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Opening Extract from...

A Sunday at the Pool in Kigali

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ONE

In the middle of Kigali there is a swimming pool surrounded by deckchairs and a score of tables all made of white plastic. And forming a huge L overhanging this patch of blue stands the Hôtel des Mille-Collines, with its habitual clientele of international experts and aid workers, middle-class Rwandans, screwed-up or melancholy expatriates of various origins, and prostitutes. All around the pool and hotel in lascivious disorder lies the part of the city that matters, that makes the decisions, that steals, kills, and lives very nicely, thank you. The French Cultural Centre, the UNICEF offices, the Ministry of Information, the embassies, the president's palace (recognizable by the tanks on guard), the crafts shops popular with departing visitors where one can unload surplus black market currency, the radio station, the World Bank offices, the archbishop's palace. Encircling this artificial paradise are the obligatory symbols of decolonization: Constitution Square, Development Avenue, Boulevard of the Republic, Justice Avenue, and an ugly, modern cathedral. Farther down, almost in the underbelly of the city, stands the red brick mass of the Church of the Holy Family, disgorging the poor in their Sunday best into crooked mud lanes bordered by houses made

of the same clay. Small red houses – just far enough away from the swimming pool not to offend the nostrils of the important – filled with shouting, happy children, with men and women dying of AIDS and malaria, thousands of small households that know nothing of the pool around which others plan their lives and, more importantly, their predictable deaths.

Jackdaws as big as eagles and as numerous as house sparrows caw all around the hotel gardens. They circle in the sky, waiting, like the humans they're observing, for the cocktail hour. Now is when the beers arrive, while the ravens are alighting on the tall eucalyptus trees around the pool. When the ravens have settled, the buzzards appear and take possession of the topmost branches. Woe betide the lowly jackdaw that fails to respect the hierarchy. Birds behave like humans here.

Precisely as the buzzards are establishing their positions around the pool, precisely then, the French paratroopers on the plastic deckchairs begin putting on Rambo airs. They sniff all the feminine flesh splashing around in the heavily chlorinated water of the pool. Its freshness matters little. There is vulture in these soldiers with their shaven heads, watching and waiting beside a pool that is the centrepiece of a meat stall where the reddest, most lovingly garnished morsels are displayed alongside the flabby and scrawny feminine fare whose only diversion is this waterhole. On Sundays, as on every other day of the week at around five o'clock, a number of carcasses – some plump, some skeletal – disturb the surface of the pool, well aware that the 'paras,' as the paratroopers are known, are not the least daunted either by cellulite or by skin clinging to

bones merely from habit. The women, if they knew what danger stalked them, would drown in anticipation of ecstasy or else get themselves to a nunnery.

This tranquil Sunday, a former minister of justice is warming up energetically on the diving board. He does not realize that his strenuous exercises are eliciting giggles from the two prostitutes from whom he is expecting a sign of recognition or interest before diving into the water. He wants to beguile because he doesn't want to pay. He hits the water like a disjointed clown. The girls laugh. The paras too.

Around the pool, Québécois and Belgian aid workers vie in loud laughter. The Belgians and Québécois aren't friends; they don't work together, even though they are working toward the same goal: 'development'. That magic word which dresses up the best and most irrelevant of intentions. The two groups are rivals, always explaining to the locals why their kind of development is better than the others.' The only thing they have in common is the din they make. There ought to be a word for the atmosphere surrounding these Whites who talk, laugh and drink in a way that makes the whole pool know their importance – no, not even that – just their vacuous existence. Let's use the word 'noisiness' because there's certainly noise, but it's continuous, there's a permanence to it, a perpetual squawking. In this shy, reticent and often deceptive country, they live in a state of noisiness, like noisy animals. They are also in continuous rut. Noise is their breathing, silence their death, and the asses of Rwandan women their territory of exploration. They are noisy explorers of Third World asses. Only the Germans, when they descend on the hotel in force like

a battalion of moralizing accountants, can match the Belgians and Québécois in noisiness.

Important Frenchmen don't stay at this hotel. They dig themselves in at the Méridien with high-class Rwandans and clean hookers who sip whisky. The hookers at this hotel are rarely clean. They drink Pepsi while waiting to be picked up and offered a local beer, which may get them offered a whisky or a vodka later on. But these women are realists, so today they'll settle for a Pepsi and a john.

Valcourt, who is also Québécois but has almost forgotten it over the years, observes these things and notes them down, muttering as he does so, sometimes angrily, sometimes with tenderness, but always audibly. For all anyone knows or imagines, he's writing about them, and everyone wants someone to ask him what he's writing, and worries about this book he's been writing since the Project left him more or less high and dry. Sometimes he even pretends to be writing, in order to show he's alive, watchful and serious like the disillusioned philosopher he claims to be when he runs out of excuses for himself. He's not writing a book. He writes to put in time between mouthfuls of beer, or to signal that he doesn't want to be disturbed. Rather like a buzzard on a branch, in fact, Valcourt is waiting for a scrap of life to excite him and make him unfold his wings.

At the end of the terrace, walking slowly and grandly, appears a Rwandan just back from Paris. You can tell, because his sporty outfit is so new its yellows and greens are blinding, even for sunglass-protected eyes. There's sniggering at a table of expatriates. Admiration at several tables of locals. The Rwandan just back from Paris is afloat on a magic carpet. From

the handle of his crocodile attaché case dangle First Class and Hermès labels. In his pocket, along with other prestige labels, he probably has an import licence for some product of secondary necessity, which he will sell at a premium price.

He orders a 'verbena-mint' at such volume that three ravens depart the nearest tree. Gentille, who has just completed her social service studies and is interning at the hotel, doesn't know what a verbena-mint is. Intimidated, she whispers – so softly she can't even hear herself – that there are only two brands of beer, Primus and Mutzig. The Rwandan on his magic carpet is not listening and replies that of course he wants the best, even if it's more expensive. So Gentille will bring him a Mutzig, which for some is the best and for everyone more expensive. Valcourt scribbles feverishly. He describes the scene with indignation, adding some notes about the outrageousness of African corruption, but he does not stir.

'You little slut!' the Rwandan just back from Paris yells when confronted by his Mutzig that is not a verbena-mint. 'I know the minister of tourism, you dirty Tutsi, sleeping with a White so you can work at the hotel!' And Gentille, whose name is as lovely as her breasts, which are so pointed they abrade her starched shirt-dress, Gentille, whose face is more lovely still, and whose ass is more disturbing in its impudent adolescence than anything else about her, Gentille, who is so embarrassed by her beauty she has never smiled or spoken an unnecessary word, Gentille cries. Just a few tears and a little sniff of the kind young girls still have in them before the smells of men take hold between their thighs.

For six months now Valcourt has thought of only one thing between the thighs of Agathe, who comes to his room

when she has no customers rather than risk walking home to Nyamirambo in the dark. For six months now he has barely been getting it half up with Agathe because he wants to turn Gentille's breasts into a woman's breasts; six months in which the only thing that gets it up is seeing Gentille walking with those sweet breasts of hers among the tables on the terrace or through the dining room. Valcourt has but one plan in his head now – to thread Gentille, *enfiler* is the word he has in mind, a favourite of the writer Paul Léautaud whom he had discovered through a woman crueller than any of the words of that detestable writer, a woman who left him in pieces like a badly butchered carcass on a blood-smeared meat counter.

'I'm the president's nephew,' bawls the Rwandan just back from Paris.

No, he's not one of the president's nephews. Valcourt knows them all. The one who plays the political science student in Quebec but in Rwanda organizes death squads that go after Tutsis at night in Remero, Gikondo and Nyamirambo. And the one who controls the sale of condoms donated by international aid agencies, and another who has AIDS and thinks the way to get rid of his poison is by fucking young virgins, and the other three, Eugène, Clovis, and Firmin, who are soldiers and protectors of the hookers at the Kigali Night, the 'cleanest' of Kigali's hookers. The paras screw the clean hookers in the bush around the bar without condoms because the president's nephews tell them *they* fuck them without condoms and they aren't sick. And the rapacious French jerks believe them. As if they didn't know the Kigali Night belongs to one of the president's sons.

Gentille, who was shy already, now walks like a woman in mourning.

Valcourt orders 'a tall Mutzig, *ma petite* Gentille.' He almosts says something to comfort her, but she is too beautiful and he feels stupidly inarticulate. And soon it will be six o'clock and around the pool all the actors in the daily cocktail-hour ritual will have taken their places on stage in the same production as yesterday. And Valcourt will play his role, like all the others. The Mont Blanc fountain pen moves: 'Now a fade-out to Blacks.'

There's Raphaël and his bunch of pals who work at the People's Bank of Rwanda. They'll leave at midnight when the fourth-floor bar closes. And there's Monsieur Faustin, who will be prime minister when the president bestows democracy upon the children of his republic. Other opposition members of the government will join him – Landouald, minister of labour, who went into politics to please his wife, a liberated Québécoise, and a few others who will bow and scrape to right and left as they go back and forth three times to the buffet table. A Belgian embassy counsellor stops for a few minutes, diplomatically affecting an air of discretion in order to avoid saying anything about the peace accord and the transfer of power that the president accepts every six months and never signs, claiming he can't because it's the rainy season, or his wife is in Paris, or the last arms shipments have not arrived from Zaïre, or his secretary's husband is sick.

Every day for the past two years there has been endless talk around the pool about the change that is brewing; it's going to come tomorrow or Tuesday, Wednesday at the latest, they say. But this time it's true and the regulars are caught up in a great ripple of excited whispering. The husband of the president's secretary died of AIDS two days ago in Paris, where

he had been in hospital for six months. Émérita, taxiwoman, businesswoman, who pays the best black-market rate for the Rwandan franc, came to tell Monsieur Faustin. A doctor from Val-de-Grâce Hospital had arrived this morning and told the first secretary at the French embassy, who repeated it to Émérita – who runs little errands for him – knowing full well she would waste no time announcing the news to Monsieur Faustin. The late husband was a perfect fool, content just to make money with his exclusive Michelin tire import licence, but rumour has it that his wife does not owe her stunningly fast rise through the civil service ranks to her typing skills. The intelligence branch of the embassy, contacted by a brother of Madame La Présidente a few months ago, reassured this 'neutral enquirer' that these things were all malicious gossip originating in the camp of the opposition.

No matter. In half an hour, when Émérita has finished her Pepsi after talking to Zozo the concierge, a swarm of taxi drivers will leave for the city. Tonight, from Gikondo to Nyamirambo, not forgetting Sodoma, the well-named hookers' quarter, they'll be imagining – then saying outright – that the president is dying of AIDS. Tomorrow they'll be saying it in Butare and the day after in Ruhengeri, the president's own fiefdom. In a few days when the president is the last to hear he's dying of AIDS, he'll fly into a rage and heads will fall. Here, rumours kill. They're checked out afterwards.

On the same plane with the doctor and his fatal news there arrived ten copies each of *L'Express* and *Paris Match* which will be swapped around for a month, and French cheeses in slightly over- or underripe condition which will be consumed amid great trimestrial pomp and circumstance in the hotel dining room.

Around the pool, two important subjects are being discussed. The Whites are consulting the list of cheeses and writing their names on the reservation sheet. People will come from as far away as the Gorilla Sanctuary on the Zaïrean border for the traditional cheese tasting, at which the first wedge will be cut by the French ambassador himself. At the tables occupied by Rwandans, the majority of whom are Tutsis or Hutus of the opposition, the tone is hushed. The subject of conversation is the president's illness (which is already taken as acknowledged fact), the probable date of his death, and who will succeed him. André, who distributes condoms for a Canadian NGO and as such is an expert on AIDS, calculates busily: according to rumour, the president has been fucking his secretary for three years; if he's been doing it often and his secretary's husband is already dead from AIDS, and the gods are with us, then President Juvénal has at most a year left. His listeners applaud wildly.

Only Léo is not joining in the applause. Léo is a Hutu who says he's a moderate so he can get to screw Raphaël's sister. Léo is a journalist at the television station that doesn't exist yet, that Valcourt was supposed to set up. Léo is not a moderate, it's just that he's got a bone on for Immaculée, Raphaël's sister. Though he comes from the North, where the president was born, Léo recently joined the Social Democratic Party, the party of the South. At the pool bar this act of courage has impressed quite a few and Léo is making the most of it. Mind you, the very thought of undressing Immaculée would instill conviction in many small minds. But Léo is also a Tutsi through his mother. With the simmering conflict in mind, Léo is seeking the camp that will save his precious skin and let

him realize his dream of becoming a journalist in Canada. Rwandans are good at putting on a front. They handle concealment and ambiguity with awesome skill. Léo is a caricature of all this: Hutu father, Tutsi mother. Tutsi body, Hutu heart. Social Democratic Party cardholder and speechwriter for Léon, the Hutu extremist ideologue, known as the Purifier or Avenging Lion. Country talk, clothes of a fashionable Parisian. Skin of a Black, ambitions of a White. Fortunately, thinks Valcourt, Immaculée feels only scorn and disdain for Léo though he zealously plies her with flowers and chocolates.

Valcourt has not joined his Rwandan buddies as he normally does in the evening. Gentille's distress is keeping him at his own table. The stupidity of the Rwandan just back from Paris disgusts him. But he has become a bit weary of the obsessive conversation of his friends and even more of their overblown, florid, pretentious, often old-fashioned language. They do not speak, they declare, declaim, not in verse but in slogans, formulaic dicta, press releases. They talk of massacres they foresee with the certainty of weather forecasters, and of the AIDS eating at them as if they are prophets of the Apocalypse. Valcourt knows plenty about massacres, brutality and AIDS, but sometimes he'd like to talk about flowers or sex or cooking. He hears Raphaël announcing, 'We have come to the end of time, eaten away by two cancers, hatred and AIDS. We are a little like the Earth's last children . . .' Valcourt covers his ears.

The Canadian ambassador arrives and without so much as a nod to anyone goes and sits at the table nearest the buffet; Lucien is wearing his favourite T-shirt again, the one sporting the legend, 'Call Me Bwana'. Lisette, the consul, is in despair since having her golf bag stolen and is in a grouchy mood.

Imagine her distress. She is left-handed, the only left-handed player among the members of the Kigali Golf Club, whose ill-kept fairways wend through the little valley overlooked by the arrogant high-rise of the National Council of Development, the luxurious villas of the regime's favourites, the Belgian Club, and the ambassadors' residences. Golf is her only pleasure, her only civilized activity in this godawful country she abhors. An appointment to Kigali when one has been in the Canadian Service for seventeen years is an invitation to hand in one's resignation. But some people are blind, deaf and pigheaded. The embassy here is only a branch, in fact, a dependency of Kinshasa, which is an even more unbearable city than Kigali. But when one doesn't know anything but the art of lying politely, one is better off living in Kigali than answering the phone in departmental offices in Ottawa. Lisette suffers in luxury.

The laughter from Raphaël's crew is short-lived. The president's three brothers-in-law appear, followed by the hotel's Belgian assistant manager and five soldiers of the presidential guard. But all the tables are taken. The former minister of justice scurries, still dripping water, to invite them to sit with him, but his table is in the sun and the gentlemen wish to sit in the shade. All the suitable tables are occupied by Whites, or by Raphaël's friends, who of course will not budge. For the assistant manager, a tricky situation. It is saved miraculously by the manager, who happens along at this moment and displaces his own wife and in-laws to make way for the three pillars of the Akazu.†

† Meaning 'house' or 'family'. At this time, the word designated the family of the president, especially his wife Agathe's three brothers who controlled most of Rwanda's wealth, both legitimate and ill-gotten.

And now Canada's presence is complete: the commander of the UN troops has just arrived. The major general is a miracle of mimesis, a perfect incarnation of his country and his employer too, rather the way masters who adore their dogs end up looking and behaving like them. Unassuming, apprehensive, ineloquent and naive, like Canada. Meticulous, legalistic, a civil servant and exemplary bureaucrat, as virtuous as 'le Grand Machin' itself (as General de Gaulle was pleased to call the United Nations). What he knows of the world is airports, the grand hotels of Brussels, Geneva and New York, and strategic studies centres. Of war, he knows what he has seen on CNN, read in a few books and experienced through military exercises he has directed, and invasions of several countries he has conducted on paper. About Africa finally, he knows its colour and several of its smells to which he has still not become accustomed, although he dexterously wields canisters of 'Quebec spruce' deodorant and douses himself with Brut, an eau de cologne highly prized by the military and the police. Yet behind his salesman's moustache and sad eyes, the major general is an honest man and a good Catholic. He is deeply touched by the obvious piety of the dictator and his family and the frequent company they keep with bishops. These are upright people. Their few excesses ought to be ascribed to a certain African atavism rather than the insatiable venality and bloodthirsty cruelty they are so maliciously accused of by all those ambitious Tutsis who pretend to be playing by the rules of democracy but in fact aspire only to set up a new dictatorship. This was explained to the major general at length by the archbishop of Kabgaye one morning after the solemn high mass which Canada's UN commander

had attended with his new personal secretary, a nice young man named Firmin who had studied in Quebec and who enjoyed the valuable advantage of being a nephew of the dictator. On the way back, Firmin confirmed what the archbishop had said, forgetting to add that the rotund representative of His Polish Holiness was personal confessor to the dictator's family, the Habyarimanas, as well as a member of the executive committee of what had been the only political party before the international community imposed the Arusha peace accord, and with it an official opposition.†

A man of duty, the major general is an unprejudiced man, and he is not displeased about being in central Africa. He could have been sent to Somalia or Bosnia. Here there's no peace but at least there's no war, for all the sporadic fighting on the Ugandan border. It's almost as restful as a posting to Cyprus. In fact, he views this mission as eighteen months of well-deserved rest, far away from all the UN paperwork and bootlicking. In New York they ordered him to interpret his mandate as narrowly as possible. He has been given minimal military resources, in case he should be tempted to show too much initiative. On account of which the major general has

† In 1990, the Tutsi-led Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) launched a military campaign against President Juvénal Habyarimana's government. After protracted negotiations, with the support of countries of the Organization of African Unity, the Arusha peace accord was signed in August 1993. It called for a Transitional National Assembly with a predetermined number of seats per party and a transitional government, pending elections. To help achieve national reconciliation, the UN Security Council created the UN Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR) to ensure respect of the terms of the peace accord. Despite the negotiated peace, a Tutsi-led rebel force remained across the border in Uganda to the north, and sporadic cross-border fighting continued.

already forgotten – or almost – that the United Nations forces are expected not only to ensure respect of the peace accord but also maintain order in the capital.

A grenade explodes. Just far enough from the pool for it to be somewhere else. Only the major general is startled. He is not yet used to this peace that kills on a daily basis. He has spilled a little soup on his uniform and looks anxiously around him. No one has noticed his nervousness. Reassured, though sweating profusely, he dips his spoon back into his black bean soup.

Twelve French vultures dive into the pool all at once; three women have just slipped into the water. Sometimes vultures turn into crocodiles.

Valcourt closes his notebook. The vaguely surrealistic play being acted out at the pool day after day ceased to interest him some time ago. The plot is heavy-handed and the characters behave as predictably as in a TV soap opera. He wonders if he hasn't put in enough time here in Kigali. He wanted to live somewhere else; he's done it. He feels this evening as though he's swimming round and round in an aquarium.

He orders another beer from Gentille whose head is still bowed, though the Rwandan from Paris is no longer there.