

Up from the Prison of Hate

the story of Rwanda survivor Josee Uwamahoro

Warning: disturbing content

Beaten, thrown down a hole and all-but buried in sand, 17-year-old Josee Uwamahoro had no reason to expect she'd survive. In a month of panicked cat-and-mouse through the Rwandan forest, she'd seen what deadly instruments her Hutu neighbours had become. Screams, sickening thuds, classmates killing classmates—it was the stuff of nightmares. A cauldron of hate boiling over and infecting all it touched.

One by one, Josee's family dwindled. Two days after the killing began, on April 13, 1994, her grandmother was dragged away. Her mother gave in the next day, sinking in an exhausted heap and frantically waving her daughter away as helicopters descended in a supposed rescue that was anything but. Seven-year-old half-brother Munyaneza was beheaded, leaving older brother Innocent with the awful image of a head that continued talking as it fell.

The forest with its corpses and prowling animals became a grim and hungry place for Josee and the two aunts who were still with her as weeks crept past. Then the pursuers returned. With knives, guns and sticks they beat first one aunt and then the other, throwing each down the same hole that next claimed their niece.

Josee swam in and out of consciousness, her body bloating and numb atop rotting corpses. On the third day, she heard two young voices. "Was that one lady still alive?" Their wondering confirmed, the toddlers ran to find help. So Josee was rescued, but her body refused to work and her tears seemed never to end. Doctors pronounced her paralyzed for life.

For months Josee sank into misery, willing herself to die and arguing with God. Slowly her arguments shifted from "How do you think I'm going to survive like this?" to "The Bible says everything is possible." Closeted inside her room, she doggedly dragged herself onto crutches, day after falling down day.

Determination took her back to high school despite repeated rebuffs, then to South Africa for back surgery. Determination, coupled with gritty faith, restarted her internal plumbing when doctors insisted it had shut down forever. Still paralyzed from the waist down, Josee again proved her doctors wrong by leaving her wheelchair behind. Using first two crutches and later one, she persisted until she could walk unaided, although with a pronounced limp.

Now 32, Josee lives in Edmonton with husband Jules, who lost most of his own family to genocide. They have a child, Egon, and are happily expecting another. "You may think, 'After all she's been through, how does she make another family?'" she says. "The only thing I can tell you about building another home is just having hope."

Josee climbed from the prison of her past by imagining a different future, both for her family and for the country of her birth. But her healing is not done, and she knows she's not alone. By telling her story, she hopes to shift the focus from hate to forgiveness, from despair to hope. "When you have hope," she says, "anything can happen."

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