



PART V
HOME

Dieudonné

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN:
Burundi

ETHNIC GROUP:
Hutu and Tutsi



Dieudonné

15 Early One Morning

Much has been reported about the 1994 massacre of Tutsis by Hutus in Rwanda, but few know much about the one in neighboring Burundi, where Hutus went house to house with spears, knives, guns, and machetes, killing Tutsis. Burundi, an impoverished, landlocked country in East-Central Africa, has experienced numerous conflicts between the two ethnic groups, even though the Hutu and Tutsi generally share the same religious beliefs (Christianity), culture, and language (Kirundi, Swahili, and French).

On July 1, 1962, Burundi won its independence from Belgium. Although the majority of the population was Hutu, the Tutsi held most of the power. This led to unending Hutu rebellions and brutal Tutsi retaliations. The cycle of war and peace (mostly war) between the two groups continues.

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In 1989, Dieudonné was born to a Tutsi mother and a Hutu father. He is the youngest of five children, two boys and three girls. Three siblings—Veronica, Balthazar, and Dieudonné—live in Nebraska; Virginia and Suazis are still in a refugee camp in Africa.

Dieudonné says, "I was four years old when the 1993 genocide of my people began. I remember all of it, every detail of that horrible day when it all began. Every. Single. Detail. It hurt me so much, I can't forget. I will never forget. Maybe it hurt so much just for the purpose to tell this story."

It was early in the morning, and my mom was in the backyard, working in her vegetable garden. We lived by a village called Mayanza, in Ruyigi Province, Burundi, where big-time farmers like my dad grew everything we ever wanted. We had uncountable fruit trees. We had cattle. The only things we bought in the store were clothes. Everything else we grew or raised.

In our culture, the eldest male child inherits the land from the father. My dad was the only son in his family, and all his family's land went to him. Our house was one of the most beautiful homes in the area, with large glass windows and French doors. My dad had recently built it, and we had just moved in.

That morning, we kids were in our bedrooms when we heard a loud banging at the door. We ran to the window to see who was there so early in the morning. Some men who lived in the village were standing at the door covered in blood, holding machetes.

My dad calmly went to the door and greeted the men. "You need to take care of your wife," they said. Those men could have easily rushed into the house and killed my mom, but because my father was Hutu and highly respected, they did not. Instead they said, "You need to kill your wife. Otherwise we will come back and kill your whole family." We kids were at the window, listening, watching the entire thing.

With incredible composure, my dad said, "Yeah, for sure. I'll take care of it." And the men left to hunt for—to kill—more.

My dad closed the door, turned back inside the house, grabbed me—I was the baby, four years old—and ran to the backyard. He pulled my mom out of the garden, and we started running. We did not even look back at the house. In a split second, my dad had decided that the most endangered people were my mom and me, the little one. Because they were older, my father believed that my brother and sisters would be okay. They hid in the house, and we ran, and ran, and ran. Our destination was the border of Tanzania, about thirty-five miles away. My father knew that if we could cross to Tanzania, we'd be safe. We didn't have a car. We lived by a village, in the countryside; we didn't need cars. The trip to the border took longer than usual because we couldn't take a straight route. We zigzagged through the jungle in order to avoid where my dad thought the killers might be.

Throughout the day, we saw many people dead or dying. The rivers that we crossed, rivers that were once crystal-clear water, were now flowing red with blood. We were totally alone, terrified, thinking someone could catch us at any time. It was horrific.

Towards the end of the day, we made it to the border. There's a big, deep river that divides Tanzania and Burundi. People at the river who had carved traditional canoes from the trunks of trees helped us cross. Once we crossed the river, we searched for a hiding spot. Monkeys were everywhere. It seemed as if they were following us. When we stopped at a pond to drink water, the monkeys in the trees threw things at us.

There was one moment I will never forget. We were walking in the bush and came face-to-face with a whole family of gorillas. My dad said that gorillas disrespected women. If they find a woman, they will either beat her or chase her away. They feared men, though. And then my father proved it. With his machete in his hand he called to them—*ngoo, ngoo*. *Ngoo* means "come." The gorillas didn't come. My father handed the machete to my mom and called again, *ngoo, ngoo*. They started coming closer and closer. They weren't threatened by my mom. My father grabbed the machete and they ran away. That was crazy.

Soon thereafter, my father found a hiding place behind some bushes. There were a few other people hiding there as well. He left us and walked back home to get the rest of my siblings. By the end of the second day, we were all together again.

There was no food, no clean water, no beds, no bathrooms, and we still were not safe. There were rumors that the killers were following people even to the Tanzania side.

After a week or so, some of the people who were hiding with us got sick. We were afraid to come out to seek help. My mom became one of those people. To this day we don't know what made her sick, because there was no doctor to diagnose anything. . . . Give me a minute. . . . That's the moment that hits me the most. . . . I mean . . . I mean, it was bad . . . it was hard. I'm sorry. Growing up, I wasn't as emotional about it as I am now. I was so young, I didn't understand. Now I understand the loss better, and I know for sure the pain she must have been in. Though I was only four years old, I could see that she was not well. Ten minutes before she died, she assured me that she would be okay. I remember that conversation clearly. One minute she was talking to me, then ten minutes later she was gone. Yeah. We buried her in an unmarked grave nearby.

So many people lost their loved ones that day to that no-name illness. I wasn't the only one. I lost my mom, and some people lost ten, five family members.

A NEW BEGINNING

Once the U.N. discovered what happened in Burundi, they started searching for survivors. That's how we were found. Out of nowhere, U.N. trucks arrived and began picking up survivors in the forest. We were saved. We were driven far, far away, hours and hours away; it seemed like hundreds of miles from Burundi, to a protected area in Tanzania that was set up by the U.N. The name of the camp was Mtendeli, Mtendeli Refugee Camp Tanzania.

In one word, the refugee camp sucked. It was brand-new, and new refugee camps suck. People think of new things as being good, but when it comes to a refugee camp, no. Not good. The U.N. had just taken charge of the area, and there was little time to break it in. There were no roads, no running water, no left, no right. We were brought to this nothing place in the middle of the jungle and given tents. Whole families, large families, lived in one tent. There were over seventy thousand families at this camp. Seventy thousand *families*, not people.

In the beginning, we just got the necessities, blankets and stuff like that. After one year, we had streets. A year after that, we had a hospital. Two years after that, we had schools. In three years, we had markets where people could exchange and buy things. Tanzanians came to the camp to exchange goods. The area had taken shape. We were organized. There was a sense of harmony. Five years after we arrived, churches were built. By that point, we were living in brick houses. We had youth centers where we kids could go and play games. Foreigners from Europe and the United States visited. They taught us new games. We were like a village.

Many people who lived in the camp had prior professions. Some had been teachers. Others, like my sister Veronica and her husband, Justin, had been doctors. The U.N. hired them to work in the refugee camp.

Veronica was twenty-seven at that time. She and Justin had just started their medical careers at a big, beautiful hospital in Burundi run by Médecins Sans Frontières [Doctors Without Borders]. The camp hired both of them as doctors for the huge sum of eighteen dollars a month. And with that money, in that refugee camp, they could easily support us all.

The U.N. gave us food: rice, flour, beans, corn. We cooked at home. While my sister and her husband worked in the hospital, we took care of the house. Boys would do the physical things mostly. My brother Balthazar and I would go out in the bushes and gather firewood. We would gather water, drinking water and cooking water. The girls mostly would do the household chores and stuff.

A child is a child no matter where he lives. We lived in Block A, Second Street. In the evenings, the kids played tag and ran around, just like any other kids.

Two years after we moved into the camp, my dad was not doing well. He was still mourning his wife, our mom. Once he was this big-time farmer who could get anything he wanted, get any food he wanted. In the refugee camp, we ate the same food Monday through Sunday—morning, afternoon, and night. There were no options in a refugee camp; there was no future, and my dad was used to being his own man.

One day he told us, “I’m going back to Burundi. You kids stay here. It will be easier for me to dodge bullets and hide alone. I’m going to Burundi and live on my farm.” He knew that he would not be bothered, because he was Hutu. We kids could still be in danger because, remember, we are mixed Hutu and Tutsi.

When my dad left the camp, Veronica and Justin became like our parents. They saved the money they got working as camp doctors and were able to build a house with a roof and everything. The soil at the back of our tent was clay, so we made bricks to build the house. We put a large tent over the house for waterproofing, and we put palm leaves on the roof to cool it down. There were chairs—no sofas, obviously—but we made beds from branches and stuff. Every three or four years, the U.N. gave us new bedding.

We didn’t have a TV, but we knew about it. There were movie theaters in the community centers, but nothing that you can imagine. It was just a twenty-seven-inch TV in a room. Entertainment was an expensive luxury, and our family didn’t have the money to see these shows. When I was ten years old, my friends and I decided to make our own TV show. We built a little hut, put plastic on the window, added a candle behind the plastic, and played shadows for the other kids on the block. That was amazing. We began collecting payments, candies and things. The kids had a great time. We had a great time. We made up plays and designed

characters. The most famous characters were the fighting heroes, Bruce Lee, Jackie Chan, and those iconic Chinese kung fu movies that we saw at the community center. We would carve their pictures from empty cartons, put them on sticks, and play them like puppets.

We lived this life for thirteen years. I started first grade in that camp. Schools followed the Rwandan education system: primary school was from first to sixth grade, and secondary school was from seventh to twelfth grade. After twelfth grade, well, obviously we didn’t have universities there, but there was a kind of technical school. Although we were in Tanzania, we followed our own cultural heritage and were taught in French.

When I was in the fifth grade, groups from countries such as the United States, Canada, and Australia started coming to the camp, looking for people to be resettled. We signed up for the U.S. and started the immigration process soon thereafter.

It was a long, long process. It took about five years to be vetted. First, they interviewed us individually, and then as a family; that is, everyone living in our house. We had to make a case about why we couldn’t go back to our birth country. “What happened to you? Why do you fear going back?” We had a strong case. It probably helped that we were of mixed heritage and that my sister and brother-in-law were doctors. We waited. And we waited.

In Burundi, secondary school is a big deal. It’s almost like a college degree. Not many people in my country get to go to college or university, so secondary school is important. We all take a special test the same day, same time. This is to avoid cheating or any other discrepancies. Probably this compared to the ACT [American College Testing] or SAT [Scholastic Aptitude Test] for high schools here.

When I reached sixth grade, I took the special test. I passed it with the highest score in the whole camp. (I guess I used to be smart.) I was so excited. I decided to go back to Burundi to tell my father that I was going to secondary school. I wanted

him to know what I had accomplished. My friends helped me contact professional smugglers who would walk me to Burundi. It would take all night and all day to reach the border. Then it would be another six or seven hours to reach my town.

The Tanzanians had this bad habit of robbing the refugees who went outside the refugee camp. Once someone was away from the protected area, they became fair game. If you are caught outside the camp, they could do anything to you, including kill you. Even a kid five years old can stop you and say, like, "What's your name? Where you from? Where are you going?" We heard about people burned alive. We had no voice in Tanzania. No power. You must be fearless or crazy to cross on foot to the area that leads to Burundi.

In one town the smugglers and I were recognized. Tanzanians can smell Burundians. They recognized us by our clothes and mannerisms. My first fear was: I don't want to be burnt.

Luckily, they just robbed us of everything we had. I had a small stereo/radio almost the size of a phone. That was a gift I got from the school for my top grades and stuff. Obviously I wanted to show it off to my father. They took that. I also had a thousand Tanzanian shillings. A thousand Tanzanian shillings is probably under a U.S. dollar. They took them too. But they let us go and we continued with the journey.

When we got to my old village, I saw some refugee camp friends who had returned to Burundi the year before. I asked them to take me to my dad's house because I had forgotten where it was. "Oh, it's Friday," one friend said. "He might be at the local bar. That's your dad's favorite spot."

We went downtown to the local bar. Inside, there was a long bench filled with many men drinking and talking. I thought he must be here. I'll just go and surprise my dad. "Hey, surprise!" I looked at everybody there but didn't see him.

The last time I saw my father, I was about six years old. Now I was twelve. My dad was sitting right there, and I didn't recognize him. And he didn't recognize me.

I had obviously grown. As I was leaving, the man sitting next to him said to him, "Is that your son? The one who was here a year ago?"

"No. I don't think so. I don't think he'd be coming back so soon."

"But that young man looks just like him."

My father got up and followed me. As soon as I turned around, there he was, my father, right behind me. "You're so tall," he said to me.

"You're so old," I said to him. We hugged. I think we hugged for a good ten minutes. We cried. We were glued to each other. There was much catching up to do.

My father introduced me to my stepmother and three half-siblings. It was right for him to have somebody; I didn't want him to be alone. My father had been a very loving man to my mom. He was a genuine, loving man. He was my idol. I wanted to be like him when I married. My stepmom is great. She's loving and quiet. She's soft-spoken, which is very unique for our outspoken, fun, and crazy family. I cherish my half-sister and two half-brothers.

Our house had been burnt by the bad guys after they found out that we had escaped. They destroyed a lot of stuff on our property. My dad was trying to rebuild the house. Once my family and I were in America, and working, we offered to move him into the city. He was, like, "Nope, no, thank you." He was happy on his own land. I stayed with my father for a week before heading back to the refugee camp. He was thrilled to learn I aced the national test and was going on to high school.

JOY

Five years after we had begun the immigration process, we got a letter of acceptance. That was the most joyful moment that we had ever, ever had. My sister and her husband were the ones who got the letter, but it was for our entire household. By now, Victoria and Justin had three kids: Sheila, Nagrasia, and little Patrick. All the siblings who lived in the household, my brother Balthazar, and me were

included in the letter. My two other sisters, Virginia and Suazis, were married and each living with their husbands' families, so they were not considered in our family anymore. They signed up for resettlement and participated the same way we did, but immigration turned them down. Many people were turned down. I don't understand this. Why did some get no, and others get yes? This is a mystery to me. Everybody had a strong story in the refugee camp. You would think that my sisters' stories were closest to ours. You would imagine they would take everybody, but no, they did not.

By 2006, there was some stability in Burundi. The U.N. decided to close the camp. The U.N. based their decision on the fact that there was no active militia fighting. But the rebel group had not yet signed a peace treaty with the government. Many refugees moved from our camp to another one because they were afraid to return to Burundi. Virginia, Suazis, and their families, for example, did not feel safe in Burundi. Rather than return home, they decided to go to a different refugee camp in Malawi. They are still in Malawi.

Seven hundred people from our refugee camp were accepted by the United States. There was pure joy. It was an unforgettable night. Unforgettable. By 2006, I was a few months shy of seventeen and about to have a new life in a place called the United States. We had no idea how we were going to get there. We had no idea how far away it was. All we knew was that it was a place somewhere out there. It had to be a hundred million times better than where we were now. Think of it this way: When we think of heaven, we know it is something good. But we can't paint it. We can't imagine whether it would be green, yellow, grassy, floating on the clouds. We don't know anything about it, but we know that it's good. Right? That's how we thought of America. It was like heaven.

16 Heaven

We learned that we would be living in an area with white people. I had seen white people who came with the U.N. When they came to our camp, kids would rush to them, to touch them, just to see if they felt like we feel. We touched their hair to see if it felt different from ours. Sometimes the volunteers would hang out with us kids. At first, it was a shock to get close to one. Even their eyes, their eyes looked like a cat. A cat's eyes. They were so unreal to us.

We learned a few things about the United States, like how to call 911 in case of an emergency. We were taught to respond to a question by saying, "No English." That was all the English we were taught. It's funny, isn't it? Once we were here, Americans would come up to me, and say, "Oh, we're so excited to have you here." And I'd respond, "No English," and look away. It was bad!