed were full of mixed emotions. I still do not understand how I amounted to something, when I look back at how the education system was. Imagine that my first exposure to running water, electricity and power, books and other education material, was only when I was in secondary school. Hang in there; I will cover that in more detail. With this in mind, I can only say that life's current circumstances are in no way to be used as prediction of what the life of an individual will be tomorrow. We oftentimes judge people's futures based on the wrong references—today's circumstances—which might lead to acting in the wrong way towards those we perceive through today's lenses. I have come to discover that the achievements admired today are in no way to be compared with the ones we have not yet seen. Because of this, I have learned to honor everyone that crosses my path.

Family

I do not have many memories of my early childhood life, such as pictures and video images, other than the wonderful, faded memory of a life that was natural and trouble free. I was born in a family of 10 siblings. Just imagine how that home might have been for my parents. My parents had given life to 9 boys and 1 girl. The first 4 were boys and then a girl, and 5 more boys. I was born number 9.

Being among the youngest in the family, there is much that I did not get to experience. The fifth born, who was the only girl, I was told, passed on when she was around 1 year old. And my brother that came before me, also did not make it to toddler age. I also do not remember living with my elder brothers under the same roof. By the time I could make sense of life,

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my 3 elder brothers had already been married. In fact, their wives were my babysitters! I remember growing up with my young brother and the 6th in the birthline. The 7th in birth was at my grandma's home. I barely remember him living with us at home.

Another memory that I did not have the chance to build is with my father. My father, Pastor Philip Makuza, passed on when I was only 2 years old. I do not remember how it was to be in a home with both parents. I was told that we were very close; to the point that in the days that followed his passing, I would not allow anyone to sit on his chair in the church. Apparently, I was determined and strongly believed that my dad was coming back. As I grew—I was told this story—I would stay outside and look up to the sky, waiting to see my father coming back. On multiple occasions, I would run to the house whenever I heard the sound of an airplane in the sky, and I would scream, hoping that the pilot would fly low enough to take me with them up to the sky to meet and bring my papa back.

Despite these non-existent childhood memories, I was raised in a very loving and coherent family, with a very strong and strict mother that taught us true love and made sure that we would live lives she and our father did not have the opportunity to live. The love that I experienced as a child—I would disclaim with a high level of confidence that this was the norm in our culture and environment—was not necessarily verbal. I do not remember my mother or siblings telling me that they love me. I do not remember saying it back. However, the love was lived. We did not have much in terms of material possessions; nevertheless, we had each other. We had a natural and integral society that made our lives as children sweet and worryless. I am pretty sure our elders did know more than we did.

We lived a life, as children, without any pressure from the outside. We were not exposed to what was happening elsewhere outside our village's

perimeters, which allowed us to sustain a high level of community love, despite the modest lifestyle.

Pure Community

Our main source of nutrients in my community/society was milk and vegetables, including beans, maize, and potatoes that were homegrown. Mothers would grind maize to make flour that was used to make ugali (a dish made from corn flour, cassava flour or wheat flour), which we ate with vegetables and/or bean sauce. I must say that children were mainly milk fed—we would just drink fresh milk from the cow, morning and evening.

We lived in huts made of bamboo, mud, and grass as construction materials. These modest houses were both our kitchens and, to some extent, our living rooms. However, when growing up, because my father was a noble, he did have two houses—one for a kitchen and which also served as a bedroom for some kids, and a second home that was our living home. The second home was the parent's and young children's main home. These houses were not locked, nor were they built of durable materials; however, there were no stories of thefts or break-ins. Communities lived in perfect harmony, and neighbors were each other's watchmen. Children would play outside and eat at whatever house the eating time found them in.

I also remember my mother making ugali and sending me to neighbors to bring sauce to eat with it. This was a common practice. Every day, we had kids coming for either this or that. You did not have to starve because you had a shortage of one recipe, and you did not even have to think twice before you started making supper. Mothers would prepare meals with what they had in the house and then send kids for whatever was missing.

This was the same for milk. No home should be deprived of milk, whether they had a milking cow or not; the whole village had to have a good supply of milk. In many circumstances, families borrowed milking cows from other families until they could produce their own milk. There were poor people who did not have cows of their own; however, everyone was supplied with milk. In my culture, milk and cows are the core of our health and riches. In fact, till now, our riches are measured in terms of cows. The more you have, the richer you are.

My community childhood memory is that of peace—violence free, theft free, and plenty of unspoken love and harmony.

Fatherless

It was 1981, during the wedding ceremony of Rwigemera, my elder brother and the first born to our parents. My father stood to give his speech and revealed his 30-plus-years secret covenant he had made with his creator. That day, he publicly narrated that he was ready to finish his journey on Earth. He had made a promise to God that when his first son married, he would pass on the baton as a symbol that he was ready to join the cloud of many who had transitioned. After this powerful and emotional speech, he handed over his Bible to his son. He concluded his speech by saying: “I don’t know how many years I still have to live, and I don’t know if God is still wanting me to go home right way. But what I had promised has come to pass. I am ready to go home, today, or whenever God will call me home.”

In the year that followed, my mother said Papa spent it sleeping on the ground, praying for Mum and his sons. He would tell Mum that he was going home and that he would want her to be strong and stay where we lived. Because my father was an ordained pastor of the church, he insisted

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to his wife that she should stay at church, as if he knew he was transitioning. On November 30, 1982, my father took his last breath and went to be with his creator. One day before he passed, he called all the church leaders in the Minembwe area—this is like a whole district—and they all gathered around him and said their goodbyes. He was not sick; his time to go home had arrived.

On the night Dad passed on, he was with my mum and his cousin and brother. He asked them to help him lie down, and he said that there were two men that had come to take him home. He gave his soul and rested eternally. Keep this occurrence in mind; we will see a similar occurrence later on.

Growing up without a father figure was hard and confusing, as I did not understand why other kids had fathers while my siblings and I did not. But because of my society and culture, and the time and environment we lived in, I did not know of any other ways of communicating and explaining these life dilemmas. I lived with this question and a loss I did not get a chance to grieve. This ungrieved loss created an extreme love and appreciation for my mother, but I did not know how to express it. I, therefore, developed a sense of responsibility at a very early age. As soon as I could make sense of life, I resolved to help my mother with whatever I could.

I mentioned earlier that many boys' activities were centered around cows and their calves. However, I found myself doing activities and duties that were predominantly done by our sisters. That included collecting firewood, fetching water, and grinding maize to produce flour. I also started cleaning the house compound with my sisters-in-law when I was a young boy. I came to find out later how these early experiences prepared me for a life I would live later (more about that in later chapters).

With this life experience, I missed my dad without even knowing that I did. I did not have his memory, and I also wasn't told or taught how to navigate life without a father. I remember later on blaming my elder brothers for not playing a fatherly role, but I came to realize that they did go through harder times than I did, because our dad passed when they had started making tough life decisions and they needed him even more than I did (for lack of a better description). Boy, life became hard without our dad, who was also a noble and strong pillar in our community at large.

My father was among the earlier converts to Christianity. These were men and women in some cases that got exposed to the outside civilizations. My dad was taught to read by a supernatural miracle (I will not dwell on this; it's a book topic by itself), and he later met with Christian missionaries that gave him a Bible and song books that formalized his education level. This is an experience that many men and women in the late 1940s and early 1950s went through in the high plateau of Mulenge. There was a wind of revival in that area, and those who experienced it were later trained and became the pioneers of the education system that allowed the next generation to access the external world.

This noble, young father of a large family, and a leader in society, was gone. He was gone when he was only 42 years old. His departure left a very big vacuum in our family, to the point that my 3 elder brothers completed their secondary education with difficulties. But because of his legacy, somehow, doors were opened, and we all managed to get secondary education. I was the first to get a master's degree. There is a Bible reference that says that the offspring of a righteous man will not be forgotten in the land of the living. I can testify that this has surely been proven true in my family life. All odds were against us after our father left us. How could a village girl, without any education, raise 8 boys and send them to school while facing the then cultural challenges? I am amazed by how God finds

a way to make his promises come to pass, even when they have been seemingly cut short.

As I write this section, all 8 brothers are alive with their families. My mother has grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Makuza lives through them all. Truly, when the light we carry is fully grasped to the point that we live our lives according to it, this very light will benefit many generations.

My Education Journey

As I mentioned above, I grew up in a remote area with near zero exposure to the other parts of the country and the rest of the world. As remote as this area was, and its inhabitants particularly all being farmers and breeders, because of a high level of Christianity penetration, parents who did have a chance to access education had brought schools. From the mid-1950s, schools were built, and families started allowing their children to attend them and gain education, and by the early 1970s, there were university graduates from the area.

My father, being among the nobles in the area with access to the external world, made sure that all brothers accessed education. In fact, he was among the pioneers of the elementary school of Kakenge, the area in which I was born, where all my siblings and I started our education journey. By the time he passed on in the fall of 1982, all my siblings, except me and my younger brother, were in school; the four elders were all in high school.

His departure cut short the plans and the dreams he had for his boys. The first born had already left home to pursue his education in the nearest city, the city of Baraka. And the second and the third born were also scheduled to leave the next year for Bukavu, to continue their education

there. Their education journey was altered as the family had to readjust to survive the loss.

My time came when I could join school. I was excited because my agemates were also attending school. At the same time, it was a disruption of my free time to play in nature. I do not have many memories of my early school experience, but a few things stuck in my memory.

I remember that we all had to wear school uniforms, in blue and white. We had to wake up very early to do the morning chores, including milking cows and cleaning the calves' mangers, and then we walked for a few minutes to school. I was fortunate because the school was in our village. I know that many kids had to walk a few kilometers to get to school.

As soon as we got to school, we would be playing football (soccer), touch, and doing lots of running. Once the bell rang, we all had to line up by class level in the school court. Then we would sing the Zaire national anthem. We would put our right thumbs on the left side of our chests, right on top of the heart, as a symbol of royalty to the Zaire ruling party and the president. It was prohibited to make any move when we were singing the national anthem. After the national anthem, we would sing our allegiance to the ruling party. The song had a line that went as follows: "It is a big lie for those who think that the ruling party will have an end; it is a lie." Facts are stubborn; everything does have an end.

Another memory that stayed with me till today, was the level of strictness of teachers. As students, we were encouraged to ask challenging questions to teachers. When it came to punishment, it was rather strict and extreme, involving slaps and kneeling for a considerable amount of time. Even though this might sound less than pleasant, the experience did build positive traits in me (I do know that it is the case for my classmates). We

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learned to respect elders, and especially to not talk when an elderly person is addressing you. We learned to focus and pay attention when we were assigned tasks to work on.

Long story short, despite these difficult conditions we were in, we studied and enjoyed it. I was not the smartest kid in class; however, I did well. I never repeated any class, and I was always in the first 10 in class, and most of the time in the first 5. From grade 9, we started studying science and electronics, like the notion of movement, but we had not even seen a bike. We had seen cars that brought military personnel and priests to the nearby Catholic parish, but I had personally never boarded a car. So, throughout elementary and middle school, our education was theoretical in nature—no experience; not even being exposed to the material we learned. I still remember stories that my brother, Jules, who had gone for his education in Bukavu and then continued to Lubumbashi for university, would narrate for us. Whenever he would come back to the village for vacations, he would tell us how things are done in the cities, and it all seemed like fiction in my mind.

My first exposure to labs and experimental education was in 1994 when we moved to Rwanda after the genocide against the Tutsi. Although the country had almost been completely destroyed, the little that remained was my very first encounter with modern education and a modern lifestyle at large. I joined one of the best schools at that time in the country: Groupe Scolaire Officiel de Butare (Astrida). It is a very renowned school that educated the first elites in the African Great Lakes region.

Surprisingly, I was not behind as compared to my classmates, who had also come from different parts of Africa, and those who were in Rwanda before 1994. I continued to perform well at school and graduated my high school with a scholarship to attend the National University of Rwanda, in

the faculty of science. I later on continued my university education in the Netherlands (to be revisited in the chapters below).

Stateless Community

Although I grew up in what I call pure community fabric, in the years that I started making sense of life, things had changed drastically. I heard stories of people who were being imprisoned for no reason; cows and other possessions were being taken from the population by the military, and there was discrimination that my community was victim of because we are Tutsi. I was very young, but I do remember that in 1990, things were not as they used to be. My community was publicly discriminated against. Consequently, young people from my village started joining the struggle that was ongoing to liberate Rwanda; at the same time, discrimination increased. I also remember that elderly people were saddened by what was happening in Rwanda as they followed the news, and they were also very concerned by the increased discrimination and threat of the genocide that was spilling over to our region.

The memories I have of law enforcement forces, military, and police personnel in Zaire (now Democratic Republic of Congo) is that they were terrifying people. Whenever they showed up, someone would either be taken away or belongings were looted and taken away. Adults would run away for safety if time allowed, and children were to stay home, hoping that nothing would happen to them. I really did not understand why the people who were in charge of our security and making sure everyone is treated equitably, were the same people who would violate the basic human rights. I recall a few events that I witnessed before I became a teenager.

Burned with a Match

The first traumatizing event I personally experienced in Zaire was when I was about 10 years old or so. It was late in the night; it must have been past midnight, and my mother, younger brother, and our sister-in-law were in our home sleeping. The next thing I remember hearing was a noise in the house; people were shouting in Lingala and Swahili. It was so terrifying that I woke up from my sleep shaking even though I did not know what was going on. It must have been going on for some time. It had been a long day at school and playing on the playground, running with friends in nature, and I was definitely in a deep sleep. I remember opening my eyes, but I could not see anything as their bright torch was right in my face. I do not remember what was being said because I was too young to even relate. They broke things in the house and took whatever they could, including kitchen utensils and food. Till today, I have not understood why that happened or what they were looking for. I never asked my mother, and I don't even think she understood what was going on that night.

After they had taken everything they could collect in the house, they lit a match and put it on my eyebrows. They made sure to leave a mark on my face. I am not sure if they wanted to burn the house or if they just wanted to hurt that little boy because they did not find any adult man in the house. I still have the scar from that burn. Next time you see me, just come close; you will see it. I will not tell which eye it is, but I trust you can closely observe, and you will see it.

I do not remember where my elder brothers had gone as I do not recall that they were home that night. Now that I think about it, they must have known about these terrifying security forces passing by and had gone hiding that night, which would explain why my sister-in-law was sleeping with us that night. It had become a common practice where village watchmen

would announce the news, and all men, especially young men, would hide before the military group would reach the village.

The pure community I had grown up in was in turmoil, caused by the very people that were supposed to protect it. People started developing behaviors that were otherwise uncommon in our culture, such as plotting against neighbors to get money, stealing, and even falsifying reasons to get others into trouble, including imprisonment.

Taken Hostage for Hours

The second event I remember, which did not make sense until later, was on a sunny, late afternoon after school. It was common in our culture that after school, boys would either go to look after calves or join the elders, their fathers, brothers, or uncles, where the cows would go grazing. That afternoon, I went with my uncle to look after our village herd. Our village was basically made up of my extended family: grandparents, uncles, and their families and my family. It was around 5 kilometers from the village, and my uncle and I were about to head home. We were behind the herd as they followed their leader. This would either be a new mother cow that was in a hurry to go home, or a bull that would lead and the rest of the herd would follow. This was one of the best feelings in our breeding lifestyle: The sun sets and you are behind a herd of traditional cows with long horns, singing for them and having them respond. How I miss that!

Suddenly, we saw a group of soldiers with loads of luggage, full of all kinds of things. They were coming from the opposite direction as we headed home. We did not have the opportunity to hide or run because they were so close, and had we attempted, they would not have hesitated to send bullets our way or towards our cows. So, my uncle took my hand and

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assured me that nothing would happen to us. Somehow, him being with me helped. Although things had gone wrong, at that time in the early 1990s, there was still some respect for children's rights. They forced us to carry their loads to a destination we did not know.

They gave me a live chicken to carry, and we walked for the next five hours or so until we arrived at a place called Murusuku. This was the next village after crossing the Mitumba Mountains; this is a large mountainous and dense forest area that culminates to the equatorial forest in the eastern part of DR Congo. We left the place they took us from, around 3 p.m., and we arrived at that village maybe around 7 p.m. We had not eaten anything, and we were carrying loads. I, being a boy of 12 years, was carrying a live chicken they had taken, probably from one of the villages they had passed.

The lieutenant that was leading the group instructed that they should let us return, as the people in that village were to continue with them. He did give us bananas to eat on our way back. My uncle and I and another man that they had brought from a neighboring village set off for another walk back home. It was dark, in a dense and tropical forest, but we had to return. There was no other option. Additionally, back home, no one could have known what had happened to us (even though they might have suspected that we were taken by the so-called military). We arrived home late in the night, and I remember finding my mother so worried. She had not slept, not knowing her son's whereabouts. I believe that the journey back home took longer as my uncle and the other man had to carry me through the Mitumba Mountains.

Guess what? The whole herd had returned home, well and safe. But the whole village and the entire family was terrified and were waiting for us to return home.

God is my shepherd, and I shall not want. In the dark night, through thick and thin, he leads me beside still waters (Psalms 23). I still fail to understand what the land of honey and milk had become. I still fail to understand why this country that my forefathers fought for and are resting in still hates my community. Since this is about my personal account, I will not dwell on the societal aspect, lest I write another book within one!

Visiting Rwanda Is a Crime!

This event is the highlight of how wrong the country Zaire had gone in hostility against the Tutsi people in the country. Any mention of any relationship with Rwanda, in any shape or form, had become a high ticket for a lawsuit. When this event took place in the summer of 1994, it was the trigger to my journey that would eventually lead me to the Netherlands, where I was to meet “my light.”

It was late summer (I should say dry season because, in Central Africa, we only have dry and rainy seasons, as all other tropical areas); I believe in August or so. It was 1994, after the genocide against the Tutsis in Rwanda. I was 13 years old, turning 14, and was now starting to make sense of things I had experienced, including the two events aforementioned, but I am still not clear on why.

As the tragic events were happening in Rwanda, we received a few people who had escaped the genocide. I would hear news on the radio about what was happening, and I did see my brothers and elders worried, but I did not know much. I also knew a few young adults who had left Mulenge to join the Rwanda liberation movement that would, fortunately, put an end to the killings of innocent Tutsis in Rwanda. One of my brothers, who was at that time working in Burundi, had also joined the

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movement as a cadre—cadres were the forces behind the mobilization of forces and funds to support the liberation movement. I did not know he had joined until later when we moved to Rwanda. As the situation in Rwanda deteriorated for Tutsis in the country, the hostility against the Tutsis in Zaire exponentially increased. The number of arbitrary arrests increased, which fueled the interest and incentives for young adults to flee and join the struggle, siding with the Rwanda liberation movement that would stop the genocide.

One of those heroes is the late General Byicaza Barabona. Byicaza was like a brother to me because his father, Pastor Barabona, and my father were both pastors of our home church, and both families were as close as relatives. May his soul continue to rest in peace. After liberating Rwanda, he later went back to liberate Zaire in 1996 as the genocide was now targeting my people, the Tutsi in Zaire. He unfortunately lost his life at the battle front in 2001.

Rwanda was liberated on July 4, 1994, right after many people from Mulenge were migrating to Rwanda. My eldest brother, the first born, also went to find out how the situation was and whether it was time for us to move. Upon his return, the situation in Zaire had worsened. The corrupt regime of Mobutu was now tracking everyone who had a family member who had crossed the border into Rwanda. Unfortunately, many people with malintent used the opportunity to whistle blow in exchange for money. The weeds had grown within the green vegetation where my community used to be. We did not know who had been corrupt!

Someone had signaled that my brother had just arrived from Rwanda, as if going to Rwanda was a crime at that time, and it is still the case to date, unfortunately. I do not know how my brother learned about it, so he would not sleep in his house. It was a Saturday, early morning, and a whole

legion came to our village and surrounded his house. Now, my brother was sleeping with me and my younger brother in our home. I do not recall where Mum had traveled to—I believe she had already traveled to Rwanda with my two other brothers. My brother, Rwigemera, who was being hunted, told me to wake up and go to my other brother, the second in line, Pastor Mutware, and tell him to wake up and talk to those military people. At the same time, Rwigemera also woke up and went to hide in the nearest bush—we were living near a mini forest that served as a farm for vegetables, and there was a river where we would fetch water.

I went outside, shaking and not fully knowing what was going on. It was around 5 a.m., and even though the sun was coming up, it was still dark. The FAZ (Zaire Armed Force) soldiers were there, armed to their teeth in front of me. When they saw me, they called out in Lingala, which I did not understand, and then they switched to Swahili. They inquired why I was up and where I was going. In a shaky voice, I said that I was going to wake up my brother, Pastor Mutware, who wanted me to distribute church invitations to the next village. I do not know where that response came from. I wondered if this was what the Bible refers to when it talks about not being afraid of what to say when we're in difficult situations—the holy spirit will give you the right words at the right time! You might call it a lie, but I believe it was a revelation that spared my life and that of my family. A few of them followed me as I knocked at his door. I signaled in my mother tongue that there were military with me. He asked me to remain calm and assured me that he was coming out.

I remember he had a portrait of King Rwagasore of Burundi, President Kagame of Rwanda, who was leading the liberation movement in Rwanda, and late general Rwigema, who started the liberation movement of Rwanda, in his living room. Before he opened the door, he made sure that those portraits were hidden, as they would make the case worse. Seeing portraits

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of those individuals at that time in Zaire was a ticket to life in prison or even death. Why? I think that would be a whole book in itself.

As he came out, he announced himself as a pastor and asked what he could do for them. They were shouting and asked where his older brother was. He calmly told them that he had taken his wife to the hospital, which was not wrong. Rwigemera's wife had been sick, and he was with her, but that day he had returned home. He then signaled me to go and wake our uncle, who was a retired military man. I slipped through them and went to my uncle's house. In a few minutes, he was there, talking to the men in Lingala, and he actually rebuked them, saying that what they were doing was violating our basic human rights. The discussion became intense between the former military man and those who had come to abuse us, and in the next few minutes, I saw one military man holding a gun against my uncle's forehead. I was so terrified, but I stood there.

My uncle told him that they would do nothing to his family and our cows as long as he was there and breathing. I guess this brutal military wanted to scare him or actually shoot him, but my uncle stood firm as a real soldier who had learned the military ethics and had served his country faithfully until he retired. In the next seconds that followed, I heard shooting, and luckily the shootings were directed in the air. They shot 14 bullets and the whole village was awake; people were running in all directions. My uncle and another relative, who was visiting and had spent the night in my brother's house, were handcuffed. They were severely beaten, imprisoned for 10 days or so, and the family had to pay ransom to release them.

What had they done? Nothing but being who God created them to be. Being a Tutsi was not welcomed anymore, but having been in Rwanda was a crime that the regime hunted everyone for.

Journey Home

This was it. My family decided to move to Rwanda. The situation was extremely bad in Zaire. The people who had committed genocide in Rwanda were now planning together with the Mobutu regime to continue the same killings to eliminate Tutsi people in Zaire. Rwanda was the new and safe home for us; it was time to move. My brother, Jules, who was working in Burundi at that time and had survived the 1993 massacre in Burundi, had already crossed over to Rwanda. This was the new land of hope for people like us in the Great Lakes Region of Africa, especially those in Zaire. Mobutu and his regime had welcomed the whole army that had committed genocide in Rwanda, and together with the extremists in Zaire, they were then planning to erase the Banyamulenge (my tribe; Tutsi's living in South-Kivu province in Zaire) and all other Tutsi in Zaire.

As soon as Rwanda was liberated and the genocide was stopped by the Rwanda Patriotic Front, a mass migration from across the globe started taking place. Many families from Mulenge were moving to Rwanda to find a new home and help rebuild the country that had seen its people and infrastructure completely erased. We did not have contact with Jules, who had already crossed from Burundi, but all odds indicated he must have moved as Burundi had become less stable as well.

Coincidentally, my mother had fallen sick for some time, and they could not find what she was suffering from. I was young but I do remember that she was in so much pain that she spent so many sleepless nights. A family meeting was called, and all my brothers decided that my mother and two of my other brothers should go to Rwanda for treatment, and maybe find out if it was time for the whole family to move. Because they expected Jules to have already crossed over to Kigali, it was the best option to take. The next few days, Albert, Jimmy, and my mother took off on a three-day

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walking trip to get to Uvira, where they would take a bus towards the border of Rwanda, in Kamanyola.

We did not hear from them for a few months as there was no means of communication available. After the genocide in Rwanda, families that survived, as well as those who had moved to Rwanda, would broadcast radio announcements to invite their family members to join. Since my mother and my three brothers had already arrived in Kigali, we would listen to the radio in the hope of hearing an announcement from Jules to join them. Months passed and the situation in Zaire continued to worsen. The day came when the announcement was aired on the radio; Jules was calling us to come to Kigali. We packed very minimal belongings and traveled for three days, walking to Uvira.

This was my first exposure to the external world—external because, in my 14th year, I had never seen electricity; I had never seen a television, or any type of city life in general. When we arrived at Uvira, looking across Tanganyika Lake in the city of Bujumbura at night was surreal. I did not understand how all houses had light at night, and life seemed to be running so fast. There were so many first experiences that I will not share here in this memoir; however, it was simply revealing and very strange to a 14-year-old boy.

Early in the morning, before the sun rose, we boarded a minibus to Kamanyola, where we would cross over to Rwanda. My brother had to pay a lot of money for a military vehicle to accompany us, as there were so many roadblocks along the highway from Uvira to the border. Fast-forward, upon arrival at the border, we were once again abused (but this time it was the last time) when the border control literally took everything we had on us—money, books, and even clothes. Because we had paid the military officer, we were let go but empty handed.

Since I left my native village in Zaire, which later become Democratic Republic of Congo, I have not had the opportunity to return.

Human in Military Uniform

The snare was broken, and we escaped. As we walked through the neutral zone towards Rwanda, the atmosphere changed. A few meters ahead of us, there were people from different governmental organizations that welcomed us with water to refresh us. They rushed us into big tents that had been installed along the highway; they fed us and we were immediately registered.

What surprised me most was the military personnel that were involved in welcoming us. These young, skinny and tall men in military uniforms hugged us genuinely and spoke my language. It was the first time seeing someone in a military uniform hugging a civilian, genuinely, and speaking in my language. They were actually people like us and it felt so different; it procured peace that I could not explain. Just a few minutes back, we were not sure that we would survive, as the Zaire military force brutalized us before letting us cross over. At the age of 14, I had experienced two opposite military dynamics, one being unreasonably violent and scary, and the other being warm, gentle, and strangely human. It felt strangely good to see military people, on their guard but welcoming and hugging civilians. Contrary to what had just happened on the other side of the border, they did not take anything from us; they did not interrogate us as though we were criminals. Rather, they hugged us, fed us, and made sure we felt safe. This was my very first good experience with this new country that had been destroyed and had lost over a million people in 100 days.

Land of Hope in the Middle of Ashes

When Rwanda was liberated, we all chanted the songs of victory and were genuinely happy that there was a place we could go and call home. I was young, but somehow I did know that Rwanda had become better than Zaire for me and my people. I knew many families that had moved, and my mother and brothers were already in Kigali.

We would listen to Radio Rwanda every day to hear the news of hope and praise of those who liberated the country, and how they invited all Rwandans to return home.

When our turn came, although I did not know what to expect, I was extremely happy, mainly because I had missed my mother so much. I just wanted to go where she was and did not care much about the place. I also did not really know the magnitude of what had just happened in that small country with people who resemble me and speak the same language as me.

From the moment we crossed the border, everything changed. Yes, the country was completely destroyed; many survivors were still under unexplainable pain and trauma, and the thickness of death was still felt in the atmosphere. Yet, at the same time, there was a light that shone through the thick darkness. Those who were coming from outside, and the survivors, joined hands and started filling the gaps. I remember that my brother, who was then a student at the National University of Rwanda, was also serving to reestablish the judicial system.

Life was still hard; supplies were limited, and the remains of war and genocide were still felt in all corners of the country. The military and law enforcement were so different from what I was accustomed to on the other side of the border, but this time they were the people to go to for help.

They walked around day and night calmly, just making sure that everyone else was at peace. This made the emptiness and the ashes of the war somehow lighter and bearable, especially for those who had experienced the tragic event. Everything was still so vulnerable and somehow unsecure. I remember one night that I was chased by a herd of dogs barking at me. These domestic animals had seen the unspeakable and had become human hunters, to say the least.

The welcoming face of resilient young men, who had just liberated the country, covered the thick and dark atmosphere after the genocide that had taken over a million innocent lives. Despair was felt all around. At the same time, the joy of life and the hope that the new leadership inspired made the shadow of death bearable. People were lost, confused, and yet hopeful. The light had dawned after a long night that lasted for 100 days. Those who survived were relieved and, at the same time, lost. After all, how do you pick up ashes and live again? Those who were returning to Rwanda after decades in exile were celebrating to finally have a country that they could call home; at the same time, they felt lost when finding a torn apart social fabric. Where would they start to rebuild the country they so hoped to live in again?

All indicators—social, economic, and even spiritual—classified life in Rwanda as nonexistent at that point in time. But there was hope that stemmed from the resilience of the Liberation Army and its leadership; there were dreams that had not been silenced, and anyone who found themselves in Rwanda strived for life.

My Becoming

My growing up and becoming a man, my exposure to life and my dream for a hopeful future, was born the day we moved to Rwanda. For the first time, I felt a sense of belonging. My years lived in Rwanda were the years that defined the man I would become later on in life.

I discovered the joy of living when we were living in Rwanda, largely because my teenage and adolescent years were lived in Rwanda, but also because I felt at home, and I was indeed home. For the first time, I did not feel strange among those I was with. For the first time, I did not have to fear that I might meet brutal and terrifying military personnel. For the first time, as I was growing, I discovered the joy of life through trial and error as a young man. I had my first crushes on young ladies; I felt love, and I was loved. It was also in Rwanda that I made the mature and conscious decision to give my life to my Savior, and I started my Christian walk and personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Briefly, my years of formation and becoming were lived in Rwanda.

If you stay with me, this book will take you through my journey to finding my light, and the hope that remains despite the setback. The historical events in my life, in the previous sections, are narrated to allow my conversation with you to make sense, and hopefully help you understand who I am today and how I got to where I am. This is my personal journey and personal biography. I am proud of my past and my present, and I am so expectant of my future. Let's continue!