



A READER TELLS  
OF AN EVENT THAT  
CHANGED HER LIFE

# My Story

## Someone to Watch Over Me

What does a child do when she realises her parents are never coming back? BY RITA KOMUNDA

**M**y twin Ruth and I were born in a mud hut in central Africa in 1988. Our parents Sam and Rachael were loving, but lived in terrifying times.

Every day, in Gitega, Burundi, where Mum and Dad worked as farmers, opposition Hutu rebels would attack members of our ruling Tutsi tribe. Bodies were dumped in the streets.

“What kind of life will our daughters have here?” Dad would ask my mother. “We need to find somewhere safe.”

Uganda, 150 miles to the north, was relatively peaceful, but to reach it our family would have to travel through Rwanda, where fighting between Tutsis and Hutus was even more savage. Mum and Dad bundled up our few belongings, strapped Ruth and me to their backs and, taking our 11-year-old aunt Katie\* with us, joined one of the hundreds of Tutsi refugee groups escaping Burundi on foot.

Progress was slow—no more than three miles a day. We lived on fruit, had no maps and it was baking hot as we

picked our way over mountain passes and through wooded valleys. Hutu gangs roamed the countryside. If word got round that they were close, we had to hide in the forest, often for days.

A month into our journey, we came to Muyinga, close to the Rwandan border. “Wait here,” Dad told Mum and Katie just outside the town. “I’ll see if the locals will give us some food.”

Night fell, but there was no sign of Dad. Mum sensed the worst. The next day we walked into the settlement and saw him lying in the street. He’d been hacked to death by a gang of Hutus.

Mum knew there was no time to mourn. “We must leave him where he is,” she said. We fled immediately.

Our journey continued over the border into south-east Rwanda, to a village in Kibungo province. With ten other Tutsis, we hid in an abandoned hut while Mum went ahead to check if there were any Hutus about. She did not return that evening. Alone with two toddlers in the wilderness, Katie repeated to

herself, “Rachael will be back soon.”

We waited in the hut for days, then weeks. The other Tutsis moved on. “Mum! Mum!” we called into the empty night, bewildered and alone.

After two months, Katie finally

## ‘We came across many children crying over their parents’ bodies’

accepted that Mum had probably been kidnapped or killed. “It’s not safe to be here any more,” she said suddenly. “We must travel again.”

The little girl bound Ruth and me to her body and strode off towards the rainforest.

The forest was like paradise. The birds would sing in the morning and there was fruit everywhere: wild figs and blackberries. But paradise could change to hell in a heartbeat. We would meet up with other Tutsis and at night they’d build fires to keep warm. The fires also attracted the Hutus. We came across children crying over their parents’ fly-covered bodies. Some victims were not quite dead and had vultures trying to feed on them.

Finally, after ten months of walking, we crossed into Uganda. Katie, Ruth and I felt safer now, but we were still alone in the world, sleeping rough and living off scraps.

One morning, after we’d spent the night at a building site, Katie was woken by a woman’s voice, “Who are you and what are you doing here?”

Katie told the woman, Jane\*, our story. She was moved to tears and invited us back to her home in Kasese, where she, too, was a farmer.

The house, which she shared with her four-year-old daughter Alice\* (Jane would not say what happened to her husband) was built from mud bricks and had sacks for beds but, compared to what we’d grown used to, it looked very grand. Jane gave us food, water and clothes.

“The three of you can live here,” she said. “But you’ll have to clean the house and work in the garden for your board.”

We were so happy to have found a new home and Jane became like a mother, providing us with everything she could afford. I often felt lonely and missed my parents, but partly thanks to Jane’s support, I spent my days largely free of emotional scars.

By 1993, the ethnic tension in Burundi and Rwanda had escalated into full-scale civil war. Hutus would often cross the Ugandan border looking for Tutsi refugees. One night in 1995, when Ruth and I were seven, there was a knock on the door. Jane told us to hide under our beds while she hurriedly tidied away our plates.

Three men with guns stood outside. Jane persuaded them that it was just her and Alice in the house, but after they had gone she told us, “If they find you, they will kill us all. You must go.”

Of course, Jane wouldn’t abandon us and later that night reassured us we could stay, but our lives were becoming more dangerous. Over the next four

years there were two more visits to the house from Hutu gangs. By chance, both times we were at school.

**D**espite the turmoil around us, we remained happy—until one evening when Ruth and I were 11. Katie came home looking bewildered. She sat us down in the kitchen and said, “Don’t be afraid, but I’ve been chosen by an agent.”

We talked about these shadowy “agents” at school. They watched you and asked your friends about your life. Some people said that they worked for a charity while others said they were the United Nations. If they thought you were needy enough or in danger, they tapped you on the shoulder and said that you were being given a ticket out of Africa—overseas asylum.

We were glad for Katie, but that night Ruth and I held each other and sobbed. Katie had been the centre of our lives for as long as we could remember. Still, before she left, she promised she’d send somebody back for us. We felt we could rely on her.

Jane told us it would take time for a 21-year-old to adjust to life wherever Katie had been sent and organise someone to come for us. But as months passed with no word, we got worried. Hutus were killing and kidnapping dozens of Tutsis in our area and we could be next. Had she forgotten us?

Three years went by. Now 15, Ruth and I had resigned ourselves to a life of fear and uncertainty in Uganda.

Then, out of the blue, Jane came home with a big smile on her face.

“I’ve spoken with some agents,” she said. “You are going to see Katie.”

A few days later, a man knocked on the door, put us in the back of the truck and drove us to an airport. Fourteen hours later on July 2, 2003, we were at Heathrow, running towards Katie. We cried with happiness. Katie explained how hard it had been to get us into Britain ahead of thousands of other refugees. “I hope you knew I’d never abandon you,” she said.

She drove us to her home in Barking, east London. We were dazzled by this strange new land: even the most dirty parts of London looked like heaven.

Ruth and I spent the rest of our childhood living with Katie, who was training as an accountant. At school, we studied hard and always avoided falling in with bad people. One friend was into rap and thought he was a gangster. One day, he showed me a gun he’d been given. “I want to be a name on the street,” he boasted.

I told him about my life and the evil I’d seen done with guns, about a father and mother I barely knew. He gave the gun back the next day.

I’m 20 now and work as a dental nurse. Ruth is studying business and finance at university. This country has given me such opportunities and it’s a privilege to be here. Despite all I’ve been through, I feel like I’ve won the lottery.

*Astold to Nick Morgan*

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