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THE VIEW FROM HERE

a short story by MITHRAN SOMASUNDRUM

I WAS BORN IN THE HOUSE my father built, a wooden house of two stories, with broad eaves. There was an avocado tree in the front garden, and from my bedroom window at night its ragged black branches appeared to reach for the moon. In the mornings, before the sun became too bright, you could see the opposite side of the valley and the blue mountains beyond. Gorillas lived in those mountains, or so I'd been told. Once, many thousands of them, but now just a few hundred, perhaps knowing their time had passed.

My father was a well-respected man, a doctor. He owned a radio and many books. We were one of the first families in our town to have a refrigerator, and, unlike many, we placed it not on display in the living room, but in the kitchen, where a refrigerator should be. When people came to visit, I always brought them a cold bottle of beer, opened in their presence. As a child I did this without asking, and I know it pleased my father for me to be aware of such things. He was a stern man, but kind in his way. Throughout his working life, he treated patients without regard to racial differences, and after he died, I missed him greatly.

I gave birth to my daughter Odette at home. After she was born, we invited all of our neighbors and friends over to celebrate. My husband paid for a big pot of banana beer, which of course he drank from first, to demonstrate its safety. We carried my father's radio out into the front garden (it still worked — a big, brown, Bakelite radio, imported from London), and our guests danced late into the night to music broadcast from the capital.

To outsiders I imagine Africa seems a big place, but to us it does not feel so, for ours is a small country. Sometimes it can feel as if there is not enough room for everyone. That is why I thought Odette was blessed: because she came to us during a time when we could celebrate openly, one of the in-between times when we were treated as people and lived without fear.

And for our family, the in-between times were better than they were for most. During the first terror, in 1959, a local councilman told my father, "We don't want to lose you." And he pushed a new identity card across the desk. They had made us Hutus. The only problem was that everyone already knew us as Tutsis. Every town has its *radio trottoir*; its word on the street, and we knew that for however many generations our family would always be too tall, our noses too narrow.

Unlike me, Odette went to university. After her studies she married a man from the north — Marcus, a quiet, serious man with hard ambition in his eyes. They came to live with us, and in the mornings Marcus would look out across the valley and say to me, "Mother, such views. Odette was lucky to grow up here." I felt he meant it in another way also. I knew people in the north were different — more aware of themselves as Hutus and readier to be offended.

Later Odette became pregnant, but she didn't have the baby at home. She gave birth to Letitia in the hospital where she worked as an anesthetist. When Marcus came back for her nightdress and toilet things, he told me, "This is the way it's done now. At the hospital they have the best equipment. They have state of the art."

Maybe, I thought, but if the child is not born at home, something is lost.

After Letitia was christened, we didn't have a party. It was the in-between time still, but something in the air was different.

Marcus found a job in local government. He worked hard and rose quickly. He was driven in a way that my father and my late husband, Joshua, had not been. And of course it helped that the governor of our province was a man of mixed race.

"I'm his fair-play token," Marcus would say, and mime placing down a card. "*If the aid donors come, he thinks, I'm going to play Marcus.*"

When he did this, Odette would stroke his back and say, "No, he trusts you."

And in truth, in spite of the joking, Marcus trusted himself. He believed he would rise to the top in his profession. Over dinner he would discuss his strategies with Odette: how this person or that was agitating; how he had to keep different power blocs happy. I used to feed Letitia and listen, and it would seem to me that Marcus had chosen an impossible task. But no, he was a success — so much so that he even surprised himself. Drinking coffee after dinner while Letitia played on the floor, Marcus would take out his career and look at it, like a man admiring a diamond, letting its edges catch the light, searching for a flaw.

Of course, all three of us could see the flaw. But no one spoke of it.

With the money from his new position, Marcus bought a suite of cane furniture, and a car, and a hi-fi delivered from a shop in the capital. The hi-fi was black with many glowing lights and switches, like something from the cockpit of an airplane. After we'd placed it in the living room, I took my father's radio into my room. Marcus would come in and ask, "Mother, why don't you listen out here? The reception is better. No valves, you see. Transistors."

I always went, to make Marcus happy. But during the daytime, when he and Odette were at work and Letitia was at the nursery, I would switch on the Bakelite radio while I cooked or mended clothes. Listening to the low whine as the valves warmed up, the crackle of the reception, I felt close to my father.

Later, I didn't listen to the radio as much. There was less music and more announcements. Again they began to use the insect words to refer to us. My father used to say, "When they no longer speak of you as people, it means they can kill you."

There had been times like this before. In '62 I saw a cattle truck go by with people of our race penned in the back. I stood and watched the dust cloud billow behind, until it disappeared from view. Then I realized I was shaking. In '67 we were warned of an attack and hid in the bush. I crouched in long grass and heard men approach our house, singing as though setting out for work. We lived in the bush for four days, and when we returned home, the house was empty.

Even in the in-between times, there were incidents: a rumor spreading across a town like fire, an angry mob, someone dragged from his car on a lonely road. But we always hoped,

with our false identity cards and our mixed-race provincial governor — this man who had employed Marcus — we would still be safe.

Then one evening Marcus didn't come home. Seven o'clock passed, then eight, then nine. We tried to put Letitia to bed. "Your father has to work late," Odette said, but our unease had transmitted itself to the child, and she refused to sleep. Odette made phone calls to friends (who knew nothing) and to Marcus's colleagues (who were evasive). The hands of the clock passed midnight, and Letitia fell asleep on the sofa.

At one o'clock in the morning we heard a car pull up outside. From the living-room window we could see two dark figures inside. One got out, and from his build and his walk we could tell it was Marcus. Odette ran to the door, and suddenly I knew what she would see: Marcus stepping into the light with machete cuts stitched together across his face. I wanted to call out, to protect her from this sight. But then the door opened, and Marcus came in, and there was nothing wrong with him, except he was speaking quickly.

"Get the child; we're leaving. Mother, hurry, pack some clothes." He picked up Letitia and carried her to the car. When he came back, we were still standing in the living room. "Odette, come on, we don't have time!" He marched to the bedroom, and Odette ran after him. Marcus said, "It's going to start soon. Right now. They'll come for everyone."

"But what about Paul?" Odette asked. Paul was the governor.

"Paul can't save us. He might not even be able to save himself."

I ran into my bedroom and took out the brown suitcase that I used when visiting my friend Mrs. Mukampore, and I began to fill it with clothes. At first I believed I was calm, but then the panic came over me, and by the end I was throwing in things without looking at them. I stopped when it seemed the suitcase might not close properly, and then I placed the pictures from my dresser on top: my parents, Odette as a girl, Letitia when she was born.

The suitcase was too heavy, and Odette had to help me drag it to the car. After we'd lifted it into the boot, I started to go back for other things, but Odette had already climbed into the car and was comforting Letitia, who was awake, and then Marcus was running toward us from the house saying, "Let's go, let's go!"

The doors slammed, and the driver accelerated quickly, bouncing us over the bumpy road. The space inside the car was small and hot and full of panic. As we raced through the town, everything seemed dangerous. When we passed stray dogs, it seemed they would bark out an alarm. When we passed people, I was sure they would threaten us. If there were many people, I was sure we were coming to a roadblock.

But no one stopped us, and we left the town. Soon we were driving past the shanties on the outskirts: dark wooden shacks huddled together, no more streetlights. And then beyond the shanties came the climb up into the hills. Only then, when there was bush outside the windows, could I lose the immediate fear. I sat back in the car seat and remembered:

"The radio! My father's radio."

"Oh, *Mother*," said Odette. She was staring out the window with her jaw set. It was then that I understood what we'd done. That house had looked after our family for so long, and we had abandoned it. I felt as though I had abandoned my parents. I started to cry and had to bite the collar of my blouse so I wouldn't make a noise and scare Letitia.

The road climbed higher into the hills, past thorn bush and acacia and savannah grass that was bone white in the moonlight. I wondered if the timing was intentional — if they'd chosen to attack under a full moon so that no one could hide. Sometimes when the car took a bend, a view would open up, and by the silver light you could see terraced farmland: coffee plantations and banana orchards. But there was nothing beautiful about it. Everything that could be seen clearly seemed dangerous.

In time the road became narrower, with rocks and pot-holes, and more twisting. But the driver was good. He had a fierce concentration, staring only at the road, one hand on the wheel, the other on the gear stick. To look at him, you would have thought he was alone in the car, and although we bounced and swayed, he didn't get stuck.

The ride was a "gift" from the governor, Marcus told us. The governor had spent the night on the phone, assessing the public mood, and finally turned to Marcus and said that nothing could be done. "He told me, 'Take my car and driver and get over the border now. It's the least I can do.' And I thought, *Yes, it's the least you can do.*"

Odette said, "Marcus, he could have done nothing."

"I worked for that man."

As we drove down out of the hills, dawn's first light was behind us. Letitia was stretched out asleep with her head on Odette's lap and her feet on mine. We were already in a different country, but had to drive farther to reach the checkpoint. The road became level: a straight, broken trail through an unknown land that, in the half light, looked just like home. Then, in the distance, we could see the checkpoint.

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