

BENJAMIN ABTAN

# Have I Told You Enough How Much I Love You?

**M**Y DEAR IMMACULÉE, my dear daughter, have I told you enough how much I love you? Now with the life draining out of me, I fear I'll leave you alone again, like when they took me away from you.

Yes, I know, the government does not want us to tell the story of what really happened here in Rwanda in 1994, but in a little while I will be no more than a memory, and a daughter needs to know the truth about her mother.

I know what the neighbors secretly say about me among themselves, what they call us, how they sneer at us. Their polite and proud greetings on the main road do not trick me. I know that if it were only for them, I would still be in jail. Fortunately, Jesus has listened to me, and the judge has not acted in the way they expected.

I look at you and your beauty strikes me. I am so sorry that I could not be at your side all those years when you needed me, and I needed you too. In spite of them pulling us apart, everyone says that we look alike. This is a great consolation to me. You look as I looked back then.

**DON'T SAY THIS**, you should be proud. Don't believe what they say about me; the truth is I have saved your life.

Yes, he may have done bad things to you, as all of them did. In the final period before it happened, when he came back from the cabaret late at night, a strange light was in his eyes. Sweat came over my body. Of course, I did not tell him anything, but I spoke with the other women in the fields, and we could recognize what the radio was warning us about. I feared greatly, for you and for me.

Feared what? I understand that they are now trying to hide what they were preparing at the time. The radio is not here anymore to give information to the population. I know I should not tell you this, but I have nothing to lose now: look what they are doing in Congo. Here, even if we are weak, we are still too numerous for them to do it publicly.

You don't need to believe me, but you need to listen to me. You will

understand later. After all, I am your mother, and I saved your life.

Because I did not do what the *interahamwe* [the young fighters] wanted me to, at least regarding you. Of course, when they came to ask me to go along and work with them, I had to do it. I was young too, and I was also a worker. Even if I was not part of them (it was only for men), we were all proud of them, and we counted on them to protect us. I must say, as I told the judge, that if I had not followed them, there were rumors which said that they could punish us by seizing our land. We needed this land, to grow sweet potatoes and beans. If we had lost it, we would have become even poorer.

Well, so I just followed them, yes, not knowing what they would do, although we were all aware of what we had to face. I listened to the radio, I spoke with the women, death could come close to us. To avoid infiltration of spies, they had built barriers. I was asked to help them, simply by inspecting the papers. They were tired, they worked a lot, and I thought of our land, and of you. I accepted.

YES, OF COURSE, some mistakes were made. Who makes no mistake? I remember Jean-Pierre, for example. He was the youngest son of the former *burgermeister*, at the time of my parents. I think he was not one of them, but he had tried to force through the barrier, or to help his cousin—a tall man said to be dangerous—go through, I don't remember well. So they got angry and did it to him too. I was sorry about that, because we used to go to the same school and I liked the way he sang. But what to do? These were troubled times.

I must confess that I cried a little about him. Not in front of everybody of course, not on the barrier. But when I dug his tomb, I discreetly left a small flower on his body, which was together with those of his cousin and the others from that day.

Then the rhythm became fast. I dug every day, until darkness. We did not speak, and stopped only to eat at midday—we did not have much because we had no time to cultivate the land anymore. The enemies had tried to enter, and the *burgermeister* had been punished for not protecting the region adequately. Some said he was influenced by his friends, since he was not a strong Republican and had connections not only within the people. He was put aside and carefully watched. We could finally protect ourselves well, but we were in great danger. We had to act strongly and fast.

It was raining a lot, these days were very wet. We all had to work very hard, from morning to dusk. I did not count the number of people; the

task was immense. The young fighters were exhausted, and more and more often, they had to go away to join the military. In those times, we had to do the job. I remember about two weeks after I had started, the first time I inspected someone I knew. It was Nadège. When she was brought by her neighbors, she did not behave as proudly as in high school, when she had managed to charm Jean de Dieu. Her long hair had gone, her eyes tried to look humble, her famous dress was dirty and ripped. She looked at me as if she finally wanted to apologize. I did what I had to do. I passed her to the workers, and did not have time to think of her too much. When I saw her head, I thought that it was a pity, that she should not have behaved this way. Although I had not done much, I was required by the state to apologize for her. Since the Church asked me too, this is what I did. I think this is the reason why Jesus has been with me, because I have obeyed him.

NO, NO, I HAVE NOT forgotten him, but I want you to understand the situation we were in then. It was a difficult time. Believe me or not, this is at least what we were told, even if it is hard to understand now, with all that they say.

Listen, it is not in my power to have you accept reality; it is in God's hands. I have given my apologies, the priest has supported me, the state released me. You can decide to hate me, but I saved your life. I love you, you are my daughter.

It was in the third week, on Sunday. It was a day between rain and sun. Everybody was exhausted. The machetes worked a lot. The workers had only bananas to eat and beer to drink. They could not have proper rest and slept only a few hours, when it was dark. In the morning, Philbert came to tell me something. He was not one to speak for nothing; he was the head of the young fighters. He used to be the bartender at the Chez Eugène Cabaret, down the main road, on the right after the school. Eugène was his father and the founder of the place. He was very famous among us and always had all the latest information, because the men talked a lot with the beer. After they killed the president, Philbert took on his responsibilities and worked all day long without a break. He could not run the cabaret, but his duty was more important, he said. He was strong and courageous; he could go back there and run it again, once the work would be finished.

I AM NOT AVOIDING an explanation, I am telling you the story. Yes, that's what they say. Philbert is now in jail because of these accusations. I don't

know if they are true. It would indeed be horrible, but such were the times. Philbert came to me and said: "We have found him. You must take care of it." Your father had left on the second day. Maybe he was afraid, or maybe it was true what they said, that he was part of them. We never spoke about that: he spent his time outside during the day and at the cabaret in the evening.

Also, it is true that he used to take you to school in the morning. I had to go to work the land as soon as the sun rose, so how could I have done it? But we never spoke of that. What was there to ask? And the influence of his mother was present. In her heart, I know she had never accepted me. On the wedding day she was very cold, and some people told me that she cried. I was not good enough for her; our family, your family, was not good enough. Her influence was on me, and sometimes I felt that his eyes were not looking at me in a good way either, because of her.

Philbert just came to tell me that they had found him, hiding with thirty-four others, in the roof of the church. They had tried this stratagem, but the young fighters had worked conscientiously. Once the *burgermeister* had been removed, they could allow themselves to go on with protection in all places.

That is how they found him. I must tell you I had understood that he sometimes came back at night to have some rest and to eat. He was tired, he said he feared for his safety and wanted help to escape. But the war was there, the families were separated; it would not have been accepted to do this kind of thing. You, my dear daughter, could have died if I had done that.

So, they came to tell me that he was with the thirty-four others. Janvier was among them. It was well known that he was part of the the *inkotanyi* [Rwandan Patriotic Front]. For Philbert and all the young fighters, it was clear that all of this group had been preparing something. I must say that I have also believed it. Such were the times.

I FEEL WEAK, suddenly. Let me breathe a little. You are wearing me out! But I don't want to go to Jesus without telling you the truth. Look at me, you are beautiful. Your face is like mine. I want you to bury me the good way, in our family cemetery, here in Butare. Give me back your hand; I want to hold it when I go.

Yes, Philbert came to tell me that I had to take care of it. What could I do? I was then the one in charge of the work; the younger ones had replaced me for inspecting the papers. We all had to work; it was so much,

all the time. Giselle and I were a team, and proud of it—there were not a lot of women who had reached that level of responsibility. Should I have asked her to do the job alone? I feared for our land. Maybe they could even destroy our house. No, they did not do that to anybody in the end, but these were terrible rumors back then. Such were the times.

This was not the only reason. I have to tell you that I needed to get rid of the evil spirit of his mother. I wanted to protect you. Although she had died years before, I could feel her presence. She used to prefer her other granddaughters, the ones she was proud of, the ones who secretly paid homage to Imana. My family, your family, and I only believe in our Lord Jesus.

She was not there anymore, but her spirit was among us. Through him, she could harm you, deprive you of your beauty, take the life breath away from you, tear us apart. In a way, she has succeeded, but it could have been worse if Jesus had not been present during the trial, close to the judge. Anyhow, I was asked to do it. Philbert and the fighters were carefully watching. What to do? I have not done it. Giselle started, I only did what I had to in order to show that my heart was with the people. I tried to make it short. I know that the neighbors now tell that I was laughing and joyfully shouting at the same time, but I had to hide my rage and to show that I was with them. I had to protect you, and if I had not done it, they could have done it to you. After all, you are one of them.<sup>1</sup> You owe your life to me. Twice. You owe your life to what I did to save you, to save our land. It went fast, I did not have time to think about it.

I am telling you all of this because I want you to know the real truth. I may find him again in the sky. Jesus forgave me, he must have done it too. His eyes were empty, but I am sure that he knew there was no other choice. Such were the times.

YES, FROM TIME TO TIME, I think of it. I can tell you, sometimes it happens that I'm sad, I've even cried. He was not a bad husband, though he did spend too much time in the cabaret. His friends and the spirit of his mother have lost him. I am sorry, but I have you, and I thank Jesus every day.

After that? We worked a lot. I had won the trust of Philbert; he appreciated my work. We got closer. It was not easy in this time, since we had a lot to do, but we were proud, although the fear was upon us. This also saved your life. He protected you like a father. When he left for Congo along with the French, after the *inyenzi* [cockroaches] finally invaded, I feared for your security, but Jesus was with us.

Yes, I stayed alone, with you. I could have gone to the West with the others, but it would have been too dangerous for you. I sacrificed my freedom for you. It is true, I did not expect the neighbors to behave as they did. Don't they know what it is to be a parent? Now I know that I will die before I see them coming back, but hopefully you will witness it and the people will have another chance to be free. Where I will be very soon, I will pray Jesus every day for that. My dear Immaculée, have I told you enough how much I love you?

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The daughter of a Tutsi man was considered a Tutsi.