A Thousand Hills

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A Thousand Dreams

(2)

'Shall I tell you something?' asked the hare by the name of Bakame. 'May I keep you awake all night with my story? Even someone from the land of fairytales will find a tall story on the pole of his hut. Once upon a time...

'Once upon a time...

'What do you think happened once upon a time? There were once dogs and rats, but they're all dead now, leaving only the cow and the drummer.

'Then I'll tell you,' said the hare. 'Then I'll tell you the story of a hero, or of a king even, perhaps. The great black Nothing nestled close to the abyss, and the wind tugged it loose, but the sparrow hawk began to play music, the chameleon whistled and mother crane started dancing to the sound of the zither inanga...'

Once upon a time

Habaye ho...

Somewhere in Brussels. Once upon a time three baskets arrived in Louis' parental home. His father had bought them at a mission exhibition one Sunday afternoon. The parish hall was festively decorated for the Lord's day, with yellow-and-white and blue-and-white pennants. They'd put up photos everywhere of smiling black people, hand in hand, bright-eyed and properly dressed, at last, by the caring white man. Louis' mother thought the baskets were exotic. And how nicely they fitted into each other.

'Where are these little baskets from?' she asked.

'From Africa,' the father answered.

'But where exactly?'

‘From Congo or Burundi,’ he said, sounding uncertain. ‘Or from Rwanda.’

Louis’ mother put the three baskets on the sideboard in the living room, where they rested after the exertions of their long colonial journey. The next day an immense machine was delivered to a shop across the street. It was the size of at least two rooms in a house, full of heavy gearing and metal rollers. It turned out to be a tanning machine. A moustachioed German mechanic came along with it and issued instructions. In the weeks that followed blue barrels arrived, hermetically sealed. When they were opened, the smell of death and salt rose from them. A short while later the whitewashed windows on the street side were cleaned and red lettering appeared reading ‘animal hides for sale’. Sheepskins and cowhides, with black or red patches, were piled up tidily as a window display. What a miracle that something so soft and supple could be prepared from filthy, bloody slaughter and tanning.

It happened that first night. Twelve-year-old Louis fell asleep. Once upon a time...

Once upon a time there was...

Habaye ho...

In some inexplicable way, the boy was showered with Rwandan words that rose invisibly from the three baskets. It seemed someone was pouring Rwandan sayings – imigani – into Louis’ slightly open mouth. Rwandan sentences were gently laid on his eyelids and rubbed in like ointment. Someone smuggled them into his ears. Louis knew nothing of this, except that in the morning he was desperately tired.

‘How did you sleep?’ his attentive mother asked.

‘Fine,’ said the child, but that didn’t feel right. Louis was exhausted, but he recalled not a single Rwandan word. Much the same happened in the next dream, two weeks later. Louis dreamed that his head was tilted back. Above him he saw a vague source of light. Was he standing or lying? Weightless he lay flat, stuck, locked up in himself. Now he could only breathe and receive. As in the previous dream, a lengthy series of Rwandan words was smuggled into him. It was a long, far from child-friendly dictation. The three baskets on the sideboard in the living room were the source of all that Kinyarwanda.

From that time onwards he had two or three Rwandan dreams every month. In the next dream he learnt how the language deals with successions of consonants and vowels. It doesn’t split the way you might think; words or syllables always end in a vowel. The word Rwanda, for example, is not ‘Rwan-da’ but ‘Rwa-nda’. A foreign word like ‘Bergman’ becomes ‘Be-ri-gi-ma-ni’.

‘Ryckmans’ becomes ‘Rekimansi’, ‘Governor’ becomes ‘Guvuruneri’.

‘Stanislas’ is pronounced ‘Sitanisilasi’.

And ‘Belgium’ becomes ‘uBubiligi’, ‘Europe’ becomes ‘uBulayi’. And the r and the l are the same.

So ‘pas op’ (watch out) became ‘gasopo’ and ‘potverdomme’ (for goodness’ sake) became ‘furudomo’.

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In the seventies volunteers all over Belgium took to presenting all kinds of colour slides, press cuttings, talks and brochures put out by Broederlijk Delen, or Brotherly Sharing. Right. Development aid. The poor in the third world. Rwanda was often talked of as an exemplary Catholic country. Young Louis was oblivious to the folders and collection boxes, even though every dream gave him another strong Rwandan infusion. Why was it happening? Was there a plan? The only known fact: it started when three Rwandan baskets appeared in the house. Now a black man came into the room in Louis' dream and said: 'It's time for the figments,' and poked at the wood fire. He sat down facing Louis and said: 'I'm telling you that I'm telling a story. Once upon a time...

'Once upon a time...

'Habaye ho...'

Louis was already softly snoring. Hares crossed his path. Since in Rwanda a story always begins with strange announcements, the narrator whispered: 'The bulbul asked: "Is that so?" And the babble bird answered: "That is so."

'Or the hare Bakame called out: "Hey, sunbird, you have such a long beak?"

'And the sunbird answered: "That's so I can taste the king's beer from a distance."'

Louis grinned in his sleep. The fatherly black narrator sitting close to him whispered: 'The wagtail disappeared into the sprouting sorghum and called back: "My mother-in-law's beer is ready to drink."'

Over the next two or three years Louis listened in his dreams to four hundred, perhaps five hundred Rwandan stories, legends and fairytales. Sometimes bright little boys grabbed his wrist in the night. Occasionally it was a woman. Women and children spoke more clearly, Louis noticed. When men talked the words lost their tonal variation. There came a point when Louis began to understand the rhythm of the words. It was like a song, with highs and lows. In Kinyarwanda you could sing words without articulating them. Louis even learnt to whistle the words.

He learnt stories about the sly Semuhanuka, the evil Nyirarunyonga and the clever hare Bakame. The stories and fables never described emotions, they used hardly any adverbs or adjectives, and some of the sentences consisted purely of verbs. They were full of action and without a moral. In these dreams Louis was He-who-is-being-prepared-for-new-tasks. He was He-in-whose-house-a-new-man-is-born. No one knew about any of this, least of all Louis. Perhaps that was simply to protect him.

Because once upon a time...

Habaye ho...

... once upon a time a child was born, and at his birth God told the parents that the child's tongue would be the death of him. So the parents forbad the child to speak. As a young man he still hadn't uttered a word. Returning from the royal court one day, he came across God, who was having a fierce argument with Death. Death was complaining that God let him have only elderly

men and women. The young man tried to mediate. He agreed with God but suggested that from time to time Death should take a young person. The young man was immediately taken by Death.

What did this mean? Perhaps the Rwandan God didn't like uninhibited speech.

One early evening when Louis was almost eighteen, a heavy shower of rain drummed on the roofs. It had been a sweltering hot summer's day. From the edge of town you could hear the nervous lowing of cattle waiting to be milked. That sound didn't normally travel so far, but now its soft echoes penetrated deep into the streets of Brussels. This Rwandan state of affairs drew a completely meaningless sentence from Louis' mouth.

'Ngiiye kubaciira umugani wa Ruhinyuza rwaahinyuje Imaana.'

It was flawless Kinyarwanda, if in the old spelling. Louis thought he was talking nonsense. Five more sentences followed. That night the hare Bakame came to tell him: 'You must not on any account speak Rwandan. It's too soon to tell you why not. This is a serious warning.'

His jaws clamped together, Louis dreamed he wanted to shout but couldn't. Rwandan's don't shout, that was obvious. He woke up trembling. He noticed black marks on his hands, marks that soon disappeared. He gazed outside vacantly. The night in the city was damp and foggy. Without Louis knowing it, the Rwandan god Imana drew lines around him. He wove Louis the way a Rwandan girl weaves a basket. In daytime this God wanders all over the globe, but at night he rests at the most beautiful place in the world. And that is Rwanda. And it was for Rwanda that Louis was preparing himself. There was a plan.

Louis continued to study his fables and legends at night. There are quivering armadas of them, endless squadrons waiting to be told and retold. For example: a hunter tracked a small animal, which suddenly spoke to him...

Or: once upon a time there was a rich man who...

Or: a king heard two people arguing...

And: one day a woman felt she hadn't long to live and went looking for someone who would bury her when she died.

Louis had to learn all this off by heart. He learnt the fable of the swallow and the toad, the fable of the owl and the rain, the fable of the jackal and the hare. One fable taught him why a dog can suckle eight young at once, a cow four, and sheep and goats only two, and why the harrier must hate the hare. Louis was He-to-whom-fantastic-stories-were-told, and who was then careful to keep quiet about them. Shortly after that, Louis dreamed he was taking the plane to Rwanda.

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A hundred days

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Because in the autumn of 1991 anthropologist Pierre Smith was in Brussels. He was fifty-two at the time and working on a new article. He already had a title: 'Les tambours du silence', the drums of silence. He nonchalantly began his text with a line from a poem by Rimbaud. 'J'écrivais des silences, les nuits, je notais l'inexprimable. Je fixai les vertiges.' (I wrote the silences, the nights; I noted the inexpressible. I captured the dizzinesses.)

As Smith copied those lines, tears came to his eyes. Hadn't Rimbaud been washed up in Brussels as well? At that time Smith was lodging in the city with his friend De Heusch, at least so I imagined. They were good friends, I was certain of that. They'd met long before in Paris, through friends of Lévi-Strauss. Pierre Smith had a drinking problem, just like his mother, who died insane. Sometimes Pierre Smith drank all his pay in three days. Sometimes De Heusch would receive a call from Paris: 'A man has been admitted here who claims he's a professor, and that he's the principal of the Ecole des Hautes Etudes.'

'Let him go immediately,' De Heusch would answer, worried.

When Smith held exams while drunk and cajoled his students into giving him money to buy drink, the vice-chancellor sacked him.

Now I saw Pierre Smith standing in front of De Heusch's bookcase. I saw it or dreamed it. Smith was leafing through La royauté sacrée de l'ancien Rwanda, the old secret text, the old constitution of the long since evaporated kingdom of Rwanda. Was Smith thinking back to the sixties, when he was a young man living in Nyanza? Gradually he became drunk on the memory. He enjoyed the smells and the bustle, heard the cows speaking around him, umufuuho. That was when he felt for the first time what anthropology did to him: the patient non-comprehension of a new environment; forming a connection with it; everyone wanting to incorporate him. Ever since he became an anthropologist he'd been in a constant state of conflict. He felt admiration, and a deep sense of kinship with those strange people. He interviewed the herdsmen and made lists of all the possible colours of cattle. That was a pleasant and useful task, but a tall priest came to tell him it had been done before. That priest was Alexis Kagame.

The whole business with the drums caught his attention at once. The male noise of beating and rumbling, the flashing black bodies. On this dark day in Brussels, November 1991, he read the old ritual text of La royauté sacrée aloud to himself, tasting the Rwandan words, Bagatumiz iyo mubéenemugunga. He declaimed the 'recipe' for the drumhead of the Karinga: 'Fetch a steer from the descendants of Mugunga, one that is not black, that has not been struck, that has no wounds, no blemishes, of which neither the tail nor the ears have been clipped. And its skin shall become the drumhead of the Karinga.'

The Karinga was never beaten.

Pierre Smith could see the whole scene before him. The quieter the drum, the less visible it was, the more powerful it became. When the old kingdom disappeared, the drum actually vanished into thin air. Its shadow remained, more threatening than ever.

Smith took the book with him to the room where he slept in De Heusch's house. He poured himself a whisky. With a green blanket over his back, he absorbed himself once more in the poetry of the text. He leafed through the seventeen chapters. He shivered, felt the sensation again. For centuries these rituals had been kept secret, and now in this book they were available for anyone to read. Anybody who carried out these rituals could become king of Rwanda, he grinned.

His eyes wandered, out across the Brussels rooftops, the ugly verandas, the occasional summerhouse, the brick extensions, a nut tree.

Smith leafed through the Ubwiru, and felt like an umwiru. Why, he asked himself, was the eighteenth chapter about the induction of the dynastic bulls still missing after all these years? Why hadn't it been given to D'Hertefelt at the time? Why hadn't Kagame published it later? Why had no mention been made of that omission since?

He sipped at his whisky and closed his eyes. According to Kagame, he recalled, whisky was good for the memory. Maquet had told him that. Smith savoured its numbing effect and for a moment he was somewhere else. Then suddenly his head reared up with a painful jolt. On the way to the toilet he bumped into the wall in the passage. He was shocked by his face in the mirror.

In the seventies he'd asked old Kagame personally whether he was still planning to publish the missing eighteenth chapter. The question had sounded very indiscreet. Smith had received a playful answer. Kagame said: 'I now understand there was actually yet another Way that was never published. There's a nineteenth chapter, the Way of the induction of the capital cities.'

Smith hadn't pressed him on the point and Kagame gave no indication of any sort as to whether he possessed the text or not. The puzzle had become even greater and more intriguing as a consequence. There were actually two chapters that Kagame had not written down. For a moment Smith thought like a Frenchman: a secret can hide another secret, like trains.

From a footnote in Le royaume sacré de l'ancien Rwanda Smith understood that both rituals had been knowledge that was specific to the Heeka, the umwiru of the Bazigaba clan. Smith asked himself: who had the function of Heeka at the great dictation? The telephone rang. Smith didn't answer it and eventually the ringing stopped. He was reminded of the book that Delmas had written in 1950: Généalogies de la noblesse au Ruanda. It gave the names of all the branches of the Rwandan aristocracy. While compiling it, Delmas had interviewed many of the aristocrats in Rwanda.

Smith knocked back his whisky, slipped his notes into a leather folder and put on his overcoat. He left a message for his friend De Heusch and took a tram to the library in Tervuren.

I could see it all before me clear as day. I even saw concerned staff asking him in the library in Tervuren, where I was now sleeping, how he was getting along these days.

'Fine. I'm working hard,' Smith mumbled.

He requested Delmas' book, catalogue number 47854. They hurried off to bring it to him. In his book Delmas first paints a colourful picture of the court. He had seen the infamous drums, the pride of royalty, each with straps woven around it that were usually meant for tying the back legs of cows while they were milked.

'Beautiful,' sighed Smith. He could imagine the whole scene. The drums were carefully carried outside. The Karinga, adorned with its dépouilles macabres, was covered in a layer of congealed blood a centimetre thick to keep the victory alive, and to guard against woodworm.

After his brief description of the court, Delmas settled down to the main part of his work – page after page of lists of Tutsi dignitaries. Thousands of aristocratic names edged across the pages from left to right, like ladders, little steps that might serve as poems. Those family trees climbed back up into what are known as the mists of time, to Gihanga around 1200. For the youngest generations there were even passport photographs. They had modern names like Oswald, Charles and Projet. Several still wore their hair in the traditional tufted style, others had shorn scalps or fashionable European hats.

On page 157 of this Rwandan who's who, Smith found what he was looking for. There was the name of a certain Kabera, a herdsman of the Insanga herd. He was the last to have taken on the

position of Heeka. He was the son of Nkwaya, son of Muvubyi of the Bazigaba clan. There was an asterisk next to his name. The footnote said he had been removed from his post by King Rudahigwa in 1942, because of a breach of trust.

This really did explain everything. It meant that at the great hearing, the so-called secret dictation in 1945 to Alexis Kagame, this umwiru was simply not present. Even the great dictation was apparently never complete.

It was explicitly mentioned here, yet how wonderfully Alexis Kagame had kept quiet about it. No one knew anything was missing. At that point Pierre Smith, aided by his depression and drunkenness, was able to look right inside the power of a secret with great lucidity. He saw what we rarely see: the dark, black silence that is a thousand times more powerful than speech. It was just like in Rimbaud's poem; it made him dizzy. It wasn't a matter of knowing everything, let alone saying everything, but rather of keeping quiet in the right way. That was the secret of the Karinga, too, the drum that was never beaten. It was enough to realize what you didn't know, to demonstrate silence, to respect secrets that were too painful or too personal. In Rwanda especially, we must know history and then have the detachment to let it rest.

Smith's quest ended there, immediately. He had searched and found there was nothing to find. It was a vivid self-portrait of the anthropologist. The anthropologist can do everything and nothing. He is good at encounters; he can translate the tension, which sometimes heals, cures. But an anthropologist can never cure himself, Smith decided. The article 'Les tambours du silence' was the last he wrote. In 2001 Pierre Smith committed suicide.

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In Rwandan families children were brought up not to go telling strangers everything. So a stranger who tells you he's about to entrust you with a secret is playing a game. Perhaps he doesn't trust you. I reflected on that when I woke the next morning in the library in Tervuren. Moïse had made coffee and was already working.

'Did you manage to get some sleep?' I asked.

'A couple of hours, yes.'

He gave me some bread, which tasted delicious. I felt relaxed as I wandered between the shelves, poked about, touched the spines of the books. I didn't need to copy anything down. I contemplated for the first time everything I'd done over the past hundred days. Initially I'd looked for all possible information about Alexis Kagame. Then I'd gone in search of some kind of secret message he might have for me. This I had learnt during the night from Pierre Smith: anyone passing on a real secret will carefully explain why it's a secret, so that it can be kept, and indeed passed on. It's the art of control, in a room too small for two people. Only then can the secret be powerful. I understood that I ought instead to be searching for the route, the means by which Kagame would be able to pass on his secret to me.

Occasionally I could hear Moïse humming in the distance. At other times I'd be sitting across from him reading silently. Now and again we glanced at each other. Moïse said: 'I'd like to invite you to Rwanda. There's more to discover there than here,' and he went on working.

I asked him: 'Imagine that at the end of his life Alexis Kagame still had a secret text. How would he be able to keep it secret for as long as possible?'

'Not easy. That man was at the centre of public attention all his life. He'd have kept any secret in his archives, I would think.'

‘That’s safe, but also relatively dangerous. Someone might find the text there. Someone might destroy it, or make improper use of it.’

‘Yes, like when Mutara dropped dead in Usumbura. They simply stole the text. So Alexis Kagame would have had to take it abroad for safe keeping.’

‘That’s right,’ I said. ‘But how?’

‘Given that he was said to be a unwiru, I think Kagame simply kept the text in his head for as long as he could. He knew it off by heart, of course.’

‘That’s the safest place,’ I said. ‘But suddenly Kagame found himself in hospital in Nairobi. He probably sensed he was close to death. He had to dictate his text quickly, there and then. To whom?’

‘First a different question,’ said Moïse. ‘If Kagame was keeping something secret, what language would he do that in? French or Kinyarwanda?’

‘When you’re abroad you speak a language no one there understands. So he dictated his secret text in Kinyarwanda.’

‘Okay, so that brings us to the person. To whom did he dictate the text?’

‘The abiru passed on the secret within the family, to a son.’

‘He was an exemplary priest, childless,’ said Moïse. ‘And he hadn’t had any contact with his family in a long time.’

‘Well, then let’s say a kindred spirit. A colleague who knew the value of history.’

‘So I assume Kagame dictated the text, passing it on to a Rwandan who had a lot of contact with whites. Profile: a university milieu in Butare. That Rwandan had to give the text to a white man, who took it abroad with him.’

‘So which white man then, and where would he keep the text?’

‘The safest place is where it’s dangerous, in the lion’s den,’ said Moïse.

‘Who was Alexis Kagame’s enemy?’ I asked.

‘Well, we know that. Coupez the linguist. He would certainly appreciate the value of the text, and keep it discreetly, since he was no fan of Kagame. And the lion’s den is here in Tervuren. Rwanda is both nearby and far away.’

‘Coupez had already made an outstanding translation of a text by Kagame, by the way.’

‘Strange to think about all these things,’ said Moïse.

At around lunchtime Moïse had a nap. I’d been waiting for that. I crept soundlessly to the second floor, to the Linguistics department, and went straight to Coupez’s office, where I carefully opened the cupboard and dug through the boxes. I found the green book of herdsman’s poetry by Alexis Kagame, an old article from 1958 about a secret language that was spoken on only one hill in Rwanda, masses of texts, which I looked through one by one, and a brown envelope containing audio cassettes. I simply sensed that the envelope was the most likely, so I put it inside my jacket and snuck back to the library, where I woke Moïse and said I was leaving. We parted warmly. He closed the window behind me.

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Jean-Baptiste played the tapes in his car. As I expected, they were in Kinyarwanda. In the first sentence I recognized the word 'abbé'.

'Jean-Baptiste, is this an abbé speaking?' I asked.

'Could well be,' said Jean-Baptiste.

'We should have Callixte listen to the recording. He's at Forces Rwandaises this evening.'

That's what we did. Callixte was indeed there. He was sitting silently smoking filter cigarettes as he leafed through old documents. He came straight out to sit with us in the taxi, in the front, with me behind him. Samuel slipped into the car next to me. As Callixte leaned back, smiling, Jean-Baptiste put the cassette into the slot. Callixte wound down the window and closed his eyes. After three minutes he told Jean-Baptiste to stop the tape. He asked for bits of the other cassettes to be played. Then he said: 'None other than Abbé Alexis Kagame himself, in the hospital in Nairobi, telling the story of his whole life, chronologically – you have made a unique discovery in Tervuren.'

This was unbelievable, yet it was what I'd expected, because everything had pointed in that direction. Callixte listened to a little more of each of the four cassettes and suggested we translate it together. Callixte would dictate; I would make notes and type them up. We made a start that same week. On each occasion Jean-Baptiste drove us to just beyond the edge of the city. He insisted we must work with the smell of grass and cows. We couldn't smell grass, only Callixte's cigarettes. There were three of those smoke-filled sessions in the taxi, each lasting two hours. Sometimes Callixte listened for too long and I was afraid he was no longer translating accurately. I signalled my concern.

'Don't worry,' said Callixte. 'My memory is very Rwandan.'

It was a difficult, beautiful and very Rwandan text about cows, politics, the revolution and his history books. It was sublime. During each session all four of us sat in the car. Jean-Baptiste worked the cassette player and Callixte translated omnisciently in full, flowing sentences which I wrote down. Samuel looked outside distractedly, texting on his phone. From time to time the tape was wound back. Callixte translated with his eyes closed. Sometimes he had to think for a moment to come up with an elegant French translation, but never for long. I suppose I hardly need add that I felt like Alexis Kagame himself when the king ordered the abiru to take part in the great dictation.

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The old priest Alexis Kagame, looking back over his life and candidly telling his story – I had it all on paper, in handscript. The final paragraphs were truly gripping. Samuel, usually such a cold fish, was so moved that he sobbed. Callixte by contrast was tired and irritable. He wanted to tell me something quickly before we parted. It was about spies who switched sides over and over, about Tutsi businessmen who bribed Hutus close to the president, about traitors and turncoats of all kinds. What he said was frightening and malicious. Then he came to 1994. The Interahamwe was set up in response to Tutsi violence, Callixte said. But its founders were FPR infiltrators, he claimed, and they actually included a lot of Tutsis.

'What, Tutsis murdered Tutsis?'

'Yes, the FPR sometimes wore FAR uniforms, occasionally even with Habyarimana's picture on them. And I've never seen Interahamwe with weapons. Now it's coming. It'll be far worse than anything we've ever seen yet.'

'What's coming, Callixte?'

'The great slaughter. The hecatomb.'

I was confused and tired. Kagame's text was astonishingly beautiful, masterful even, but I wanted to get away from this translator as quickly as possible. Samuel was sobbing again; it had all become so personal. I said I wanted to get out. I urgently needed fresh air. Samuel was quick to concur. 'I've been wanting to be somewhere else for quite a while,' he said. We took our leave.

Samuel and I walked back together, along the Elsensesteenweg and then along the Kleine Ring.

'Perhaps I ought to explain to you, finally, why I'm always in the taxi,' said Samuel.

'Maybe you've got nothing better to do?'

'That's true enough,' said Samuel.

'Did you escape from there in 1994?'

'Yes. Of course.'

'So you'd have been about ten years old?'

'Twelve, as a matter of fact.'

Very briefly, he told me his story. In May 1994 Samuel arrived in Belgium as a twelve-year-old boy. He had nothing except the clothes he stood up in – apart from certain images in his head, which he still didn't want to say anything about at that point. He was adopted, but since the age of eighteen he'd been living alone in Brussels. He mixed with other Rwandans. Recently he'd visited twenty White Fathers to hear them talk about Rwanda.

As we walked back to the city centre, he said that he now urgently wanted to go to Rwanda. He asked whether he could travel there with me. He was keen to leave as soon as possible.

'Who says I'm going to Rwanda?' I asked.

'Don't be silly. You've been searching for Rwanda in Belgium for a hundred days now. You're just waiting for someone to make you go.'

By the time we reached the centre of Brussels, the decision was made.