

CHAPTER 11

THE COST OF SILENCE

“In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends.”

—MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

If Honorata’s story is one of rebirth, then Agnes’s is one of a soul’s weakening, a dive into darkness. Agnes was groomed to be a leader from the time she was a young university student studying law. For most of her life, she worked on issues of social justice, first as a judge and then as one of the first women on the African continent to serve in her country’s parliament. Just months prior to the genocide, she was working to form a political party with moderate views, one that would have been inclusive of all ethnic groups. But somehow, she ended her career as a high-profile prisoner charged with crimes of genocide.

I wanted to understand her story. I had known her and worked with her on issues of social justice. She had been a woman of enormous potential, a pioneer in the women’s movement, a role model for African women. Though I’d questioned her integrity while she was at Duterimbere, it was inexplicable to me that Agnes could end up a *leader* of such a cruel and murderous regime. If she could become part of a killing machine, then the capacity for evil was more common than uncommon. I’d read Hannah Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, but I’d never imagined I might actually know someone who could help lead a systematic effort to destroy an entire ethnic group.

I visited Agnes twice after the genocide, both times in Kigali’s massive Central Prison. Built in 1930 by Belgian colonialists, the prison is a red brick fortress with a green metal door located at the edge of the city, about 100 yards away from the main road, at the top of a hillside. With its red, red brick, it resembles an old factory from the Industrial Revolution.

If you walk far enough down the road in front of the prison, you can see green fields sloping downward to a verdant valley, rolling gently, then soaring upward into soft hills and a glorious sweep of sky, suggesting a sense of freedom and possibility. Originally built for 2,000 inmates, the Central Prison held more than four times its capacity 5 years after the genocide: 7,800 men and 600 women. There were few toilets, and the prisoners were fed only one soupy meal a day. I was told the men took turns sleeping, as there was insufficient room for everyone to lie down at once. Both men and women had been sleeping this way for up to 5 years at that time.

I arrived at the prison on a Friday—visiting day. Thousands of people, mostly women and children, had come from throughout the city and neighboring areas, some walking 5 or 6 hours, carrying baskets of food for their loved ones in the prison. The visitors were required to wait in the yard outside until they were permitted to see the prisoners, who depended on this food

for their survival. The enormous toll all the preparation and travel took on the visitors was evident in their tired, weathered faces. The women wore colorful dresses and often carried babies on their backs, but waited motionlessly, staring with vacant eyes. Some sat quietly on the cracked dirt and nursed their children. Others murmured quietly among themselves.

This mass of women separated from the men inside represented one of the most severe social dislocations in the country. Every Friday more than 150,000 women and children brought food to approximately 120,000 prisoners in various Rwandan prisons. The women whose husbands served years in those prisons were like widows themselves in many ways, struggling to raise a family with no one to help them generate income or cultivate the fields. This loss of productivity in a country already devastated by war was staggering.

On the day of my visit, all of us waiting were kept at a distance of about 100 feet from the empty prison yard by a makeshift barrier, a thick rope tied to two poles. Three guards dressed in blue escorted two pink-clad male prisoners, one wearing green high-top sneakers and a red beret; the other, in yellow flip-flops, carrying three shiny new machetes wrapped in plastic. The five men laughed like old friends.

One of the guards approached me and took me to the director's office, then led me farther, to a small room with a single window covered by a pink curtain. I stood there alone, waiting and looking across the yard at a huge green door, wondering what lay on the other side.

Ten minutes later, Agnes emerged.

Though her head was shaved, she looked like a young girl, not the powerful former minister of justice of the genocide regime. She'd been an inmate for 3 years, 2 of them in confinement, and was wearing the standard prison uniform—a clean pink cotton short-sleeved dress with buttons down the front. I watched her walk toward me, swinging her arms and moving her head from side to side, seeming more little girl than woman. Freckled cheeks and soft brown eyes made her appear even more childlike, less capable of cruelty.

Of all the women at Duterimbere, I had known Agnes least of all and never fully trusted her. This day was no different.

“Jacqueline!” she exclaimed when she saw me, “I was just thinking of you!”

She held my shoulders and planted an exaggerated kiss on each cheek. “I didn't know you were coming,” she said as if we were longtime neighbors reunited by a chance meeting. “Thank you for visiting me. You've been on my mind!”

I couldn't imagine how it would be me she was thinking about, and my own discomfort made my stomach turn. Though she still had not been tried by a jury of her peers, she'd been sworn in as minister of justice at the beginning of the genocide when the Hutu Power government had just begun forming. It was said by many that Agnes had made vitriolic and incendiary speeches, urging men to kill Tutsis and inciting women to encourage their husbands to work harder in their murderous and barbaric acts.

I feared her. I feared even coming too close to her essence. I worried that some of it might rub off on me. I had read that she had shouted out to a mob at one rally, urging, “When you begin extermination, no one, nothing, must be forgiven. But here, you have merely contented yourselves with killing a few old women.” Was this the same person who just 5 years earlier

had urged women to go forward with enthusiasm and build a better Rwanda together?

Many individuals believe that if women ruled the world, we'd finally have a chance at peace. While that may be true, Agnes stood as a reminder that power corrupts on an equal-opportunity basis. Agnes loved the trappings of power, and when all was said and done, she'd traded integrity and whatever good she'd built for glitter and gold.

Despite all I'd read about her involvement, I also knew that together we had worked to create an institution. My motives for visiting Agnes were mixed. I wanted, at least, to offer her kindness, though I was unsure what that really meant. I wanted to understand her, even if I had no desire to befriend her.

While I was still running the Next Generation Leadership program at the Rockefeller Foundation, I once convinced a South African freedom fighter that we should visit one of the generals who had overseen the country's security forces. The general was promoting the concept of a separate state for Afrikaners in South Africa. Though initially unwilling, the freedom fighter finally agreed to meet the general, but with the caveat that we could cut the meeting short if he became too uncomfortable. The meeting ultimately lasted nearly 2 hours, during which the two men found they shared a love of poetry. Afterward, the freedom fighter and I discussed the general's warmth and lack of self-doubt.

"He was only himself and didn't pretend to be anyone else," my friend mused. "Not like some of the white liberals I know who always say what they believe to be politically correct. At least I know who I'm dealing with here."

Though I no longer knew who I was dealing with when it came to Agnes, perhaps I could learn something from her.

We filled the first awkward minutes of the visit with small talk. How is your family? Did you ever marry? Always the first questions I was asked.

After much reflection, I had brought her a small box of chocolates. She tasted a morsel and beamed, looking like a blissful little girl again. I wondered what hell lived inside her head, what tortures she had created for herself. Externally, I saw nothing.

As she spoke, Agnes fingered the beads of a wooden rosary. I shared with her how much I'd loved the rosary when I was a little girl, though I hadn't held one for many, many years. Agnes had been trained by nuns whose belief in her had played a great role in her academic and career success. She had been one of the first girls in her school to attend university and had been one of Rwanda's first female judges and parliamentarians.

"Having someone believe in you makes all the difference," she told me.

I turned the conversation to Agnes's life in prison and to the general situation in Rwanda, and she plunged into a 20-minute rant. Her youthful face disappeared, transforming itself into a twisted mask of anger. She spoke through lips pressed tightly together, showing neat rows of perfect teeth, with eyes opened so wide you could see the whites surrounding her irises. I said little as she seethed about false accusations and the tragedy of the war, all the while rubbing the beads of her rosary.

According to Agnes, the RPF, the Tutsi-led army that had defeated the *genocidaires*, were to blame for having assassinated the president. On April 6, 1994, someone had shot down a

plane carrying both the president of Rwanda and the president of Burundi, killing them instantly and igniting the genocide. No one discovered who actually did it.

“The RPF did atrocious things,” she told me, “but the world sees this as only one-sided.” She sucked in her breath. “Jacqueline, you will never understand what really happened because you are from the West. In Rwanda, we know each other. We know how things work. Both sides were killing. If you counted, you would find many more Hutus dead than Tutsis. I know people who were killed by the RPF all over the country in the first few weeks of April. Now it is convenient that the world has vilified the Hutus, so the Tutsis take no blame.”

She likened the Tutsis to Jews—hungry for power. “The Jews lost millions and hold out those losses to the world, so they always have power. It will be the same with the other side here. The Tutsis have so much power now, and the world will be behind them for a long time. It could have been in their interest to see so many killed. That is why we need to discover who assassinated the president to determine on whom to lay the blame for this terrible war. You know, those who thirst for power will do incredible things.”

I asked her what she remembered most about the work we’d done together.

“Personally, the thing that impressed me the most was the women, who learned they could do something more than they were used to doing. Before, the women would go to the fields, then wait all day to see what their husbands would bring home. When they learned that they, too, could work to bring home even more income than their husbands, they were eager to try. That interested me.

“They came to Duterimbere in big numbers,” she recalled.

She reminded me of how hard we’d worked together. “Personally,” she began again, “I had to combine the work with political responsibilities. We went to meetings that ended at 10:00 p.m. But we didn’t complain. We didn’t expect a salary from anyone or even reimbursements for expenses.”

It was true that Agnes had worked as hard as any of the women toward building Duterimbere, though I didn’t remind her that we essentially had asked her to leave because of her petty corruption.

She continued: “Duterimbere was founded by women who had been lucky to attend school, who had degrees, who had jobs, who wanted to do something for their sisters who hadn’t been as lucky. We wanted to help women who weren’t able to go to school. The country was getting poorer and poorer. There were more and more female heads of household who had to care for their families. Something had to be done to help them help themselves. In the beginning, that was our strength.”

Without warning, a deafening cacophony interrupted her words. The women waiting outside to see their family members were finally allowed into the prison. First, at least 300 prisoners, all clad in pink, emerged in the yard, seating themselves on bright green benches, squeezed tightly one next to another, each holding a dark green plastic bag. A shrill whistle from the guard catalyzed the still-life market outside into wild action: 300 women and scores of children galumphed across the yard, their bags and buckets causing them to sway to and fro until they plunked down on the benches in front of the men. For 3 minutes, maybe 4, they threw

fragments of information back and forth as loudly as possible. They were not allowed to touch each other. The din was unbelievable.

“Hello... . Are you well? ... Is there news? ... This child is sick... . That daughter just married... . Our mother died... .”

Almost as soon as all of the women had taken their seats, the guard rapped his baton on a bench and blew his whistle again. As quickly as they had appeared, the women moved away again swiftly and surely, as if these meetings had become as routine as brushing their teeth.

The prisoners shuffled back through the big metal door, each carrying a green plastic bag filled with the week’s provisions. Minutes later, the whole process repeated itself. Three hundred men and 300 women poured a week’s provisions from baskets into green plastic bags. Three hundred stories were shouted helplessly over a desperate babble. And at the bang of a wooden stick, both women and men retreated like a regiment of ragtag soldiers. By the end of the day, about 4,000 people would have been in that yard, leaving the confetti of incompleting stories in the air.

Agnes and I resorted to talking in the spaces between the mad shuffles.

As I listened to her speak, it occurred to me that Agnes might have taken a completely different road in the genocide, one that might have left her a hero instead of a perpetrator. For years, she worked closely with Annie Mugwaneza, the Belgian member of our group. Agnes and Annie were part of the founding group that created the Liberal Party in the early 1990s, a broad-based, moderate organization focused on a united Rwanda.

At the time, the West was pushing Rwanda toward multiparty elections. But you can’t impose democracy without first establishing some foundation of civic education and understanding of what it means to be an active *citizen*—a lesson the world is still learning. Most leaders took the opportunity to form parties based not on democratic principles, but on an agenda of gaining power. In Rwanda, an enforced and empty democracy was another lit match in the powder keg.

In the beginning, Agnes and Annie tried to form a party based on principles of diversity and moderation. At one point the party apparently considered allying itself with the Tutsi-led RPF. But when a far-right wing eventually split off, Agnes left with it to join the extremist Hutu Power party. I’ll never understand fully how or exactly when she made that decision and can only believe she followed power itself instead of risking her life for principles.

Annie Mugwaneza was one of the most vocal of the individuals calling for a diverse but united Rwanda and had to be silenced if the extremists were to be victorious. On April 6, the first evening of the genocide, the Interahamwe murdered Annie, her husband, and four of their five children. Hundreds of Hutu moderates and Tutsi intellectuals also died that night. There are none more dangerous to extremists than moderates.

Agnes ignored my question when I asked about her friend’s death. She seemed to have lost herself in a swirl of words that had little connection to my questions.

“Let’s take the United States, for example,” she said. “Neither blacks nor Hispanics are the majority. If one day they seized power, if they started oppressing the rest of the population, you understand, that would be a problem. I don’t know if you can imagine the blacks one day

fighting and seizing the power. I don't think you could accept that."

"You're assuming those in power necessarily oppress the rest," I said.

She just looked at me blankly. Her fear and paranoia summed up the insecurity of a small elite trying fanatically to hold on to power in a society based on a strictly Hobbesian worldview. Power ruled in a zero-sum game.

In one sentence, Agnes laid out her view of Rwanda: "Those who had the power, who didn't want to let it go, had to use any means necessary not to lose it; and those who wanted it also had to use any means to get it."

As I listened, I realized there was only so much I could learn from her. She seemed to have paid the greatest price for her choices, sacrificing her very principles to become a force for evil. I'd been running a leadership program in the United States that focused on strengthening one's moral compass and building those things inside you that no one could ever take away. While I was visiting in Rwanda, nearly all the many women with whom I spoke who'd worked with Agnes remembered her as kind, intelligent, and warm. They were devastated that so much had gone wrong, that she had lost her way.

"She was among the strong women who energized the others to work and make better lives for themselves," one of her former friends told me. "She never should have entered into politics, for it is there that you become prey to power."

"I cannot think that she even knew what was being planned," said another. "When you are in politics, you become part of a machine."

I would listen to the women with a sense of wonder that they could believe Agnes hadn't known what was being planned despite the fact that she held one of the government's highest positions. At the time, if the minister of justice hadn't known what was happening, I would ask, who would have? Usually, they would just shake their heads.

When the guard returned to lead Agnes away, she gave me another hug. I thought of how she had traveled with the president to Butare to unleash the killings that would take Honorata's family from her. I thought of the good we all did together for a brief moment, fighting for women's economic justice. I played the same words over and over in my head: How had she gone so far astray?

I watched her walk away in her pink dress and shaved head, looking so vulnerable, still rubbing her beads, turning every so often to wave to me. I stood there, choked by suffocating sadness. A part of me wanted to push away what I'd just heard, to flee entirely from a situation that would forever seem incomprehensible. But Agnes had helped me internalize what I hadn't wanted to see before—monsters do exist, but not in the way I'd imagined them. I grew up believing in Frank Capra's world, where everyone was good except the bad guys who wore black hats and either died or found redemption by the end of the movie.

I *hadn't* imagined a bald woman with long eyelashes and soft eyes in a pink uniform, with whom I had built an institution of social justice. Agnes is currently being tried in Rwanda, though she has been in prison for more than a dozen years. Such a slow road to justice must distort even further the woman Agnes was, while such a delay of justice for some of the genocide's top officials must chip away at and ultimately gash the souls of ordinary Rwandans.

The West wants easy answers for modern atrocities that revolve around ancient tribal hatreds, international aid gone astray, or political corruption. The real world does not oblige. Clearly, perpetrators must be held accountable for their actions, and justice must be done for victims—for everyone in the country—to heal. At the same time, our world’s challenge is not simply in determining how we punish, but instead in how we prevent the kinds of atrocities that can come only from a deep-seated fear of the Other in our midst. Such fear is fueled in a world where the rich feel above the system and the poor feel entirely left out.

I determined to work on gaining more courage to put myself in others’ shoes and more vision to enable me to create ways for them to help themselves. I wanted to become part of a movement to extend to *all* of humanity the notion that all human beings are created equal—for our world was shrinking even then. Somewhere along the way, Agnes must have put aside that notion of our shared humanity, possibly from a combination of real fear and the equally real desire for power. We’ll never fully know.

IF RECONCILING WHAT HAD become of Agnes was impossible for me, I found myself confused and humbled by Prudence’s story.

She had been imprisoned near her hometown of Byumba in the northern part of the country. Like Agnes, she’d been accused of category 1 crimes, meaning that she was allegedly a major perpetrator of the genocide. But the most complex aspect of her story was that Prudence was potentially neither victim nor perpetrator. Catholics speak of sins of *commission* and sins of *omission*. I assumed Prudence must have known what was happening, though many with much greater power to do something about it had also known, including UN officials.

My hired driver, Leonard, and I departed early one morning for the 2-hour drive from Kigali to Byumba. Jeeps filled with soldiers and trucks overflowing with Ugandan bananas drove straight toward us, swerving at the last possible moment to spare our lives. Boys on bicycles carrying enormous bundles of tall grasses extending 3 feet on either side of their skinny bodies careened down both sides of the narrow road. Goats chased by barefoot boys with sticks trotted past regal women draped in bright colors who were holding massive loads of firewood on their heads. A gray mist mixed with the yellow sunshine, lending brilliance to a teeming, beautiful morning in this land of a thousand hills.

Leonard drove his battered Nissan with a dour, depressed, and unchanging mien. He, too, had lost his family. Suddenly, just outside Byumba, our old Nissan broke down, and for all his efforts, Leonard couldn’t restart the car.

He stepped out, walked to the front, and, like a surgeon, plunged his aging hands into the car’s belly. Out of nowhere—always the case in Rwanda, where you can be in an entirely empty place and a minute later, surrounded by a crowd—two children approached the car and pressed their faces against my window. Both had closely shaved heads. The girl’s round, black eyes were framed by thick lashes. The boy wore an old T-shirt with the neck stretched out of shape. I opened the car door and took in the length of their thin bodies. Her dress hung beneath her knees, and his shorts were rolled at the waist in an effort to keep them up. Both were barefoot.

They didn't say a word. As they stared, I held their gazes.

"Hello," I said.

Shyly, the little girl repeated my greeting. I wondered whether they were among the 400,000 orphans in the country.

"My name is Jacqueline," I said.

Their silence was more heartbreaking than any begging would have been.

I gave them each 300 francs—just a dollar. They took the money and ran, disappearing into the trees on the hillside. I remembered how the boy in my blue sweater had fled so many years ago.

We are connected, but the weave is sometimes fragile.

There wasn't a gas station until Byumba, another 10 miles away. As Leonard worked silently on the car, I moved to stand in the middle of the empty road, confused and a bit frightened by the sudden lack of traffic. Marauding gangs still had too much control in the north and west especially. With relief, I remembered the walkie-talkie UNICEF had issued me in case of an emergency, but the battery was dead.

Looking at the long road ribboning its way through the hills, suddenly I felt very small. As I stood with the defunct walkie-talkie in my hand, I said a prayer and waited.

Twenty, maybe 30 minutes later, a white jeep joggled by. I ran after the vehicle, waving my arms wildly. The passengers—both aid workers—agreed to drive me to Byumba and offered to help me get to the prison. From the jeep, I noticed a massive hill to my right that was covered with thousands of tents made of the ubiquitous UN blue plastic, lined up row after row. It looked like a canvas pasted with blue postage stamps from top to bottom. Twenty thousand Hutus were living there, still too frightened to go home. They suffered from insufficient water, disastrous levels of disease, inadequate food, a lack of latrines, and the stench of death. The RPF had killed thousands in this area, war crimes still a part of the country's wounds; you could feel the weariness in the air.

It was past noon when I reached Byumba's central prison, an old edifice with a capacity of 100 people now holding more than 1,000. We drove through the gate into a sweaty swarm of men. The compound, enclosed by a high fence, was wide open, with several brick buildings in the middle. All around me, men dressed in pink Bermuda shorts were fixing engines, shaping metal into useful objects, talking among themselves. One group was engaged in a boisterous competition to see who could do the most push-ups. In the bright sun under a cobalt sky, these boys swinging on bars and showing off to one another looked more postcard than prisoner.

For a split second I forgot where I was—until two men walked past me and stared with searing intensity, sending a chill down my spine. Alone, unguarded, and unarmed inside a prison overflowing with men accused of mass murder, I wanted to flee.

I moved quickly to the director's office. Alongside a wall, a row of barefoot women dressed in skirts the color of cotton candy sat doing needlework. They reminded me of cutout dolls all made of a single sheet of paper. They had the faces of grandmothers and next-door neighbors, of nurses and sisters.

It had been a decade since I'd seen Prudence, who, along with Agnes, had been one of

Rwanda's first woman parliamentarians, but more important, had been a mentor to me. On my last day in Rwanda, we'd hugged so fiercely that it hurt. She had written my recommendation for business school; I hadn't yet found out if I'd been accepted, but she sent me off with all great wishes and confidence that I would make the cut. When I did let her know of my acceptance, she wrote me a wonderful congratulatory note that arrived on featherweight pale blue airmail paper and was filled with praise and caring.

Would she remember me, I wondered as I stood in my white T-shirt and khakis, looking like a Gap ad, waiting among hundreds of men for an old friend now on death row for crimes I could not imagine. She'd been accused of being a planner, just as Agnes had been, though many believed she hadn't played an active role. In an upside-down world, it was hard to ever know.

Prudence walked across the compound with a bright silk scarf of scarlet, lime, and turquoise draped over her shaved head. She seemed more petite than I remembered and yet oddly attractive. Even in prison garb, she stood apart.

With her head cocked to the side and her hand held to shade her eyes, she squinted in my direction as she walked. Recognition: She ran to embrace me, and I held her tightly, trying to conceal my nervousness.

"I can't believe you came all the way to see me," she said. "And here I am in prison. It has been so long, and I've thought of you so often and yet barely recognized you."

Sitting in the director's bare, dark office on two wooden chairs with our knees touching, I was again torn between my desire to know what had happened to Prudence and an impulse to disassociate myself—a mix of shame and revulsion. I held Prudence's hands, and she started weeping. We looked at each other, partly to assess, partly to remember.

She'd been in prison for nearly 2 years—arrested without charges. She described the conditions of the environment, explaining how the women slept on the concrete floor one after another, like cards. There were only two toilets for 80 or 90 women.

"You really must have a supernatural energy to survive here," she said. "We're all in such close contact with each other, touching even as we sleep. Right now, for example, everyone has the flu. I've not gotten it, I think because I won't allow myself to get sick. One survives thanks to one's own energy and thanks to God."

Prudence had held a high-ranking position in government before the genocide as head of the General Assembly—the equivalent of Speaker of the House in the United States. She explained to me that, unlike Agnes, her power was nonetheless limited after the Arusha Accord in August 1993. The Arusha Accord was a peace agreement built on a power-sharing negotiation between the Rwandan government and the RPF. A transitional government was put in place until general elections could be held, though, of course, they never were.

While I imagined that Prudence must have known something, my understanding was paltry at best. I wondered why she hadn't blown whistles, but could barely conceive of the stakes for anyone close to power. If she *had* known, she must have understood she would be among the first killed if she protested the policies.

Where is the line between knowing and participating? Prudence didn't believe she was guilty. Indeed, she told me she had returned from living for 2 years in the refugee camps along

with everyone else to make her way home, assuming that everyone understood her innocence. Agnes, on the other hand, had fled along with other government officials to Zambia, where she'd been abducted by the Rwandan government. Prudence had just made it home to Byumba in November 1996 when she was arrested on the street and imprisoned. She was put in solitary confinement, though not charged. Soon after, she was transferred to this local prison.

I remembered her as kind. She was kind. She told me about the Tutsi housegirl she had hidden during the chaos. Yet here she was, accused—if not charged—with crimes of genocide.

The ambiguity felt toxic, infecting me with a sense of vertigo. “How did you get here?” I asked, barely audibly.

She shook her head, telling me she didn't know. “I walked back with the rest of the refugees because I was innocent and returning to my home. I never thought they would arrest me,” she repeated for the second time.

“Rwanda was caught up in a great wind,” Prudence said. “And now the country itself is the biggest loser.” She went on to talk about the humiliation experienced by women like her who were innocent, but were now spending their lives in prison. I just listened. Even if she were only partly right, the humiliation of people accused of false crimes and sent to horrific prisons for years would deepen fissures of mistrust.

Later, a friend told me haltingly through tears about how she'd felt upon seeing Prudence return from the refugee camps, where my friend had also spent 2 years. “I couldn't look at her. Her hair was loose, and she carried everything on her head, like we all did. Prudence was never common—she was always extraordinary. It broke my heart in two to see her looking like a beggar woman. I suppose we all did, but it seemed so much worse to see it in someone who had commanded so much respect.”

At the time of my visit, women already were beginning to play major roles in the reconstruction of Rwanda. They were starting businesses and building homes and representing as members of parliament in numbers that had never been seen before—in Rwanda or anywhere else on the continent. The sad truth is that the first three woman parliamentarians in the country, who had made such extraordinary strides for women, ended up with tragic histories.

Between 1991 and 1994, RPF soldiers reportedly killed two of Prudence's brothers in the north. We discussed the history of the unstable northern region of this tiny country. Many Tutsis had lived in exile for a generation and wanted to return. The RPF's movements and stories of war crimes generated deep-seated fears among Hutus in Rwanda. Politicians preyed upon this, turning fear into hatred, and ordinary people into killers. “It was a terrible time,” she said.

When I pressed her on her involvement, she pushed back, restating that she was innocent. Prudence accused me of interrogating her along military lines, and she was right. I wanted to understand, and I was being aggressive. I felt trapped in a story of fear, identity, politics, and self-preservation and could see why what must never happen again so easily could unless we recognized our shared humanity and conquered fear itself.

Now there was distance between us. Who was I to step into her life after a decade-long absence, to show up at the prison and begin firing off questions? I understood why she didn't

trust me. But what I sought in talking with Agnes and Prudence had little to do with trust; rather, in truth, I think I was searching for clarity from them to keep my own worldview in some sort of order.

As I said good-bye to Prudence, she thanked me for visiting her, saying that none of her friends had come.

“They’re probably afraid,” I said, and she gave me a wan smile.

On the drive back to Kigali, I felt so nauseated I had to ask the driver to pull over so I could be sick. Why had I thought I might find any clear answers in these prison cells? Maybe the gift those women had given me had more to do with accepting the *disorder* at the crucible of human existence.

A YEAR LATER, PRUDENCE was freed, declared innocent, though she never made an appearance in court. This time, I visited her at home, where she welcomed me with grand salutations and a long, warm embrace before walking me from her blue metal gate past the manicured garden filled with fruit trees and flowering bushes. On that day, this former high-ranking government official looked like a woman you might bump into at the supermarket, in black pants and a loose-fitting striped top. Her hair was styled with hundreds of tiny extension braids that nearly reached her shoulders.

We drank tea, exchanged pleasantries. When I asked her how she’d ended up being released, she responded softly, “There were never any charges against me.”

She told me that after 2 years in prison, reclaiming a life was harder than she’d expected. She had grown accustomed to the coarse prison food and had problems sleeping in a bed after so many nights spent lying on the floor, pressed against women on either side.

“I had become nearly paralyzed from sitting all day and night in prison without moving much. I had terrible swelling in both legs. All night long I woke up, wondering where I was, forgetting that I was not on the ground.”

But now she was a free woman—at least legally so, released without charges. Her eyes still had that familiar twinkle.

“And you know,” she said, “if you pray hard enough and believe with your entire heart, miracles do happen.”

THE NEXT YEARS WOULD not be easy for Prudence, but in time she would again become a contributor, due to her own resilience and the acceptance of a country still undergoing a remarkable healing process.

If Prudence had been just a bystander and that was her crime, then what about the rest of us who just stood by? The international community could have stopped the genocide if it had intervened. As our world becomes increasingly interconnected, we need to find better solutions that will include everyone in today’s opportunities. Monsters will always exist. There’s one inside each of us. But an angel lives there, too. There is no more important agenda than figuring out how to slay one and nurture the other.