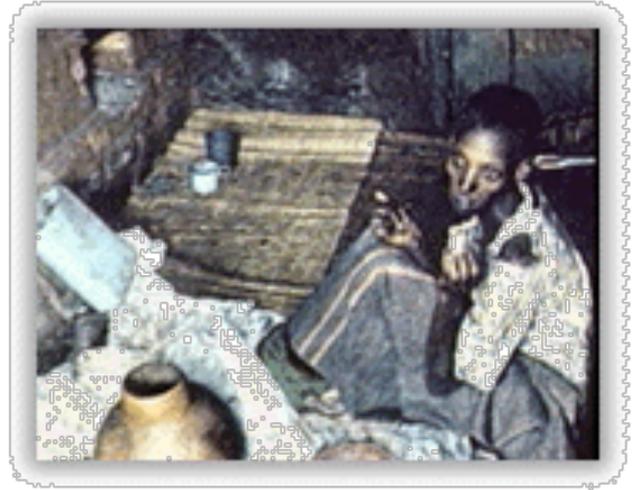


## The Rwandan Girl Who Refused to Die by Fergal Keane

When I first saw her nearly three years ago she seemed more shadowlike than human, a skeletal ghost lying on a camp bed in a country where corpses littered the roads and fields.

Her hand had been chopped in half and the wound had become infected. It had taken on a threatening black color. In addition, there were two deep gashes on the back of her head. There were no painkillers in the little room she shared with three other children. When it came to the time for changing her bandages the girl winced and cried in pain. I gave the nurse my stock of paracetamol and a bag of sweets. It was a pitifully inadequate offering but the only comfort I could give.



The nurse told me the child's name was Valentina. She was 13 and her family had been killed in a massacre carried out by Hutu soldiers a few weeks before in the nearby parish of Nyarubuye. Valentina was among a small group of survivors. "She will probably die," the nurse said.

I left Rwanda shortly afterwards vowing never to go back. In a few weeks I had witnessed brutality and evil on a terrifying scale. Nothing could have prepared me for the immensity of the killings or the hatred I encountered among those who had carried out the genocide. However, Rwanda did not go away, nor did the memory of Valentina and the other survivors of genocide. I found myself endlessly questioning: how could this have happened? How could people butcher children? What kind of man can kill a child?

I was still in search of the answer three years later when I returned. The country had changed dramatically. The schools had been reopened and the fields were full of peasants harvesting their crops. The sound of shooting had been replaced by the ancient chorus of African village life: crying babies, whinnying goats and the interminable crowing of roosters.

The church that had been the focal point of the massacre had been cleaned up, the bodies removed and placed in a series of rooms nearby. These rooms had also been the scene of brutal killings. Now the government was preserving them, replete with skeletons and corpses, as a memorial to genocide.

Within minutes of arriving at Nyarubuye I learnt Valentina had not died. Shortly after I had last seen her she had been transferred to a hospital and, against the medical odds, survived her injuries. Now, meeting her in front of the church, I saw a tall and beautiful 16-year-old nothing like the thin child of three years previously. But before long I realized that this new appearance was deceptive. As Valentina patiently told me her full, terrible story I found myself wavering between shock and anger.

The story of what happened at the church of Nyarubuye is more than a straightforward commentary on humanity's capacity for evil. It is a very particular story about the cruelty inflicted upon children by adults, people who were their neighbors and whom they trusted.

It began on a Friday afternoon in the middle of April. For days the Tutsis of Nyarubuye had sensed an impending disaster. They were aware elsewhere massacres of Tutsis had already begun. Ten days before, the president of Rwanda (a Hutu), was assassinated, most probably by members of his political circle.

His death--which the extremists blamed on the Tutsis--provided the pretext for a "final solution" in which all Tutsis and Hutu moderates were to be killed. It would result in the murder of all but a handful of Nyarubuye's Tutsi community.

The killing at Nyarubuye began with an attack on Tutsis at the local marketplace. After this Valentina fled to the church with her family. That afternoon the killers arrived, led by Sylvestre Gacumbitsi, the local mayor. Valentina recognised many of her Hutu neighbors among the more than 30 men who surrounded the church. They carried knives and clubs and were supported by soldiers from the Rwandan army.

She described what happened next: "First they asked people to hand over their money, saying they would spare those who paid. But after taking the money they killed them anyway. Then they started to throw grenades. I saw a man blown up in the air, in pieces, by a grenade. The leader said that we were snakes and that to kill snakes you had to smash their heads.

The killers moved into the terrified crowd of men, women and children, hacking and clubbing as they went. "If they found someone alive they would smash their heads with stones. I saw them take little children and smash their heads together until they were dead. There were children begging for pity but they killed them straight away," she told me. The killings took place over four days. At night the butchers rested and, guarding the perimeter so that nobody would escape.

Other infants, crying on the ground beside their murdered parents, were taken and plunged head first into latrines. One of Valentina's classmates, Placide, told me how he had seen a man decapitated in front of him and then a pregnant woman cut open as the killing reached its frenzied climax.

"There was so much noise," he recalled. "People were begging for mercy and you could hear the militia saying, 'Catch them, catch them, don't let them get away.'"

Valentina and Placide hid among the bodies, pretending to be dead. Valentina had been struck on the head and hands with a machete and was bleeding heavily. Following her child's instinct, she crawled to her mother's body and lay there. During the killing she had seen the militia murder her father and her 16-year-old brother, Frodisse.



After several days Valentina crawled to the room where there were fewest bodies. For the next 43 days she lived among the rotting corpses, too weak to stand up and convinced that the world had come to an end.

"I prayed that I would die because I could not see a future life. I did not think that anybody was left alive in the country. I thought everybody had been swept away," she said.

She drank rainwater and rummaged for scraps of food. There was some wild fruit and some grain but she became weaker and weaker as the days progressed. In the weeks that followed, a few other children emerged from hiding places around the church. The stronger ones lit fires and cooked what food they could find, feeding the weaker ones like Valentina.

Then a new hazard appeared: wild dogs that had started to eat the corpses.

"The dogs were coming at night and eating dead children in the other rooms. A dog came to where I was and started to eat a body. I picked up a stone and threw it at the dog and drove it away."

There comes a point in the telling of this story where the existing vocabulary of suffering becomes inadequate, where words wither in the face of an unrelenting darkness. As a reporter I found this the most difficult story of my career to tell. As a parent I listened to Valentina's story with a sense of heartbreak. I marveled at her courage but felt deep anger that this should happen to any child...

