

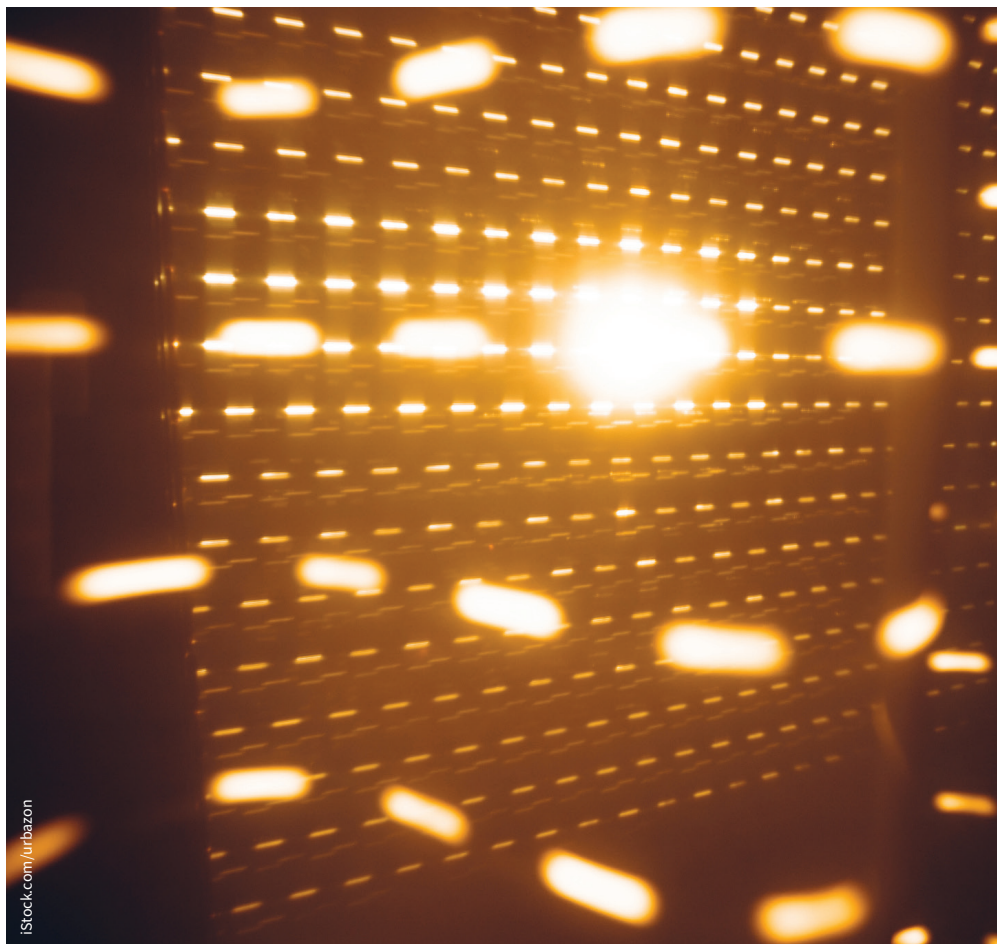
New dawn

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The slivers of sunlight sneak through the blinds, parting my eyelids and waking me from my restless sleep. Ruth stirs in her crib, her tiny fingers curling tightly around my arm as I pick her up. The short hand of the clock on the bare wall marches toward 9. The new house is sparser than a war field but will perhaps signal a new dawn in our lives, after the dark days in the shelter. I catch a glimpse of my writing as I pass the calendar, where a red circle marks December 1, the date of my refugee hearing. I will learn my fate and that of David and Jean. The hope that my husband and son can also come here as refugees keeps me going. “One day,” I tell myself.

I run to drop Ruth off at daycare. She must get used to being away from me during the day, though the thought hurts me. As I wave goodbye, my heart twinges. It is conditioned to this strain, knowing that its other pieces are far away. I think of a little brick house on the other side of the world, near Kigali. I wonder what David and Jean are doing now. It is afternoon there, and David must be making the long trek on the dirt road, wearing a hat despite the sweltering heat and keeping his head down to go unnoticed. School must almost be finished and Jean must be waiting longingly, though quietly, as he was instructed, so as to not garner the wrong kind of attention. As our phone calls have become less frequent, my imagination has had to fill in the gaps of what their days must be like.

Back at home, out of nowhere I hear the voices — loud and angry and seeking. Their footsteps are first a shuffle and then determined thumps. They are getting closer. My throat tightens and I can no longer feel whether my heart is beating. I wonder what life would be like had I not spoken out. I think of the chaos and mess they created as they waded through



Auntie’s house looking for me. Their loud screams that I was writing false stories. That I was making up the soldiers’ brutal kidnappings and murders in my village. Suddenly, a loud wail awakens me from my thoughts. I run to pick Ruth up from the crib to hold her tight where she will be safe, but my hands meet the unruffled sheets of a bare bed and I am reminded she is several blocks away, laughing and playing with the other children. Feeling my tear-stained shirt sticking to my skin, I tell myself that that is better for her than to be imprisoned among these 4 walls every day, or worse, to be imprisoned in

the mind. The pills have lately not been working as before.

I take myself to church, where my title as “volunteer” is perhaps the most legitimate one I have had in this country. I walk some elderly folks to service and we are engulfed in prayer for a while. I press my hands together tightly and my thoughts return to my husband and son. Their lives were turned upside down by the truths I told. The shaving of their heads to change their appearance. The moving of houses to escape. The fewer phone calls to prevent interception. Regardless, it is just a matter of time until the soldiers connect

them to me. I pray for their safety and strength. There is a light tap on my shoulder and I realize the church is now empty and it is time to go. Back in the long-term care facility, I sit down to chat with some of the familiar old folks. One dreams of his younger days working on the farm. Another longs for the days when she was a young lass on the lookout for her lad. My brain whirs, searching for stories to share, but my memories do not go that far back. My lips part but no words come out. By now the folks here are used to it and with a knowing smile they look away. Their kindness softens the beating my mind is giving itself.

Later, Ruth frolicks in the bathtub as I shower her. Her giggles pierce the silence as she uses her tiny fingers to pop the bubbles that float away. I am happy she is free where it matters most, in the mind. Once she is in bed, I try to feed myself. The metal spoon clinks loudly against the ceramic bowl, and I am grateful there is something to end the silence. I chew the potatoes and beans slowly, savouring the closest semblance of back home that I could infuse into this dish. While it is not the same as the warm porridge that Mama used to make, it is better than the bland food here that my taste buds have yet to become accus-

tomed to. Then it is time to heed the night. My head rustles against the pillow and I wonder when the nightmares will come. It is just a matter of time.

Arunima Sivanand BHS

Faculty of Medicine, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ont.

This article has been peer reviewed.

The author is a fourth-year medical student. This narrative is based on the experiences of her patient, a war refugee experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder. The patient gave consent for this story to be told. Names and details of the narrative have been changed to protect privacy.