Stained with Lime

SHERRI H. HOFFMAN

NOTHING IN KIGALI is what I expect. The city is a swell of hills thick with lights, strings of fog, traffic, and streams of voices. Along the tree-lined street near the hospital, every block is under construction. Bamboo scaffolds cling to the new structures, steel cranes poised between towers of concrete and blue glass. Schools of motos dart to the curb with passengers, helmets over hairnets. Men in dark jeans. Women side-saddle in long skirts and heels. I am forbidden by my husband Dean to take the motos, and when the American doctors arrive, we wait for a cab at the foot of an enormous billboard lit with tungsten lights: *RwandAir. Daily flights from Nairobi to Entebbe*.

Our cab winds through the financial district, drops down a gully to the river past the bus station and markets that smell of fish and wet earth. I've been here for five days of my holiday, less jetlagged but still disoriented by the constant movement. The temperate weather of spending Christmas near the equator was expected, but not the humidity that made me sweat all the time, even at night.

Our cab driver forces a place in a turn lane. Honks. Next to me, Meredith cringes. She's short and lithe, blond hair pulled straight back into a long braid, and I know she's in pediatrics at the teaching hospital, working in the same group as Dean. The other two docs are surgeons. We slide across the wide bench seat, bodies colliding, no working seatbelts in the cab. Gregg assures me it's safe. The penalty for hitting a pedestrian in Kigali is prolonged jail time.

Fabian is typing into his iPhone. "How about Chinese?" he says.

Gregg moves to give me more space, our hips touching. "Is it decent? I liked that pizza place last night."

"It's *The Zen* over on 78th. South. Worth a shot." With much pointing and hand waving, Fabian redirects our driver. We're markedly American, even if Fabian isn't white, although sometimes his dark skin seems to earn him less patience from the locals. We shoot through a roundabout. Meredith slips nearly into my lap. "Sorry," she says.

"Where's Dean?" Fabian says.

"He had a private consult," I say. As if I know the whereabouts of my husband. "Another late night for the doctor." Of course, he's cheating, and I marvel at our ability to resist talking about it. During his residency at Stanford, we rented a house in Palo Alto we couldn't afford, because we were in love with the trees—Coastal live oaks in a tangle around the back deck. We'd sit out on the deck after work, sip our cheap wine, candles lit, and make plans, talking up the moon. Everything was an opportunity. A real vacation. A year in Rwanda. Children, perhaps.

The road curves around a hill. Meredith and I slide into the men, Fabian balancing his phone. "Text from Dean. He says he'll catch up."

The message bar on my iPhone is blank, even with 4G, and I wonder if he knows I'm with his medical team.

The Zen is a white adobe with sweeping arches behind a gated brick wall. The uniformed guards carry machine guns—Russian models, Gregg says—and they do a full sweep of the cab with a mirrored staff, checking the underside for bombs. At the broad double doorway, they search my purse and send us through a metal detector.

In the marble entry, a lighted plastic Santa greets us with open arms alongside an enormous elephant garlanded with green and red tinsel. The high-ceilinged room hums in multiple languages and the tic and clang of dish and dinnerware, the spread of tables flush with red linens, wine, and long-stemmed glasses.

Gregg whistles. "Some kind of Zen."

A breeze from the ceiling fan chills my legs, and I tug at my cotton miniskirt. "Fancy," I say. "I feel underdressed."

A tall woman in a traditional gown with matching drape and head wrap

greets us. "*Murakaza neza.* You're welcome," she says. "Please come in."

She seats us on the far side near some tall windows open to a pair of poinsettia trees. Two young waiters in tight black T-shirts stand at each end of the table. They are muscular and darker than the woman. They take our drink orders. Gin and tonic, no ice. Whiskey sour. Mimosas.

"Your place is lovely," Meredith says.

Our hostess stretches her plump arms along the backs of our chairs, embracing us collectively. "Thank you. We rebuilt after my husband was killed in the genocide. My son and I. The original restaurant was burned. My son built it from a vision." Her hand sweeps upward with such authority, we can't help but look at the ceiling. "Now you are here to enjoy," she says. "You're welcome." She leaves us, pausing at a table here and there, bending her head toward her customers with an attentive smile.

Meredith peeks over the top of the menu. "I'll never get used to the greeting. It makes me feel like I've been rude."

"Agreed. Like I've missed a cue," Gregg says.

"A cue. Exactly."

One of the young waiters delivers my gin. I pick out the slice of lime with my fork. "What gets me is the way everything is framed around the genocide. What has it been? Twenty years?" I remember the U.S. news reports, barely a blip—video montages vague with details, some of the stories mere headlines.

Gregg sips his mimosa. "They report their medical histories like that. 'Three pregnancies before the genocide. One after.' 'Kidney stones a year before the genocide. Appendix removed two years after.'"

"You get used to it," Fabian says.

The travel guides detail the history of the colonialist-Belgians, the separatist propaganda campaign, and the killing—an estimated one million ethnic Tutsis killed by the Hutus in one hundred days. In some places, the Tutsis were instructed to gather in the schools or churches for safety. Once contained there, water and electricity cut, they were systematically slaughtered by their Hutu neighbors armed with machetes and farm implements.

A waiter returns with small plates—cucumbers dressed in curls of a white tuber, splash of yellow oil, and a green garnish. "The chef has sent some complimentary *hors d'oeuvres*." His French is perfect.

"*Asante*," I say.

Meredith turns the plate. "Lovely presentation. What's the rating, boys?" Fabian gives it a once over. "Cucumber. Coconut or turnip. Chili oil. Peanuts. I give it a five."

"Unless you're allergic to peanuts," Gregg says. "Amanda, you realize you're thanking him in Swahili."

Heat flashes into my face. "I learned that this week. At the market. Is it wrong?"

Meredith deconstructs her cucumber stack. "Really? A five? These mimosas are probably a five. A peeled cucumber? You think they haven't been Cloroxed?"

Fabian stabs the cucumber from her plate and pops it whole into his mouth. "Exactly the risk. To bleach, or not to bleach."

Meredith pushes the plate to the center of the table. "Five," she says. "Don't come to me with your diarrhea, mister."

He circles his fork about his face. "Doctor," he corrects her.

Their banter spins my head in the heat and the smell of hot oils and some kind of fragrant flower. Jasmine or orchid, sweet and rancid. Gregg picks the white curl off the top of his plate and nibbles at it. "Cassava," he says to me. "You look a little pale, darlin'"

My stomach cramps with the gin, and the ceiling fans blur. "Can I get some water?" I say.

Gregg orders a bottle of still water. Versus bubbly. He pours it into my glass. "'*Asante*' is Swahili," he says. "Lots of that in the market. And French. But if you want to say 'thank you' in Kinyarwanda, it's '*murakoze*.'"

Fabian talks around his food. "That's true," he says. "It's an interesting language. No social niceties."

Gregg nods. "It's pretty blunt. I'm not a linguist, but it does seem mostly directive. 'I'm telling you about this fish.' 'Go fly a kite.'"

The waiter in black stands at the head of the table. "I'm taking your order," he says, and Gregg and Fabian's laughter startles the young waiter. He shifts his feet and glances around for something that isn't there. Across the room, the lovely proprietor moves to greet another customer. It's Dean.

I sip at my still water as my husband is ushered to our table.

"I have four sons," the proprietor is saying. "First Etienne. Then John Paul and Sylvester. Then my youngest is born in the summer after the genocide. He is Mother's Blessing. Eppe, he is called, after his father who was killed."

Dean nods with her story. "You are blessed four times," he says.

She takes his hand in both of hers and strokes it like something precious. "You are kind."

He drops a kiss on my cheek without meeting my gaze and slides into a chair on the other side of the table. He nods. "Gentlemen. Ladies. Is there a plan?"

"I'm taking your order, sir?" the waiter says.

Our hostess tilts her head. "Doctor," she says.

"Doctor, sir."

Dean asks for the specials, engages the waiter, moves easily between French and Kinyarwanda. Orders for us all.

Fabian adds some spicy green beans and noodles with tofu. "Token vegetarian," he says.

"I thought you were our other token," Gregg says, tipping his head toward the room where the tables are distinctly segregated.

Fabian shrugs. "You thought I was gay?"

"Whoa, there," Meredith says. "Don't go crazy, Robbie Rogers."

"Stop it, you three. I can't keep up. Does that matter in your work?" I say. "Being black or white?"

Fabian looks at me.

"For the Rwandan doctors. Not you. Do they work well with you?"

"Sure," Fabian says. "The language barrier is more of an issue than anything else."

Gregg lifts his glass. "But at the end of the day, the locals go home to be with their families. And we're left with each other."

I don't know how to answer. It's always late when Dean gets home, comes to bed where we sweat and grapple, sheets kicked down, under the mosquito netting in the only language we can speak, something remembered, perhaps not even about this place.

Dean and his team catch each other up as if they haven't been together all day. They talk more food ratings, department toilet facilities, and engage a more intensive debate about antibiotic-resistant organisms that feels as if it is an ongoing discussion. Their intimacy reminds me of my family, two brothers and two sisters—our own best friends for years growing up in the military, always on the move.

The room seems to take another slow spin around me. I flag the waiter.

"Please, may I have another water? Thank you. Like this." He takes my empty bottle.

Dean watches me over his glass, twirls the ice once around. "Case of the day," he says.

Fabian leans back in his chair. "Case of the day."

"36-year old man presents with sudden-onset blindness, chronic headache, post-nasal drip, elevated white count."

"Exam?"

Plates of food arrive to interrupt their game. Vegetable rolls. A plate of hot oil noodles. Chicken curry. Spicy beans. Peppers and beef. Tofu.

"Nothing significant. History of fevers. Mild cough. Insignificant rales." Dean tips his head at me. "Wheezing sounds in the lungs."

"Pleural?" With large spoons, Gregg and Fabian scoop steaming sauces, meat and rice onto their plates. They lean forward, wipe their mouths with red linens. Forks ticking on the china.

"Test for TB?"

"MRI?

"Not yet. Potentially."

"Malaria? Tumor?"

"I'm thinking infection. Abscess."

"There it is," Gregg says. Fist bumps Fabian. "Always his go-to."

Meredith jabs me in the side. Whispers. "Save me from the insanity. They'll do this all night."

"Deal." We touch our glasses together.

The large party at the next table gathers themselves, chairs scraping as they disengage. They call to each other, shaking hands.

Meredith leans in closer to whisper. "That's the dean of the International School. His chief of staff. And that," she points, "is the French ambassador. All the students there are children of ambassadors and government officials. All the NGOs."

"All the mucky mucks. Anyone we should know?" I press my hand against my cheek to cool my face.

Meredith leans back, squints at me. "It gets better," she says. "The jetlag."

I rest an elbow on the table. "I'm fine."

She is near enough I can smell her perfume, faint and spicy, with a hint of antiseptic. Her eyes are what my Texas grandfather calls cornflower blue—deeper than the sky, brighter than the gulf waters. "I'm sure you are," she says. "I was surprised how long it took me. As if the earth was always moving under my feet."

"Did you say you were going to a genocide museum? I've seen a couple in the little villages. They look like memorials. I'm told you're on a mission to see them all."

"Who told you that? But yes, I'm going to Murambi next week. It's supposed to be one of the best sites. Have you been to the one in town?"

I shake my head. "I haven't the nerve to go by myself."

"Well, you should go. Last month, Gregg and I went. Didn't we?" The men are invested in their medical sleuthing, but Meredith doesn't seem to expect a response. I swirl noodles in the brown sauce on my plate, take small frequent bites to keep up the pretense of eating that also saves me from having to hold up my side of the conversation. Meredith frames her words with her hands, making little boxes as she talks, intermittently reaching back to indicate something behind her or perhaps outside the guarded gates of the restaurant, beyond the white plaster walls so bright they sting my eyes.

"I can pick you up if that's easier," Meredith is saying. "Ten-thirty?"

I gulp down the last of my still water. "Yes, of course," I say. "That would be great."

In the courtyard, bats hurl themselves in frantic arcs over our heads as we take separate cabs, Dean and I headed in the opposite direction from the others across the city. Meredith kisses me on both cheeks.

"*Au revoir*," she says. "Until Thursday."

The holes in the road to Murambi are large enough to force Meredith into the shoulder and the low hanging branches of the eucalyptus trees. The downhill side of the road falls away into terraced plots of corn and coffee, and at the bottom, the valley is cut into the irregular ponds of rice paddies. We pass a row of adobe houses. More little houses are layered in between the trees and terraced sugar cane. Around one corner, the shell of a building sits against a sharp

drop of red earth, the metal roof a crease fallen into the center. Two children squat in the collapsed doorway, each armed with a long stick, minding a single chicken.

We drive with the air conditioning on, windows up. A series of complicated switchbacks brings us to the gates of the former boarding school that is now the museum. Meredith parks in the dirt. The hum around us is at once human, insect, and animal, diffused by the thick stands of eucalyptus, heavy with moisture. A crowd gathers at once, mostly children. They reach their hands through the chain link that separates the parking area from the road and call to us for money and bottles of water. A goat tied to the fence bleats in time with the children's voices.

The metal gate at the bottom of the long driveway is unguarded. At the top of the hill, several uniformed soldiers with machine guns stand in the doors of the white two-story building. We walk in the ruts. The tall grass in the field is going to seed and soughs in a breeze that doesn't reach us.

Meredith takes my hand. "Nervous?"

"Should I be?"

She shrugs. At the top of the hill, I shake off her grasp in a show of opening the door for her. Inside the school building, the lobby is expansive and bare. A double set of ballroom-style stairs curves up to an open balcony. Light fills the space inside the fishbowl wall of windows. One man who is not a soldier stands by a desk. He is dressed in slacks and a green sweater-vest.

"You're welcome," he says. "Come in to Murambi."

The exhibits are mostly self-guided, tall panels of historical details interspersed with photographs of former kings and presidents, geo-political maps of Rwanda from the sixteenth to the twentieth century, the Belgian colonial rulers and their armies, documentation of Christian baptisms, marriages, and lineage graphs. There is one interactive element, a yellow Bakelite radio box mounted to the wall. I press the lighted button, and a recording begins, the radio broadcast in Kinyarwanda with an English voiceover, complete with the crackling background of radio static:

> *The Tutsis have always been evil. They smile and wink, but they will take your children away.*

I press the plastic button, and it starts a second recording, playing over the top of the first:

Take sticks, clubs, and machetes. Stop them from destroying our country, the cockroaches. Kill them all.

The button plays the first recording from the beginning. I press it two more times, and the voices jumble together. Our guide in the green sweater is nowhere in sight.

"What the hell?" I say, holding the button. "Make it stop."

Behind me, Meredith giggles.

"It's not funny," I say.

She snorts through her nose. "No, of course not."

Another recording starts.

You find the Tutsis look hideous. They look like animals. They are animals.

Our laughter is horrible. We cover our mouths and run, fleeing the radio voices. In the corridor of the next section of the museum, the director approaches. Meredith flings her arm across my chest with the instinct of a mother, and we skid to a stop, panting and red-faced.

He considers us for too long in silence. He turns. "Come. I will show you to the crypts," he says.

My neck prickles as if it is not eighty degrees inside the building. Meredith takes my hand, and this time, I let her. The voices from the radio spin in my head. The crypts are dark pits that smell of wet earth. We stand behind a velvet rope and cannot see into the bottom. Our guide explains how many bodies were discovered here. He points down the long hallway, the walls covered with photos, some of the thousands of dead or missing. His voice echoes in the space that opens below us, and as if conjured by his words, two enormous brown bats rise out of the dark crevice. Meredith and I bolt for the door.

Outside the sunlight is harsh, and my sweat feels cold. I catch my breath, wishing I was somewhere else. Wishing for the trees at home. For Dean. The director motions us up the walkway to the south. Two modern concrete crypts are sealed and covered by a metal awning. They hold the bodies reclaimed from

the mass graves discovered on the other side of the hill. Behind the main school building, red-brick dormitories stair-step the hill in neat rows to the summit. Meredith and I hesitate in the doorway of the first dorm. The director waves us in. The room is sickly sweet, like rotted fruit. I am in the center before I realize that the white-powdered forms on the pallets are human skeletons. Scraps of fabric and hair cling to the bones stained with lime.

Our guide tells us these are only some of the bodies recovered from the mass graves. "These are the bones of men. They are preserved so that we will never forget. See this one," he says, indicating one with bony hands clasped before its skull. "Asking for mercy."

He points out other details. Crushed nasal cavities. Machete marks. Ankles slashed where the tendons were cut to keep them from running. Bile burns the back of my throat. Meredith's grip hurts my hand. We are directed into another room. More skeletons. Another room and another. An entire dormitory filled with women.

"See this one?" He points to the fixed white leg bones. "Raped before she died."

Another full of children. One for babies, soft chest cavities deformed from the weight of the others over them in the mass graves.

Outside in the thin sunlight, the crest of the hill drops away to a flattened terrace of thick grass. A wooden sign on a picket identifies this as the site of the mass grave discovered by German engineers when they tried to build a volleyball court. I cannot make the connection between the volleyball court and the grave. I cannot understand any of it.

The director points to the camera around my neck. "Would you like me to take your photo? You two together?"

Dumbly, I hand the camera to him.

"Look here," he says. "Smile."

Meredith drives with both hands on the wheel, knuckles white. We haven't spoken since the tour. In the bathroom before we left, I'd listened to her hard breathing in the stall next to mine. We'd each put $5000 Rwandan francs in the donation box. Left the guest book unsigned.

A moto shoots out from a footpath on our right. Meredith swerves, bumps us over a set of hard ruts, curses. Honks. The moto driver raises a hand in greeting or thanks, and behind him, strapped to the rack by bungee cords, two live chickens raise their heads.

Meredith brakes hard, fishtailing the car in the loose dirt and gravel. The front wheel on my side drops into a deep pothole. The car tips forward. My body slams into the shoulder belt. Meredith shrieks. An eruption of dust billows behind us, hovers, drops over us like a shroud, the engine stalled. I gasp from the shock of the belt across my chest.

Meredith is crying. Or laughing. She clings to the steering wheel, her shoulders in spasms, her hair loose, spilling into her face.

"Are you okay?" I say.

She shakes her head no. "Yes," she says. In her lap, blood speckles her khaki pants. She cups her hands over her face and chin, bleeding from her nose, a purple ridge welling up over the bridge.

"I think," she says. "I think I hit the steering wheel."

"No shit." One of my earrings is hanging at the end of its wire, unclasped, the other missing. I release the seatbelt and fall into the foot-well against the door. "Can you get out your side?"

Meredith frees herself from her belt, but she can't get enough leverage under the door to push it open. People surround the car. The door is wrenched open from the outside, and a flurry of hands pulls Meredith out. Then me.

We sit on the hillside with several women, a mob of children, and several goats. A group of men swarm the car, heaving it out of the hole by their sheer strength. One man in blue cut-off pants and a short-sleeved button-down shirt seems to be in charge. He instructs another to pop the hood, sits in the driver's seat and tries the key while several others prod and poke at the engine, their voices running together, until the car fires into life.

One woman gives Meredith a piece of yellow cloth to keep pressure on her nose at the base of the purple welt. The woman says something to Meredith, her voice low and melodic, and Meredith answers in what must be Kinyarwandan, chin elevated, eyes closed. The woman says something to me. She's young, twenty-something. Her dress and shoulder drape are apple green with large white flowers.

"I'm sorry," I say. "I can only speak English."

"I speak English," the girl says flawlessly. "My name is Peace."

She hands me a bottle of water, and I drink the tepid water before thinking about the unsealed lid. There is a hollow tenderness over my collarbone. Meredith's nose has stopped bleeding and the women have re-braided her hair. The car is running better than it did before, the boys crowing and calling to each other over the engine. Children crowd Meredith. They giggle and sigh and stroke her blonde hair.

Peace translates our gratitude and helps distribute all of our loose coins to the men. Meredith tries to give Peace some money, but she waves it away.

"My mother would shame me for taking money from someone in need," she says.

Meredith pats at her nose with the stained cloth. "Well then, your mother has done a fine job raising a daughter."

"Three daughters my mother has raised." Peace waves two girls out of the crowd. They each have the same narrow faces, sharp cheekbones, and cap of cropped hair so similar to their older sister, they look like reflections. One of the girls has a cloth bag slung over her shoulder, the fabric the same as her sister's green dress.

"Monique. Angela." Peace nudges them at their shoulders. "Say hello."

"Hello," they say together, ducking their heads, the youngest scooting behind the other.

"Don't be rude," Peace tells her.

Back on the main road to Kigali, Meredith navigates the car past bicycles hauling enormous gunnysacks of the white potatoes that are a staple in the markets, the rider walking alongside to balance the load. Women with sugar cane or eucalyptus on their heads appear to be bundles of leaves with legs. Meredith keeps apologizing. "I'm normally such a good driver," she says.

"It's okay," I say. "Really."

Meredith hovers her fingers over the swollen nose, the blue-black spreading into the wells of her eyes like dark tears. "The guys will never let me live this one down. For sure."

"Yeah?"

"They're always giving me a hard time. Fabian and Gregg."

I cringe at her omission. Maybe it confirms what I already knew. Maybe I'm just tired. "You're sleeping with my husband," I say.

She watches the road. We pass two more bicycles hauling potatoes.

"Yes," she says.

A man is carting a dining set on his bicycle, chairs stacked together, legs entwined for efficiency and balance. I count six chairs and a table stacked on the bicycle. As if this place defies even gravity.

"I'll stop," she says. "I didn't know you before."

"Should it matter?" I say.

Her mouth tightens, her lips white. I should be angry with her, angry with Dean. I wonder what will become of us.

We pass a slow-moving taxi-van so full that people are jammed against the windows. A Chinese mining truck speeds around us, metal rattling over the thunder of its enormous tires. Around the next corner, convicts are walking single-file on the shoulder between heavily-armed military guards. The bright orange of their tunics identifies them, many carrying hoes, shovels or other farm implements as they are required to raise and harvest their own food from the government properties.

At the back of the line, a dozen prisoners wear pink tunics, marking them as genocide criminals. Convicted of killing or inciting hatred. After the genocide, a U.N. tribunal tried less than fifty, high-profile cases for crimes against humanity. In the years that followed, the Rwandan courts processed hundreds of thousands of cases, many of them resulting in convictions. I'd also read that in 2007, Rwandan courts abolished the death penalty.

Dean is not at the house. I light the stove. Start some rice, add salt and spices. Open a can of red beans. I rinse the cabbage that was bleached and set to dry this morning. With the largest knife, I cut it, watching my hands, my white fingers against the pale cabbage slices.

Peace had asked if we'd been to Murambi. *Yes*, I said. *What are you? Hutu or Tutsi?*

She took my hand in hers, twined her thin black fingers with mine.

We are Rwandan, she said. *We are all one*.

I add a peeled apple and a precious half-cup of raisins to the cabbage. Dress the slaw and find space for it in the half-size refrigerator in the pantry. On the back stoop, I sit in the gathering dusk. The tall security wall of concrete block is topped with shards of glass, shattered greens and browns. I consider whether I should pack. What it would be like to simply wait in the dark.

Outside the wall, a tungsten streetlight comes on, yellow light refracting through the glass into a glittering spray of color. A pair of bats spins through the lights. If I squint, the poinsettia tree in the garden could be Coastal live oaks decorated for Christmas. The smell of saffron, beans, and bleach almost masks the sweet sickness caught under my skin, citrus and wet earth.