

Grief

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On TV, on the radio, they never called it genocide. As if that word were reserved. Too serious. Too serious for Africa. Yes, there were massacres, but there were always massacres in Africa. And these massacres were happening in a country that no one had ever heard of. A country that no one could find on a map. Tribal hatred, primitive, atavistic hatred: nothing to understand there. “Weird stuff goes on where you come from,” people would tell her.

She herself didn’t know the word, but in Kinyarwanda there was a very old term for what was happening in her homeland: gutsembatsemba, a verb, used when talking about parasites or mad dogs, things that had to be eradicated, and about Tutsis, also known as inyenzi—cockroaches—something else to be wiped out. She remembered the story her Hutu schoolmates at high school in Kigali had told her, laughing: “Someday a child will ask his mother, ‘Mama, who were those Tutsis I keep hearing about? What did they look like?’ and the mother will answer, ‘They were nothing at all, my son. Those are just stories.’ ”

Nevertheless, she hadn’t lost hope. She wanted to know. Her father, her mother, her brothers, her sisters, her whole family back in Rwanda—some of them might still be alive. Maybe the

slaughter had spared them for now? Maybe they’d managed to escape into exile, as she had? Her parents, on the hill, had no telephone, of course, but she called one of her brothers, who taught in Ruhengeri. The phone rang and rang. No one answered. She called her sister, who’d married a shopkeeper in Butare. A voice she’d never heard before told her, “There’s nobody here.” She called her brother in Canada. He was the eldest. If their parents were dead, then he’d be the head of the family. Perhaps he had news, perhaps he had advice, perhaps he could help her begin to face her terror. They spoke, and then they fell silent. What was there to say? From now on, they were alone.

From now on, she would be alone. She knew a few people from home, of course, friends she’d made at the university here, where she’d had to start her studies all over again, her African degrees being worthless in France. But that little part of her—the part that still tied her to those she’d left behind in Rwanda, despite the distance and the time gone by and the impossibility of rejoining them—formed a bond that grounded her identity and affirmed her will to go on. That bond would fade, and in the cold of her solitude its disappearance would leave her somehow amputated.

She felt very fragile. “I’m like an egg,” she often told herself. “One jolt and I’ll break.” She moved as sparingly as she could; she lived in slow motion. She walked as if she were seeking her way in the dark, as if at any moment she might bump into an obstacle and fall to the ground. Climbing a staircase took a tremendous effort: a great weight lay on her shoulders. She found herself counting the steps she still had to climb, clutching the bannister as if she were at the edge of an abyss, and when she reached her floor she was breathless and drained.

She tried to find an escape in mindless household tasks. Again and again, she maniacally straightened her studio apartment. Something was always where it shouldn’t be: books on the couch, shoes in the entryway, Rwandan nesting baskets untidily lined up on the shelf. She was sure she’d feel better if everything was finally where it belonged. But she was forever having to go back and start over again.

If only she had at least a photograph of her parents. She rifled through the suitcase that had come with her through all her travels. There were letters, there were notebooks filled with words, useless diplomas, even her Rwandan identity card, with the “Tutsi” stamp that she’d tried to scratch away. There was a handful of photographs of her with her girlfriends in Burundi (which they’d had taken at a photographer’s studio in the Asian district in Bujumbura, before they parted ways, so they wouldn’t forget), there were postcards from her brother in Canada, a few pages of a diary she’d quickly abandoned, but she never did find a photo of her parents.

For that, she rebuked herself bitterly. Why hadn’t she thought to ask

them to have their picture taken and send her a copy? Was she a neglectful daughter? Had she forgotten them as the years went by? No, they were still there in her memory; she could call up their image anytime she liked. She sat down at her table, took her head in her hands, closed her eyes, focussed her mind, and pictured, one by one, all the faces that death might already have erased.

Then, toward the end of June, she got a letter. There was no mistaking where it had come from: the red-and-blue-bordered envelope, the exotic bird on the stamp, the clumsily written address. . . . She couldn’t bring herself to open it. She put it on her bookshelf, behind the Rwandan baskets. She pretended to forget it. There were so many more urgent and more important things to do: make dinner, iron a pair of jeans, organize her class notes. But the letter was still there, behind the baskets. Suddenly, she found herself tearing open the envelope. She pulled out a sheet of square-ruled paper, a page from a schoolchild’s notebook. She didn’t need to read the few sentences that served as an introduction to a long list of names: her father, her mother, her brothers, her sisters, her uncles, her aunts, her nephews, her nieces. . . . This was now the list of her dead, of everyone who had died far away from her, without her, and there was nothing she could do for them, not even die with them. She stared at the letter, unable to weep, and she began to think that it had been sent by the dead themselves. It was a message from the land of the dead. And this, she thought, would probably be their only grave, a column of names she didn’t even need to reread, because she knew them so well that they echoed in

her head like cries of pain.

She kept the letter from her dead with her at all times. She never showed it to anyone. Whenever someone asked, "What happened to your family?," she always answered, "They were killed, they're all dead, every one." When people asked how she'd heard, she told them, "I just know, that's all. Don't ask me anything more." She often felt the need to touch that piece of paper. She gazed at the column of names without reading them, with no tears in her eyes, and the names filled her head with pleas that she didn't know how to answer.

What she didn't want to see: pictures on television, photographs in newspapers and magazines, corpses lying by roadsides, dismembered bodies, faces slashed by machetes. What she didn't want to hear: any rumor that might summon up images of the frenzy of sex and blood that had crashed over the women, the girls, the children. . . . She wanted to protect her dead, to keep them untouched in her memory, their bodies whole and unsullied, like the saints she'd heard about at catechism, miraculously preserved from corruption.

Most of all, she didn't want to sleep, because to fall asleep was to deliver herself to the killers. Every night they were there. They'd taken over her sleep; they were the masters of her dreams. They had no faces; they came toward her in a gray, blood-soaked throng. Or else they had just one face, an enormous face that laughed viciously as it pressed into hers, crushing her.

No, no going to sleep.

Of course, she should have wept. She owed the dead that. If she wept, she could be close to them. She imag-

ined them waiting behind the veil of tears, nearby and unreachable. Maybe that was why she'd gone so far away, why she'd headed off into exile: so that there would be someone to weep for all those whose memory the killers had tried to erase, whose existence they'd tried to deny.

But she couldn't weep.

"My father just died," one of her friends told her.

"I'll go to his funeral," she answered, without thinking.

She immediately regretted making that promise. Was it right for her to honor someone else's dead if she couldn't weep for her own? In her mind, she summoned up images of Rwandan women weeping over their lost loved ones, able to weep because the body was there in front of them, before it was buried. Yes, the women of Rwanda knew how to mourn. First, they wept sitting up very straight, still and silent, their tears falling like raindrops from eucalyptus trees. Then came the keening and the wailing; the women shivered and quaked, racked head to toe by violent sobs. Finally, they huddled beneath their pagnes, disappearing, soundless but for their sighs as they choked back their tears, and then even those slowly waned. Now the loved one could enter the land of the dead. He'd got the tears he deserved, and although the pain of the loss was still there, you knew that it would slowly ease, that you'd be able to live with it, and that the lost loved one would leave a peaceful memory in the world of the living, a welcome memory—maybe that was what white people meant when they talked about "the grieving process." And, with that, the loved one was allowed to set off for his final home. The body was carried

on an ingobyi, a long stretcher made of bamboo slats. The women would keep their eyes fixed on him, accompanying him on his voyage, as if lending him their support one last time before he was admitted to the other world, the unknown world of the spirits. The ingobyi also served as a bride's palanquin on her wedding day. She, too, was expected to weep. As she was taken from her parents' house to that of her new family, her sobs—too loud to be sincere—showed everyone that she was leaving the paternal enclosure against her wishes. The ingobyi always demanded its tribute of tears.

She sadly recalled the little cemetery where she and her three fellow-refugees had liked to meet. This was in Burundi, in Bujumbura, at the seminary that had temporarily taken them in after they fled from Rwanda. In exchange for halfhearted hospitality, the four companions-in-exile did housekeeping, helped in the kitchen, served the abbots at dinner, washed dishes. They tried to ward off the insistent curiosity of the seminarians, who were made restless by the presence of girls. They were forever having to invent new excuses to turn down the abbots' invitations to come pick out a book or have a talk in their rooms. When the siesta hour came, the girls went out into the garden to talk about all that had happened to them and to consider their uncertain future. Beyond the banana grove, they discovered a small forgotten cemetery with a handful of wooden crosses, whose white paint was peeling, the black letters of the names almost entirely faded. "Let's say a prayer," Espérance said. "You must always do something for the dead."

They returned to those graves day

after day, hurrying out to the little cemetery early in the afternoon, as soon as the dishes were washed and the siesta hour had begun. It became their secret domain, their refuge, a safe place, far from the irritable stares of the miserly old nun, far from the indiscreet, ardent gazes of the abbots and the seminarians. They pulled the weeds from the graves and laid out purple flowers, cut from the bougainvillea that climbed the façade of the Father Superior's small house. "These could be our parents' graves," Eugénie said. "They may have been killed. Maybe because of us, because we left, they were killed." They stood side by side and held one another as you do for a Rwandan greeting. Then they burst into tears, and their shared lament brought them some comfort and solace.

They'd each chosen a grave to consider their own. Sometimes it belonged to their parents, sometimes to a brother, a sister, a fiancé. . . . And they mourned the absence of that loved one, or possibly the death, if he or she turned out to have been killed in reprisal for the girls' going away. The dirt was cracked and eroded from the heat and the rain, so they covered the graves with pebbles taken a handful at a time from the wide walkway that led to the calvary. They found a few slightly chipped vases in the sacristy, and they placed them before the crosses, which they'd carefully straightened. They filled the vases with flowers they'd borrowed from the altar of the Holy Virgin. And then, sitting by the graves, their arms around their legs, their chins on their knees, they silently let their tears flow, always on edge, fearing that a seminarian might happen onto them and mock them for their strange rituals.

Long after that little group of refugees had gone their separate ways, she still missed the haven she'd found in that cemetery. And today she realized how much she wished she could be back by those strangers' graves, where she'd shed so many tears.

There was a sort of minivan, of a discreet, elegant gray, parked in front of the church. Two men in dark suits were waiting, bored, on the steps. She went in and tiptoed down the side aisle until she reached an empty seat with a view of the choir and the altar. There was a priest standing at a microphone, talking about the consolation of the afterlife. Nothing to do with her dead. She spotted her friend in the front row, no doubt surrounded by her family. She was shocked to see that the women weren't weeping, although some had red eyes, and she was sorry to find that they weren't draped in the elaborate mourning veils she'd seen in old photos. The men were all wearing solemn expressions that seemed forced to her.

Soon her eye was drawn to the coffin, which was sitting on a pedestal, armfuls of flowers laid out all around it. She couldn't help admiring the coffin's gleaming, polished wood, its handsome molding, its gilded handles. The old man, she understood, was lying in that padded box dressed in his best suit, and maybe, as she'd heard people say, they'd made up his face so they could tell themselves that death was only a restful sleep. She began to hate that old man, who'd died a painless death, her friend had told her—"a good death," the friend had said, over and over. And as she stared at the coffin she felt as if she could see inside it, as if the wood had become transparent. And the body she saw in that silken, gently lit bubble was

her father's body, dressed in the spotless pagnie that marked him as an elder and the white shirt he wore for Sunday Mass. Suddenly she felt tears rolling down her cheeks, and she heard a loud sob escape her. Now there was no stopping it. She let the tears flow; she didn't try to hold them back or wipe them away. It was as if a wave of solace had erupted from the very heart of her sorrow. She couldn't stop whispering the lamentation that accompanies the dead in Rwanda. She could feel her neighbors' uncomfortable, reproachful stares. She heard a murmur run through the rows in front of her and behind her. She fled, here and there jostling a kneeling woman as she hurried past. Her footfalls resounded against the stone floor as if to denounce her: what right did she have to weep for that man she didn't know, that man surrounded by a family who mourned him with a proper, polite sadness? She was a parasite of their grief.

She wished she could forget what had happened at the church: that vision of her father's corpse, her fit of tears. She avoided her friend so she wouldn't have to answer her questions. But a strange thought nagged at her, insistent, obsessive, telling her that her dead had given her a sign, and she was afraid to understand too clearly what they were trying to say to her. Nonetheless, she found that the long strolls she liked to take through the streets of the city inevitably brought her to a church, where she always hoped to see a gleaming gray or black hearse parked in front. More than once she did, and then an irresistible force drew her inside, with the crowd of mourners. She knew exactly where to sit: always behind a pillar, but with a view of the coffin. She stared at it

long and hard, hoping she might once again see through the wood and find one of her dead inside it: her mother wrapped in her pagne, her younger sister in her schoolgirl dress . . . It didn't always work, but the tears came every time. And she was convinced that, because she was there with them—those who had come to mourn a son killed in a traffic accident or a brother dead after what they called a long illness or a father felled by a heart attack—they would also weep for her dead, just a little. In exchange, she told herself, I'm sharing their sorrow for the one they lost. They can't possibly mind.

She thought that her dead wanted her to be present at funerals so that they, too, could have their share of mourning and tears. In the past, she had never read the newspaper; now she opened it feverishly every morning to read the obituaries. She became a regular at the church near her apartment. That went on for some months, but eventually her strangely faithful attendance was noticed. One day, as she was trying to discreetly leave the church, a young priest stopped her outside the front door.

"Madame, please . . ."

She couldn't push him away, and she couldn't go back inside.

"Madame, please, allow me, I'd like a word with you. . . . I've noticed that you come to almost every funeral, and that you weep as if you knew the deceased. That can be upsetting for the families, for everyone who's suffered a loss. Perhaps I can help you? I'd like nothing more than to listen to you, help you . . . if there's anything I can do."

"No, let me be. I promise you'll never see me again."

She wandered the city streets,

which had become a labyrinth of her despair, with no way out. She sensed that the very tenuous, very frail bonds that had connected her to her own dead through the losses of others were now broken forever. She felt herself sinking into an aloneness that would never end. All she had left was that piece of notebook paper, now tattered, and its list of names that she couldn't bring herself to read but whispered to herself over and over, like a hypnotic refrain of sadness and remorse.

She went home and tried to immerse herself in her most recent class notes, to neatly copy them out on a fresh sheet of paper, but she found the names of her dead filling the page. Now she was afraid: she was going to lose her mind, she had already lost her mind, these things she'd been doing weren't what her dead wanted at all. They weren't here, in this land of exile, in these foreign churches. They were waiting back home, in the land of the dead that Rwanda had become. They were waiting for her. She would go to them.

"Stop," she told the driver. "This is the place. That's the path to my house, and if you keep going it takes you up to the eucalyptus plantings at the very top of the hill. And that hut over there at the side of the road, that's Népomucène's cabaret. He sold banana beer and Fanta, even Primus sometimes, but not often. One time, I remember it to this day, my father bought me an orange Fanta when he came back from the market. He must have got a good price for his coffee."

"You really want to go there?" the driver said, sighing. "You know, it's no use. There's nothing left. It might not be good for you. In any case, you shouldn't go by yourself: you never

know, you might run into a madman, and besides there are people who still want to 'finish the job,' so being there all alone, with those people who died up there . . ."

"I made a promise. Maybe I'll find what I've come here for. . . . I promised, I have to go."

"I'll come back this evening, before the sun goes down. I'll honk, and then I'll wait for ten minutes. Look, I have a watch just like you do, ten minutes, no more. I've got people waiting for me, too, at home."

"I'll be here. See you this evening."

The Toyota pickup drove off in a cloud of red dust, loaded with bananas, mattresses, sheet metal, maybe ten passengers, and a few goats squeezed in. The noise of the engine faded away. She spent a long moment looking around her. The dirt road snaked between the hillside and the swamp, but the shallows where her mother once grew sweet potatoes and corn were now clogged with reeds and papyrus. Népomucène's cabaret was a ruin, its flaking mud walls showing their skeleton of interlaced bamboo. The start of the path up the hill was half hidden by tall fronds of dried grass. For a moment, she wondered if this really was Gihanga. But soon she got hold of herself. She should have known that everything would be different: death had come to this place. It was death's domain now.

The hill was steep, but the path soon turned rocky, and the tangle of brush that slowed her down at first gradually thinned. She tried to make out what were once cultivated parcels of land in the thick growth that had invaded the hillside. The plots marked off for the coffee plants were easy to spot, but shaggy, dishevelled bushes

bore witness to their abandonment. A few oversized, sterile manioc rose from the weeds, smothering the last stalks of sorghum.

Halfway up the hill, in the middle of deserted fields, a patch of almost impenetrable forest had survived. Fig trees towered over the sea of pointed dracaena leaves. Her father had told her that those were the vestiges of the enclosure of an old king. This place was now haunted by his umuzimu, his spirit, and he had perhaps been reincarnated in the python that guarded this sacred wood where no one dared set foot. "Stay away," the old ones said. "The python has been furious ever since the abapadris forbade us to bring it offerings. If you go near him, he'll swallow you!" She couldn't help thinking that this gloomy forest and its python were now the masters of the hill and would end up devouring her.

She reached the stand of banana trees, whose glossy leaves had once concealed the enclosure. Many of the trees had fallen and were dull brown with rot. The leaves of those still standing hung tattered and yellow. A few of them bore sad, stunted fruit.

She found her pace slowing as she neared the enclosure. She wasn't sure she'd have the strength to see this journey through to the end, to face firsthand what she'd already been told about. But now she was standing by the palisade. The wall of interlaced branches had collapsed and come apart, and what were once uprights were now shrubs with vigorous greenery or scarlet flowers, which struck her as indecent, as if, she thought, those simple stakes had been brought to life by the death of the people who had planted them. Nothing was left of the rectangular main house but a shat-

tered stretch of wall. She searched for some trace of the hearth and its three stones, but she found only a little pile of broken tiles. She couldn't hold back a surge of pride: somehow her father had roofed his house with tiles! But she also observed that the killers had gone to the trouble of taking most of them away. They'd had all kinds of reasons for murdering their neighbors: the neighbors were Tutsis; they had a house with a tile roof. In the back courtyard, the three big grain baskets were slashed and overturned, and the calves' stable was a mound of ash and charred straw. Not wanting to break them any further, she took care not to walk on the shards littering the ground, all that remained of the big jugs the family had used to collect rainwater. Amid the debris of the collapsed awning that had once covered the hearth, she thought she saw a patch of fabric and hoped it might be a piece of her mother's pagne. But when she came closer she realized that it was only a yellowed taro leaf.

She knew she wouldn't find what she was looking for in the ruined enclosure. As soon as she'd got to the town, before heading to the hamlet of Gihanga, she'd gone to the mission church where the Tutsis had sought shelter, where they'd been slaughtered. Four thousand, five thousand, no one quite knew. Outside the front door she'd seen a little old man with a white beard and a broad, fringed straw hat sitting behind a wooden table. He was the guardian of the dead. He had a notebook in front of him. Visitors were invited to write a few words on their way out, as at an art gallery. The old man gave her a long stare, nodded, then finally said, "I know you—you're Mihigo's daughter. Did you come to

see the dead?"

"Yes, they were calling me."

"You won't find them here. Here there's only death."

"Let me go in."

"Of course. Who could deny you that? I'll come with you, follow me, but then I have something to tell you."

"As you see," the old man said, "the abapadris and their houseboys washed everything clean. There's nothing left, not one drop of blood, not on the walls, not on the altar. There may still be some in the folds of the Virgin Mary's veil, if you look closely. Once it was all cleaned up, the Monsignor came. He wanted Mass to be said here again, like before. All it would take was some holy water. But the survivors objected. They said, 'Where was your God when they were killing us? The white soldiers came to take the priests away, and He went off with them. He won't be back. Now the church belongs to our dead.' The mayor and the prefect agreed. It seems they're going to turn it into a house just for our dead—a memorial, they called it. I'll show you where our dead are waiting in the meantime."

He took a key that hung around his neck on a string and opened a door behind the altar, at the back of the apse. Beyond it was a vast, dark room stacked to the ceiling with large bags, like those used for carrying charcoal.

"These are for skulls," the guide said, pointing at the bags against the wall to his left, "and the ones straight ahead of you are for bones. We've got everyone who was here in the church, and all the bones we could find in the hills, left behind by the jackals and the abandoned dogs. Even the schoolchildren went to gather bones during vacations and days off. I hear there are

going to be display cases, like at the Pakistani's shop in the marketplace. Your family's here in these bags, but no one can tell you whose bones are whose. You can make out only the babies' skulls, because they fit in the palm of your hand. But what I can tell you is that your father isn't here. His bones are still up there where he lived, at Gihanga, but don't you go looking for them. They're someplace where you shouldn't see them. All right, let's go now, you don't have to write anything in the book—that book's for the bazungu, the white people, assuming they'll come, or for the grand gentlemen from Kigali in their four-by-fours. There's nothing for you to write. You're on the side of the dead. But let me tell you again: don't go looking for your father's remains, you mustn't see him where they left him."

She stepped over the back courtyard's broken fence and found herself in another banana grove, which seemed more overgrown than the one she'd just come through. But, even with the weeds, she could make out a path. It led to a thicket that exuded a horrible stench, veiled by a buzzing, humming fog of mosquitoes, gnats, and fat green flies. A black puddle had spread all around it, like stinking lava. Pallid, almost transparent worms twisted and writhed wherever the flood hadn't yet dried to a sickening crust.

She forced her way through the tall grass and sat down for a moment on the termite mound where people used to wait their turn every morning. The smell was almost more than she could bear. The air felt thick and heavy. She wasn't sure she could go on, wasn't sure she had the courage to climb the last few metres to that putrid thicket. But she told herself that she had to

see this through to the end, that in just a few steps her journey would be over. She staggered up the final slope, tried to wave away the blinding mist of gnats, and bent over the side of the latrine. She thought she could see something shaped like a human body in the filth, and maybe—but surely this was an illusion—the horrible black glistening of what used to be a face. A violent nausea washed over her, and she vomited as she ran back to the termite mound. She closed her eyes, only to see once again what she'd just glimpsed in the latrine, that same fleshless face with its vile, viscous mask. She opened her eyes to make the vision of horror go away. She was sure that she would never again close her eyes without that monstrous face appearing from the deepest darkness. She ran down the hill and took shelter amid the crumbling walls of Népo-mucène's cabaret, next to the road. To keep her eyes open, she stared at a bamboo rack, still dotted with a few clods of red clay. Trembling with fever and nausea, she sat there for hours, watching for the truck to come back, like a promise of deliverance.

All night long, she struggled against sleep in the room she'd rented at the mission, trying to hold back the flood of visions and nightmares that would wash her into their world of terror if she let herself drift off for even a moment. When the curfew hour came and the generator was turned off, the mission was submerged in pitch-darkness. She saw the glow of a fire through the narrow window: the watchmen warming themselves on this cold, dry-season night. She wished she could join them, hold out her hands toward the flames, talk with the men. But, of course, a girl couldn't min-

gle with strangers in the middle of the night. She remembered that she'd seen a hurricane lamp on the little table, and surely a box of matches next to it. She felt around for the matches, struck one, and lit the lamp's wick. It felt as though that trembling, blue-tipped flame were watching over her, keeping at bay the dark forces that lurked all around. She lay down on the bed and finally fell into a dreamless sleep.

There was someone in her room when she awoke. In the dim early-morning light, she recognized the guard from the church, sitting in the room's only chair.

"You went to your house in Gihanga," the old man said. "Don't tell me what you saw or thought you saw there. You went right through to the end. There's nothing beyond it, and no way out of it. You won't find your dead in the graves or the bones or the latrine. That's not where they're waiting for you. They're inside you. They survive only in you, and you survive only through them. But from now on you'll find all your strength in them—there's no other choice, and no one can take that strength away from you. With that strength, you can do things you might not even imagine today. Like it or not, the death of our loved ones has fuelled us—not with hate, not with vengefulness, but with an energy that nothing can ever defeat. That strength lives in you. Don't let anyone try to tell you to get over your loss, not if that

means saying goodbye to your dead. You can't: they'll never leave you, they'll stay by your side to give you the courage to live, to triumph over obstacles, whether here in Rwanda or abroad, if you go back. They're always beside you, and you can always depend on them."

Now the rising sun was illuminating her tiny room. She sat on the edge of the bed, elbows on her knees, head in her hands, listening. She let the guardian's words sink into her, and slowly despair loosened its grip.

They sat for a long while, looking at each other in silence. Her visitor picked up a small gourd that he'd set down at his feet. He dropped a single straw into it. "I made this sorghum beer for the dead I watch over," he said. "Share it with them as I do."

He handed her the gourd and she sucked up the liquid. She closed her eyes. A gentle bitterness filled her mouth, like something she'd tasted long before.

"Now," the guardian of the dead said, "what is there for you to fear?"

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Scholastique Mukasonga will publish her fourth book in English, the story collection "Igifu," in September. The movie adaptation of her novel, "Our Lady of the Nile," was released in 2020.