

Title: **A PROMISE FOR RIVER:
How Keeping a Promise to My Son Is Changing the Heart of
Africa**

Author: **Jimmy Lakey (with Rick Killian)**

Sometimes our greatest adventures come from simply answering when our hearts call.

Overview: In December of 2004, an abandoned newborn was rescued during a rainstorm in the Gikondo District of Kigali, Rwanda. A few years later, Jimmy and Carrie Lakey visited this boy's orphanage as part of a short-term mission trip with the intention to adopt. That was the day River Mattson Moise Lakey became their son, though it would be another two years before he came home with them.

Blocked by bureaucracy, the day before they were to return to the United States without River, they watched their new son and his friend play in the dusty courtyard. As he looked on, a question came to Jimmy's mind as if a future River himself had spoken it: "*Daddy, what happened to the kids I grew up with?*"

Jimmy didn't want to answer that question with, "I don't know." So he turned to the staff member he was standing with and asked him, "What's the greatest need for these children?" Without dropping a beat, the man answered, "Education." After a little research, Jimmy and Carrie realized they could send each child in the orphanage to school for less \$2 a week. They had no excuse not to help these kids.

That was the day a promise was born. Jimmy and Carrie agreed together that they would do whatever needed to be done to make sure River's earliest friends got an education and had the skills to provide for themselves once they outgrew the orphanage.

And that, you could say, is when the real adventure of *River's Promise* began.

Unique
Selling
Points:

The young adults of today are hungry to make an impact in the world by making a difference for others, particularly those who are not in a position to help themselves. Their hearts are absorb with social issues such as human trafficking, hunger, poverty, racial, political, and religious persecution, child warriors, as well as the plight of widow, orphans, and the homeless. Yet despite their best intentions, many of them are not sure what they can do beyond liking a Facebook page, joining a social media campaign, or sending a little money to a charity of their choice.

A Promise for River is about what happens when you simply dare to ask what more you can do and then act on the answer to that question.

There hasn't really been a book like this since *Three Cups of Tea*. This one, however, just happens to be true.

Benefits:

Readers will:

- Realize how simple it is to make an impact if you take the next simple step to answer the most important question you face.
- We get an insight into how “socialpreneurship” differs from non-profit work and how it holds the true answers to solving the world’s most difficult problems, especially when it comes to poverty and development.
- Shows the power of relationship building and working with political authority in order to make positive change.
- Be both entertained and inspired by the stories in this book that often teach important principles as if each adventure was a parable of its own.
- Gain an insight into the plight of orphans and the importance of family.
- Gain a new respect for the power of one person doing what is right even in the face of a world of billions.
- Realize that many problems the world faces today don’t need elaborate, complicated international programs to solve them. They just need someone who will step in and take the next step in solving a problem.
- See how respecting the integrity of each individual allows a person to help and give without it becoming a handout that eats away at individual dignity. The will also come to understand how this attitude empowers rather than makes people dependent on the help.
- To realize that it is not only about the help that can be given, but how important it is that there is individual contact and the sense of a parent who both wants the best and expects the best of “their kids.”

Categories: Business, Memoir, Travelogue, Humor, Inspiration

Tone: This book will be written with the candor and humor of what it is like to be waylaid by the needs of others and to tackle issues head-on that are more than a person imagined or dreamed was possible to do. It is at times touching, at times honest and insightful, and at times, laugh-out-loud funny.

Author Bios: Jimmy Lakey is the founder and president of *World Changers International, Inc.*, a non-profit organization that works around the globe. Under the banner of *World Changers, River's Promise*—named after a promise Jimmy made to his son River to take care of his earliest childhood friends—does extensive work to help orphans in Rwanda have access to education and other basic needs. *River's Promise* has now grown to do work among the Twa people, helping send the children of some of the poorest of the poor to school.

Jimmy is also the founder of *Lakey Entertainment Group*, which focuses on promotion and creative investment in Christian and Family entertainment events. Jimmy has started *Epicenter Entertainment, Jimmy Lakey Presents, Nation Shakers, Change Your Planet*, and *Lakey Cigar Company*, a manufacturer of premium, handmade cigars whose proceeds benefit the work of *River's Promise*. He has led partnerships with organizations such as *Live Nation, House of Blues, AEG LIVE*, and *Gospel Music Association*, among others. Jimmy has committed his life to making global impact by using his business acumen and entrepreneurial passion to grow business endeavors and fund humanitarian causes.

Along with his entrepreneurial business savvy, Jimmy is a gifted communicator who has become a strong voice in American radio. *The Jimmy Lakey Show* has become a staple on Colorado radio airwaves and launched into national syndication in 2012. Jimmy has interviewed a countless number of leaders in both business and politics, among which was President George W. Bush.

Jimmy also ran to be Colorado's 7th Congressional District representative to the U.S. Congress in 2010. He still resides in Colorado with his wife, Carrie, and

their son, River.

To learn more about River's Promise watch: <http://vimeo.com/24747176>

Writer Bio: The book would be ghostwritten with **Rick Killian**, who has had the editorial lead on more than fifty books. Rick was the developmental editor on the platinum-selling *Jesus Freaks* and ghostwrote *Jesus Freaks: Revolutionaries* by dc Talk and *The Voice of the Martyrs* (which have collectively sold more than 2 million copies). He also helped to write the NYT's bestsellers *The American Prophecies* and *The Final Move Beyond Iraq* by Michael D. Evans. He recently also ghostwrote another book that involved an international adoption entitled *Taking on Goliath* by Jim Dotson.

Rick and his wife, Melissa, were both Peace Corps volunteer in the Central African Republic after graduation from college. Because of this, helping children in Africa is also near and dear to his heart.

Manuscript: Approx. 50,000 words.

The manuscript will be complete within three to six months of contract.

Platform: ***River's Promise*** followers

Email List: 3000+

Twitter: 1200+ Followers

Facebook: 2400+ "Likes"

Access to Cumulus Media, Salem Media, Clear Channel Communications Radio Networks for local and national radio shows.

Possible Endorsements or Foreword:

Music:

Michael Tait (Lead Singer, Newsboys)

Daniel Bashta (Writer of "Like a Lion (God's Not Dead)"/Recording Artist/Worship Leader)

Rita Springer (Recording Artist/Worship Leader)

Mac Powell (Lead Singer, Third Day)

David Crowder (Recording Artist)

Politics:

Rep. Tom Tancredo (U.S. Representative & 2008 Presidential Candidate)

Rep. Bob Beauprez (U.S. Representative)

Mitt Romney (2012 Presidential Candidate)

Radio & Ministry:

Dr. Bill Bennett (Radio Host & Former Secretary of Education for Ronald Reagan)

Gino Geraci (Senior Pastor, Calvary Chapel of Denver)

Hugh Hewitt (Talk Radio Host/News Commentator)

June Hunt (Radio Host "Hope in the Night" & Hope for the Heart Ministries)

Jim Daly (Focus on the Family)

John Fuller (Focus on the Family, radio co-host)

Pastor Mark Ramsey (Pastor Citipointe Church; Brisbane, Australia—2nd largest church in Australia behind Hillsong)

Comparative
Titles: ***Three Cups of Tea*** by Greg Mortenson (Penguin Books)

The success and subject matter of this book—despite its eventually being uncovered as fraudulent through a *60 Minutes* report and *Three Cups of Deceit* by John Krakauer—proved inspiration for millions looking for a way to help children in the developing world. As it turned out, readers didn't just want to write a check to a charity every month, they wanted to share in the experience of what it was like to come across a need and then actually to do something about it. Their desire to walk in Mr. Mortenson's shoes with him made this book a must read among those who wanted to help the poor in developing nations.

Start Something that Matters by Blake Mycoskie (Spiegel & Grau)

Blake Mycoskie's TOMS Shoes company was not just a business, but a movement. His model of giving one pair of shoes for every pair they sold

captured the heart of a generation and helped millions of children stay healthier. This momentum alone was probably also what pushed *Start Something that Matters* to the top of the NYT bestsellers' list. This book illustrated the principles Blake felt were important to the creation of TOMS with both the story of how he stated TOMS as well as stories of other entrepreneurs.

Start Something that Matters is a smart little book, but reads more like a lecture on business with some good illustrations than an entrepreneurial adventure. Had it been more of that, perhaps it would have inspired more into action.

The Promise of a Pencil by Adam Braun (Scribner)

You don't have to get much farther than the intro video at AdamBraun.com to love Adam's idea of being "for purpose" rather than "non-profit." While *The Promise of a Pencil* is also a book about socialpreneurship, it gets bogged down by trying to be an autobiography instead of the adventure of Adam's organization. It also takes a rather long time before we get to know any of the people Adam's organization helps.

Conscious Capitalism by John Mackey (Harvard Business Review)

This is a great business book by Whole Foods CEO and founder John Mackey about the power of creating a business that is also a social movement and culture. It is more business principles than adventure, however, and is more targeted to business students and owners rather than a more general audience. It also has somewhat of an educational tone rather than a narrative voice.

How to Change the World by David Bornstein (Oxford)

This is another great book on socialpreneurship and has lots of great stories, however it also has a rather educational writing style and feels more like a sociology textbook than an entertaining adventure story. However, it is still a classic in its field and has been well received as one of the most important books to read on the subject of international development and creating grassroots social change.

Chapter
synopses:

Prologue

See writing sample

Introduction

See writing sample

1. Nowhere I Thought We Would Ever Be

The night we decided to adopt only months before going to Africa for the first time—starting the adoption process—some initial missteps in communicating with our African contacts—preparing for the trip as leaders of a group of university students—choosing River from our pile of “baseball cards”—leaving for Rwanda in May of 2007

2. The Land of a Thousand Hills

Arriving in Rwanda—visiting the Kigali Genocide Memorial—our first visit to the orphanage—going to “Hotel Rwanda”—our reactions to Africa and learning just how different things are run there—the adoption proceedings at the Rwanda Central Courthouse—the chance meeting of Dr. Charles Murigande—adopting River but realizing we would have to leave without him (this may need another chapter or two to cover)

3. The Birth of a Promise

The last few days of the first trip to Rwanda—the day River’s Promise popped into my head—the initial steps we took to support the orphanage—the response from friends at home that inspired us to turn River’s Promise into an organization

4. Up from Ash and Bone

The year of waiting and what I learned about Rwanda while planning to get back to bring River home—what Rwanda is doing to put itself back together and end the tribalism that was at the root of the genocide

5. Chasing Down River

River’s “paperwork pregnancy” and knocking on almost every door in the Rwandan government to make it happen—the year of waiting—the second trip

back to Rwanda with the first River's Promise presentation—chasing down the necessary testimonies and signatures in Rwanda in order to document River's history and verify that he was an orphan—meeting some of Rwanda's most influential leaders and the favor we gained as we did

6. The Last Orphan Out of Rwanda

Taking River from the orphanage and the events of the journey home—the stopover and doctors visits in Addis Abba—getting to know River even though we didn't speak the same language—River meets Carrie for the first time in the San Francisco Airport—River's first meal in the U.S. at In and Out Burgers and his immediate love for French fries

7. A New Land of Opportunities

River's Promise grows and focuses—the first steps we took to supply beds and mosquito nets for every child in the orphanage—new opportunities to help Genocide orphans and others—defining RP as an organization established to help educate orphans so they can have a better future—why we always tried to buy locally and other foundational principles

8. Dipping a Toe in American Politics

How our work with River's Promise and my connections with conservative groups led to running for the congressional seat for Colorado's Seventh District

9. Papa Kazungu

Returning to Africa on various trips—some of the stories from orphans of what happened to their families—how I got the name “Papa Kazungu”—our agricultural/farm project and nutritional programs—first visit to the Twa (Pygmy) villages—the KLOVE Radio school supply promotion—taking the orphans to an amusement park—beginning of the child sponsorship program—blankets and food to the Twa

10. Orphans No More

How a series of mishaps led to the founder's widow using the Pefa Orphanage to embezzle money from abroad—how we discovered the fraudulent activity—

defending three of the orphans scapegoated for stealing from the orphanage—the decision and work to get every orphan adopted so that we could close the orphanage and end the orphans relationship with the founder’s widow—how our work to see that every orphan was placed in a home became a model for the Rwandan government to address its orphan issues

11. A Wedding to Remember

The mass wedding and baptism that I performed in the Twa village; one of the funniest days of my life—continued growth and transformation of River’s Promise to support the same orphans now living in homes around Kigali

12. River’s Return

In March of 2014, we took River back to Rwanda during spring break—this chapter would be the stories from that trip and take us up to the present with River’s Promise

Epilogue The Work Goes On

Closing notes about what River’s Promise is today, where it is going, and what readers can do to get involved with the work and help us reach the poorest of the poor in Rwanda with education and basic amenities

A Promise for River

**The Story of How Keeping a Promise to My Son
Is Changing the Heart of Africa**

Jimmy Lakey

With

Rick Killian

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- Epilogue The Work Continues On

**Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this:
to visit orphans and widows in their affliction,
and to keep oneself unstained from the world.**

James 1:27

Each one of them is Jesus in disguise.

Mother Theresa

Prologue

Ntâ bubyîmba bw'înda bupfa úbusá.

There is no pregnancy that isn't useful.

Rwandan Proverb

It was nearing 11 PM on December 7, 2004 in Kigali, Rwanda, and Tesire Egidia was getting ready for bed. She was smiling slightly and humming as she remembered the wedding she had attended earlier that evening. It was nearing the end of the shorter rainy season in Rwanda, and a heavy rain had set in soon after she returned home. It now pounded on the metal roof of her home as she turned down the covers on her bed.

Then she heard the cry from outside.

“Woman, woman, come now! There is a baby out by your gate!”

Tesire turned instinctively towards the noise, and then moved to the doorway of her home to look out towards the gate that divided her neighborhood from the nearby road. Her house was surrounded by a fence constructed of cement blocks. The gate was made of metal and could swing open wide enough to accommodate a car or truck, if needed. The large gate had a door built into it to allow access without needing to open the entire gate. She had just passed through that door less than an hour ago as she returned from the wedding. She'd noticed nothing unusual. With the shouting, she instinctively looked out, but could see nothing through the downpour except the slight outlines of a distant streetlight.

The shouting continued from outside, “Woman! Woman! There is a baby by your gate!” Tesire headed out of her house and moved as quickly as possible towards the closed gate. She walked gingerly through the rain, being cautious not to slip on the wet ground. She pushed open the door in the gate, and looking out, could see water running in every direction. It was a chaotic scene as people were running by attempting to escape the sudden torrents of rain.

Her eyes were still adjusting as she looked around to see who had shouted. As she scanned to the right, she noticed movement on the ground. The slight movement had come from a dark object that stood out slightly against the glistening runoff. As her eyes focused, she saw a bundle of dirty rags against the pillar that connected her fence to the gate.

She moved quickly now—surprisingly quickly, considering her age—and scooped up the bundle. As her mind understood what was before her, she quickly distinguished a face, and suddenly, a cry broke through the rush of rain. The baby was carelessly wrapped in old rags, soaked through to the skin as she now was. She felt the child shiver as she clutched it against her body shielding it from the rain.

“Ko, ko, ko, ko,” she clucked soothingly. The child was like ice.

“Come, little one,” she said. “Let’s get inside.” She scanned the area around her as she walked quickly back towards her door, thinking perhaps the mother had fallen nearby and needed help, but she saw nothing. Looking down at the child in her arms, she thought, *Can you live? Surely you will be sick and die before the morning; you are so wet and cold.*

She made her way back into her home and closed the door behind them. She found something to dry herself and the child. Laying the infant on a table, she removed the few sopped rags the child was wrapped in. She saw the child was a boy and discovered a small piece of umbilical cord still attached to his navel. He couldn't be more than a few days old. Once the baby was dried, she took one of her shirts and put it on him, laid him on her bed while she changed into dry clothes, and then scooped him up to ease his crying once she was done. She held him tightly against her body for warmth and went to her kitchen. She had nothing proper to feed such a small infant, so she took some sugar and mixed it with warm water. She worked with one hand while holding the child tightly with the other. She rocked back and forth instinctively in a motion her body remembered from when her own children—now grown with families of their own—were this small. She began to sing a hymn she remembered from church. When the sugar water was mixed, she took a clean rag, dipped it in the mixture, and held the corner of the cloth against the child’s lips, painting slowly back and forth so that he could get the taste of it.

She continued to rock back and forth and sing. She felt warmth coming back into the tiny body and the child began to respond to the cloth. He let out a weak cry, then began to suckle. Tesire smiled.

She continued to rock the infant as she fed him, dipping the cloth again and again into the sugary water, until he finally had enough and fell asleep. The child was now warm and dry, and she sensed no temperature had developed in response to his chill. *Maybe you will live,* she thought to herself.

She laid him under the blanket next to where she would sleep. *If you live*, she thought, *you will need a name*. “I shall call you Moise [Moses],” she decided as she crawled under the blanket next to the child, “because I pulled you out of the river just as Pharaoh’s daughter pulled out Moise when he was an infant.”

* * * * *

As these events took place, Carrie and I were just rising to a brisk, sunny morning in Frederick, a small town about a half hour north of Denver, Colorado. At the time, we had no plans to ever go to Africa and knew nothing of Rwanda besides what we had heard in scattered news reports about the 1994 genocide there. Africa was as foreign to us as the far side of the moon. In fact, for all we knew at the time, the events of that morning might as well as have happened on the moon. But, as we would later learn, that was the day River Matison Moise Lakey was pulled out of a ditch where he likely would have died if not for a compassionate old grandmother. It was the first of a rather miraculous string of events that led to him one day becoming our son.

Introduction

Umuntu asiga ikimwirukaho ariko ntawusiga ikimwirukamo.

You can outdistance that which is running after you, but not what is running inside you.

Rwandan proverb

Parenthood changes a person in unexpected ways, especially when you adopt. For Carrie and I, the decision to adopt a toddler out of an orphanage in Rwanda did much more than change our lives. In fact, it is difficult to describe exactly what happened once we made that decision. I suppose that is a big part of why I decided to write this book. The domino effect that began with that decision is literally changing the future of dozens of children growing up in the heart of Africa today.

Carrie and I constantly wonder at the story of how River Matison Moise Lakey came to live with us in Colorado and all that has happened since then. As we prepared for a missions trip to Rwanda in early 2007, Carrie and I made the decision that if the opportunities aligned themselves correctly, we would see if we could adopt. Then, as I stood in an orphanage compound one day looking at the young boy we had chosen from a pile of baseball-card-sized photos as the one we would make our son, I couldn't help but wonder at what would happen to his friends. I knew that one day River might ask me what happened to the other children at the orphanage where he spent his earliest years and I wanted to have a good answer for him. So I started asking about their welfare and what they would need to escape the cycle of poverty that Africa is known for. Before I knew it, a promise was born in my heart that Carrie and I would do what we could to see each of these children had what they needed to get an education and grow up to make Rwanda a better place. We had no idea of the joy and challenges we were getting ourselves into when we made that decision.

The journey since has led into the halls of Rwandan government where we now have many friends, into becoming a community developer on behalf of the orphanage, into a run for United States Congress, into the groundbreaking decision to help find a family to house every orphan and close the orphanage, and into the isolated and virtually forgotten villages of the Twa (Pygmy) villages of Rwanda's backcountry.

In the few years since we took the first steps on that journey, we have seen River grow from a self-conscious, timid toddler who clung to our legs whenever we left home into an energetic, outgoing grade-schooler who has made friends with virtually every person in our neighborhood. At the same time, we have seen the influence and scope of River's Promise grow and affect the lives of more and more people throughout Rwanda every year.

The journey has also taught us some incredible things. First of all, I can tell you without a doubt that God has a sense of humor. I can tell you that a little can go a long way if managed correctly and invested in the right people or programs. The principle of loaves and fishes still applies in the world today. I can also tell you that God can do incredible things with our lives if we are daring enough to say "Yes" when He asks us to do the outlandish.

As I write this, in a few weeks, Carrie and I will be taking River back to Rwanda with us for the first time since we took him out. Being able to do that and looking forward to reuniting him with some of his earliest friends is a great reminder of the power of a promise. Our hope is that the story of that promise will bless you, and inspire within you the power of staying true to promises of your own.

Jimmy Lakey
June 17, 2014

Chapter One

Nowhere I Thought We Would Ever Be

**Do not despise these small beginnings,
for the LORD rejoices to see the work begin.**

Zechariah 4:10 NLT

“I want to play with children and hold dying people.”

It was an unexpected turn in the conversation for sure. After years of working with college students, I knew they had a way of throwing you for a loop with a question or statement. The trouble was, just because I knew it happened, didn't mean I was ever ready for it. It's not every day that someone asks you to help them hold dying people.

I looked at Jason's face for a moment. His eyes looked at the carpet and almost glistened. I could tell the thought was sincere. He wasn't looking to go on a mission trip to find a nice beach or build a school near a resort. He wanted to go somewhere he could touch the lives of real, hurting people. He wanted to comfort the destitute and orphaned. He wanted to push out of his comfort zone—and he was pushing me out of mine.

“Hmm,” I thought out loud. “That sounds like going to a third world country.” I thought a moment more. “That sounds like going to Africa.”

Our adventure started with as little as that.

You see, I never planned to go to Africa. The thought had really never crossed my mind. If you had told me before that moment that I would ever go to Africa, I would have probably laughed; and if you told me that I'd go to Africa twice—or now thirteen times as of this writing—I would have said that you were out of your mind.

Much of my knowledge of Africa consisted of what I recalled from social studies class. I also remember missionaries who would come to church when I was a child. They would often be wearing some crazy tribal clothing. As a kid, I hoped they'd at least have a slide show with photos of jungles, exotic animals, and people carrying spears.

In those years I learned that Africa was reserved for Wednesday nights—never Sunday morning services. As a child, I remember being told to save up my pocket change and bring it to

my Sunday school class on the first Sunday of every month. Somehow my small change was going to help someone in Africa. I participated with pocket change, although Africa wasn't my motivation, it was the chance to choose a toy prize for participating. It is safe to say that I never thought Africa would have anything to do with me.

Fast-forward a couple of decades. The leadership kids in a college group I led decided they wanted to go on a short-term missions trip, so I asked, "Where?" Out of the blue, Jason made that statement about "holding dying people." In the back of my mind I knew our church had some connections with work in Rwanda, so Africa was the first place that popped into my head. No angels sang. I had no dream or vision. I wasn't even excited by the idea. Africa was simply the first place I thought of when Jason said, "I want to play with children and hold dying people."

So, as simple as that, we began making plans to go to Rwanda.

* * * * *

That was sometime in the fall of 2006. By early 2007, we had determined that we would go to Rwanda in mid-May, right after the University of Colorado finished its spring semester and had graduation. As plans developed, my wife Carrie decided that she would take time off from work to go with us. It was, after all, a "once in a lifetime" trip.

As we made our plans, I spoke with our pastor and others who had traveled to Rwanda. I learned that Rwanda is a beautiful place, even though one of the poorest countries in the world. It's known as "The Land of a Thousand Hills." Those rolling hills are covered, for the most part, with dense, tropical rain forest. Rwanda is the home to gorillas, pygmies, and one of the bloodiest conflicts of the second half of the twentieth century: The Rwandan Genocide of 1994.

I only vaguely recalled hearing news reports about the Rwandan Genocide back when I was in college. I do recall once seeing a marquee at a movie theater that read *Hotel Rwanda*, even though that was not the movie we were there to see. I didn't have any interest in seeing it either.

As preparation for our short-term missions trip progressed, everything that I read about the country and everyone I spoke with talked about the Rwandan Genocide. Even though it happened in 1994, more than a decade earlier, the country still bore the scars of the conflict. It

became obvious that it was the pivotal event for understanding and appreciating modern Rwanda.

Those I spoke with said that over one million people were murdered in a one-hundred-day period starting in April of 1994. Even as they described some of the places they had visited in Rwanda—mass tombs, memorials, churches turn into sepulchers filled with bones that had thousands of skulls stacked on shelf after shelf like library books—I couldn't get my head around it. One of them mentioned that as a result of the Genocide, Rwanda had more orphans per capita than any other nation on the earth. Rapes that occurred during the Genocide spread HIV/AIDS to many. And all this pain was without even considering the blight of poverty, disease, and continued conflict already engulfing Central Africa as a whole.

The more I learned, it became obvious—if we wanted to go play with children and hold dying people, Rwanda was the place to go. It was filled with opportunity, widows, orphans, and the forsaken and forgotten. Rwanda had experienced the darkness of hopelessness, and that is where the leadership kids wanted to go.

All of this information sort of percolated around in my head as we made plans and thought about the trip. Our Rwandan contact, whose name was Pastor Willy, began the process of finding orphanages we could visit while there and identifying other projects we might be able to unleash a group of college students on.

All the while the thought of hungry, abandoned orphans worked on me. From what I understood, some families had taken in two or three to try to help out and still the orphanages overflowed. The more children there were in a small orphanage, the less food there was to go around. What did these kids have to look forward to?

Sometime around February, another thought came into my mind. As with any married couple now in their early thirties, Carrie and I had talked a lot about the right time to start a family. Her career was pretty demanding and it was something we kept putting off. As part of those discussions, we had talked about adopting, but in the context of having a biological kid or two beforehand. Maybe we would look into taking an unwanted child from a teen in the Denver area, or look for an older child beyond the age commonly adopted. In everything we discussed, it was just something we always planned to do for a lot of very socially responsible reasons.

So the thought came to me, *What if we looked into adopting a child from Rwanda?*

That night, when Carrie got home, I blurted out the thought that had been bouncing in my head. I didn't approach the topic with any hint of diplomacy. It was truly a blurt.

"Hey Babe, we've talked about adoption, so why don't we consider adopting a child from Rwanda and we can bring 'em home with us when we return from our trip."

Needless to say, I had her attention. The topic was on the table and she looked at me with a quizzical stare as if waiting for a punch line to follow. She had barely even gotten in the door from a long day at the office and a long commute home, and this was the first thing I'd said to her.

The moment was finally broken when she finished setting her things into their usual place on the kitchen counter. Somehow that allowed her to finally muster a reply, which came in three short bursts: "Excuse me? Where did that come from? Are you kidding?"

"No," I said. "I'm serious! We have always talked about adopting, and Rwanda is overflowing with orphans. What if we adopted one and brought him or her home with us?"

Her eyes grew narrow. "Okkkaaaay," she said slowly, without a hint of confidence.

"No, really, I'm dead serious! Let's look into what it would mean to adopt from Rwanda."

"This is kind of out of the blue," she commented. "I only just decided to go with you last week. How long have you been thinking about this?"

"I don't know. It just kind of came to me."

She went upstairs to change and I called after her that I'd take us out for dinner. We headed to a restaurant and I continued to repeat my thoughts about why this was a good chance to adopt. Our back and forth continued even as our salads arrived. She remained skeptical, obviously still blindsided by the bluntness of my initial approach, but by the time we had finished our main courses, she conceded, "You're really serious about this, aren't you?"

"I am!" I replied. "I think we should do it!"

The conversation continued until we were readying for bed that night. We agreed that we would start knocking on doors. If they opened, it was meant to be. If one didn't open along the way, then we would know adopting was for another time and place.

Of course, we knew nothing about the process of adoption. We knew nothing about domestic adoption and we definitely knew nothing about international adoption. Nevertheless, Carrie was on board and there was no time to waste. It was already February, which meant we had less than three months until the time we would leave for Africa. We were in the deep end and it was time to swim.

The very next day I was on the Internet as soon as I got up. Fortunately, I own my own company so my boss wasn't going to bother me about spending time on this. I sat at my laptop — and typed “adoptions in Rwanda” into Google. It didn't take long to figure out there wasn't a lot of information available. I quickly learned that adoption agencies were not really active in Rwanda, so it appeared that we'd be “on our own.” Every step of the process would need to be discovered and directed by us. We'd have to find out which hoops we needed to jump through in Rwanda and in the US. This wasn't going to be easy, but difficulty was different than impossible. I saw the door as open, not closed, so I proceeded full-steam ahead.

It seemed we'd need a Rwandan attorney to help us. This definitely wasn't someone I had in my contact list. Then we would need to start the process of getting approved as adoptive parents in the State of Colorado. That included criminal background checks, medical testing, parenting classes, financial form after financial form, and tax returns, and that was just for Carrie and I! Alongside that there was paperwork for the potential adopted child. Oh, and at the same time we needed to identify a child to adopt! It was as if the clock started racing towards the date of our May trip.

Adoption agencies were usually the quarterbacks of this elaborate international adoption process, but these agencies weren't really working in Rwanda. It was one of the few countries that preferred to work directly with adoptive parents rather than a third party agency. Rwanda had not yet become a part of what was known as the Hague Convention, which set guidelines for protecting children during international adoptions.

I read story after story of people who spent years working on international adoptions. The paperwork, the process, the approval, the travel—everything took longer than expected, even with an agency leading the charge. It seemed that with my short time frame, I was trying to do the impossible, but I was still not discouraged. The more I learned, the more determined I became to continue the march forward. Difficulty is not the same thing as impossibility.

Every day the stack of file folders on my desk grew higher. Daily I worked through my checklists. In my head, the adoption process was not going to beat me. With every passing day May grew closer, and I grew more determined.

A day or so after I started, I got ahold of Pastor Willy in Rwanda and told him, “We want to adopt a child.” His immediate reply was hilarious and still makes me laugh. “How many do you want? I will make arrangements.”

“Just one!” I shot back. “One is fine. One is plenty!”

To our surprise, Pastor Willy called back about a week later and proudly announced, “I have found your child.”

“Wow! Really?” I said. I waved Carrie over to my computer to hear the Skype call. The connection was delayed over the Internet, so we talked between long silences. “Okay—where did you find him?”

“Out in the villages. I told the people there, ‘I have an American family who wants to adopt a child. Who would like to give me their child?’”

The next silence wasn’t the fault of the Internet connection.

Not hearing anything from me, he finally continued triumphantly in sing-songy African English, “I have a woman who says, ‘You can have my child to give the Americans. They may adopt him.’ So I told her, ‘If you give them the child, you cannot come back for him. He is their child, not yours.’ She agreed, because the child would have such a better life.”

“No, no, no, no, no!” Carrie and I exclaimed together. “We don’t want you to go to the villages to look for a child,” I said. “Go to or-phan-a-ges. Go to an or-phan-age. We want to adopt an orphan, not a child who has someone there to care for him already. We want to adopt an orphan—a child who has no one.”

Now there was silence on the Rwandan end. “Oh, okay. I will do that then,” he said in the end. At that, the connection was lost and I knew I’d need to follow-up in a few days.

Since Pastor Willy was the person who was finding us orphanages to work with when we brought the college students to Rwanda, he went to them to find out if they had children we

could adopt. He also found us a lawyer named Sophonie Sebaziga to spearhead everything for us on the Rwandan side.

One of the orphanages that agreed to have us come and do activities with their children was the Ngondo Orphanage in the Gikondo District near Kigali. This orphanage was started when the pastor of a church, Pastor Ngondo, started taking in abandoned children in the wake of the Genocide.

Imagine what it must have been like for him to finally be able to come out of hiding to find the streets full of children walking around with no one to care for them? Many of these children had seen their parents and other family members brutally murdered with machetes or clubs right before their eyes. Many of them had barely escaped death themselves and it would be days before they realized their brothers and sisters had been massacred as well. Thinking about it, I wondered what I would have done in similar circumstances. Pastor Ngondo seemed like a sort of Oskar Schindler to me.

By the next year, 1995, Pastor Ngondo garnered funds to build a separate building near the church for the orphans and began raising money and collecting food and clothing to formally care for the children he had found. Several years later, Pastor Ngondo got sick and died. The orphanage was taken over by Pastor Safari Emmanuel when he took over leadership of the church.

Meanwhile, our work on the adoption continued. A few days after I had told Pastor Willy to go to orphanages, a large e-mail file arrived. I downloaded and opened the attachment and saw dozens of photographs of orphaned children. After I printed them, cut them out, and stacked them up, they reminded me of baseball cards.

Pastor Willy included a note that explained that they had taken pictures of all the children in the orphanage for us to choose from. In order to keep the children from getting their hopes up about being adopted, they had told them it was for a sponsorship program from the United States. Thumbing through them quickly, I saw there was a group photo and the rest were individuals. Names and ages listed on Pastor Willy's note. We had only the first names of the children and many of them had question marks next to their ages. Picture after picture grabbed my heart. I thumbed through the deck of photos several times before I decided not to look at them again until Carrie was home, when we could decide together what to do with them.

That evening, Carrie and I agreed that we would each look at the photos on our own, see which child stood out to us, and then compare our choices. Knowing this was a big decision, we knew we should pray about what we were about to do. I gave Carrie her own copy of the files from Pastor Willy and we agreed that we'd compare our thoughts the next day.

I spent the rest of the evening in my office looking through the photos. I looked at them on my laptop and then I laid the printed copies out on my desk like I was playing solitaire. Some of the kids had beautiful smiles and were obviously used to posing for a camera. Others looked like they had a real hard time standing still enough for the photos to be snapped.

Then, in the midst of my thumbing through, I saw a picture of a little boy, maybe about two years old. This photo grabbed my attention. I was captivated. His face wasn't quite looking at the camera and he appeared rather upset. From the way he was standing, it looked as if he was bow-legged or perhaps had something wrong with one of his legs. I turned to Pastor Willy's notes to find the corresponding information. It read: "Moise, two years old."

With this boy's face now embedded in my mind, I quickly found the group photos again and tried to see if I could find him and get a better look at his face. I found him. He was wearing the same ill-fitting shirt as in the other photo; he still looked unhappy, maybe even crying. His finger was in his mouth and he was trying to turn away from the camera. One of the older boys from behind him had even put his hand on his head and was trying to turn his face forward towards the photographer. I looked through the rest of the photos and saw these were the only two he was in. Regardless, I knew he was the one. This was my son.

I took the photo to Carrie, who was sitting on the couch, and pointed at Moise's photo. "Him. That's him." She looked at the photo more closely, and then smiled. "Yes," she said. "This is the same one I chose too. This is *our* son."

* * * * *

So we continued searching the Internet, making phone calls, sending e-mails, and working our way through the adoption process as best we could. By the beginning of May, it seemed as if we had done the impossible by completing an international adoption in just a matter of months, rather than a year or more. I thought I had all of the information we needed so that we could adopt our son while we were in Rwanda.

It was Thursday and we were set to depart for Rwanda the following Monday. This is when Sophonie, our Rwandan attorney, asked me. "Have you had your American paperwork certified by the Rwandan Embassy yet?"

I was thrown for a loop. "What do you mean?"

"You need the Rwandan Embassy to say that all of your documents are in order. When they do, they will issue a letter called, 'The Letter of No Objection,' which basically says, 'We have looked through the Lakey family's data and have no objection to sending this to Rwanda for consideration.'"

"How do I get that?"

"You submit your American paperwork to the Rwandan Embassy in Washington, D.C."

"Okay," I said, panicked. "I'll figure this out." We made our good-byes and hung up.

Again, this was Thursday, the next day was Friday, certainly the embassy would be closed on Saturday and Sunday, and we left from Denver for Rwanda on Monday. So I started by looking for flights to Washington for later that day so I could be at the embassy on Friday. *Is there any way to get this paper in one day? Or will they want me to leave my documents and come back later?*

We had made too much progress over the past several weeks to allow this to stop us. I found a flight and tried not to shudder at the price, then had another idea just as I was ready to click to purchase it.

I knew a little about Washington from interactions I had had with political figures through my radio show, and I knew they had couriers who ran documents around town for signatures and such because sometimes things were more urgent and needed to be more secure than the mail could provide. I found a company that proclaimed themselves as "document runners," who would take my forms to any embassy in Washington, get them to the right department, get the signatures and letters or whatever is needed, and then send things back to us. So I called and made arrangements with them, stuffed copies of the necessary paperwork into an envelope, and headed for Fed Ex to overnight them to the document runners.

They got our paperwork the next morning before 10 am, they took it to the Rwandan Embassy, and miraculously, someone there agreed to review it and get us the Letter of No

Objection while they waited. This was incredible, really, since, after sending the documents off I had searched the Internet again to see how long it would take and most people said it took them at least two or three weeks. However, by that afternoon, the paperwork we needed was on its way back to us, and the very next day, we received them in a Fed Ex delivery.

We had been packing for a week or so by then, so I took the paperwork and placed it in a pocket of my carry-on where it would be safe and within reach the entire trip.

I breathed a sigh. We were ready to go to Africa.

Chapter Two

The Land of a Thousand Hills

Akarênze impinga karushya ihámagara.

What reaches the top of the hill cannot be called back.

Rwandan Proverb

It was hot, muggy, and dark as we got off the plane at the Kigali International Airport. There was no jet bridge to the terminal. Instead we walked down access stairs directly onto the airport tarmac and crossed a few hundreds yards into the terminal building to get our luggage. We had eight students from the University of Colorado following our every move. There were a few others who had traveled with us from our church, but we were leading the college students. The others were there for separate projects. We were all fairly quiet as we walked towards the terminal, probably a combination of exhaustion from the long flights and our taking in every detail of the moment of our arrival in the most foreign place any of us had ever been in.

With our passports in hand, we entered the terminal building. I instinctively thought that when I walked through the glass door into the terminal that I would feel the cool of air conditioning. It was a Pavlovian expectation since that is the way it happened everywhere else I had ever traveled. I was looking forward to the refreshing coolness, so was taken aback to find the air inside the terminal was just as sticky and hot as it had been outside. I could feel the sweat on my forehead making its way towards my eyes—as if in protest to the heavy humidity that was in such contrast to the dry heat of our high desert home in Colorado. I knew it wouldn't be good for the trip leader to be the first to complain, so I held my tongue despite an overwhelming longing for a blast of cool air.

It was around nine o'clock in the evening when we arrived. Along with the humidity, the darkness grabbed my attention. Looking out the airplane window on our final approach, it looked as if we were landing in the middle of the wilderness. Below us was an ocean of black broken up with an occasional light flicker off in the distance. Once we landed, it didn't get much better. Even the airport exterior façade lacked the lighting that I was accustomed to. Inside the airport, my tired eyes strained to focus. It was as if everyone in the airport made sure all the dimmer switches were set to "murky."

Carrie and I came through customs at the front of our group. I knew that Pastor Willy was meeting us, but didn't know if he'd be alone or what transportation he had arranged. As we walked out of customs into the main terminal, I immediately saw him. He was surrounded by an entourage. Their smiles were the brightest thing we had yet seen in Africa. As Carrie and I crossed to them, Willy threw his arms around me as if I was a long-lost relative finally returned home. "Jiiiiimmmmy!" he greeted. Willy was fluent in more languages than I could count, including English, and usually spoke quite deliberately to make sure I understood every word. Over the phone when I spoke with him from the US, I never really struggled to understand what he was saying. This greeting was different. It could have been that I was just tired and my comprehension was sluggish, or perhaps he was just excited to see us and was speaking at a faster pace than usual. Whatever the case, it was as if he was speaking a mix of English and Kinyrwandan. I comprehended only every few words, so I ended up just doing a lot of nodding and smiling, not at all sure of what was going on around me.

As each member of our group walked into the main terminal, the smiling and hugging ritual continued. We hardly understood a word each other said, but there was no misunderstanding about what was being communicated. This was one of the warmest and most genuine welcomes I ever experienced. Pastor Willy and his entourage were thrilled that we had come to Rwanda. Their smiles and joy made me forget about the humidity, at least for a few minutes.

We soon learned that one of the men with Willy was our adoption attorney, Sophonie. He recognized Carrie and I and stepped up to introduce himself. With him was a man who was serving as his interpreter. As the two of them spoke with us, another from Willy's group took my backpack and grabbed our luggage and began moving quickly toward the exit.

While the rest of our group was still smiling and hugging—and my eyes were following our luggage out the door—Sophonie motioned for Carrie and I to follow. "Come, come," he said in English. Then he turned and bolted off after where our luggage had disappeared. Carrie and I looked at each other, both totally baffled, and then, without word, turned to catch up with Sophonie.

Before we realized it, we were looking out of the back window at the college students who were starting to gather on the sidewalk outside. Our car immediately pulled away, and we

watched helpless as our students looked around for us. Before I could ask the driver to stop and go back, Sophonie began again in broken English. “Jim-mie! We need to tok about de a-dope-shun.” For the next half hour, we were lost in African sing-song feeling hopelessly out of place. Everything was so foreign. We had just been whisked away into the Rwandan night by men we had never met before. I had no clue where we were going and could only pray we’d eventually find the rest of our group. Carrie and I held hands and looked out the car windows as Sophonie tried to explain the importance of a sundry of documents he produced from his briefcase. With no air conditioning in the car, we rode with the windows down and the noises, sites, and smells of Africa pouring in.

The stark darkness again became obvious as we drove. There were no streetlights; only the glow of headlights and the occasional dim flickering of murkily lit local businesses that passed by as we drove. Despite the darkness, the sidewalks were filled with a constant wall of pedestrians going in every direction. Some were walking in pairs having conversations, some were carrying things on their heads, some pushing carts, and others just sauntered along.

In one of Sophonie’s rare breaks to look for specific documents in his briefcase, I asked the interpreter, “Where is everyone going?”

He simply said, “They’re walking.”

To this day, despite repeated trips to Rwanda, I have never gotten a better explanation than that.

Without any sense of how we got there, we eventually arrived safely at our hotel, feeling stickier and grungier than we have ever felt in our lives. We talked a little more with Sophonie in the lobby, where we sat at a table in the corner of the room. We signed some documents, and then, finally, the rest of our group came in the front door with Pastor Willy and the remainder of his entourage.

Carrie and I counted heads and breathed a sigh of relief. Everyone was there. One of the Rwandans who met us at the airport started checking everyone in as we finished things up with Sophonie. When the lobby finally cleared, we said our good-byes and headed to our rooms, luggage in tow.

I travel often in the US and love to keep my hotel room cold. Cranking down the thermostat is a ritual of sorts that I perform upon entering any hotel room. As we closed the door

behind us and looked around, it was obvious that my air-conditioning ritual was impossible here. There was no air conditioning. Instead, the windows were thrown completely open. I pulled back the curtains, but there wasn't even a breeze to reward my efforts. The air hung heavy and dank as I stuck my face out into the night. Though I was exhausted, I wondered how I was going to be able to sleep with no relief from the heat.

After a bit of unpacking, Carrie and I crawled into the bed. It only took a moment for me to realize that sleeping in the heat was going to be even more difficult than I had first imagined. As we pulled back the duvet and two blankets that were on the bed, we realized that the sheets were flannel. I wasn't sure why they would even sell flannel sheets in this climate, but someone did and our hotel had bought them. I knew this was going to be a long, hot night.

* * * * *

"Have you been to the Genocide Memorial yet?" the breakfast attendant asked the next morning. We were gathering in the dining room of the hotel waiting for the rest of our group to materialize so we could begin our first full day in Rwanda.

We had been in Rwanda for less than twenty-four hours and I had already lost track of how many times we had been asked that question. It seemed to be the first thing anyone asked after finding out it was our first time in the country.

"No," I admitted again, "but we will visit it as soon as we can." We had little else scheduled for the day, anyway, and I figured it was as good a place as any to help us settle in and adjust to being half a world away from home.

We discussed the day ahead with our group as we ate breakfast. Then a taxi van arrived along with one of Pastor Willy's workers who was assigned to be our guide. We were soon on our way to the memorial. Hardly anyone spoke as we stared out the windows seeing Kigali and the Rwandan hills for the first time in daylight.

About a week or so before we flew out of Denver for Kigali, we'd had the college group gather at our house to watch *Hotel Rwanda* starring Don Cheadle. It told the story of hotel manager, Paul Rusesabagina, at the *Hotel des Mille Collines*, which sits just outside of downtown Kigali, not far from the hotel where we were staying. *Mille collines* is French for a "thousand hills." We were soon to learn that even though the film told a horrific story, the reality had, in fact, been much worse.

As we entered the memorial, it initially felt a little like any other museum. The first section included a history of Rwanda starting with the German colonization in the late 1800s. Prior to colonization, all of the tribes of Rwanda had lived together with relative civility. However, relationships began to deteriorate quickly in the late 19th century with the arrival of German colonists. Germany eventually lost the Rwandan territory to the Belgians as part of the treaties ending World War I—and the Belgians started colonizing it in earnest around 1926.

Unlike most countries in Africa, Rwanda had not been greatly affected by slavers in the 1800s because of its central location and its difficult terrain. Nor was it an area divided into different tribes with different languages, as were most other African territories that the Europeans arbitrarily carved up and called nations. Many colonial powers had been able to use tribalism to prey on existing prejudices and set faction against faction to keep the Africans fighting each other so they could do as they liked. In Rwanda, this was more difficult because the Hutus and Tutsis had lived peacefully side-by-side for centuries. The two tribes intermarried freely and shared many parts of their cultures, including folklore and dance.

According to the displays, following the examples of other European nations, the colonists decided they needed to increase the divide between Rwandans in order to maintain control. This would prove to be a difficult task when many Rwandans were not even aware of their actual lineage. The Belgians would resort to eugenics to help increase the divide between Hutu and Tutsis. Eugenics was quite popular at the time (i.e. Nazi Germany) and would use genetic traits in an attempt to determine racial superiority. The Belgians used skull measurements, greater height, and lighter skin tones to make their case for Tutsi superiority over the Hutus. They argued that these factors proved a closer link to European ancestry.

If the above factors were not enough to determine tribal affiliation and assignment, the Belgians would then assign a tribe based on the width of noses or the number of cows owned (the Tutsis, like the Masai in Kenya, were known as cattle herders). An early video played on repeat showed Belgians measuring noses and sorting Rwandans into different lines. I couldn't help but stare at it and feel sick to my stomach.

Along with the Hutus and the Tutsis, Rwanda is also home to a third group, the Twa, who most outsiders refer to as the Pygmies. Being less than one percent of the population and very, very poor, the colonists never really saw them as much to be bothered with. They lived in remote areas and remained mostly out of sight.

Once a tribal link was determined, the Belgians then took another step to divide the Rwandans. They required an increase in coffee production. They required poor farmers—who were, for the most part, Hutus—to grow coffee on their land. Refusing to obey this directive could carry a death sentence in the Rwandan courts. Since the Tutsis were given most of the government positions and ran the courts, each death sentence fed tribal strife. Roughly sixty years of such colonization—from the late 1800s into the late 1950s—would prove ample time for great seeds of resentment to blossom into outright hatred.

The colonial manipulation created enough friction between the Hutu and Tutsi that it hampered Rwanda's push for independence. Eventually it still came on July 1, 1962, but that was roughly two years after most of its neighbors. By this time, Belgium and the United Nations had shifted the power in the local and national government back into the hands of the Hutu majority. Rather than forgetting the past, however, there was still a lingering distaste in Hutu mouths for having once been “controlled” by the Tutsis.

This shift in power had come with the “Hutu Rebellion” that had taken place in late 1959 and ended in January of 1960. This had caused violence and ill will between the groups that saw roughly 336,000 Tutsis seek refuge in surrounding nations between 1959 and 1964.

Rather than burying the hatchet after independence, the controlling Parmehutu (Hutu) Party held a lingering grudge. Much like the National Socialists did in Germany in the 1930s with the Jews, the Hutu leaders felt having a people group to scapegoat for their ills served their political purposes. The problem is that you can't keep hatred and racism boiling for years and not see disastrous results.

Over the next three decades, Tutsi organizations like the Rwandese Patriotic Front (RPF) formed among the refugees and went from requesting the right of return to their homeland to demanding it. These demands were continually rebuffed by the Hutu leadership, who were at that time firmly in control of the Rwandan government. Not being heard as they wanted to be, the RPF eventually took matters into their own hands. Under the leadership of General Paul Kagame (who is the president of Rwanda today), they took control of the northern town of Ruhengeri near the Ugandan border and tried to demand repatriation through military force.

Again the Hutu leaders refused reconciliation and instead, far beyond reason, responded with a madness that was likely beginning even before Kagame's forces entered Northern

Rwanda. A “final solution” was proposed—if there were no Tutsis in Rwanda for the refugee Tutsis to return to, the refugees would be forced to give up their claims and accept their exile.

It all seemed outlandish and impossible, but there were the facts and the events spelled out in display after display. The Hutu-controlled Rwandan government systematically armed and trained its civilians to wage war with machetes, farm equipment, and anything they could get their hands on. Lists of Tutsis were created for each neighborhood and given to local squad leaders to be monitored and kept track of. These squads would become known as the *interahamwe*—“those who attack together.”

Years of subversive, anti-Tutsi propaganda was delivered daily over the government-controlled radio station interspersed with Africa’s best music and entertainment. With no other form of media entertainment or news, Rwandan National Radio was perpetually on in most shops and homes. These practices grew more and more outlandish in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Then, at about 8:30 PM on April 6, 1994, the aircraft of President Juvenal Habyarimana—the member of the Parmehutu Party who had signed the Arusha Peace Accords on August 4, 1993 with Kigame’s RPF to initiate a ceasefire—was hit by two ground-to-air missiles as it approached Kigali’s international airport. Though the perpetrators were never caught, Rwandan National Radio immediately blamed the RPF for the attack and the signal was given to eradicate any RPF-sympathizers from Rwandan soil. That meant it became the responsibility of every loyal Hutu to execute anyone who was Tutsi, anyone married to a Tutsi, anyone who protected Tutsis, and eventually, anyone who refused to murder a Tutsi along with the rest of a mob. In the next ninety-some days, somewhere between 800,000 and 1,117,000 were brutally and ruthlessly massacred by people who had formerly been their next-door neighbors.

I pale even now to write the stories I read on the walls that day. Most were killed with machetes—literally hacked to death. Some even begged and offered money to pay for the bullets to be shot instead. Hutu husbands were forced to kill their wives and children with the promise they would be spared, and then were slashed to death themselves. Women had their infants shot while holding them in their arms and were raped as they watched their children massacred. Pregnant women were cut open and had to watch their unborn babies murdered before their eyes and then were left to bleed to death.

People were slaughtered wholesale in church buildings. Two nuns were eventually sentenced for “crimes against humanity” for setting fire to the church building where they had just lead people for sanctuary. One pastor promised safety to 5,000 parishioners, then barred the doors of the church once they were inside, and stood back to watch as bulldozers leveled it. Others turned their congregation—who had flocked to their churches to seek refuge and pray for deliverance—over to the *interahamwe* in order to save themselves.

Amidst the tragedies, there were also incredible stories of heroism. Gahiga Nsengiyumva took one man into his yard and stood to face off the *interhamwe*, telling them to go away. For some reason, they complied. When asked why he had done this, he said, “The Koran says, ‘If you save one life it is like saving the whole world.’” The man he saved commented that that was a Jewish text as well. Nsengiyumva ended up saving thirty people by hiding them in his outhouse.

Swulyi Karembi, a seventy-year-old woman many thought was possessed with evil spirits used her reputation to scare people away from her land and saved seventeen Tutsis she hid in an animal shelter. Thamaze Kazingery Gasamba saved about 400 whom he took into his orphanage and smuggled out of the country with the help of the International Red Cross and Adventist Development. Some who escaped with his help he had rescued out of the mass graves they had been dumped into and left for dead. Felicite Niyitegeka used her influence as the sister of an army colonel to smuggle many across the border near Gisenya. Eventually she refused to be spared when the militia came to her house to find her with thirty refugees.

Carrie and I and those in our group walked the halls in silence reading story after story. A palpable heaviness grew over us. This had happened just a little over a decade ago. The dead were everywhere. We saw picture after horrific picture. Systematically, neighbor had killed neighbor, ticking names off of the list they’d been given weeks before Habyarimana’s plane was shot down. Many had refused to see the warning signs believing such cold-blooded violence wasn’t possible—these people were their neighbors and friends. But the killing frenzy blinded the aggressors with a bloodthirsty rage that could only be seen as demonic. There was virtually no place to hide and most died without raising a hand to fight back.

The final section of the memorial is called, “The Children of the Genocide.” It simply contained large photos of some children killed in the Genocide along with a small plaque about the child. In some instances, the cards also displayed the last words they were reported to have

spoken before they died. There was one child who had said, “Don’t worry, mommy. The United Nations will come to help us.” Of course, that never happened.

When we finally got out into the sunlight again, I breathed in deeply hoping that the fresh air would help. I was changed by what I had seen and quite glad the details of the Genocide were behind us. However, they weren’t. The children’s area of the memorial exits to a veranda. As we stood there, catching our breath and gathering our thoughts, I looked out across the valley and the skyline of Kigali was perfectly framed between the trees. I stood looking at it blankly as my mind raced.

And then we saw them. Just below the veranda, only a few steps away, was a series of mass tombs. We had seen something about these inside and knew that each one held the remains of three to four thousand people. Because of the massiveness of the slaughter, there wasn’t time to bury each person individually, so bodies were gathered and put into these enormous sepulchers. Standing in stark contrast to the sinking sun, we began to count these structures: . . . seven, eight, nine of them were visible from our vantage point.

It’s really impossible to imagine what a million dead bodies look like, or the magnitude of the chaotic bloodlust during the days of the Genocide, let alone the days after the attacks when people had to go from house to house to gather the dead. They must have been scattered like so many broken branches after a storm. It was impossible to imagine it at all, but we were beginning to get a picture of it. It made everyone in our group pensive and uneasy. I felt like Ezekiel must have looking over the valley of dry bones.

Lord, what are You building in this land? How could You have let this happen? I wondered.

At the same time, on these very bones, we knew Rwanda was building what was quickly coming to be one of the most rapidly developing nations in Africa. I had to wonder if these horrors hadn’t in some way opened the doors to this new Rwanda in a similar way to how the Holocaust had opened the eyes of the world to the Jewish refugees of World War II—and made repatriating Israel a possibility.

There was much more to Rwanda than had initially met our eyes. Perhaps that is why the Rwandans were so eager for us to see the memorial. It is hard to really understand what they

were currently building without understanding how low they had sunk. I couldn't say that I understood it yet, but I was getting an inkling—and I wanted to see more.

[NOTE: This chapter will continue and discuss more of the first trip to Rwanda—we may need to insert another chapter before we get to “The Birth of a Promise” since we still need to talk about the first trip to the orphanage, the first visit to Hotel des Mille Collines, going to the Rwandan courthouse for the adoption hearing, and the other key events of the first trip. We'll have to see how each section plays out. I think it is likely we will end with more than fifteen chapters rather than just twelve.]

Chapter Three

The Birth of a Promise

Education is the most powerful weapon, which you can use to change the world.

Nelson Mandela

What happened to the kids I grew up with, daddy?

The question posed itself as I watched the children playing together in the red-dirt courtyard outside of the Ngondo Orphanage. My eyes kept returning to the two-and-a-half year old who would soon become my and Carrie's adopted son—but as they alighted on him, that question tugged at me from a future conversation I knew would one day take place.

It came to me as a rush of foresight. In some not-so-distant future, River and I would be sitting in the house, looking through pictures—or out somewhere together when we caught the smoky smell of a wood fire—and memories of his early childhood in Africa would come rushing back to him. As distant memories of Rwanda's rolling hills and the faces of his childhood friends came to him, he would wonder why we chose him out of all the children who needed a family.

After wondering why he was so blessed to have been spared from growing up as an orphan in extreme poverty, I knew he would ponder the fate of those who had been with him during his earliest years. I knew he would ask the question now echoing in my mind: *Daddy, what happened to my friends who got left behind?*

A lump formed in my throat, but at the same time a resolve began to form in my heart. This wasn't a question where "I don't know" would be acceptable. If this boy were truly going to be my son, I would have to be able to look him in the eye and have a better answer than "I don't know." I wanted to have an answer. I wanted to be able to tell him we did everything we could to help his earliest friends survive and succeed, even if we couldn't take them all with us back to the US.

The American, anything-is-possible, entrepreneurial gears of my mind began to turn as I considered the question. "Pastor Emmanuel," I wondered out loud to the orphanage director who stood next to me, "what is the greatest need here?"

After the words were out of my mouth, the lump in my throat grew larger. What was I doing? Had I just opened myself up to promise the moon?

I expected him to stroke his chin for a minute, try to size up what I was worth and how much he could reasonably ask for. All Americans are rich, after all, right? I mean our streets are paved—an extravagant luxury in the mind of most Africans—every home has electricity, and no one goes hungry, right? How much could he ask for and reasonably expect to get? In his place, I would have seen the digits spinning like the reels of a slot machine.

But that was not what he did. He didn't miss a beat. He answered simply and directly: "School fees."

"Oh," I said, struck a little shameful at my thoughts of being taken advantage of after the simplicity of his answer. *School fees?* I wondered. *I thought they had public education.* "What is a school fee?" I blurted out.

"Look at the children," he said, ignoring what I asked to answer my real question. "They have clothes on their backs—they may not be great clothes, but they have clothes. They are not starving to death. They live well enough, but if they do not have education, what will they have when they leave here? They may walk outside of our fences and leave our grounds, but they will never leave being poor. Without education, they will never be anything more than beggars, thieves, or common laborers."

The depth of his answer cut me to the quick. "Well," I stumbled, "how much is a school fee?"

He gave me an amount in Rwandan Francs. I quickly tried to covert the number to dollars, but it didn't seem right. "For a day?" I asked.

"No, for a month."

"But then books and uniforms are extra, right?"

"No, that is for everything but their notebooks, something to write with, and their personal supplies."

That can't be right, I thought. *I need to ask someone else.* I decided to table the discussion and do a little more research.

When we got back to the hotel, I got on my laptop and ran the numbers. *That can't be right*, I thought again. I made a couple of calls to check with some other contacts, and the numbers they gave were pretty much the same. I calculated it again, and then sat back and looked at the calculator on my computer. The little screen read, "\$1.93."

That meant, according to my calculations, we could send an orphan to school *for \$1.93 a week*. That was only about \$200 *for the entire year*. I couldn't believe it. For \$200, we could send a child to school with all the books and uniforms he or she would need for a year.

Are these kids going to stay in poverty for the lack of \$1.93 a week? I thought. *I spend more than that on coffee every day!*

Then and there, I made a promise—River's earliest friends at the orphanage would not be kept out of school for the sake of a simple \$1.93 a week, even if Carrie and I had to pay for it ourselves. That was the moment when River's Promise was born.