

BAD NEWS



LAST JOURNALISTS
IN A DICTATORSHIP

ANJAN SUNDARAM

Author of *STRINGER*

ALSO BY ANJAN SUNDARAM

Stringer: A Reporter's Journey in the Congo

BAD NEWS

Last Journalists in a Dictatorship

ANJAN SUNDARAM

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To local journalists the world over, mostly anonymous, who bring us information every day.

To my students.

Quos vult perdere dementat.

Those whom (a god) wishes to destroy he sends mad.

—ANONYMOUS

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GRENADES

I felt swallowed by the wide road, the odd car hurtling uphill, the people hissing on the sidewalk bathed in sodium-vapor orange—a tick-tock had gone off in my mind since the bomb.

And were I not so consumed by these emotions I would have savored the immense surrounding pleasantness—the long baguette-like hills on the horizon, the silhouettes of clouds that hung low over our heads, the calm city that offered so much space—that tonight made me feel disoriented and smothered.

I searched for charred metal, the smell of burning rubber, any remains of the violence. A blue-uniformed policeman stood near the traffic circle, tall and rigid. I raised a hand to signal him, and he spoke almost in a whisper: “*Mwiriwe!* Good evening! Was it here, the explosion?”

“The what?”

“The blast. I heard it from down the hill.”

“No, no, you are imagining things.” He spoke slowly, shaking his head.

“What is that man sweeping, though?”

“We always clean the roads.”

But I saw fragments shimmer, and I made to take out my camera.

His hand moved in front of my face. “No photos! *No photos!*”

“What’s the problem, if there was no explosion?”

“Listen carefully. Nothing happened here.” I instinctively stepped back.

Everybody in the neighborhood had heard it. I was told the ambulances had come—their sirens silent. But the road was now practically clean. Traffic was circulating, as it always did in Kigali, in an orderly fashion. And the center of town, in this, the most densely populated country in mainland Africa, was nearly empty, as usual.

• • •

The discussion in my classroom two days later only heightened the sense of insecurity. Ten journalists arrived, and one by one took chairs. The mood was somber. The curtains fluttered at the back of the room. A stout young man said the blast had been caused by a grenade, thrown to destabilize the government.

The journalist had succeeded in taking photographs, but the police had recognized him and searched his bag. They had found the camera and taken the film—many journalists in my class still used old, outdated equipment—and warned him to wait for the official version of events, not to promote the enemy.

There was a murmur of discontent. The faces in the room were all marked—some by hunger, by fatigue, others with deep gashes. I heard a wooden knock pass the classroom door—it was the figure of Moses, hunched over his cane, stumbling over a leg that had been smashed in a torture chamber.

Moses, a senior journalist, had been responsible for summoning the students to our training program. He was so respected that not a single person had refused his invitation.

The students were newspapermen and -women, both owners of publications and employees. Most were in their thirties, though some were much older than I was. They had been specially chosen for our training program for their independence and ability—the idea was to bring together and professionalize Rwanda's last free journalists, so they functioned as a skilled unit.

I had come to Rwanda to teach journalists how to identify, research and write news stories in the program. I had spent the last two years in America, but prior to that had worked in neighboring Democratic Republic of Congo as a journalist for American news outlets. I was familiar with the sensitivities of news in this region, with its history of conflict, and was eager to return. I wanted to help these students be successful journalists.

Our program was funded by the United Kingdom and the European Union. The mandate was to help these journalists report mostly on government initiatives, such as efforts to make people wash their hands or see the doctor. So the program had been approved by the Rwandan government. It had existed for ten years already. But now it had become a place where these last journalists could work together.

The grenade in the city had come as a reminder of violence. It could have been thrown by armed dissidents. It could also have been an act of the government itself. Regardless, the regime would use it as justification for a new round of repression.

“I don't know if we can survive it this time,” a student said.

“The government is making arrests. Secret prisons.”

“Many developed countries were once dictatorships. Tell us how they obtained their freedom.”

The stout young man said the last time he was beaten he had been blinded by his own blood gushing over his face. It was because he had mentioned the harassment of journalists at a press conference, in front of the president. His name was Jean-Bosco, and he ran a popular newspaper. He had been left in a coma for four days after that attack.

“But we have to keep speaking out,” a female student said. “That's our only defense. The more we speak the more the government will be afraid to hurt us, along with the other activists. And we have to stay together, no matter what.”

The speaker was a short young woman with a red bow in her hair. She had just spent a year in prison after criticizing the government. She was sick with HIV, and had endured psychological and physical abuse while in prison. The prison officials had screamed in her face until she was tired, dragging her from room to room so she could not rest. Her name was Agnès.

The room had turned quiet.

Someone muttered: “How can we fight a violent state. Is there a way out for us?”

“America gives them weapons. Israel trains their secret service.”

It happened that we were approaching the twentieth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, and there was a series of commemorative writings about that period.

I read them one such article I had recently come upon. It was a reflection by a former Czech dissident, about his struggles to create a political opposition, and about how everyone had thought his

ridiculous, his task impossible, until the dictatorship suddenly crumbled.

Agnès stared at the other journalists.

The Czech dissident spoke about his efforts to create news pamphlets and underground information networks—it was a battle with the dictatorship, a battle to keep alive the information that the regime destroyed, suppressed.

And I felt it was important that he described his pamphlets: for the journalists in that class were from the newspapers. The written word, in a dictatorship, offered possibilities that the radio, often used by dictators for propaganda, could not. The written word offered subversive possibilities in a dictatorship, offered some hope of freedom.

It has been so in every revolution, even in the Arab Spring, in today's digital age. Writers are often at the forefront of revolutions. And it often is they who bear the brunt of the repression.

A radio broadcast requires equipment—an emitter, an antenna. The speaker on the radio might be recognized, and killed. The equipment can be destroyed, leaving the revolution mute.

But the written word belongs to no one. It has no source, no root that can be annihilated. It passes from hand to hand. It is destroyed; new words are written.

And now more people have begun to write, there are more sources. The written word can thus become something sacred to a people seeking freedom, to a revolution.

I collected the homework from the previous week—a report about a city hospital—said goodbye to the students, pulled the white cotton curtains over the windows of the classroom hall and began to walk to my house.

Moses hobbled beside me. It was another peaceful, cool evening. I felt the exhaustion of the day of teaching. I didn't mind his slowness. A sympathetic taxi driver, Claude, saw us on the road and offered a lift. Moses, grateful, climbed into the beaten-up car.

At home, I poured myself a cup of tea and arranged a seat on the balcony. From here I looked over a large garden, and farther down into a green valley. This was without doubt the most beautiful city I had lived in.

The house belonged to the training program. It was commodious—four bedrooms—and had once been a diplomat's residence. Unaccustomed to so much space, I occupied only the common areas and a bedroom whose door, the landlord had eagerly pointed out, was bulletproof.

I went through the homework. And there was a surprise. I had come to know my students well—by a certain Gibson, a quiet man in his thirties who always sat at the back of the room, had written a remarkable report. The ideas were organized logically, almost without error. He was not afraid to ask large questions. And the hospital was vivid in one's mind: its doctors, the children.

Feeling slightly buoyed, I made for my bedroom. Briefly I turned on the radio. Still nothing about the explosion from the other night. No acknowledgment that it had happened; no sense that people in the country had been wounded or killed.

• • •

I did not have to wait long for the pressure to take effect on the journalists. The first notion I had was during a series of pronouncements by the president, Paul Kagame. I expected he would at some point address the explosion, which had been a surprise, even incredible. Rwanda had known an extraordinary calm over the last decade, a calm nearly as absolute as its genocide sixteen years before.

had been violent.

The president spoke slowly, his voice shrill, almost like a bird's. He spoke about democracy in the country and the freedom that his people enjoyed, and how sad the coup d'états on the continent were being the result of the absence of democracy. These were at his political meetings, press conferences, ceremonies in football stadiums and at the opening of a new factory. He was a tall, emaciated man whose suit billowed over his body. He seemed innocuous, laughing at his own witticisms. But he could make or condemn people, villages and entire regions with words—it was almost as if his spoken words became reality, became the world. His was the voice of the nation; this was possible in the dictatorship, for mere speech to attain such power over living and dead things. So when he spoke there was great silence. His words were broadcast all over the country, with the regularity of a drumbeat and on the windy hilltops and in homes, the people strained to listen.

The president had fled these same hills as a child. He was only three years old when, in 1960, an uprising against the Rwandan elite forced his family to flee to Ugandan refugee camps. So he began among the dispossessed. As a young man he fought with a Ugandan rebellion, becoming that country's head of military intelligence and receiving training in America. In 1990, he commanded a force of Rwandans who had broken off from the Ugandan army and invaded Rwanda. The invasion set off a protracted conflict that the president called a war of "liberation" and culminated in Rwanda's 1994 genocide. The end of the genocide, in July 1994, was like a new birth for the president, as he took power in Rwanda.

Kagame's control was at first something that needed to be divined. He was the vice president, the minister of defense. Others made the speeches and the state visits. But over time Kagame had done away with his front men. He had Rwanda's previous president arrested for five years, and then pardoned and released him without explanation. The radios now broadcast Kagame's slow speeches.

Some were permitted to ask questions at his events. "Your Excellency, why are so many countries eager to study our roads, hospitals and poverty-reduction programs? Is it because the country is developing so rapidly after the genocide?"

"Our country has learned a lot from its history," the president said. He added that he was happy to share what had worked for Rwanda, and what had not, with anyone who was willing to learn.

The radio crackled, radiated these ideas of the authorities' success. "Your Excellency, I was asking myself the other day why our government is so capable and professional, why we have so little corruption. Our business ratings are so good. The World Bank, the United Nations, the Americans and the British are praising us. But what is the cause for the praise? Yesterday I realized the answer. It is our leadership, Your Excellency. This is our secret."

I recognized that last voice. It was Cato, one of my students. I felt something piercing in my stomach. He had decided to turn, and evidently join the president's army of flatterers—a group officially called the Intore in Rwanda. By praising the president they incited fear and devotion in others. It was the easiest way to protect himself. Our class had lost a student, but I did not blame Cato; the situation was too precarious for all the journalists.

• • •

I found a frightened Gibson in his apartment. He asked me to close the door at once. "Have a seat. His sofa was a wooden frame with soft square cushions, all covered in an old bedspread's maroon cotton. Besides a small center table this sofa was the only piece of furniture in the living room. The

apartment had whitewashed walls and was lit by a dim lamp. It had a single bedroom. Gibson lived in a shantytown on a slope of an eroded mud hill.

“I bought the sofa just a few days ago,” he said. “Do you like it?”

He was clearly proud of this somewhat pathetic acquisition. I said I would find him some new clothes. He became immensely pleased.

I had come with an idea to travel with Gibson. We were entering the season of memorials for the genocide, in which some eight hundred thousand people had been killed over a hundred days—a rate of murder unequalled even by the Nazis—and in great pain, for they were killed mostly with machetes, not guns. It had been an idea of mine since I had arrived in Rwanda, to pay homage to and remember those who had died from this human cruelty. But Gibson furiously shook his head. He said it would be too dangerous.

He was a man sized like a fourteen-year-old boy whose hands trembled lightly when he reached out to pick up things. Perhaps to hide this, he wore shirts with sleeves too long that extended beyond his wrists and up to his hands. The shirts were often white and hung over his small shoulders. And besides his best friend, his former roommate at the seminary, he was something of a loner, rarely mixing with the other journalists, who teased him for eating his *fou-fou*, a paste of manioc flour, with his fingers in a way that tried to imitate the manner of city folk—it immediately gave him away as someone who came from the countryside.

And here as well, in his apartment, he was ashamed of his poverty. I could see it in the way he passed hurriedly into his room. He had little to offer though he had known I would come. A large bottle—shaped like a canister of liquid detergent—containing diluted and sugary apple juice was brought out.

He poured himself a glass but did not drink it.

I asked what he thought might happen if he traveled with me.

He shrugged, seeming to search for words.

I congratulated him on his hospital story, which had won a prize in our class. There had been visible consternation from the other students, particularly Jean-Bosco—no doubt from a sense that Gibson was a peasant boy, and did not have the requisite dissident credentials. Gibson had himself been surprised, and had stood stunned, looking at his certificate during the prize ceremony.

I suggested he try to get his story published.

He shook his head, smiling. “My newspaper will never publish it.”

“There’s nothing political about your piece,” I said, insisting that his editors would not turn down a well-written story.

But Gibson had for some months been writing for the country’s main independent paper, *Umuseso* The Early Morning. It was Rwanda’s most popular publication, revered by the people. Within hours of a new *Umuseso* edition vendors had to sell photocopies—such was the demand. Even in far-flung villages, where few could read, one would find old copies making the rounds, being read aloud by the illiterate. The print press was sought after in Rwanda, as few had access to the Internet.

The government had begun to crack down on *Umuseso* reporters, many of whom had once been close to the president, even living in exile with him. Some *Umuseso* journalists had already fled the country; others were in hiding. An old court case had been resurrected and the lead journalists found guilty of defaming one of the president’s powerful accomplices. The president hated criticism.

But like a many-headed hydra *Umuseso* survived the government attacks. This was not an ordinary newspaper. Its stories rarely cited sources, and were rarely verified. Yet they were often accurate. With astonishing success *Umuseso* predicted which officials would be fired or accused of corruption or sexual misconduct. The paper's source was the regime itself. There were officials deep within the government, who publicly supported the president but who felt certain information should be known and had for this reason become leakers.

This made *Umuseso* the most important paper in the country—its journalism was the only kind that had any meaning in the dictatorship. And the people had long ago learned that it was in presidential office gossip, rather than the theatrical parliamentary or ministerial hearings, that they should look for clues to their future.

The association with *Umuseso* meant Gibson led an extraordinarily private life. He used a neighborhood boy to fetch him beer in order to avoid being seen. And when he got out of the house he quickly escaped, he said, to a distant neighborhood where there was less risk of being recognized.

I turned down his offer of a drink, and asked how often he saw his family.

“Sometimes I worry for them. But it is better we don't see one another. My work could endanger their lives. It is better like this.” He sounded as though he was trying to convince himself.

He mentioned that he had a girlfriend. “I would like to marry her. But who would marry me? I have no money, and I am always worrying about the government. I can't offer a girl much. I would like to have a child and raise a family. Sometimes I wonder what it would be like to have a normal life.”

He looked around the room.

“Have you read Hegel?” His eyes sparkled.

It had been a while.

“I think his concept of the dialectic can help describe my life. Two ideas are opposed, and they give rise to a greater truth. Sometimes I feel this is why I confront the authorities.”

He added: “I think it is also because I realized many years ago that God was dead.”

Gibson often cited one of his mentors at the seminary, a bishop who had edited a newspaper. The bishop had written against the poor prison conditions and the harassment of human rights workers. The authorities had seen him as a threat. When the bishop fell ill, the government prevented him from traveling abroad to seek medical treatment. He subsequently died.

We then exchanged some philosophical banter, though I was unable to keep up with him.

“You don't know how much this conversation means to me,” Gibson said. “I am always closing myself in, and my mind loses sharpness. My professors, friends, I have given them all up. I don't have anyone to talk to except poor people. I have nothing against them, I am a modest man, but this kind of exchange of ideas, I have not had it for a long time, and it makes me feel somehow alive.”

He read to me from a recent edition of *Umuseso*, which he had salvaged from a government raid of his former apartment—the authorities had been looking for traces of the leakers within the regime. This *Umuseso* issue was a story about how the president's chief of cabinet had contrived to remove his predecessor, who had fled to Belgium claiming he would attend a training program but had never returned. When the government was silent about those who had fled the people were scared to evict them. Outside of the independent newspapers it could seem as though these exiles had never existed.

There was a knock on the door.

Gibson froze. Fortunately it was he who had been reading, and I had been silent.

The knocking repeated.

I sensed his terror at being seen with me, and I slipped into his bedroom. Here in this poor neighborhood, not frequented by foreigners, there would be suspicion about my presence, and what we were discussing in private. In his bedroom the floor was covered with stacks of handwritten papers I moved closer; they were notes for a news report.

Gibson spoke from the doorway. There was a tense discussion between him and a man—it seemed a census of some sort. After a while I heard the door being shut. I waited some moments.

It had been the Intore, the group that Cato had joined. The presidential election was coming up and gangs in the neighborhood were going house to house to ask, “Are you sure you know whom to vote for?” They were also holding a celebration in the president’s honor, and forcing people to attend.

Gibson was sweating.

I asked if he would go. We spoke more quietly now, pausing often, our ears alert for even a slight movement outside.

“Sometimes I tell them that I am sick, and hope they go away. But you can’t avoid these events for too long. They are the duties of a ‘good citizen.’ I too have to go and chant for the president. It is necessary if you want to eat.”

I took my leave. Gibson, seeming disappointed, picked up my empty glass, and said he normally would have walked me back.

Before leaving I asked about the explosion. Any news? The event seemed to have almost passed into my imagination. Gibson said there had still been nothing.

Closing the door on me, quickly, he seemed deep in thought. I sensed a despair had grown within him over the evening. As I walked out a small exterior light came on, to help me navigate the uneven mud, shaped with crevices by running water. I looked up: the moon was ringed by a glowing halo. It would rain tonight. The light was put out as soon as I stepped out of range—I turned, but could not spot from where he was observing me.

I slowly made my way down the red hill, tripping, my mind occupied.

A helicopter moved over the city, shining a powerful spotlight on the neighborhood around me—this was the police’s night patrols.

• • •

I thought much about Gibson in the days that followed: I admired the man. In his tranquil brown eyes, despite the fear, I sensed an ambition and defiance. He seemed sure of his resistance and in his quiet way courageous. I suppose it moved me that he did not come from a wealthy family that could afford dissent: no. I felt I should do everything to help him, even if it occasionally involved risks.

Gibson was still writing for *Umuseso*, but only “harmless” stories. It was not the moment to be provocative, he said. The genocide memorials seemed to make the journalists newly nervous. In the classroom, again I asked why he would not visit them—I thought Gibson could write a simple story about genocide survivors. He shrugged. I grew frustrated at his evasiveness.

I arrived late to class one day. At home, I had turned on the national television—the country’s only channel, it was what people watched when they wished to see the president delivering a speech, documentaries on topics they were permitted to talk about: the country’s mountain gorilla development projects, criminals captured by the security forces. I saw images of people hacking

one another with machetes.

It took me a moment to understand what I was looking at. And then I felt a new, visceral kind of terror. It was a bloody, insane slaughter.

I watched a grainy video of a roadblock on a red dirt road. An unarmed figure—a man? a woman?—was assaulted. A machete came down on the figure, arcing high through the air. The figure fell to the ground. The machete came down harder and harder. Now the camera moved close up, showing bodies on the ground, on the grass, in latrines. The blood over them was thick black. A piece of a head was missing. Another body was sliced open at the stomach so one could almost see its internal organs. Children, women, men.

Everything about the genocide terrified: the sheer number—eight hundred thousand—of dead; that thousands of ordinary people had participated in such a vile act; that it had all occurred in only one hundred days, between April and July 1994; that so few had seen it coming; that when presented with proof the world had turned a blind eye and done nothing.

On April 6, 1994, the official airplane carrying the then Rwandan president, Juvenal Habyarimana, was shot down, killing him. The genocide began shortly after, as did a military advance by Kagame's forces, which had invaded Rwanda four years earlier. The country at that time was facing an economic crisis, and was ruled by what used to be the farmer class—the Hutus. Kagame represented a section of the Tutsis, the traditional Rwandan elite, who had been exiled just before Rwanda gained independence from Belgium in 1962. His invasion stirred fear that the Tutsis would continue an old history of subjugation, and radio broadcasts during the genocide goaded the killers to exterminate Tutsis so that the people of Rwanda would never again be oppressed.

The victims suffered alone. As the killings in Rwanda mounted, and the evidence of genocide became clear, the United Nations voted to decrease its troop numbers. The United States shied away from recognizing the atrocity as genocide for fear that it would be compelled to stop the killings.

The national television channel showed us more bloated bodies beside a river, and then a church that had become a mass grave.

Kagame achieved his military victory during the genocide, taking charge of Rwanda and imposing order and calm. His government now regulated minute aspects of the country's functioning.

The journalists I taught and the ones at independent newspapers like *Umuseso* were both Hutu and Tutsi. Some were from the families of Tutsi genocide survivors, others from the families of Hutu killers now in prison.

That day in class, during the tea break between lessons, I asked Gibson about the images broadcast on national television. He silently picked at his piece of sponge cake. We were standing outside on the classroom porch. Gibson seemed too distressed to tell me much. I felt the broadcasts had touched a nerve, and that he was trying to shelter himself from such emotions when he refused to accompany me to the memorials. I knew he had been a boy in Rwanda when the killings had occurred. He smiled and mumbled something about the season of memorials. And I sensed it was more than the history that terrified Gibson, for his fear seemed rooted in the present, in how the genocide was now felt. I needed to seek counsel, for I did not fully understand.

I spent the afternoon teaching the class how to construct the lead paragraph of a news story. The paragraph needed to contain the essential information and grab the reader, yet be brief. We attempted some examples together: the students and I started with the same story, about a flood in America, and each tried to write the best lead.

Then we received news that the government was going to shut down *Umuseso* and also the newspaper run by Jean-Bosco, the student who had once been beaten into a coma. Jean-Bosco had not come to class that day. Several students did not believe the reports. “That would be going too far,” Gibson said, particularly of *Umuseso*. “We are supported by powerful people, close to the president himself.” He was sure that come Monday new issues would be published and available on the streets.

I called Jean-Bosco. He confirmed the government pressure, but said he was fighting it from every angle and that his paper would soon be up and running. That night I made another round of calls to my students, to learn if they had more news, and also to see if they were all right.

But less than a week later we learned that Jean-Bosco had been alerted that his life was again in danger. Government agents had followed him and told him to make a “U-turn,” to stop his reporting and help the government or they would “finish” him. He had fled. It was rumored that Jean-Bosco had crossed the eastern border, over the river, into Tanzania, perhaps as a way to get to friends in Uganda and that the security services were working frantically to capture him.

The repression did nothing to help Gibson’s nerves. He stopped talking much on the phone for fear that we were being listened to.

And the country was still imperturbably quiet, calm. A visitor would have no notion that anything was happening. No one demonstrated or spoke out. Radios and newspapers continually relayed good news about the government, besides information about the ongoing genocide memorials, and brief mentions of the criminal journalists.

I passed a difficult few nights.

• • •

It was Moses, the elder statesman of the journalists, who showed me the extent of the threat that was looming. The repression was having wider, transformative impact. I told him about my discussion with Gibson. He shook his head, and said there was an acute risk as the journalists were gradually silenced: the changes in the country, he said, were irreversible. Matters had become critical and needed to be written about. “You are concerned for the lives of the journalists. We must look after them. But how can they be idle now? The government is doing things that need to be stopped, and it is destroying our ability to have any kind of discussion.”

He was grave about the recent events, particularly I thought for a man who was so respected by the other students—it made me alert. “You have to understand, in all this,” he said, leaning over his cane, “that there are not many journalists left.”

I had come to his home to collect him. Moses was escorting me to a memorial.

We were to go to the place where the genocide took root in Rwanda. It was in the north of the country—it was there that the president’s forces, then in rebellion, had begun to attack the previous government, launching incursions from the mountains. And it was here that the previous government had conducted retaliatory killings, rounding up and killing everyone of the rebels’ ethnicity—already at this early stage, thousands of people.

I got to know Moses personally at this time. I learnt that he was in fact a survivor of the genocide. During the hundred days of killing he had hidden himself in bushes while street boys had fed him bread and wine that they had stolen from churches. Moses had reported on the genocide by the previous regime at risk to his life. Now he had committed himself to working against the repression, though more discreetly because he was older. We boarded the bus that would take us north. Moses to

me he would like to write about some of the president's crimes.

I asked why he wasn't afraid of speaking to me, in the open, at such a tense time, when the other journalists were being so cautious. I was thinking of our program, and also of Gibson.

His answer surprised me. "I died during the genocide," he said. "My entire family was massacred. I should have been killed with them. Now what's there to fear; are they going to kill me a second time?"

He called himself one of the walking dead. It seemed many survivors of the genocide described themselves as such.

Did he go often to the memorials? Not in a long time, he said. He had attended them in the beginning, just after the genocide. Indeed he had created one of the first committees to organize remembrances. But soon the government had taken over the memorials.

This was our conversation, to the sounds of the pop music that played in the bus, as we traveled alongside the beautifully forested hills, to the town of the memorial.

Moses had gotten me on a special bus normally reserved for survivors of the genocide and their families. I spent the first hours listening to the chatter. And I would have remained silent—I had begun the journey in a sacred spirit, thinking of the dead—if there was not a general lack of sobriety in the bus. It was the Western pop music, and the laughter of the passengers.

I tried to pry out of Moses what he wanted to show me. He was crisp: "You'll see."

He added: "You know, to control people you need to create a great deal of fear."

I asked if there was much rancor against the president for the people he had killed.

I was referring to crimes committed during the genocide and afterward in Congo. The president's forces had killed tens or perhaps hundreds of thousands of people. His army had invaded Congo, sparking a war there that still runs today and has killed many millions more, mostly from hunger and disease. The president had said he was hunting down the perpetrators of the genocide in Congo, but his forces reached nearly a thousand miles into that country and installed a new government there while slaughtering unarmed women and children en route. The massacres in Congo had been documented in U.N. reports—which had called them acts of a possible counter-genocide—but the killings in Rwanda were still shrouded in mystery. The president had suppressed investigations. When I asked Rwandans about these deaths they said, "I know nothing about them."

Moses and I started to talk without mentioning names so people would not know we were referring to the president.

"He's killed a lot of people," Moses said, "who will never receive justice. Many Rwandan families cannot name their dead because he was responsible." Moses waited a moment. "But did you know he also killed his fighters, including his child soldiers? It was a policy in his rebel forces. There was a word for it, *kufaniya*. It means 'do something for him.' That kind of ruthlessness, we started to realize it later. He cares for nobody. Even his wife means nothing to him. I think he is a little sick in the mind."

I asked why a man would kill his own people.

"He only knows to rule by fear."

Moses had become perturbed. "He grew up as a refugee. He returned from exile with his army and conquered this country. A Pygmy senator, after that war, said that when the big man and his people left Rwanda they had to leave their stomachs at the border, and go with their nobility, so people abroad would care for and feed them. But when they returned, they found these stomachs at the border."

hungry for thirty years. They left behind their nobility, and picked up the stomachs.”

I waited. Moses became bolder and now mentioned the president.

“Nobility is very important for our people. Politeness, generosity. The president kills people who fought by his side, who protected his life, and were like his brothers. Where is the nobility in that?”

We had nearly arrived—the hills had grown larger and larger, and were often capped by forests. They gave the idea of a natural countryside. But on closer observation one saw that the thickets of trees on those hills were made up of a single species. They were plantations of eucalyptus, brought in by the Belgians during the colonial time. So there was little natural about the countryside.

And the undulating land, which at first seemed lush, one saw was everywhere divided into rectangular patches—each a shade of green, yellow or brown, depending on the crop. Here, unlike Kigali, it was possible to sense how populated the country was, occupied to every inch.

The music, as we arrived, changed to religious tunes; the volume was raised. In the bus there was a general fidgeting; a sense of purpose had come over the passengers. Feeling it was inappropriate to talk I leaned back in my seat. Moses was looking out of the open window, his hands holding the vibrating glass. At the venue I saw a van with a satellite dish broadcasting the event across the country.

We walked into a battery of wails. Several thousands of people huddled on a field, dressed in purple, the official color of the memorials, and hurling cries. Women rolled on the ground; others fell over the men beside them. Immediately it began to rain—the sharp cold rain of Rwanda, accompanied by an enveloping mist. We pushed ahead, Moses with his cane, among the incessant cries of increasing volume, and arrived in the center of the field at a set of white stairs.

At the top of the stairs was a white platform, on which stood a man screaming into a microphone. “Repent! Repent!” Music began alongside the wailing, repeating the words: “*Jenoside, Jenoside.*”

I climbed the steps. A group of poor-looking people were lined up behind the speaker, and they had begun to cry. The women began to beat their breasts with palms and fists. And they pushed forward their children—five and seven years old, bawling, with snot dripping from their noses and over their tattered shirts.

I felt a tugging on my shirt. It was Moses. “You see what he is doing?”

There was a pleading look in his eyes. Leaning over his cane, he was totally concentrated on my face.

Coffins began to be carried below the staircase, into a white crypt. The coffins had glass tops, so one could see inside. In the first were skulls, neatly arranged, one beside the other, clean and perfectly shaped. I could not help but fix on one of the skulls, and imagine its past: the anger, hatred, fear and desperation. In the next coffin were femurs, set along its length. A dozen boxes passed by. “Repent!”

This was strange, for the culture of Rwanda would value preserving the dead body as a whole. Even if only a femur and a fragment of bone had been found after the genocide, they should be buried together, to represent the body, honor the dead. But the victims had here been dismantled, and the bones regrouped by part; it had the effect of emphasizing the number.

The children were now crying so hard that they had to stop to gasp for breath. Their voices were strained, grating. They coughed, and liquid spilled out of their mouths. Why had they begun to howl and bray? “*Jenoside! Jenoside!*” These children were too young to have been alive during the genocide. But they behaved as if they possessed its memory.

And one realized that the memorials also served the purpose of transmission. And that the

transmission was meant to cause distress. It was as in Rwandan schools, where teachers complained that during the memorial season the videos on national television made the children uncontrollable. But despite the teachers' complaints, the gruesome films continued. I was doubly horrified: I had expected something else from the memorials: some compassion for society, but I felt only violence. The government of Rwanda had created these events, which instead of healing society, increased its trauma. The terror of the genocide was being used and spread. One realized that the genocide and the time of war, almost two decades past, were still kept alive in the country. The trauma of the genocide was, in the children, running like roots through society.

"They are manufacturing fear in these places," Moses said, gasping. "We survivors have asked them to stop this violence. What do they want from us?" I could see he had begun to shake, that he had lost strength in his legs. "Sometimes I cry to myself at night. Like this"—he put his teeth over his lips and started to bawl—"not because of the memories of the genocide. But because of how the government mocks the genocide, uses it to get pity from the world, to get money, and at the same time keep us in a state of fear."

The crying around us was alarming.

"The imbeciles, the imbeciles," Moses repeated. He seemed not to care about the government officers standing nearby. "The imbeciles who run this country are negating us, using us, selling us. They are building our country on our bodies, our blood. They hold shows like this, theaters, and pretend. This place is the trauma. They put people in prison for negating the genocide. But if they were serious about it then the first man in prison would be the one who ordered this."

Moses said there were other places: military-style camps across the country for children. Kept far from society, the children spent weeks in them, were dressed in military fatigues, and indoctrinated to be utterly devoted to the government.

The president each year held an event, at which he brought thousands together in the national stadium: films of the killings were played, the crowd was driven into a traumatized frenzy. And the president reminded everyone that he was their savior.

There were other places as well.

"We can't say anything," he said. "And when the president is done, no one will want to."

On the journey home it took Moses several hours to regain some sense of calm. "I don't know if we will succeed against this," he said. "But God knows we have to try."

• • •

The explosion had by now become something vague in the mind: the memory of its sound had receded, and the shimmering swept-up glass had acquired an unearthly glow. Without acknowledgment, or any proof, evidence, without the shock that society should normally feel, without a sense of an emotional response from the country, I began to wonder if the explosion had happened at all, if it had not been something I had imagined. It was frightening, that something so obvious to the senses as an explosion—that had wounded and killed—could turn into a sort of hallucination, and be made to disappear.

LIGHTS

In the classroom Gibson suddenly said that he wanted to start a magazine. It would not flatter the president, nor print overtly subversive news. He wanted this magazine to fall somewhere in the middle of the spectrum of newspapers in the country, and hoped it would one day publish his hospital story.

The anger was lurking; the news was harsh. Already among the journalists only the uncompromising still dared operate. “The more they harass the press,” Gibson said, “the more aggressive the news gets, and the angrier the government becomes. Perhaps we can break this negative cycle with some sense.”

But he looked away from me as he spoke. I suspected that the stress had become overwhelming. I saw few ways to report honestly without drawing the authorities’ wrath. Gibson was trying not to react to the government’s pressure on him, to remain calm as the tension mounted. That week he had stopped writing for *Umuseso*.

He asked what I thought. I told him I wanted to help. Gibson said his best friend would join in our efforts.

He would call the magazine: *NEW HORIZONS*.

What Moses had foretold began to be. I continued to teach my journalism classes. Without Cat who had turned to the Intore, and Jean-Bosco, who was being pursued by the government, it wasn’t the same. I invited new journalists to take their places, so we still had ten students. But the classes were quieter. Discussions were less vibrant. It took longer to get through basic material.

Gibson still sat at the back of the room. Agnès was there as well, scowling as always, her back to the wall. I was glad for their presence. Sometimes I felt I was teaching mostly for them.

A student brought in a copy of a government paper. It was in Kinyarwanda, the local language. A picture of the president was on the front page. I asked the student to read out the first paragraph of the lead story.

“Victoire Ingabire, the criminal with genocidal ideology, will be prosecuted by the government...”

She was an opposition politician who had been living in the Netherlands, and had returned to run in the upcoming election against the president. One of her first acts in Rwanda was to visit a genocide memorial and say that there were many others who had been killed but were not remembered—she was also referring to those massacred by the president’s forces, all mention of whom was suppressed.

I looked around the room at my students. My cup of tea from the morning break between lessons was growing cold.

I asked if there was a problem with the news story. No one answered; this alone was unusual. Before, it would have been difficult to contain the students.

I asked them if the politician, Victoire, had been tried in court.

After a pause, some of the students meekly shook their heads. They sat on either side of a long conference table, at whose head I stood. I scribbled from time to time on a flip board. Now I wrote “Court.”

“No, she has not been tried, and is therefore not a criminal—not yet,” I said.

“But the president has said she is a criminal,” someone countered vociferously.

“Does that make her a criminal?”

It was futile, for the courts depended entirely on the president. Reformist judges had been expelled so the president controlled the judiciary. This was how dictators destroyed countries, to gain power they destroyed the capacity for independent speech, then independent institutions—and ultimately independent thought itself. I was bearing witness to this process of destruction, and trying to reverse it.

“Who wrote that story?” I asked. It was the newspaper’s editor in chief. “Is he experienced?”

When no one else volunteered Agnès answered that he was indeed experienced, that he had been a reporter for twenty years, and had on many occasions written good, balanced stories. There had been fierce competition for his job.

I reiterated my point: “Is he incompetent? Or does he know what he’s doing?”

They murmured, though before they had been reluctant: “He knows what he is doing.”

“Then why does he write like this?”

Silence again.

A student finally spoke up: “He wants to make the president happy. The editor in chief knows what he is doing is wrong. But to please the president he will not only agree with what the president has said, but go even further. Out of an excess of zeal. He will accuse Victoire, indict her and judge her for other crimes. It is how we are taught to show loyalty—”

“One journalist has written that Victoire had extramarital affairs. It has no relation to her case. But the government likes to smear its enemies. So we do the job for them, even without them asking.”

“When you flatter the president you receive favors, promotions, money.”

A woman interjected: “How do you expect otherwise? If we don’t call her a criminal then the authorities think we are on her side. They have even threatened my children. But if we say she is guilty they leave us alone. So we even call her a villain, genocidal...”

A free discussion had begun, at least. It had taken some work, but with the assistance of the original group of students, the other journalists were now expressing themselves, debating, thinking, supporting each other, helping one another speak.

I knew that I could not hope to fight the system on my own. But I wanted the classes to be a catalyst, to create a feeling of solidarity, so the journalists knew that they were not alone—the regime was trying to isolate them, and pick them off one by one.

And I could see that the students already knew the answers—even if these were buried deep within them. They needed courage, and the solidarity of their colleagues, to speak their minds.

“This excess of zeal is a problem,” Gibson said. “We say things we don’t believe, just to please some people, and we end up believing what we say.”

“To stop flattery we have to stop being afraid.”

“It makes us forget the truth.”

I had given the students assignments—to visit schools, clinics, agriculture programs. Their stories had more errors than when I'd had the more experienced journalists. I spent hours outside the classroom making corrections.

But the work felt rewarding. Every day that I drew the students out of the repression I was satisfied. I felt that a small part of truth had been won that day. And there seemed hope that this piece of truth could grow, and live.

The office, where I taught the classes, thus became a place of great energy, a place that gave me strength. Class after class was conducted; the students advanced, developed camaraderie, and became more adept in their reporting. With limited resources and funds, I felt our training program was making a real difference in the country.

Gibson would stay on in the office in the evenings, and together with his best friend, the former seminary roommate, who was to lead the business development—Gibson would be chief editor—we drafted a detailed business plan. The government required this for the magazine's registration. One had to show enough funds for computers, tables and chairs; an office, the government said, had also to look like an office. The regulations were meant to dissuade journalists, and make our work difficult. We joked amongst ourselves that the government would soon also mandate the color of journalists' socks. I offered Gibson the use of our office facilities, which had ample chairs and spare computers when the other students were not around.

It was a fulfilling period, of long hours of work with good spirit, during which our friendship grew stronger and more complete.

I understood Gibson better as the magazine took shape, and became increasingly convinced of his sincerity, his courage and intelligence. We grew excited by the possibilities the magazine offered. The project began to occupy our minds. We felt that it would almost certainly succeed with the public, and might even turn a small profit in its first months, if we were lucky.

I remember the office garden from this time. Our office was blessed with an enormous garden that had a quality of privacy and splendor. I had been told that before the genocide it used to be a favorite sitting place on Sundays for the former president's daughter. It had a large scaly guava tree with spreading branches. We could see this tree from the rooms in which we worked, and I associated its scattered form with many strong memories. I was delighted to have gotten to know Gibson.

A first copy of the magazine was printed. The front page was in color, and he had even found a couple of advertisements, which were of simple design but impeccably printed. It was an admirable effort.

The design, the copy, the printing, the advertisements: all this had been achieved with little fuss. Gibson worked in silence, on his own, as if unaware of his intelligence and his progression. He was lost in his work. There was never the disturbance of achievement.

He still kept his distance from the others, spoke to no one, had no real friends besides his former roommate.

The main story in this first issue was about malnutrition. The government position was that Rwanda had sufficient food and that the president's policies had banished hunger. Gibson had avoided confronting the official line. Without ever stating that Rwanda had a malnutrition problem, and that children even in the capital—the beacon of the government's message of its success to the world—were dying from the condition, Gibson simply provided information to mothers that would help them feed their children.

Fundamental needs of the population like food, housing and health were especially sensitive topics. They were essential to the discourse that the government was doing good for its people. The government might point out problems that arose, but for a citizen to do the same, to say without prior signal for example that people were lacking food, was inherently dangerous. It was seen as diminishing the government's authority. Even posing the question could be seen as a form of displeasure, dissent. It was why one always added that the government was doing everything necessary. Or to be safe, one avoided stating the problem at all.

Language was thus made complex. It was as much for your use as for use against you. The attempt to write or say something, to express yourself, turned into an intricate exercise. Distrust and unhappiness might show in a word, a pause, a twitch. One had always to feel that one was being watched. And that anyone could use what you wrote or said—or what you did not—to denounce you.

What then was the truth about how people were faring? The president was declaring to the world that he was creating progress: he was growing the country's economy, reducing poverty, reducing hunger. But he suppressed verification of these claims. For instance, when the World Food Programme announced a famine outbreak in Rwanda in 2006, affecting hundreds of thousands of people, the government denied it. To this day, there was officially no famine. When the United Nations released a study in 2007, signed off on by Rwanda's finance minister, saying the number of impoverished people in the country had risen, and that hunger would remain above levels in 1990—the year the president had invaded Rwanda to “liberate” the people from the previous regime—the government forced the United Nations to discredit its findings and blacklist the researchers. A World Bank research team studying the country's progress, directly testing the president's claim that he had improved life in Rwanda since 1990, was forced to destroy the data it had collected when it became clear that the study was willing to contradict the official narrative. Subsequent research teams, at the government's invitation, have found that the economy is growing, poverty is declining, and the people are better nourished. Researchers investigating police corruption were expelled from the country; the country was declared among the least corrupt. A magical nation was thus created.

The government's telling of history was rich in such deceptions. An irony of the memorials was their slogan, “Never Forget,” which to many Rwandans, even genocide survivors, meant the opposite. Rwandans had to forget, for example, that the president had opposed the deployment of U.N. peacekeepers one month into the hundred-day genocide. The president had worried that the peacekeepers would interfere with his military campaign, and prevent him from taking power. Thousands of deaths in the genocide could have been avoided, besides the scores of civilians his forces had killed. But the president had cast himself as the hero of the genocide, as the man who had ended it while the world stood idle.

There were some outlets, like my students' newspapers, where people still dared to describe their lives and memories. Otherwise, one could not question the government's statements, so what the government said became the truth.

Gibson had realized that the solution was to write around these official narratives. In this way he would address the immediate concerns of the people, but ensure his own protection.

One afternoon Gibson came to the office with news we had been waiting for. The ministries of information and health had both approved *New Horizons*. We had been optimistic about approval since his publication was not critical of the authorities. It was a good sign. Gibson's pimpled, cratered face showed both satisfaction and a kind of melancholy. He would soon be able to publish.

Gibson had already charted out the next four issues, their themes. He had lined up journalists, and

spent his own money, from the little he had saved up, to pay them for their reporting.

We went to the garden that evening with some bottles of beer. They were almost the size of wine bottles, the standard in Rwanda. Once Gibson had made sure no one could observe us he drank his beer through a straw. It was the traditional way. In villages men would sit in a circle and pass around a flask of banana beer—a practice the government had outlawed. I think Gibson quietly enjoyed his small subversion.

One still felt the nervousness in the country. The *Umuseso* journalists had been summoned to court. Their lawyers had asked the judge if the president had sent in a complaint, perhaps a letter, as proof of his irritation with their newspaper. The prosecution asked if that were the only way to know of the president's irritation. So this landmark case, with serious implications for the country, would devolve into a discussion about the president's possible emotional states.

"Maybe *New Horizons* will become a way for journalists to open up spaces to speak," Gibson told me. "We can get the message out while worrying less about the government attacking us. People in our country are dying needlessly. If we tell them how to cure themselves they will survive. We just have to be patient, and help a few of them at a time."

The garden had grown more and more splendid. We were in the rainy season, and the humid afternoons came with sharp, heavy showers. The clouds would then quickly disperse, and the sun would light up every blade of grass, every leaf, flower.

In the twilight hour Gibson and I observed the birds with long orange tails, the African paradise flycatchers, swoop down from the guava tree and pick out the flies that hung in midair as though in stupor.

Gibson was now considering a point of business: should he publish the magazine as a stand-alone or would it be better to distribute it as a supplement with existing newspapers? He felt the latter would be more feasible, particularly to begin with: he would avoid having to build a distribution network, and wouldn't have to craft a brand from scratch. I had not seen any paper use such an idea in Rwanda. I observed the young man. He looked nonchalant, and unaware of his ingenuity.

We heard a noise above. A helicopter plunged toward the city. Gibson and I stepped back. It was not the night police—the rotors were set higher and the engine had a more powerful, smoother sound. It flew low, almost recklessly low over the houses. A professional pilot on his own accord would not fly in this manner. The machine, its belly slender and white, hovered to one side of us. The chops became hard, suddenly audible. I wanted to hide. Feeling exposed, we shielded our eyes, and tried to get a view of the person in the cockpit.

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There was a high wall, at the top of which hung a small square picture of the president. And in front of me, against this wall, was a scrawny man wearing a thin T-shirt and khaki shorts. The man smiled repeatedly at me. We stood outside a conference room.

He looked up, at the photograph. And then at me.

I looked up as well. And at him.

He started to laugh. It was a cackling laugh, hysterical and high-pitched.

I laughed.

"It's funny, no?" he said.

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