

Half a Continent, Step by Step

by Andie Miller / RWANDA, DRC, SOUTH AFRICA

For many people in the West, Africa seems to consist of one tragedy after another. Pictures of war-torn villages, genocide victims, AIDS orphans and starving children make up the majority of news stories about the continent. Though nobody can deny the fact that Africans endure more than their share of violence and hunger and disease, it is rare that we hear stories about the sheer pluck, endurance and fortitude that millions of Africans, including children, show in the face of hardship. Thanks to celebrity writers like Dave Eggers, more of us know about the lost boys of Sudan, who walked literally thousands of miles to escape war. Innocent Bisanabo's story rivals theirs.

When violence against Tutsis rapidly escalated into genocide in Rwanda in 1994, more than a million people were murdered in the space of three months. As Andie Miller relates, Innocent, then thirteen years old, started to walk to escape the violence. Several years and thousands of miles later, he was still walking to escape wars that he encountered in virtually every nation he wandered through. Finally he made it to South Africa. Though South Africa has its own economic problems and has endured only a fragile peace since its transition to democracy in 1994, it is still the land of milk and honey for many refugees from all parts of Africa. Yet Innocent's troubles weren't over. In South Africa, he has encountered a different kind of violence as well as xenophobia. A majority of black South Africans suffer crippling poverty themselves and resent the refugees who compete with them for a limited number of jobs; a surging tide of violence against "foreigners" shocked many South Africans in 2008.

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ON APRIL 6, 1994, the genocide in Rwanda began. But three weeks later the world's attention turned elsewhere, to the "miracle" happening in South Africa, with its first democratic election. Apartheid, the system that had divided South Africans on the basis of skin color since 1948, was finally coming to an end, and blacks and whites would be going to the polls together on April 27. Meanwhile, in a tiny country in the

center of the continent, close to a million people were killed over a period of three months.

When Rwandan President Habyarimana's plane was shot down, the tensions between the Hutu and the Tutsi people, which had been building for decades, came to a head. Indiscriminate carnage began and chaos ensued.

Innocent Bisanabo was visiting his aunt in Kigali on that day. He was thirteen years old at the time. He never returned home. They hid in the passage of her house for over a month before fleeing in their car. Eventually the roads were filled with bodies and there was no space to drive. His long walk began.

"I walked with my aunt for about a week. There were thousands of people walking, and then in the chaos I got lost and I was on my own, just walking with everybody, millions of people who were trying to leave the country. At one stage, you walk in a group of so many people there is no space to walk. Everyone is pushing one another. Then people get tired and they just sit. And others get sick. So the crowd becomes smaller and smaller."

Along the road, he met a school friend who was also lost, and together they walked approximately 200 miles from Kigali to Cyangugu in the west of the country, on the border of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC, then known as Zaïre), where they stayed with his friend's aunt and uncle for eight months.

When the fighting stopped, he decided to return to Kigali to look for his family, but a trader from DRC brought news that his mother was across the border in a refugee camp in Bukavu. He crossed the border by pretending to be the trader's son and was reunited with his mother and two of his brothers. Then he learned that his father had been killed the first day of the genocide, and three of his six siblings were missing.

"We lived about two years in the camps, and then we were forced to move again. And then there was nowhere to run to." In 1996, the revolution to remove dictator Mobutu Sésé Seko from power—which he had enjoyed since Patrice Lumumba's assassination three decades earlier—began in Zaïre. Laurent Kabila, who had been a Lumumba supporter in his youth and lurking in the shadows since then, was assisted by the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF)—the guerrilla army that

had ended the genocide in 1994—to topple Mobutu. Because many of the perpetrators of the genocide were still living among the survivors in the refugee camps, Kabila instructed the rebel army to attack the camps and about 37,000 Rwandan refugees fled into the forests.

“So in the process of walking away from the war in Rwanda, people were getting killed in the DRC. Some people had cars, but a large portion of DRC is jungle, and the roads are not maintained, there’s nothing, so those people who are driving are usually driving 4x4s.” It has been said that “the bush has eaten the roads” in the DRC. “And because there are so many rivers, most people just drive up to that point and then leave their cars and walk. Whether you walk or you run, you just try to get as far away from the fighting as possible.”

At fifteen, Innocent’s year-long, mostly barefoot walk across the war-torn Democratic Republic of the Congo began. “From the border of Rwanda, from Lake Kivu in DRC, we walked to reach the border of Angola. It’s maybe 2,500 miles. The walk was sort of in a linear way, just walking in one line, following the people in front of you.” There were those apparently endless lines of people walking to who knows where that we see from time to time on the nightly news, just putting one foot in front of the other, carrying the little they possess in the world. “Because left or right, it’s just the jungle, and if you get lost in there, it’s going to be very difficult to get back. So people stick together.

“The local guys, they’ve got homes in the jungle, they know shortcuts to special places where they do their farming. And then they sell their products in the centers, and those centers are a distance away from one another. So you walk until you reach a commercial center. If you’ve got money, you’ve got food. If you don’t have money, you trade in something, shoes or clothes, a watch. Then that will be your provision for a week. Then you walk you walk you walk...sometimes you walk for two weeks and there is no center, the next center is 300 miles away. And you’ll know because you’ll meet guys who are coming from there, who went to sell their food there. You ask them, ‘Where is the next center?’ They tell you, ‘You’re going to reach there by Monday.’ That’s if you’re walking thirty miles every day. You trade until you have nothing left to trade. By the time you’ve walked maybe three months, you’ve got nothing.

“The only way to do it is just to survive the next step. If Kabila’s troops find you, they will kill you. So you have to walk. When we started walking, it was a huge number of refugees from the camps. Walking, scattering in the bushes. People used to walk till their feet were so big. I saw women with feet as big as...” He demonstrates the width of a soccer ball. “Because of the nutrition, because people were eating a lot of bad meat in the jungle—baboons, rats—people got very sick. Even from fresh meat, like pork—maybe it’s pigs that were sick, people died. So basically from that time I didn’t eat meat for five years. Just vegetables and fruits and drinking water.”

But because the water was often not clean, it could also make you sick. “And sometimes we couldn’t find water to drink. I saw people drinking water that was like mud.” It was a bitter irony that some would survive the rebel soldiers only to be killed by the water.

And then there were the rivers. “If you come to a river and you can’t cross it, then you have to stop. So the motivating factor was just to get as far away as you can.” This was how he was separated from his mother. “When we arrived at the Congo River, she had to walk back; she couldn’t swim. I saw many people drowning. We could swim, but because the river was big there were only a few guys who could swim straight across. It took about two hours to cross.

“By the time we reached the border of Angola, we were not more than fifty people. When Kabila took power in DRC, we were at the border of Angola. I got one mile from the border. Some people tried to go into Angola but they couldn’t because there was still a war there. So people walked to the point where they couldn’t walk anymore. And then you decide that you’re going to lie in the street. Wait for UN aid or somebody to assist you.”

I find it hard to comprehend walking from one war through another war and into another. But the borders become almost irrelevant as the wars bleed into each other. Conflict in the DRC was sparked by the influx of Rwandan refugees—the First Congo War. But after the Rwandan Patriotic Front assisted Kabila to oust Mobutu, and then relations between Kabila and the RPF soured, they supported his overthrow, fueling the Second Congo War.

“By the time we reached that point, on the border of Angola,”

says Innocent, “I was the youngest, the smallest. It wasn’t safe for us to go over the border because of Savimbi [the rebel leader]. His men thought that the refugees were helping the Angolan government.” Jonas Savimbi had founded the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) in 1966, originally to fight Portuguese colonial rule together with the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA). But when the MPLA came to power, a civil war ensued. “There were lots of misconceptions,” Innocent says. “And then when we reached that point—me and two of my close friends, we met in the refugee camp, we walked together, then we separated, then we met again—we decided that we’re just going to integrate into the community in Tshikapa. It’s one of the richest places in the DRC, with lots of diamonds. And we stayed there for a year.

“When we arrived there, it’s like you’ve got a mark. A refugee was a person who’s known to be... He looks different, he’s dirty, he’s got thick hair, he doesn’t have shoes, he steals. But that perception changed within a few months.” With hard work, he and his friends began to be accepted into the community.

Innocent remembers his first job. Unlike his friends, who were bigger and started earning their living producing charcoal, “My first job was to sell cold water. That place is very hot. First you have to fetch the water from somewhere far, between four and six miles walk. This twenty-litre basin, you carry that to the village. When you get there you have to start looking for a fridge where you can put it for a while. Then you put the water in small plastic bags, one cup. Then you put the plastic bags in the basin and you walk through the village with the basin shouting *Mayi ya malili*, cold water. You go from A to Z. Your customers are big guys who are standing on the street. You sell it for about fifty cents. And you do that for three months.”

He often speaks in the second person, as though remembering another time, another life, another person.

“When Kabila took over in 1997, he had been assisted by many of the troops from Rwanda. Then he said all the troops must go back to their countries, and that fueled the conflict again. Rwanda became the enemy of DRC, and people from Rwanda were considered enemies. And even though in that village people knew we were fleeing from the

war—and by that time we could speak the local languages fluently—we just had to make the decision that we have to leave DRC. By that time we had a little bit of money, and we couldn't go through Angola, so we had to go to Zambia, which was a long distance. We took a train. It took about two months.