

The day hope died.

The imagined experience of 11 year old Neza, a young Tutsi girl on April 7th 1994

The Day Hope Died is an imagined experience of April 7th 1994, and what it may have looked like for a young girl who belonged to the Tutsi tribe of Rwanda. *The Day Hope Died* adopts a sombre tone to reflect the tension of the beginning of Rwandan genocide.

I decided to set my historical fiction story, *The Day Hope Died*, in 1994 Rwanda because I felt it was an opportunity to shed some light on the past experiences and history of African people. I believe that the world has become desensitized to a lot of the experiences within Africa and the struggles still left today due to a pattern of hate and discrimination. My hope is that 'The Day Hope Died' will be able to register and speak to people of different backgrounds, in hopes that they may be able to sympathise with the characters and may perhaps spark an interest in the history and legacy of Africa.

The Day Hope Died

By Melissa Muthama

Runner up of the Young Walter Scott Prize 2022

The day hope died.

The imagined experience of 11 year old Neza, a young Tutsi girl on April 7th 1994

That was when I saw them, that was when they saw me. Without thinking, once again I ran...

The morning of April 7th 1994 was cold. I remember sitting at our circular wooden table, taking brown porridge with Ntwari beside me. I remember parts of our wooden table had split, I remember the parts of the table that had split. That morning Ntwari stood beside my chair, tugging at the wrist of my grey school sweater. "Neza, come and play with me," he pleaded, his dark brown eyes full of yearning. Instantly, the sound of Mama's voice thundered across the table. "Ntwari, kurya!" *Ntwari, eat!*

5-year-old Ntwari, without the slightest tinge of resistance, returned to his bowl of porridge; not saying another word for the rest of that morning. Ntwari was silent the morning of April 7th 1994.

Ntwari and I began to go on our way to school, past the fig trees that lined the neighbouring compounds, across the dusty roads of Neomata and through the hazy mist of the morning until we arrived at the small one-room building, where young children spent their days preparing for careers that Rwanda could not provide for them. I glanced up at the words *Christian Star Primary School* written on the gable in white paint against the dark blue wall that covered only the front of the brick building.

I felt Ntwari's grip tighten on my hand as we approached the building. On April 7th 1994 Ntwari took a moment longer to let go. Today, I wish I would have held his hand a moment longer.

"Genda, Ntwari, Genda," I said turning back.

Go, Hero, Go...

I arrived at school just as everyone was sitting down, the chalk from the blackboards plastered on each of the walls entered my nose making me sneeze. I took my seat two rows from the back next to a new girl from Uganda by the name of Keza. It wasn't long before I got to know her and discovered

The day hope died.
The imagined experience of 11 year old Neza, a young Tutsi girl on April 7th 1994

our fathers made work driving trucks together to and from Kenya. She became my friend. The meaning of Keza's name matched her. Keza means beauty.

One would think that beauty is something that stays with someone forever or at least until the end of their youth. Keza's beauty, however, faded on April 7th 1994.

On that day all the beauty faded; hers, ours - everything became ugly.

“Silence class!” Madam Utiwonze exclaimed. We were all silent.

“Everybody here who calls themselves a Tutsi, stand up,” she continued.

Again there was silence. Silence until the boy sat on the right of Keza steadily rose from his seat. One quivering brow raised, his eyes fixated on Madam Utiwonze's face. Her expression shifted from one of false curiosity to one of pique as their eyes met. He began trembling, whilst his hands played a tireless game of catch. The feeling that whatever he had stood up for was not something to be proud of, spread through the classroom like a bad rash. A look of disgust began to settle on the faces of each of my peers. I turned to Keza, who was already staring at me, a small puddle had formed on the cemented floor beneath her seat, the look of absolute horror overlaid on her face as she slowly mouthed, *‘Don't stand up.’*

I did not know what Madam Utiwonze meant. I didn't move.

“Come with me Emmanuel, leave your books...” Madam Utiwonze's voice was low. Her head turning to face us, “Class, study page 31 in your books, I will be back.” They left the classroom together. The sunlight briefly entering the classroom as the green door swung open, then shut, revealing the words *Class 5* that were written on the front of the door. Nothing but the murmurs of the classroom left to fill the silence.

The afternoon of Thursday April 7th 1994, Keza and I stood in the courtyard for a few minutes after school. Just as I was about to say goodbye to my closest friend, she turned to me and in a hushed tone somewhat confessed, “Neza, this is my last time standing with you.”

The day hope died.
The imagined experience of 11 year old Neza, a young Tutsi girl on April 7th 1994

“Kuki, Keza?” Tears began to form in the backs of my eyes even before I could understand why.

“Because we are all going to die.”

Every Thursday Mama collected Ntwari from school after her trip to the market and every time, just as they were about to enter the house, I would always hear their singing sitting from the dining table whilst doing my schoolwork. I would slightly pull back the curtain just beside the dining table to watch them as they walked in. Mama would be casually balancing the crops on her head, supporting them with one arm whilst the other held Ntwari’s hand. Her grinning face looking down at Ntwari as he ate a mango or guava from the pile. The specks of fruit stuck in his teeth revealed whenever he would smile or sing the letter ‘y’. They were always singing. On April 7th 1994 there was no singing. There was no noise.

That evening as I awaited my family’s return home, the sun had begun to set. I sat on the worn-out red armchair in our living room, watching the television. Next to me, the equally frayed green sofa that separated the living room from the kitchen. I wrapped myself in the rough knitted blanket from the top of Mama and Baba’s bed when the living room bulb began to grow dim, occasionally flicking off but then always coming back on. The images on the screen kept only my eyes occupied. My mind was far, thinking about Emmanuel; of where he had gone, of why Mama and Ntwari were late to come home. I thought about the next day when Baba would return. A soft smile spreading across my face.

I thought about the words that Keza had said to me just a few hours ago.

The words that scared the living soul inside me. My face went blank.

My feet grew cold as they met the red clay tiles on the floor; I began to smell burning. I frantically turned my head in every odd direction trying to learn where the smell of smoke was coming from until my eyes landed on the open window on top of the kitchen sink. Orange. Through the window, a bright orange lit one of the inside rooms of Mama Shema’s house. Automatically, my legs carried me outside. A small crowd of people had gathered outside the burning building, a few stood still whilst

The day hope died.

The imagined experience of 11 year old Neza, a young Tutsi girl on April 7th 1994

most rushed with buckets of water to and from the well trying their best to extinguish the fire. I quickly ran to join them. I noticed on my way back from the well, a child that appeared the age similar to Ntwari, sat just beside the crowd, crying. Mucus dripping from his nose and a fly kept landing on his nose, then his head, then his knee. Shema's little brother. Moments later Shema emerged from behind the stone wall that separated the small house from the road and collected the child and cradled him in his arms. Dust covered Shema head to toe, from the top of his short afro to the bottom of his heels. Shema dropped to the side of the crowd cradling the small child in his arms. I stood there motionless, watching him, watching the expression on his face turn to complete disbelief as he stared at the house then to ground; eyes wide open. He began wheezing. Hard, heavy breaths. The small boy hugged Shema's neck, his screams getting louder. The babble of the crowd came to a sudden stop when a man stumbled out of the house, coughing out the acrid smoke he spoke the words, "She's dead."

The crowd broke into a harsh wail before the chatter began again. This was the last day that the community would unite.

From behind me I heard a harsh voice, "Neza, Neza!" I turned around and there stood Baba.

Baba was home! I thought. Briefly glancing back to the crowd before running to him. "Come quickly Neza," he muttered into my ear. His shirt had been torn at the hem, his eyes filled with angst. I followed him back into the house. We walked in to see Mama, sat on the same red chair that I had sat but moments ago with Ntwari perched on her lap. I faced Baba once again.

"Neza..." He began in the same hushed tone. "When the time comes for hiding you all must not hide together; or they will kill you all." Baba planted a kiss to my head, his cold hands resting against the temples of my head. My stomach began to turn. Suddenly, the radio scratched, all our eyes shot towards it. A small crack sounded before a deep voice began to speak.

"Arise all Hutus, the time for cleansing is now, kill them all, for even the child of a snake is still a snake..."

The day hope died.
The imagined experience of 11 year old Neza, a young Tutsi girl on April 7th 1994

“Now listen,” Baba started, drowning out the scratchy voice coming from the radio. Mama’s back straightened all the way up, her eyes widened like that of a puppy being told what to do, her hands supporting Ntwari’s neck as he lies asleep with his head on her shoulder. “I have said it but I will say it again, you are all not to hide together, Kwizera, tomorrow you are to go to the church with Ntwari, beneath the church there is a room where you may keep Ntwari along with the other children, take him food and stay with him during the long hours of the day.”

Kwizera, I thought, Mama’s name meant hope. On April 7th 1994, hope died.

A long pause, “Neza, you must be strong, make sure nobody sees you and you must take care of yourself for I will not be there to protect you, ndagukunda.”

The lump in my throat was too heavy to lift but my eyes spoke.

I love you Baba.

Suddenly, a chant from outside,

Kubagana!

Kubagana!

Kubagana – fight till death

The chants grew louder and louder. A moment later Baba said, “Tomorrow has come today, go hide, I will handle this.”

With Mama cradling Ntwari in one arm, we scurried into their bedroom when just as my foot passed the door frame, I felt Mama’s hand haul me back. “Child do you not remember what your father said, we are not to hide together, *genda*.” The sound of accusation in her voice but the look of desolation forming on her face.

Glancing to look at Ntwari a last time, I saw his eyes wide alert; the look of absolute horror. I held Mama’s gaze for a moment longer before turning to run down the short corridor, past the two separate

The day hope died.

The imagined experience of 11 year old Neza, a young Tutsi girl on April 7th 1994

rooms of the kitchen and living room to outside. That was when I saw them, that was when they saw me. Without thinking, once again I ran.

Sprinting once again past the fig trees, across the dusty roads of Neomata and through the black of the night. Until there stood in front of Ntwari's school, two tall figures. Each with a dog, holding a rifle in the other hand. Before they could notice me, I hid behind a sparse hedge and slowly peered to the side to catch a glimpse of these tall silhouettes. A man appeared from inside the building holding a torch as well as a rifle. "Clear!" he spat to both of them, the glare of the moon barely allowing me to make out any of the movements, when just then the cry of a baby came from inside the classroom. The man who had just emerged out of the room quickly turned back. With a single boom. The cry suddenly stopped.

Again there was silence.