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DANNY

Prague, Czech Republic

1994

The telephone jangled on the front counter, the sound harsh and demanding in the high-ceilinged café where customers sat bathed by the long rays of morning sun that reached around the still sleeping bulk of the National Theatre. It sat opposite, faceless in shadow.

The jarring sound had interrupted the concentration of over a dozen caffeine lovers, but I only noticed the woman. She was spotlit in golden light. Time had etched her face; her eyes, softened by life, still looked for more. She glanced up from her book and smiled as I squeezed past her table with my coffee. With her blue and green plaid skirt and gentle smile, it was unlikely she would have a nefarious bone in her body. However, as I sat down at the corner table in Café Slavia, I could not have known that in less than fifteen minutes she would, like some geriatric ninja, reduce me to emotional paralysis. Each progressive detail she revealed in her innocent Welsh lilt would unshackle memories held in my deepest vaults.

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The Vltava River flows under eighteen bridges as it makes its way through Prague; Charles Bridge is the oldest and most famous of these, completed in 1402. Over a dozen statues line each side and gaze down with stony indifference upon the throngs of tourists, vendors, performers, and scammers. Downriver is the newest bridge, the Legion, which was completed in 1901, and the one I was looking at now, just outside my corner window of the café. Only pedestrians and trams cross the river here, where Narodni Street ends, where the

National Theatre and a former palace face each other, the latter housing Café Slavia on its ground floor. I've visited Prague several times and always wind up here.

Both hands cradled my cup; my body still warming up slower than I would have liked as the weather on this morning in early April still held more allegiance to winter than spring. Jet-lagged and grumpy, I had ordered coffee with milk in my best guide-book Czech, hoping I remembered and pronounced everything correctly and wouldn't wind up with fried liver and a slice of lemon. The server seemed to understand and produced my order correctly, even with the Canadian-accented attempt at Czech.

Just before crossing the bridge, a tram dinged to warn pedestrians of its approach, the signal barely audible above the tinkle of cups and saucers that accented the ambient hum of the café. This meeting place had, for over a hundred years, spawned countless poems, novels, and love letters. It had watched over people as they read newspapers and books; chaperoned couples as they stared into each other's eyes.

For myself, my needs were merely coffee and a chance to let my mind rest. Well, who am I kidding? My mind never rests, but at least I was just watching the world go by, the deeper philosophical thoughts that often plagued me, shunted momentarily to the side. Those deeper thoughts, which often came whenever I was stationary with some sort of drink in my hand, when my mind was free from more mundane details like travel arrangements or photographic assignments, often struggled with the arguments for the existence of God. I preferred all my theological ducks quacking in a row, but somehow there were always several that waddled out of line. It was sometimes too much work to have it all make sense. But I kept trying. Some say that spiritual faith causes less angst if one floats along, smug within the safety of the religious life jacket your parents or culture bequeathed you. I was no longer that person.

However, as I was not now wrestling with those thoughts, I grabbed my journal and started catching up on the last few days, a necessary task as my life seemed a never-ending stream of details that needed to be tracked: names, contacts, photo captions, locations where I'd photographed, the amount of film I'd shot, which rolls I'd couriered back to the office, shipping invoice numbers, favourite cafés or hotels and, as always, ideas for the photography book on Zaire I'd begun to develop.

The ding-ding of another tram interrupted my mind at rest and for a second I looked over to the front counter where one of the staff filled a tray with fresh pastries, the aroma wafting throughout the café.

I took another sip of coffee and looked at her. Seated across from me at a table for two, the woman I had squeezed by earlier looked to be in her 70s. She was well into a rather tattered book with a torn dust cover; a sharp contrast to her appearance, grey hair pulled back and held at the nape with a silver clasp. A navy blazer complimented the dark blue and green plaid skirt; elegant, but not wealthy, I decided, with that European look that seems effortlessly stylish. I wondered what she was reading. My default genre had always been thrillers, picked up at an airport to hold my attention during a flight and then discarded. It was long past time to broaden my scope.

After another sip, I put my coffee cup down just as she put her book down. She sighed and reached into the pocket of her blazer, removing a handkerchief to dab at her eyes. Maybe she is reading a Czech romance, and the hero has moved on to another love interest.

Finishing her coffee, she reached for her coat. Insatiably curious, I leaned forward to better view the title of her book and my chest tightened. I stared at the cover of a book I knew well, one that was definitely not a romance novel. The ripped cover revealed the title–111 Days in Stanleyville. This was David Reed's well-written account of the joint Belgian/US rescue of 1600 hostages from the separatist rebels in Stanleyville during the 1964 Congo Crisis.

Without a thought, I stood up and went to the front of her table. "*Dobry den*. Do you speak English?"

"*Dobry den*. Yes, that's why I'm reading an English book," she said with a laugh.

I felt my face blush. Of course, that was stupid of me. "You know about Stanleyville?"

"I knew about it when it happened, but I had never read this book." She was looking at me and I didn't know what to say. I was breathing faster and turned my eyes down to the table.

Several seconds passed. "Young man, are you all right?"

I don't know how long the silence lasted, but I eventually said, "I'm sorry, I should go," barely able to squeeze the words out.

"No–please wait. Could I buy you another coffee? Please sit down."

I stood for a while, then pulled out the empty chair and sat down. I was breathing better, but my eyes were moist, and I didn't want to look at her.

There were seventeen packets of sugar in the white porcelain bowl in the centre of the table. I took some deep breaths. The top of the saltshaker had fifteen holes.

After a while she said softly, "You were there, weren't you?"

I nodded. She waved over the server and ordered two brewed coffees. I tried to control my breathing and think of something to say. The server returned and put the cups down. I looked up at the woman; her face softened when she saw my tears and her hand reached across to cover mine.

"You don't have to say anything. My sister worked in the Congo at that time, so I kept up with the news. She had left the hospital she worked at in October 1964, for a brief break in Nairobi and thus was out of the country when the troubles started. When it was obvious the rebellion would last for a while, she came back to Wales and stayed with me. The two of us are here in Prague on vacation while her husband does a two-week stint of surgery at a hospital in Rwanda. She wanted to spoil herself with a pedicure this morning, so she's back at our hotel."

The woman put some milk in her coffee. Then after a while she asked, "Were your parents missionaries, by any chance?"

Again, I nodded and took a sip of fresh coffee. More silence. I told myself to say something, but I couldn't think clearly.

"I'm sure you're following the news; it doesn't look good in Rwanda. The president's plane was shot down yesterday and I'm afraid tribal conflict will erupt. I hope Richard will leave before it gets nasty. Richard, that's the husband of my sister, Gladys."

I raised my head and looked at her. "Sister Gladys…Sister Gladys is here…in Prague?"

She stared at me for a while. "They called her Sister Gladys at the hospital, didn't they? Nebola Hospital. You knew her?" Her hand went to her mouth, then came back to my hand. "You're Danny! Gladys and I didn't know where you were. For over twenty years, nobody in any of the missions or embassies knew where you were. After finishing your schooling in Nairobi, you disappeared."

I nodded again. "Would I be able to see her?"

"We're flying out tomorrow morning to London." A moment passed, then she asked with a smile, "Would you join us for dinner tonight?"

"My flight leaves at 11 p.m. tonight." As it always did, the emotional trigger had passed and allowed my breathing and speech to return to normal. "I'm headed to South Africa to cover the elections; I'm a photojournalist. If we could eat unfashionably early, like 6 p.m., it might work. Is your hotel around here?"

"Not too far. We're over in the Old Town. How about six at the Cafe Imperial? We saw it quite close to our hotel."

"Sure, although I have nothing fancy to wear. When I walked by yesterday, it looked a little uppity."

"Oh, I'm sure you'll be fine. I'm Evelyn, by the way. It was nice to meet you, Danny, and Gladys will be over the moon to see you. She's talked about you so much and prayed for you for years."

Well, I didn't know what to say to that, so I said, "I'll see you at six."

She stood and we hugged, then I grabbed my jacket from the corner table, put my journal back in the satchel and left to pay the bill. I paid for her as well and the server gave me a warm smile. I hoped my eyes weren't red.

The early spring air felt invigorating as I walked back to my hotel, although I had to zip up my jacket to keep out the bite of the April wind.

Sister Gladys is in Prague. Wow, thirty years was a long time; would I even recognize her? All those days of doing my schoolwork with Salamu at the extra tables in the hospital lab and having Sister Gladys or my mother stopping in to check on us. I was excited but then soon realized that they would want to hear my story, where I've been the last thirty years, what my life has looked like since that day in late November 1964. I still couldn't talk about it without getting emotional, thus I never did. But this wonderful older woman had thrown open wide the door of my memory vault and the deepest ones had rushed out: my ten-year-old self fleeing in a convoy of mercenary vehicles leaving my parents lifeless in the dark red dirt of a roundabout, leaving one of my two closest friends behind as she was the only caregiver to a mother with leprosy, and being accompanied by the other, who was trying to be brave as blood seeped through a bandage where a stray bullet had pierced her leg.

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Arriving at my hotel deep in thought, I got my room key from the desk and made my way to the elevators, passing a sign that pointed down a dim hallway to the spa. The thought came to me that maybe they offered massage services; something I could use before another day trapped in an economy airline seat. Once in my room, I called the front desk and asked for the spa; the attendant said that they did offer massage and because of a cancellation, she would have a one-hour spot available in about thirty minutes. I booked it and sat down on my bed. Not only would I be flying tomorrow, but tonight I might have to go over some triggering details at dinner and it would be helpful to be as relaxed as possible. I imagined a cute brunette with a name like Sophia waiting for me.

After having a quick shower and a shave, I went down for my massage. Finding a chair by the spa door, I sat down, flipping through a tourist guide while I waited.

"Mr. Dahnee?" I stood up, looking at the open door. Sophia obviously had the day off. I looked at the brass name badge on a white lab coat, the buttons of which were strained to the limit. "Come. Now. Clothes off. Lie Down," said Staza.

Staza, wasn't that what they called the East German secret police? Okay, maybe that was Stazi.

This massage therapist had limited English but there seemed to be no limits to the strength in her hands and arms, and at one point I remember her swatting my shoulder and saying "Relax Dahnee." I realized I had tensed up into some sort of exercise-like plank position and lowered myself back down to the table. Surviving the hour somehow, and feeling rejuvenated, I charged the fee to my room, thanked Staza and left some coins in her tip jar.

Back in my room, I chose some clothes for the evening and packed the rest, then picking up the hotel phone, I checked in with my office in Toronto. I also called the airline and confirmed my flight, and as this upcoming leg of the journey to South Africa would be a long one, I set the alarm on my watch and tried to have a nap.

Like most naps, it felt like I had just closed my eyes when the alarm went, and fighting the urge to continue sleeping, I started getting ready. After my suitcase was packed, the carry-on camera bag and my satchel ready, I sat on the bed and ran through my mind what I wanted to tell the two older ladies, one of whom I knew thirty years ago and had felt quite close to as a child, and the other whom I had known for only a few hours. Neither of them had experienced any of the rebellion, except through news reports and the accounts of refugees from the conflict. To get through the evening, I decided to focus on them, what Evelyn had spent her working life doing and what Gladys–I still couldn't quite say her name without prefacing it with Sister–had done since her Congo days.

It was a long shot, but I wondered if Gladys would know anything about Salamu. The search for the friend who had been like a sister, had gone on for years; she was a ghost that haunted my dreams. It must have been four or five times over the last decade, that when I had been in Nairobi for work, I would take a few days off and hitch a ride with my pilot friend Herri. She would take me across the great lakes, letting me off in Isiro, one of the larger cities in northeast Zaire and a few hours' drive south of my former home at Nebola Hospital. It was here that my Greek friend lived, owner and manager of a thriving general goods store. He would generously lend me his motorcycle whenever I dropped in to see him. His Honda 600 was a powerful single-cylinder motorcycle that easily handled the potholed and often muddy jungle roads that snaked north towards Nebola. The ill-kept road wound through roadside villages and deep forest, across several streams where small log bridges were in varying stages of decay. One or two sections of the road passed through bamboo forests where the tall slender trunks that bordered the road bent inwards and created a tunnel. In these areas, the road surface was usually damp and muddy, and I would often come across a kaleidoscope of butterflies, hundreds of them either hydrating themselves from the puddles or extracting nectar from flowers on the creeping vines that encroached upon the road. They would explode in a cloud of iridescence as the noise and vibration of the motorcycle stirred them.

Whenever I passed by a village, the kids would hear the bike long before they could see it and would wait by the road to wave, stragglers running to catch up with their friends, often pushing a salvaged bicycle rim with a stick. These rides were always memorable: humid air laden with smells, dozens of species of birds to identify, often monkeys berating the passerby from road-side trees. By the time I arrived at the hospital, I was always in a good mood.

On one of my visits several years ago, I had discovered an older male nurse that had remembered me as a child, and he had told me that the rebels had shot Salamu's mother, along with the rest of the lepers in the village. No one knew, however, of Salamu's whereabouts. One day she was there and the next she was gone. He cautioned me she might not have made it through the war alive, but I didn't want to think about that possibility. She had no relatives; her estranged father had returned to Belgium after independence and was probably dead by now. The last anyone had seen of her was her escape into the forest in early December 1964, a week after the mercenaries went through the area. I checked every lead I got but always came up empty.

However, from her home in Wales, maybe Gladys had heard or read something about Salamu in mission newsletters and that made me kind of excited about dinner.

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The lobby of the Café Imperial showed Moorish influence: beautiful floor mosaics and cream-coloured ceramic tiles placed randomly into the walls. I was examining the menu posted on an easel when I heard the

brass door open, and as I turned towards the door, two older women walked in. It was easy to recognize Gladys. She almost ran up to me and I bent down as we embraced; she wouldn't let go and I could tell she was crying. Then she let go and looked at me, her hand reaching up to touch my cheek. "Thank God I was able to see you again. I've prayed for you all these years, hoping you would find your way. I don't imagine it has been easy."

"Well, I haven't known anything different since that day when my life changed. But I've made it so far. Lovely to see you, Gladys, and Evelyn. Why don't we go to our seats?" The waiter hung up our coats and took us to a reserved table, threading his way through the empty dining room.

"Any drinks tonight?" he asked. The two ladies both said that water would be fine for now. I ordered a Pilsner Urquell–the Czechs have been making this beer for 150 years and it is close to perfection, at least for my palette.

Gladys dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief and blew her nose. "Forgive me, Danny," she said. "This has been such a shock since Evelyn came back to the hotel with the news of running into you in the coffee shop. And are you Danny or Dan?"

"I'm still Danny, and you'll always be Sister Gladys to me."

She laughed, "Well, no one has called me that for years; the medical profession has gotten away from that term as there are now many male nurses and far fewer Catholic ones."

"Okay, I'll try to lose the Sister. So, Gladys, can you tell me if you know anything about Salamu? She has disappeared off the face of the earth."

"Dearest Salamu," she sighed. "Well, Danny, one could argue you wrote the book on disappearing." She smiled, then looked down at her plate for a while and then said, "You know, I had the strangest thought yesterday when I talked to my husband in Kigali. Evelyn told you about him, I believe?"

I nodded, and she kept going.

"He said his surgical assistant this week was a lighter-skinned African nurse who mentioned she was originally from Congo but had been at the hospital in Kigali for over a decade now. After hanging up, I wondered if that was our Salamu. Of course, there are many mixed-race people around and I always look at any I pass in the street, even at home in Wales, to see if I recognize her. She was such a special child; well, you were too. And the Davies girl as well. Us single missionaries thought of you children as our nephews and nieces. What was her name? Her family was at Libongo."

"Olivia Davies–I've kept on the lookout for her too. Last I heard, she was working as a psychologist in London, but that's a few years ago now. Although, last week I was at a conference in Vancouver and one of the speakers was Dr. Olivia Davies, so that could have been our Olivia, but I didn't get a chance to connect with her to find out. Many times, I'd thought I had found Salamu, and it turned out to be someone else or a false lead, so I'm guessing this will be similar."

The waiter came back with my beer and took our order. After he was gone, I asked, "So, Evelyn, what did you do in Wales while Gladys was in the Congo?"

"I was a teacher in the secondary school system. Math and science. I met a banker, and we had two boys. My husband has been gone now for almost ten years. Both boys work in the computer world–that seems to be all the rage now and almost everyone has a personal computer at home, except me. I don't want to learn about all that. My typewriter still works fine."

"We never like change, do we? They say at some point that cameras will be digital and without film. I've seen some results, and they are quite pathetic, so I'm not throwing away my film anytime soon."

"How did you get into the news world?"

Here we go, you can do this–just the highlights. "Well after the Rebellion, and without any parents, I wound up with my uncle in Vancouver. He was into commercial real estate, which was booming then in the lower mainland of British Columbia, and he didn't have any time for me. I did my Grades Six, Seven and Eight staying with him, then my uncle offered to pay for me to attend a boarding school in Nairobi for my high school. I had felt like a fish out of water in Vancouver–soccer being one of my few happy spaces–so his offer came as a welcome surprise. I think he was glad to have me out of his hair.

"When I finished high school in Nairobi, I went back to Vancouver and found a place on my own. I tried a year at university and then transferred to a technical college for journalism. Two years later, I was hired by a news agency from Toronto, although I spent about ten years based out of Calgary, in Alberta."

The waiter brought our food, and we started eating.

"Sis … ah, Gladys, did you continue nursing in Wales when you returned from the Congo?"

"Yes, although after a while I moved into teaching at a nurse's college in London. I retired three years ago, although I work part-time now at a hospital back in Cardiff. Evelyn and I have taken a few trips over the last while to see a bit of Europe."

"Have you kept up with any of the Congo missionaries from back then?"

"Not really. Some went back after the political situation settled down and Mobutu took over. Then he changed the name to Zaire. When was that, the '70s, I think?"

"Yes, 1971."

"Sometimes when I heard of a mission conference in London, I would attend to see if there was anyone I knew, to see if there might be someone who knew the whereabouts of you and Salamu. I ran into the Davies once, but they hadn't heard from you or your uncle. They thought it strange that the only communication with him was saying that you had arrived following your evacuation from Congo. They had sent several letters in the months that followed–early 1965, but he didn't respond. At the time of that conference when I met them, the Davies said Olivia was still in secondary school and her two brothers had recently started at one of the universities in London."

After a brief pause, Evelyn asked, "Will you stay working in the media? It keeps you busy?"

"Oh yes, it's busy, and it allows me to travel; lately, it seems like that's all I'm doing. Just over this past week, upon the request of the Canadian Press, I made the move across the country to Toronto to be closer to where my agency is based. As to whether I will stay in the news world, I'd have to say I'm ready for a change. The way news is gathered is changing quickly and I am ready for a change. I have a former classmate from my school in Nairobi; he and his wife run a safari company in Uganda catering to wildlife photo enthusiasts, and they need a photographer to travel with the tour groups. Newer cameras have become quite automatic and easy to use, so photography has become a popular hobby, especially photography of wildlife. The experience for those on photo tours can be improved by having someone who can help them find, identify, and make better photos of the wildlife they see on a safari. Tonight, I'm off to South Africa to cover the build-up to the elections in what will probably be a coronation for Nelson Mandela, but I've given notice to the agency in Toronto that this will be my last job for them. I'm quite looking forward to this new venture in the tourism sector."

The waiter picked up our plates and asked about dessert. Evelyn went for the chocolate cake, Gladys chose the mango sorbet, and I went for my default crème brûlée.

Gladys leaned forward and asked, "Did you ever go back to the hospital?"

I took a deep breath.

"Yes, several times, mainly looking for Salamu. I have a high school friend who's a pilot for a charter company that flies supplies and people all over the Great Lakes region. She's based in Nairobi, and as I'm often there for work, I pop in for a visit and to see if she can take me with her to Zaire. I get off the plane in Isiro–you remember it used to be called Paulis in your time?"

Gladys nodded and I continued.

"There, I have a Greek friend who lets me borrow his motorbike to make the trip out to Nebola or wherever I have a lead to follow up. In fact, just a few weeks ago, I was there again. The hospital has improved over the years, and some money has gone into it to rebuild and even expand. The leper's village was never rebuilt because the multi-drug treatment that came out in the early 80s has been very effective, and patients are staying in their home villages. By now, the older people that remembered us have died, and no one even recognizes the name of Salamu. I've asked the younger hospital staff if they went to school with her, thinking she might have trained in medicine, as she had grown up in a hospital. No one had. I went to the schools they trained at and no one by that name had ever been enrolled there. She must have left the country, or … maybe she didn't make it through the war."

Dessert was done, and we were all quiet for a while. Then Gladys said, with a determined edge to her voice, "When we get back to the hotel, I'll call Richard; maybe I can get more information on his assistant. I intended to call him tonight anyway as I'm worried about the situation there; I presume you've heard that the Rwandan president's plane was shot down yesterday?"

"Yes, I heard. In fact, I keep waiting for my agency to tell me to go there next. That situation will, I'm sure, get ugly fast. However, if I hear nothing different, I leave tonight for Johannesburg. Can you give me your address and phone number so we can keep in touch?"

We exchanged our information, and I also gave them the number of my new cellular phone that the agency had given me. They were intrigued by the little antenna that you pulled up to make a call. "It's like a little shortwave radio," Gladys said.

Evelyn and Gladys said they were treating me to the evening meal. I thanked them, gave them each a hug, and we left the café. When we were on the street, Gladys turned and said, "Oh Danny, before you go, I forgot to ask–did you ever meet a special girl?"

"No, I never did. Being on the road as much as I am doesn't leave any time for a relationship. Plus, it would have to be someone special to put up with me; Salamu might be the only one who could. But I've given up on that."

"Don't give up. I'll try to get more information tonight from Richard on his assistant and to make sure he's coming home. Good night, young man."

"Good night, young ladies. Make sure you go straight home."

I heard them laughing as they walked arm in arm back to the Old Town.

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Once through security at Prague-Ruzyne Airport, I was heading for a seat in the waiting lounge when my cellular phone rang. I found a seat and answered.

"Danny, it's Gladys. Richard said the woman he works with is called Sydney; she was originally from Congo but trained in Kigali. She said her father was Belgian. Danny, it must be Salamu. Richard is leaving tomorrow morning and there have already been killings. Hutus are attacking Tutsis with machetes–he saw an attack from his hotel window. I don't have to tell you how dangerous this is for Salamu; her lighter skin makes her look like a Tutsi. Danny, I think we've found her."

"Okay, I'll get a flight to Kigali when I land in Nairobi. I've got a full day before I must be in Johannesburg. I'll find her. What hospital was this?"

"UTH -University Teaching Hospital."

"Got it–thanks Gladys. I'll let you know."

"God go with you."

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Nairobi, Kenya

Disembarking in the early morning hours of April 8th, I walked through the familiar wood-panelled walkways that funnelled travellers into the open arrivals area. Humid air slammed me with a double-barrelled hit of diesel exhaust fumes and bougainvillea flowers, the discordant smells a definite change from the clean chill of Prague.

At the KLM ticket counter, I delayed my Johannesburg flight by 24 hours, found a Uganda Airlines flight leaving at noon for Rwanda's capital, Kigali, arriving at 1:30 p.m. Then, I booked two tickets for a 4 p.m. return flight to Nairobi on Kenya Airways and paid for it all with my agency credit card. While I waited for each transaction to take place, I questioned my sanity. After the arrangements were complete, I left the counter relieved everything had worked out; it was rare for me to have this much luck all at once. When I got to the baggage carousel, my battered suitcase was circulating all by itself on the squeaky belt.

Outside the terminal, I flagged a cab, and half an hour later found myself at the downtown Hilton Nairobi where I've stayed many times. My agency insists on booking me here to take advantage of some deal they have with Hilton. Each room has a safe that my camera gear fits into and the shops in the lobby usually meet my immediate needs. So, while the hotel provided more luxury than I needed, I never complained.

I transferred my valuables into the safe, then changed into something cooler and more comfortable. I grabbed my passport and a wad of cash in both Kenyan shillings and American dollars, then looking at my watch, I realized that I only had time for a quick bite to eat before I needed to be back at the airport for the Kigali flight. Before leaving, I stopped at the front desk, and the clerk reluctantly added an extra four nights to my room booking. It never hurts to be prepared, and on the off chance that I would find Salamu, she could stay here until I returned from South Africa. From there, we would decide our next steps.

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Kigali, Rwanda

The Uganda Airlines flight was almost empty; people were leaving Rwanda, not having it as their destination. Again, I questioned my sanity. I was voluntarily heading into a situation that could develop into a civil war, based on a rumour that a random nurse in a Rwandan hospital was my long-lost friend. Although this time, there was a sense of urgency in the quest, as Salamu's bi-racial skin tones, the whiteness of her Belgian father mixed with the darkness of her Congolese mother, had produced the wonderful light brown tone I had always loved. Except that skin colour had now, almost overnight, become a visual death sentence. The hatred of Rwanda's majority ethnic group, the Hutus, who were darker skinned and agricultural, had now boiled over and they wanted to exterminate the minority Tutsi group, who were slightly lighter skinned and pastoral.

Crossing over Lake Victoria, the plane hit some turbulence and shook my mind out of the darker place to which it had been headed. In no time, the aging jet had landed and pulled to a stop on the tarmac. A set of stairs rolled across to the front passenger door, and I was soon on the tarmac, racing into the terminal. Finding the customs and immigration area, I pulled out my passport and gave it to the agent. He stamped it and looked up at me. "I would advise not to stay very long."

"I'll be back in a few hours," I said, as I put my passport away and left to find the car rental desks.

While it had been a simple job to book my flights, I found out renting a car in Kigali was another story. The Hertz, Budget, and Avis counters were closed and when I got to Rwandan Rentals, before I could even ask the question, the attendant said, "All the cars are gone. They were taken last night. All gone." He pointed to a smaller building across the street and said, "You can try that place over there–Rwandan Safaris. They might have something."

Trying to stay calm, I ran across the street and the person at the desk saw me coming and shook his head.

"No cars today, sir. And even if you found one, it is not a suitable time for tourism. You should go back to where you're from."

Okay, this was not in the plan and what I had previously thought would eventually happen, did happen. My luck had run out. There must be a taxi stand around. I went outside and looked, spotting two taxis just outside the arrivals hall across the street. Looking up the street to check for traffic before I crossed, I saw the side of the Rwandan Safaris office and its large service bay for cleaning the returned rental units. The overhead door was up and inside against the wall was a BMW motorcycle; on the front fender was the logo–RS Rentals. I ran back into the office and asked, "I'd like to rent the motorcycle?"

"Oh, yes, I guess that is available, I kind of forgot about it, as only the foreign backpackers choose that. It's fifty US dollars for the day. But are you sure? Are you listening to the news?"

"I'll take it. Is there a helmet?"

"Yes," he said and reached under the counter producing a white full-face helmet with a cracked face shield.

"Do you have two? I'm bringing a friend back here."

"No, sir, just the one."

"Here's the fifty," I said, peeling two twenties and a ten from my small roll of cash.

He put the key on the counter. I grabbed it and ran to the service bay.

"Sir, you must fill out the paperwork before you go."

"I'll be back in two hours," I yelled as I pulled on the helmet.

In the service bay, I smiled when I got up to the bike. This BMW model was the R100/GS, a model particularly suited for the variety of roads and trails found all over Africa. A former classmate of mine in Nairobi had something similar that I had ridden. My luck had returned.

The electric start set the boxer engine in motion with a satisfying rumble, and I swung my leg over the bike. Releasing the kickstand, I rolled out of the service bay, nudged the toe of my left foot down to put it in gear and smiled when the rear wheel spun gravel as I left the lot. It was a joy to be riding again, especially after several long flights in a row, and I headed onto the main road following the route I had studied on the city map during the inbound flight. The University Teaching Hospital wouldn't be hard to find, and it should be less than half an hour away. Under a cloudless sky, I raced to the city. The temperature at Kigali's higher elevation kept the air, even in the early afternoon, quite comfortable. I made a mental note that I needed more of this in my life.

On the incoming flight, I had worried that there might already be a military presence in Kigali, maybe roadblocks because of the escalating violence. But so far, so good. I had no time to waste, and I increased my speed on the strangely empty road. The kilometres flew by as I tried to keep the doubts at bay. Would this be yet another unsuccessful attempt at finding Salamu? It would certainly be the most dangerous attempt I'd made to find her.

As the map had shown, the hospital was just past the roundabout with the statue. I went through the main gates and pulled up to the Emergency entrance, where I parked close to the doors. Pulling my helmet off, I ran in and found the waiting area full. People moaned with pain as they slouched stoically in chairs or slumped against the walls. Most had large slash-type wounds…of course–machete wounds. Staff raced by, and in a nearby hallway I saw a heated argument as a Hutu nurse objected to treating a wounded Tutsi. It was clear this was the start of an ethnic-based civil war; hatred and unrest had been going on for generations, but from what I had read in the last few days, it was possible this one would be at a level not seen before. I stopped someone rushing by in hospital scrubs. "Do you know a nurse named Sydney? She works in surgery."

"No," he replied, "Check in the surgery area–2nd floor."

"Thanks." I raced down the hall to where I saw the stairs and took them two at a time to the second floor. The door opened into a hallway where a sign pointed to Surgery on the left. There I found several surgical suites arranged in a semi-circle and in the middle, a desk with a chair. The only problem was there was nobody in the chair.

I looked around at the emptiness. "Hello!" I shouted. It took a moment and then a door opened, and an older woman in scrubs looked out at me. "I'm looking for Sydney. It's an emergency."

"Everything is an emergency here, especially today," the person said calmly. "Sydney didn't come in today. You are a friend?"

"Yes, and we need to catch a flight."

"You're wanting to leave the country with her?"

"Yes, I'm trying—if I can find her."

"You're a friend or relative?"

"Yes, she was like my sister when we grew up at another hospital across the border in Zaire."

She continued to look at me and finally said, "Her apartment is in the staff building, the brick four-story beside the Emergency entrance."

"Thank you," I shouted over my shoulder as I ran back to the stairs.

Two ambulances were pulling up as I ran out of the ER and swung a leg over the bike's seat. As I cranked the engine and took off, I saw another ambulance turning in from the main street. Rising up from the seat to absorb the impact, I jumped the curb and raced across the grass to the brick building, again parking near the door. In the foyer was an intercom system and I scanned the names; there were only initials for the first name–I punched the button beside S. Limbosa. There was no answer. Maybe she had married and now went by a different last name. A woman in hospital scrubs ran into the lobby just then and punched a button. The door buzzed and she pulled the door open.

I said, "Excuse me, do you know a nurse named Sydney?"

"There is a Sydney down the hall from me. Who's asking?"

"An old friend. We have to be at the airport shortly."

Holding the door for me she said, "Well, let's go." I followed her up two flights of stairs and halfway down an almost dark hallway. She pointed to a door on the left and I was about to knock when I noticed the door was ajar, and voices were coming from inside.

I knocked. "Sydney?"

The voices stopped, someone giggled, and then the door flew open. Two women in nursing scrubs ran out carrying clothes, shoes, and purses; one had a portable radio.

As the women hurried by, they said something in Kinyarwanda to the older nurse who had let me into the building. She translated. "Your friend seems to have run away. These nurses said that they just saw her jump into the UN truck from the refugee camp where she works part time. She had a bag with her, so she is probably planning to try and hide out there. But the militia men will find her. That's why these girls were helping themselves to her possessions; she won't need them anymore. We will soon have a nation free of Tutsi scum."