How one young woman lost her family, survived a war, escaped two continents, and through the kindness of strangers found a lifelong home in Atlanta.

“You have thousands of angels around you.”

by Paige Williams

photography by Kevin Garrett
“Oui.”
“Do you have any questions?”
“No.”
“Are you willing to answer my questions at this time?”
“Yes.”
“Do you swear and affirm that all the statements you are about to make are true and complete?”
“Yes.”
“The time would soon come and go to board Flight 3468.
“What is your full and correct name?”
“Siyomova, Cynthia.”
“What is your date and place of birth?”
“September 29, 1983, Kayanza, Burundi.”
“No.”
“Have you ever been arrested or convicted of a crime anywhere in the world?”
“No.”
“Have you ever been in prison in any country in the world?”
“No.”
“How long were you planning on staying in Canada?”
“I was going to ask for asylum in Canada.”
“Do you have any family in Canada?”
“No.”
“No.”
“Where is your mother and father at the moment?”
“No.”
“They are deceased.”
“Where is your brother, sister or other relative?”
“I have no other family.”
“No.”
“Do you have any questions?”
“No.”
“Do you have a fear of returning to your home country?”
“No.”
“Will you be harmed if you are returned to your home country?”
“No.”
“Do you have anything to add to this statement?”
“I would just like for the United States to take care of me.”
“I need everything, they said. Cynthia’s wrist felt strange now, bare. She had not taken her bracelets off since the day her brother, Franck, gave them to her. They were made of tiny blue string beads and she wore them as a pair on her left wrist. She could not remember exactly when or why Franck gave her the bracelets or even whether he gave them to her before or after their parents died. At the time, the bracelets had meant little to her, but they meant quite a bit to her now that she had nothing from home—not a photograph, letter, or keepsake, no evidence that she or her family even existed. As she had grown older and taller, the bracelets tightened on her wrist. It would take a contortionist feat to get them off, and she begged the jailer not to make her do it. But Cynthia was an official U.S. Alien now and those were the rules. One bracelet broke. The other they bagged with the rest of her personal effects. Nearly starving had been hard, running had, too, and seeing so much death. But in some ways this felt even worse, being stripped and searched and locked in a cell.

After three days the door opened and they put her on a plane and flew her south, away from any possibility of Canada and who, or what, might have been waiting for her there. Another contortionist feat and she got her remaining bracelet back on as she moved once again into the unknown.

Grace Uwimfura
Cynthia Siyomova

PART 1

She got off the plane from Paris with nothing more than a couple of small bags. The bags had been packed for days as she waited for Eddie, a stranger who had approached her out of nowhere to say he knew all about her problems and could help. For $35, Eddie had given her a passport in the name of Marie-Therese Ekeva, age twenty-four, from Verviers, Belgium. This young woman, however, was seventeen, and her journey had not started in Paris, and she had never been to Belgium. It was just before five in the afternoon. Detroit, September 4, 2001.

The airport agent looked at the passport and asked her to state her business. She spoke very little English and did not understand.

Français?

Oui. She wore her long hair in braids and had on a T-shirt and pants. She stood five-foot-ten and carried her slender height gracefully, almost gliding. Despite the long flight, she had not slept but rather spent the transatlantic journey in conversation with herself: Where am I going? What am I doing? Have I done the right thing?

In an office, an agent asked questions in English and a translator repeated them in French.

Why are you going to Canada?

For my brother’s wedding, she answered. Her Northwest Airlines ticket showed Montreal as the final destination. The flight would depart at ten...

Where are you from? Where do you live?

She gave an address in Brussels, telling the agents she had lived there eleven years and was a Belgian citizen. I was born in Cameroon but went to Belgium to live with my parents, she explained. They are dead now. I live with my boyfriend. He is a student. Prove you’re Belgian. You don’t have other identification?

I lost my bag in Paris, she said.

What is your brother’s phone number in Montreal?

We’ll call him.

Yes.

The airport agent looked at the passport and asked her to state her business. She spoke very little English and did not understand.

Français?

Oui.

Her business. She spoke very little English and did not understand.

The translator said: “Look, we’ve tested your passport and we proved you’re Belgian. You don’t have other identification?

They are dead now. I live with my boyfriend. He is a student.

Cameroon but went to Belgium to live with my parents, she explained.

She could not remember exactly when or why Franck gave her the bracelets or even whether he gave them to her before or after their parents died. At the time, the bracelets had meant little to her, but they meant quite a bit to her now that she had nothing from home—not a photograph, letter, or keepsake, no evidence that she or her family even existed. As she had grown older and taller, the bracelets tightened on her wrist. It would take a contortionist feat to get them off, and she begged the jailer not to make her do it. But Cynthia was an official U.S. Alien now and those were the rules. One bracelet broke. The other they bagged with the rest of her personal effects. Nearly starving had been hard, running had, too, and seeing so much death. But in some ways this felt even worse, being stripped and searched and locked in a cell.

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From Hartsfield International Airport, they drove her down past Fayetteville, past Peachtree City, to the Georgia Baptist Children’s Home in Meansville. A country town, population 1,054. A home full of other children in her situation—unaccompanied, undocumented—but from Honduras, Guatemala, and Mexico, as well as China, some trafficked to work illegally in the garment industry or as sex slaves. An official in Detroit had wondered whether the fellow Eddie, whom eventually they had learned about, hadn’t been planning something similar for Cynthia. “You’re lucky we got you,” one of the INS people had told her.

Set on 300 acres, the home looked like a college campus or some kind of summer camp and certainly like no refugee camp Cynthia had ever seen: tidy residential cottages, a school, a gymnasmium, a chapel, ball fields, ponds. No one spoke her language, but she understood everyone’s tone and gestures that they meant her no harm. Every morning before class, they gathered to worship and sing. Obviously these were people who believed in God. For the moment, she was safe. The world, increasingly less so. Sev- eral days later, as she watched the events of 9/11 unfold on television, Cynthia stared at the falling and burning buildings and the parade of stunned faces, wondering what to make of this nation’s grief.

In her West Peachtree Street law office, Sue Colussy, director of immigration services at Catholic Social Services, got a phone call from an Atlanta-based INS agent named Irene Holth. “I’ve got this kid who’s about to age out,” Holth told Colussy, “and I don’t want her going to detention.”

Colussy quickly understood the girl’s asylum case to be unusual
Peace talks progressed but the killing continued. No one ever really felt safe, especially people like Cynthia. Among Hutus, it was dangerous to be the child of a Tutsi; among Tutsi, it was dangerous to be the child of a Hutu. She had no one and belonged nowhere.

for a couple of reasons. First, she came from Burundi. So few Burundians sought protection in the United States that the nationality had hardly registered and she just thought she had walked up to the immigration desk and, if she had time to look up from her work she might see passing heads, or daylight. She could have chosen the big money of a private practice but preferred to be here, in the world of Hail Marys and path scattered with rose petals. But no paths were scattered with rose petals in Burundi, the most densely populated country in Africa and one of the poorest, tensest places on earth.

About the size of Maryland, with 6 million inhabitants, Burundi lay wedged between Kenya and Tanzania on the west and southwestern Tanzania to the south and east, and the similarly diminutive Rwanda to the north, in the Great Lakes region. About 250,000 people lived in the capital, Bujumbura, but the second largest town had only 25,000 residents. Others lived not so much in towns or villages as on hills, on family plots where they grew their own food. Churches and schools usually stood alone in the countryside. Commercial districts, if they could be called that, and if there were any, consisted of a few houses used as government buildings or shops. Everyone spoke Kirundi, and the educated also spoke French, but most were not educated; most could not even read.

As in Rwanda, the primary ethnic groups were Hutu, tradition- ally farmers, and Tutsi, aristocratic cattle herders. The Hutu overwhelm- ingly outnumbered the Tutsi at 10 percent yet held none of the power. When the Hutu tried to gain power in 1972, the Tutsi-led army put them down with such gruesome violence—a genocide that killed as many as 1,000,000— that no one would ever forget. When a Hutu finally became president in 1993, he lasted barely 100 days. The conditions for conflict had simmered for centuries, but, Sue Colussy knew, this latest civil war had been going on since late 1993, nearly eight years of fighting there in that lush, moun- tainous nation of coffee plantations and banana groves. When it started, Cynthia Sziyomvo would have been a schoolgirl who had just turned ten. Rwanda’s genocidal horrors of April 1994 would only be a memory when she stepped off a plane in Atlanta and into the security of men, women, and children whose lives were desperate. They came to her home and taught her English. They drove her to the grocery store and taught her how to shop. They helped her find a job and took turns driving her there. They showed her the dream that life would be perfect, that everything would belong to her, her youngest children in shifts. They taught her to drive. They showed her a car. Grace enjoyed working for Colussy—who admired her style. Colussy’s office was packed but it often felt empty; she listened closely and perceiving through her rainless glasses. Sue Colussy seemed to understand that most of her clients came with nothing—no money for lawyers and no country to return to. Grace had warned Sue Colussy about what she heard—no path scattered with rose petals, or simply board a plane on faith. “Lazy people don’t walk in search of “Sister Lucy.” Hundreds of those who had survived homeland brutalities only to face Atlanta’s particularly tough immigration court would tell people, “I owe Sue Colussy my life.” Even other lawyers revolved her. “She should be sainted,” as Charles Kuck once put it. Kuck in 1990 turned his entire private practice to immigration law. He went on to become managing attorney for an immigration law firm in the Southeast, in 2007 he’s president of the American Immigration Lawyers Association. And Colussy operated at different points on the fee scale but shared reasons for choosing immigration. They enjoyed the increasingly complex puzzle of U.S. immigration law while in making High.$. When it started, Sue Colussy knew, this latest civil war had been going on since late 1993, nearly eight years of fighting there in that lush, mountainous nation of coffee plantations and banana groves. When it started, Cynthia Sziyomvo would have been a schoolgirl who had just turned ten. Rwanda’s genocidal horrors of April 1994 would only be a memory when she stepped off a plane in Atlanta and into the security of men, women, and children whose lives were desperate. They came to her home and taught her English. They drove her to the grocery store and taught her how to shop. They helped her find a job and took turns driving her there. While she worked, they babysat her kids. They found a apartment car. Grace knew some immigrants came to the United States with the dream that life would be perfect, that everything would belong to her, her youngest children in shifts. They taught her to drive. They showed her a car. Grace enjoyed working for Colussy—who admired her style. Colussy’s office was packed but it often felt empty; she listened closely and perceiving through her rainless glasses. Sue Colussy seemed to understand that most of her clients came with nothing—no money for lawyers and no country to return to. Grace had warned Sue Colussy about what she heard—no path scattered with rose petals, or simply board a plane on faith. “Lazy people don’t walk in search of “Sister Lucy.” Hundreds of those who had survived homeland brutalities only to face Atlanta’s particularly tough immigration court would tell people, “I owe Sue Colussy my life.” Even other lawyers revolved her. “She should be sainted,” as Charles Kuck once put it. Kuck in 1990 turned his entire private practice to immigration law. He went on to become managing attorney for an immigration law firm in the Southeast, in 2007 he’s president of the American Immigration Lawyers Association. And Colussy operated at different points on the fee scale but shared reasons for choosing immigration. They enjoyed the increasingly complex puzzle of U.S. immigration law while in making High.$.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 168
that her, parroted her. If she prepared them with courage and forgiveness, then the world could use them. With Americans, the genocide was almost impossible to discuss. If you have not been through war, you cannot understand war. War is like a tornado. One moment you have your life and the next everything explodes. When war starts, you cannot sit down at a computer and type something in and say, “Okay the war has started now, let me see where I can help.” You don’t even have time to pack. You just grab your children and run to the next place you think will be safe. You hope to keep your mind. In war, the mind comes first, then danger. She is by herself—no family. She does not know what is going on, what is going to happen.”

As Colussy got to work on Cynthia’s asylum application, Catholic Social Services e-mailed hundreds of contacts, looking for a sponsor. “If they don’t find someone soon,” Grace told herself, “I will talk to my priest and we will save her life before she turns eighteen.” At home in Lawrenceville, she gathered her large family and said, “We have to pray.”

Grace never put the topic of their difficult past off limits but chose not to dwell on it. Wars between Hutus and Tutsi—so ridiculous. Were they all not black? Did they not eat the same food and speak the same language? If you are born into a family where a Hutu and a Tutsi married, how can you differentiate? One is your mother, one is your father. You love your mother, you love your father.

And what would it do to talk about those who had murdered her husband? To be angry all the time? What could she do about it, get a gun and go kill . . . whom? She would not even know where to start. As a child, Reid would come home to find the house filled with the conversation of Brits, Belgians, Italians. Her father stoked her intellectual curiosity as much as her teachers did. If Reid hadn’t read the daily newspaper, she was not allowed to sit at the dinner table with the grown-ups. If she asked a question about something, her father would supplement his answer by buying Reid a book about it and expecting her to read it. Her father was a man hungry to know the world, a man at home in the world; Reid shared that attitude and wanted her children to have it, too.

A devout member of the Cathedral of St. Philip in Buckhead, she also believed—strongly—in the Episcopal Church’s tenet that its members had a responsibility to participate in missions of justice, compassion, and reconciliation in the world, that everyone must play a part. As she sat staring at her computer, an e-mail appeared from a friend at Saint Philip, a man Reid knew volunteered at Catholic Social Services.

“Reid,” the note said, “you speak French, don’t you?”

Reid herself, a native Alabaman, came from such a family. Her father, an IBM executive, moved the family all over the country. No matter where they lived, the Prestons maintained an open-house policy. If business contacts came from overseas, Reid’s parents insisted on putting them up. As a child, Reid would come home to find the house filled with the con-
h my God, she’s Sara’s age,” Reid thought as she read the e-mail about Cynthia.

She picked up the phone and called Donna Dunson, head of upper school at Atlanta International School, and asked, “What can we do?” Dunson went to AIS admissions director Aliren Williams, who offered to bring Cynthia into AIS on full scholarship.

Driving home, Reid thought, “Okay the scholarship is a huge help, but who’s going to sponsor her?” Then, sitting at a red light, she just started laughing. The clarity of the moment struck her.

The Mizells had room in their home. Most of them spoke French. Of all the schools in metro Atlanta, the Mizells had helped start the one that would best serve someone like Cynthia. Sara was her age—they could be international problems, given all that she had been through! What had she been through? And say she had coped well, as some war survivors miraculously did, wouldn’t she be terribly behind in school? AIS students there were learning to speak English, but Cynthia had been educated in the refugee camps of wartime Africa, and sporadically at that.

“If we do this, the burden will be on you,” Reid told Sara, who was only weeks into her senior year. “You’re her age. You’re going to have to go to school with her every day. This is going to intrude on your life the most on a day-to-day basis.”

“I understand that,” Sara said. “Let’s meet her,” Reid said. “If you feel you don’t want to do it, no judgment. We’ll just say no.”

Reid and Sara drove to Meansville on September 28, twenty-four days after Cynthia arrived in the United States and one day before her eighteenth birthday. When the INS agent introduced Cynthia to the Mizells, Cynthia began crying, and then Reid began crying, and then the INS agent began crying, and then Sara rolled her eyes and took Cynthia by the hand.

“Bonjour, on va parler,” she said. Come on, let’s go talk.

Sitting on a garden bench, Sara explained in French all about her family and their house and her school—that many students were learning to speak English and that Cynthia could, too. Merci, Cynthia kept saying, et je ne crois pas—I can’t believe it. When they walked back over to Reid and the agent, Sara whispered to her mother, “Let’s do this.”

Reid looked at the agent and said, “Okay.”

One word and everything changed. Let’s do this.

Was it more than one word? Look, I’ve got this kid . . .

Reid, you speak French, don’t you? Let’s do this.

Okay.

The e-mail from Catholic Social Services had gone out to hundreds who had forwarded it to hundreds, and out of the silence one responded, like an answer to an SOS.

Day after day, Grace had signed onto her e-mail at work, hoping for good news about Cynthia. With one day left on the ticking clock, a colleague stopped by her cubicle and grinned: “Have you opened your e-mail yet?”

“No!”

“Yes!”

The staff and residents of the children’s home celebrated Cynthia’s birthday a day early with a cake and gifts. Cynthia had never had a birthday cake before. The next day, when she arrived in Buckhead, the Mizells were waiting with a birthday cake of their own.

PART 2

Here is your room, here is your bathroom, here is your closet.

The house was modern, multistoried, airy as a lodge, with a stone fireplace and leather sofas and broad windows overlooking a deeply wooded lot that glowed a thousand shades of green.

Here in the newspaper, the stereo, the television. Here is Baxter the cat. Here is the kitchen—please eat a lot. Here is your house key.

Cynthia’s room lay at the top of a short flight of steps. It held a brass bed with fresh linens, and a desk. The picture windows faced the lush, peaceful leafiness of the forested yard. With the blinds open it was like living in a tree house.

They showed her where to put her things and invited her to their table. As she sat quietly and took it all in, they cooked for her and talked to her and went about their gregarious Mizell ways. On this day eighteen years ago Cynthia had been born in Kayanza, Burundi, up in the mountainous north, near Rwanda; born into a family of two parents and an older brother: Paul, Marie, Fraunc—gone now, all. And here she was in Buckhead, Atlanta, Georgia, United States, North America, 7,700 miles from where she started, with a family and an entirely new world. Cynthia had gone out to hundreds who had forwarded it to hundreds, and out of the silence one responded, like an answer to an SOS.

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had left an impoverished country of 6 million for a superpower of 278 million. In Burundi, her life expectancy would have topped out at age forty-seven; by coming to America, she effectively doubled it. She had left a country where only 35 percent of the population could read for one where 97 percent could. Burundians had 24,000 radios; Americans had 575 million. The United States had nearly 15,000 airports; Burundi had four. She had left a country where a conversation with the wrong person could get her killed for a place where absolute strangers were going to all ends to help her.

In ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages), Shanta Kalyanasundaram’s students happened to be studying human rights. Kalyanasundaram wondered whether she should change the subject matter for Cynthia’s benefit but decided against it. For days, they discussed child soldiers, Amnesty International, the meaning of life, the concept of man’s inhumanity to man, Cynthia riveted. She also showed a particular interest in natural disasters—earthquakes, volcanic eruptions. When Kalyanasundaram commented on the instability of Earth during a discussion on tectonic plates, Cynthia looked up from her textbook as if in alarm and Kalyanasundaram thought, “Oh no, have I said something wrong?” She reminded Kalyanasundaram, who is South African–Indian, of other African students she had known—resilient, determined. The Mozambique children she had known had walked through land mines to save themselves, and lost limbs, yet were the most positive, productive people she knew. “They work and work and work,” Kalyanasundaram commented on the instability of Earth during a discussion on tectonic plates, Cynthia looked up from her textbook as if in alarm and Kalyanasundaram thought, “Oh no, have I said something wrong?” She reminded Kalyanasundaram, who is South African–Indian, of other African students she had known—resilient, determined. The Mozambique children she had known had walked through land mines to save themselves, and lost limbs, yet were the most positive, productive people she knew. “They work and work and work,” Kalyanasundaram commented on the instability of Earth during a discussion on tectonic plates, Cynthia looked up from her textbook as if in alarm and Kalyanasundaram thought, “Oh no, have I said something wrong?” She reminded Kalyanasundaram, who is South African–Indian, of other African students she had known—resilient, determined. The Mozambique children she had known had walked through land mines to save themselves, and lost limbs, yet were the most positive, productive people she knew. “They work and work and work,” Kalyanasundaram thought. Cynthia proved herself no different. She needed none of the usual reminders and constant affirmation. “Her whole aim in life is to get on with it.” Kalyanasundaram thought. “To move on.”

At home, as the weeks passed, Cynthia answered politely when spoken to but volunteered nothing more. She seldom made eye contact. She moved through her budding world as if on untested ice. “She knows what it’s like to have everything taken from her,” Reid thought. If Cynthia had any scars, she needed none of the usual reminders and constant affirmation. “Her whole aim in life is to get on with it.” Kalyanasundaram thought. “To move on.”

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"You have to build up faith in your mind," Grace told Cynthia. "This family did not just come up from air. God was working. People picked up the phone, people made decisions. You have thousands of angels around you." The Mizells refused to treat Cynthia as a refugee who came without religious faith, it’s going to be hard.” Grace and Sue Colussy both had found this to be true. Refugees who came without religious faith, it’s going to be hard.” Grace and Sue Colussy both had found this to be true. Refugees who came without religious faith, it’s going to be hard.” Grace and Sue Colussy both had found this to be true. Refugees who came without religious faith, it’s going to be hard.” Grace and Sue Colussy both had found this to be true. Refugees who came without religious faith, it’s going to be hard.” Grace and Sue Colussy both had found this to be true. Refugees who came without religious faith, it’s going to be hard.” Grace and Sue Colussy both had found this to be true. Refugees who came without religious faith, it’s going to be hard.” Grace and Sue Colussy both had found this to be true. Refugees who came without religious faith, it’s going to be hard.” Grace and Sue Colussy both had found this to be true. Refugees who came without religious faith, it’s going to be hard.” Grace and Sue Colussy both had found this to be true. Refugees who came without religious faith, it’s going to be hard.” Grace and Sue Colussy both had found this to be true. Refugees who came without religious faith, it’s going to be hard.” Grace and Sue Colussy both had found this to be true. Refugees who came without religious faith, it’s going to be hard.” Grace and Sue Colussy both had found this to be true. Refugees who came without religious faith, it’s going to be hard.” Grace and Sue Colussy both had found this to be true. Refugees who came without religious faith, it’s going to be hard.” Grace and Sue Colussy both had found this to be true. Refugees who came without religious faith, it’s going to be hard.” Grace and Sue Colussy both had found this to be true. Refugees who came without religious faith, it’s going to be hard.” Grace and Sue Colussy both had found this to be true. Refugees who came without religious faith, it’s going to be hard.” Grace and Sue Colussy both had found this to be true. Refugees who came without religious faith, it’s going to be hard.” Grace and Sue Colussy both had found this to be true. Refugees who came without religious faith, it’s going to be hard.” Grace and Sue Colussy both had found this to be true. Refugees who came without religious faith, it’s going to be hard.” Grace and Sue Colussy both had found this to be true. Refugees who came without religious faith, it’s going to be hard.” Grace and Sue Colussy both had found this to be true. Refugees who came without religious faith, it’s going to be hard.” Grace and Sue Colussy both had found this to be true. Refugees who came without religious faith, it’s going to be hard.” Grace and Sue Colussy both had found this to be true. Refugees who came without religious faith, it’s going to be hard.” Grace and Sue Colussy both had found this to be true. Refugees who came without religious faith, it’s going to be hard.” Grace and Sue Colussy both had found this to be true.
reading in French. When she had court dates or appointments with Sue Colussy, Robert was usually the one who took her. He talked to her about everything, in English, whether she understood it or not. His animated monologues covered Buckhead, Eminem, Star Trek, the political significance of some ratty leather chair he found on the curb, and whatever other random bits of knowledge he felt she needed to know. The more confused Cynthia looked, the louder Robert talked. Sometimes Sara or Reid translated, but most of the time they let Robert and Cynthia find their way. Reid thought, “Every girl needs a father.”

Cynthia began taping snapshots of the Mizells, even the grandparents, to the door and window frames in her room. If someone cut up a photo for a scrapbook, Cynthia kept the castoffs. If someone gave her a gift, she kept even the box. The Mizells rarely wanted the little LEGO-like toys that came in cereal boxes, but Cynthia wanted them. She assembled the toys and lined them up for display in her room. She kept the “graduation” certificate the children’s home had given her upon her departure, along with a sheet of notebook paper on which she’d penciled a prayer she heard the other children reciting: “Thank you, Lord, for the good things you did for us today. We need your help for our problems…”

It was spring before anyone heard her laugh. Only then did Reid think, “She’s going to be okay.”

No one would remember quite when this happened, or why, but Cynthia began calling Sara and Callie her sisters, and Jackson her brother, and introducing Reid and Robert as her mom and dad. Grace she called Auntie. Only occasionally did anyone try to draw Cynthia out about her past. If Reid asked, “What kind of Burundian food did you eat?” Cynthia would say, “I prefer American food.” Yet at Christmas, as the Mizells put up their North Carolina fir, Cynthia leaned into the fragrant branches and inhaled. “It smells like Burundi in the morning,” she said.

Even Grace had never asked Cynthia about home. And Cynthia never asked Grace about Rwanda. They knew each other’s souls without knowing each other’s stories. The only ones who needed to know Cynthia’s story were Sue Colussy and the government. Colussy hoped Cynthia’s chances for asylum were better than most, given the tens of thousands dead in Burundi, but with the shock of 9/11 giving way to stricter laws and procedures under the newly created Department of Homeland Security, no one’s security was guaranteed. For all her good fortune in finding Sue Colussy and the Mizells, Cynthia had walked into something of a snare by landing in Atlanta.

William Cassidy and Mackenzie East, the region’s immigration judges, denied asylum 88 percent of the time, well above the national average of 62 percent. Cassidy was the tougher of the two. From the mid-nineties to 2000, only three judges in the country had denied asylum more often than Cassidy. East ranked twenty-first. A former assistant state attorney in Florida, he had been an immigration judge for eleven years. Between 1994 and 1999, he had granted asylum in only fifty-five out of 370 cases. Yet if you wanted a shot at asylum in Atlanta, you hoped for East.

Judges base a big part of their decision on instinct. Everyone knew the first rule of immigration law: Clients lie. Sue Colussy always told her clients straight away: “You lie to me, I’m gone. And in the extremely rare event that a client did lie, Colussy kept her word and walked right out the door. She trusted her gut the way judges had to trust theirs when applicants came before them with only their word, which made for disparity among the courts and left little room for predicting which way a case would go. It all depended on the story.

**PART 3**

October 21, 1993

he president of Burundi went to bed with his cell phone on. The palace occupied vast grounds surrounded by a high wall at the intersection of two broad avenues in Bujumbura. To the north lay the Hotel Meridien, to the west, a golf course. Army soldiers guarded the palace and lived in military camps a few miles away, across the Muha River. President Melchior Ndadaye, a forty-year-old ex-banker and the first Hutu president in history, had been in office since June. Barely a month after he assumed the presidency, Army officers had attempted a coup that was quickly put down. Now, coup rumors were circulating again. The country was uneasy.
The coup has started, a high-ranking official told him. “Il faut sortir,” he said—you must leave. Ndadaye rose and quickly dressed. Paratroopers from the Second Parachute Battalion had surrounded the palace. Gunfire and cannon blasts could be heard throughout the city. By now, the army had closed the borders, cut the phone lines. By seven in the morning, the president, his wife, and their children had been taken to an army base, where soldiers surrounded the car and forced the Ndadaye family out. “Tell me what you want, we can negotiate,” the president told the soldiers in Kirundi. “But above all, do not spill blood. Think of your country. Think of your families.”

As it became clear that the president was in trouble, Hutus across the country began executing. The Hutu should stop having mercy on the Tutsi. The people waged war with stones, spears, clubs, hammers, bayonets, bows and arrows. The soldiers used guns.

North of the capital, in the province of Bubanza, Cynthia Siyomvo sat watching nighttime television with her family. The country had one television station. It broadcast from four in the afternoon to eleven at night, and the Siyomvos watched together. They got the news in Kirundi, the news in French, and old music videos from the United States—Janet Jackson, Michael Jackson. They also got movies and, on Tuesday nights, an NBA game days or weeks old. Cynthia especially loved the basketball games. Her father, Paul, called her “Jordan,” as in Michael. If girls played soccer, she would have joined in. Instead she tailed her brother Franck to his matches, where his friends teased, “Why you always get to bring your little sister?”

They lived better than most Burundians, in a small but nice brick house with three bedrooms and one bath, and a car. Paul Siyomvo worked as a liquor distributor; deliveries kept him on the road a couple of days a week. Like most Burundians, Marie grew their own food in their vast backyard. Their neighbors lived in similar homes within walking distance. Families knew each other. The children walked together to school.

Paul Siyomvo was Hutu. Marie was Tutsi. According to custom, their marriage made Cynthia Hutu and Franck Tutsi. But the Siyomvos never talked about that. Older people talked about it, as in, “Oh, he is Hutu,” but never once in her life had Cynthia asked another person, “Are you Hutu or Tutsi?” Marie had always told them, “That doesn’t matter.”

One day, at the end of her last grade, the Siyomvos were preparing for Cynthia’s graduation ceremony. Over tea, Marie sat her daughter down and whispered: “You’ll be a teacher.”

Marie had never talked about that. Older people talked about it, as in, “Oh, he is Hutu,” but never once in her life had Cynthia asked another person, “Are you Hutu or Tutsi?” Marie had always told them, “That doesn’t matter.” Marie had lived here for years among Hutus with no problem. A knock on the door. Paul opened it. Outside stood a crowd of men: neighbors, friends, including Cynthia’s fourth-grade teacher. They held machetes.
country, they have already started.”

Paul said he needed time. He said he would take care of it. The men were angry and restless, but because they all knew each other, they agreed to give Paul time. “When we come back,” the one said, “we want to see their bodies. We want to see them dead.”

Inside, Paul told Marie and the children, “Right now they’re just upset about what happened. In the morning it will be fine.” But just in case, he said, hide.

Right away, Marie took Franck and Cynthia to the banana grove at the far, dark edge of the yard. There they waited all night. In the morning, they went back to the house and found Paul dead in the living room, the men’s dark promise having been carried out for his failure to kill his family.

“Stop crying,” Marie told Cynthia. They needed to move fast because the men would be back. Marie and the children gathered whatever clothing and food they could carry and went back to the banana grove to wait, to think about what to do. Soon the men returned. Cynthia could see their shadows moving about the house, see them step out with their machetes, into the backyard.

Then the house began to burn. It burned with Paul in it and with everything they owned. When morning came, Marie and the children ran.

Cynthia felt caught in a very bad dream. “Tomorrow is just going to be normal again,” she kept thinking. She cried for her stuffed animals and for school and for the homemade french fries they used to eat at supper and for her favorite clothes. Marie slapped her right across the face.

“Stop crying,” she said.

They made it to a refugee camp, thinking safety in numbers. Outside the camp, the killing continued. Schoolteachers killed their pupils. Pupils killed each other. Tutsis were locked inside an abandoned gas station and burned alive. The army randomly hunted down Hutus and shot them on sight. The Nyabarongo River flowed with bodies. Even most of the nation’s cattle were killed.

Ten, twenty, fifty thousand people lay dead in the early days, and more than 200,000 would be gone by the end. Some of the bodies would remain where they fell, going to bone, for many years to come. As one official put it, “Everybody has hands full of blood.”

By the end of just the first week, 400,000 Burundians had fled to Rwanda and other neighboring countries. By the end of the month, 600,000. By Christmas Eve, one and a half million. “The situation is very complex,” as Burundi’s minister of communications, a Tutsi, explained it to The New York Times. “It is not a western. You don’t have cowboys on one side and Indians on the other. It is not a moral problem, it is a political one. This will not be resolved in one week or two months.”

In the camps, 180 people were dying each day, many of them children. They starved, or died of cholera, dysentery, malaria. In Cynthia’s camp they had powdered milk and little else to eat. At first Cynthia refused it. She said, “No, I don’t eat that.” Soon, she was happy to eat anything at all. “If I could just get a handful of beans,” she would think.

As a lifelong Catholic, she knew how to pray. She prayed for survival. But as she began to understand that her life would never be the same—that their home was
gone, her father was gone, bread was gone—she prayed to die.

But she didn’t die. For nearly a year, Marie, Franck, and Cynthia lived crowded into one small tent in a camp with little water and no place to wash and people piss- ing and shitting right on the earth.

Still, someone set up a school. First-graders attended with fifth-graders. No one took it very seriously because no one was sure they would survive to care about mathematics.

From time to time Marie cried for no reason. Franck grieved in dry silence. Cynthia studied with the landlords’ tutored children. For the next year, as the war continued, Marie worked for the landlords and in the fields. Cynthia studied with the landlords’ tutored children.

One night, noise in the street. Men yelled, “Come here!” and “Who are you?” and “Where are you going?” Peeking out the door, they saw houses burning, women running, children standing stunned and screaming in the road. As Franck began gathering up their things he told Cynthia to run out the back, to the abandoned house; he would be close behind.

Cynthia slipped out the back and hid in an overgrown corner of the old house. A girl she knew ran past, holding her infant brother. Cynthia called the girl over and got a uniform and a space but allowed Cynthia a uniform and a place in class. Franck took work and buried their savings in the floor. For three years they lived in the room—through another coup, more slaughters, through the genocide and its aftermath up north in Rwanda. Like the other families, they cooked outside and slept in the forest and scavenged for food.

Behind their cottage stood the charred husk of an abandoned house. Weeds grew through the foundation. In dullest moments Franck and Cynthia went to the house and played pretend, rebuilding it in their minds. Here is the living room, here is the kitchen; this could be your room, that could be mine.

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For hours, Franck and Cynthia waited. Then they came down. The long night with their mother’s body passed as they thought about what to do. At daybreak the landlord came and said the men had also killed her husband, for letting Tutsis live in his house. She gave Franck and Cynthia bus fare and told them to hurry away before the killers returned; she would take care of Marie.

The bus took them to Cibitoke, near the border of Zaire, where they rented a one-room cottage with a dirt floor and no kitchen or bath. Cynthia was twelve now, Franck sixteen. Cynthia enrolled in a school for orphans. The orphanage had no bed place in class. Franck took work and buried their savings in the floor. For three years they lived in the room—through another coup, more slaughters, through the genocide and its aftermath up north in Rwanda. Like the other families, they cooked outside and slept in the forest and scavenged for food. There was nothing to discuss.

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might have been in adult lockup, waiting. Sue Colussy was with her when she told her story. Grace testified on her behalf. Robert Mizell sat in the courtroom, just as he had sat in almost every other courtroom with Cynthia in the past fifteen months. By then she had graduated from Atlanta International School and scored 1100 on her SAT. Without the proper papers, she couldn’t enroll in college, or work, so as she waited for Rast to rule on her future, she had been volunteering at a center for refugee women.

With asylum, she applied for a green card, the hardest of all documents to procure, and there began more waiting. Once she got the work permit, she found a job—no, several. Working at Zaxby’s, Conducting inventory at Abercrombie. Selling clothes to wealthy women at a boutique in Lenox Square, whose space and beauty mesmerized Cynthia; Lenox Square seemed like one big happy party.

She took driving lessons and got a license. She bought a cell phone that rang all the time. Her circle of friends now included not only Americans and Rwandans but also Somalis, Nigerians, Sudanese. Reid watched Cynthia move deftly between her American life with the Mizells and her African life with Grace’s family in Lawrenceville.

One morning in early January 2004, Cynthia called Grace, crying.

“Cynthia, what happened?” Grace said.

Cynthia could barely talk.

“No, Auntie, I cannot say it.”

“Tell me!”

“He died,” Cynthia said.

“Who?”

And it was just beyond. Robert Mizell, such a good man.

For I was hungry, and you gave me food. I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger, and you welcomed me. I was naked, and you gave me clothing. I was sick, and you took care of me. I was in prison, and you visited me.

Yet on just another Saturday morning at the gym, a massive heart attack took him, at age fifty-two. Two by two, the Mizells followed the casket into the Cathedral of Saint Philip: Reid with Callie, Jackson with Robert’s sister, and Sara hand in hand with Cynthia.

“Why?” Cynthia asked. “It was happy that I had a second father, and now he is gone.”

Grace told her, “But you still have a mother.”

Two years after Robert’s death, Cynthia opened her mail in Buckhead to find her green card. Grace could have heard her screaming all the way in Lawrenceville.

They drank champagne in the Mizell house that night. Cynthia wrote Sue Colussy a letter, telling her the news. She enrolled at Georgia Perimeter College and began earning the credits to get into a four-year college. In 2011, Cynthia will be eligible to apply to become a U.S. citizen. Citizenship will make everything complete. “Atlanta is my home now,” she says.

For the first time, Cynthia can walk unaided. She can eat more than a single slice of pizza. She sleeps through the night, without waking Grace.

Two by two, the Mizells followed the casket into the Cathedral of Saint Philip: Reid with Callie, Jackson with Robert’s sister, and Sara hand in hand with Cynthia.

When she needs to, she can run, hiding when she had to hide, and by trusting when her instincts told her to trust.

After six years, she has known the Mizells almost as long as she knew her own family. She still lives in the room with photos taped to her wall and with framed pictures of an American boyfriend on her nightstand.

She thinks in English now. But the bracelet Franck gave her still hugs her left wrist. She speaks as seldom of her past as she ever did. Sometimes when people ask about Burundi, Cynthia will say she does not remember. To those who know her this often means, I don’t want to talk about it. The unabridged version is personal, and tightly contained, like the contents of Grace’s gold locket.

In August, Cynthia enrolled at Georgia State University. A biology major with a year and a half to go, she plans to apply to medical school at Emory. She hopes to become a cardiac surgeon, a healer of broken hearts.