opening extract from

Over a Thousand Hills I Walk With You

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PART I

il y avait une maison sur la colline
there was a house on the hill

I listen to you.

I have always believed that horrors can seal the mouth. And not only the mouth, but also the heart and mind, at least for a long time. That there are horrors that let all stories die because the words refuse to come.

But you wanted to tell. Me. And, with me, or through me, others too. I am going to listen to you, as I have several times already. I am going to try to conceive of the inconceivable and see what happens to me.

When it comes to the point, I may cry for help. As loudly as you did.

Or did you not cry out? You will tell me.

We will put our words together, and I will write them down. Perhaps it is even true that once a thing is contained in words, it leaves us. Or turns into something from which we are able to take a step backward.

If we succeed, perhaps your pain, embedded in a whole, may be put to rest.

Whenever I try to imagine the extent of your pain, I can find no dimension that makes it conceivable for me. And so

I am also afraid of what we are attempting.

But you trust me. And I you. I firmly believe in your strength.

There was a time before. There will be a time after.

Let us build a bridge. A bridge that will carry us over the unbearable.

I am certain that as we walk back and forth, we will find love on both sides.

Jeanne was sitting in the small tin bathtub, which had been brought outside into the inner courtyard in the afternoon so that the sun could warm the water.

The children had carried the water to the house themselves. During the course of the day they had several times followed the narrow path to the distant, carefully guarded place where you could buy it at a kiosk. They walked there mornings, noontimes, and evenings in the company of the bigger children and some grown-ups to secure the supply needed daily. Once, during one of the many trips, Jeanne had counted much more than a thousand steps.

Chattering, sometimes singing, too, they made their way home in the shadow of the banana palms that lined the path left and right, passing a bamboo field whose arm-thick stalks towered three feet high, a little later through a small eucalyptus wood that concealed a large frog pond. The dirty surface of the pond never receded, even during dry periods, for it was constantly fed by several springs burbling out of the ground. Here was where people who couldn't pay for water got theirs.

A great deal of water was needed if banana juice was going to be processed. The younger children, of whom Jeanne was still one, balanced the small plastic cans on their closely cropped heads, held by a wreath of banana leaves or a cloth tied around, in which the hard bottom of the can sat as if in a nest.

The older children—among them Jeanne's brother, Jando—and the grown-ups carried the big cans between them, hung over a long, sturdy stick held up on each end. Sometimes even several cans at a time.

The water came from the mountains. There was enough of it. But it had to be brought to the houses. And so fetching water was just as unalterable a part of the daily routine as waking up and going to sleep.

As Aunt Pascasia's strong hand approached with the sponge, Jeanne pulled in her head and arched her back like an angry cat. Squeezing her eyes shut as tightly as she could and inwardly fidgeting with impatience, she endured being soaped from head to toe and scrubbed until her skin glowed.

Aunt Pascasia showed no mercy toward the day's dust. Jeanne hated this unavoidable evening cleansing ritual and, besides, she found it beneath her dignity. She was six and no longer wanted to be washed.

At home with her parents, she had once succeeded in convincing Julienne, the still very young housemaid, to let her do this job herself. But then she'd earned the noisy scorn of all present when—obviously—she'd forgotten one of her feet. And Julienne had gotten into trouble.

Here, however, in the country with her grandmother, where Jeanne passed the long summer vacations from June to September with all the rest of the grandchildren every year, there was no escape.

Jeanne heard her little sister whimpering in a second tub beside her. And mixed in was the irritated voice of her cousin Claire, who was already allowed to do women's work.

"Then hold still, Teya!" she commanded.

Teya had gotten soap in her eyes, Jeanne guessed and squeezed her eyes even tighter shut in precaution as she felt the burning suds running out of her hair over her face.

Secretly she was glad that she had gotten Aunt Pascasia for the bath this time. Of course her aunt's hands grabbed hard and firmly, but all the same, they were much more practiced than Claire's, and so Jeanne had a good chance of getting finished sooner than Teya today.

Being first at every conceivable opportunity was the ongoing battle between her and her younger sister, and it never came to an end. Not seldom, Jeanne lost, which galled her terribly because the two years she had on Teya should really have ensured her a constant advantage. But Teya was smart, also a little beast sometimes when it came to winning over the grown-ups and getting them on her side.

When Teya deployed her weapon of relentless, piercing crying, Jeanne had to yield the field, just because she was the oldest.

"Don't you hear how your little sister is crying!" her

mother would reproach her in such instances. "Then why can't you hūmor her?"

And Jeanne would yield, even though she was resentful inside. It isn't fair, she would think. But she never said it out loud.

Aunt Pascasia dropped the sponge and scooped up water in both hands to pour it over Jeanne's head and rinse away the soap. This was done a few times in succession, for the sake of thoroughness. Jeanne straightened up and stood there. Now she would soon have it all behind her. The lukewarm water streamed from her head down over her body, and some of the stinging suds got into her eyes. They burned horribly, but Jeanne pressed her lips together and didn't utter a sound. After all, you could also win in matters of bravery.

Besides, she didn't want to attract Aunt Pascasia's displeasure, to avoid the risk of being kept here any longer than absolutely necessary. She could hardly wait to gather with the others near the fireplace, where the smallest children assembled evening after evening before supper. They sat down on straw mats at the foot of Grandmother's chair—all spotless from head to toe and in their bathrobes—and listened to the old woman's stories, while the aunts and Véneranda, the housemaid, busied themselves around the fire preparing the evening meal.

Jeanne loved her grandmother's stories.

She would close her eyes while she followed the quiet, dark flow of the old voice, so that she saw everything right in front of her. She swallowed the sentences almost greedi-

ly, filled with the desire to fix them in her mind word for word until she knew most of the stories by heart. Sometimes she annoyed the others by suddenly interrupting a story and anticipating something.

"Your fingernails need cutting, Dédé!" Stern-faced, Aunt Pascasia interrupted her thoughts.

Though they were still burning, Jeanne opened her eyes in horror, and a fat tear washed away the rest of the soapsuds. Cutting fingernails meant a loss of time that could never be made up.

"Whatever do you do to get yourself so dirty every day!" grumbled her aunt.

She lowered her broad, energetic face dangerously close to Jeanne's, but she received no answer.

Aunt Pascasia knew perfectly well how a person got so dirty.

From roaming through the banana grove, from attempts to cook with sand and freshly plucked leaves, from hide-and-seek, from climbing on the widespread branches of the avocado trees behind Grandmother's farm buildings.

Today, running away from Jando, Jeanne had been a little too fast and too careless while climbing down from a tree and had fallen from a low branch onto the dusty ground. Happily, Aunt Pascasia's critical eyes had so far missed the scrapes below her knees.

Unwilling, Jeanne hid her hands behind her back. "My nails just got cut!" she declared.

The words had scarcely passed her lips when Aunt Pascasia's hand whizzed down and landed with a painful

smack on Jeanne's small, curving behind.

Jeanne silently dropped her head and peered out of the corners of her almond eyes at her aunt's face, where she could discover nothing but grim determination. Respect forbade further objection, and besides, it was useless and could even lead to banishment to the house or a prohibition against taking part in the story hour. With heavy heart she resigned herself, looking enviously over at Teya as she did so. She, now toweled dry, was at that moment being rubbed with milking fat.

The light brown skin of her sister's small, round face shone in the deep light of the evening sun and her blindingly white little teeth beamed in a triumphant smile.

Jeanne was only able to restrain her tongue with difficulty. It wanted to poke from her mouth like a sharp dagger and stick out at Teya full length.

Some time later Jeanne joined the circle of clean children, last of all.

They were sitting close together on the straw mats, eyes turned expectantly toward their grandmother's house. Until they were called for supper, they were not allowed to stir from that spot.

Jeanne was relieved to see that her grandmother hadn't appeared yet. Ordinarily she was already sitting there and greeting the children who gradually gathered around her. But today her chair was empty. This quieted Jeanne's gnawing feeling of having been done out of something, and also

her secret anger.

She lifted her chin and looked over the circle toward the front row, where for a second time she encountered Teya's victorious smile. Directly at the foot of Grandmother's chair.

"Puh!" Jeanne said. With exaggerated slowness, she let herself sink into the only place still free, next to her cousin Saphina, stuck out her lower lip, and turned her face away, to the fireplace, where Véneranda was stirring something in one of the oversized kettles.

Before her bath, Jeanne had found out, through a quick peek into the pots, that there were sweet potatoes and vegetable sauce again today. She didn't like sweet potatoes at all. Therefore she'd taken the precaution of gobbling down a few sugar-sweet red bananas and a juicy ripe mango. Later, when she gathered with the small children around the big common bowl for supper, she intended to fish out just a few beans with her sharp fingers when the grown-ups weren't looking.

Véneranda put down her stirring stick and wiped her forehead with the back of her hand. She had been Grandmother's housemaid for many years, and Jeanne had known her ever since she was born. But Véneranda's time as housemaid was coming to an end, for she was already twenty—much too old for a housemaid—and she would soon marry.

Jeanne could hardly imagine summer at Grandmother's without Véneranda. She just belonged there. Usually good-humored, she freely took part in practical jokes with the children, laughed constantly and louder than all of them,

and let the really small ones ride on her shoulders when she cantered along the path to the water place, her long legs swinging in great steps. Her movements seemed to follow a secret rhythm. Often she danced or sang, and she couldn't keep from drumming on anything that came under her nimble fingers.

The children loved to tease her, and she mostly took it good-naturedly. But if ever someone went too far, she got respect by grabbing the pest on the spot and setting him straight with an authoritative slap.

Véneranda was the only one of the housemaids allowed this grown-ups' right. The younger housemaids were strictly forbidden to raise a hand, and they often found it hard to restrain themselves.

Mournfully Jeanne watched the young woman, so familiar, who would no longer be there a few weeks from now. Véneranda's small, dark profile stood out like a silhouette against the evening sky, where the gigantic ball of the sun, sinking slowly behind the hills, had spread its lush orange, now, as on many summer evenings, suffusing the colors of the land: bathing the green of the gentle row of hills in deep ochre and making the earth swim in gold.

Véneranda was singing now, too. Or rather she was humming a melody that Jeanne had often heard from her. The young woman's crinkly hair, twisted into thin, short braids, stood out from her head belligerently, like the thorns of a cactus, and the wild flower pattern of her dress challenged the day to hold out a little longer yet, until pitch-dark night descended over all.

When Véneranda noticed Jeanne's gaze, she gave her an enigmatic smile, which had the color of the evening. It worked like milking fat on Jeanne's small soul, chafed with the defeat it had just suffered. She returned the smile with a slight trembling at the corners of her mouth.

At that very moment the sound of the opening door announced Grandmother. Jeanne turned around and immediately joined in the greeting of the others.

"Good evening, Nyogokuru!" the children cried.

Upright, one hand supported on her polished, carved stick, holding her pipe in the other, the unusually tall old woman walked out of the house, approaching the crowd of her grandchildren one step at a time. As she moved, her face wore a tense expression of suppressed pain.

She had a serious disease in her bones, which confined her to her bed from time to time and made each movement torture for her. She had not been able to do the work in her fields herself for a long time, and other activities demanded so much of her strength that her daughters or people who were temporarily living with her had to step in for her.

However, year after year the grandchildren gathered during vacation on her farm outside the town of Kibungo, and she still took joy in the task of looking after the children and keeping them awake with stories before the evening meal.

As always, Nyogokuru had dressed carefully for the evening. Today she wore a brilliant blue *umucyenyero*, a cloth gown that wrapped around the body and fell to her feet, which were inserted into comfortable slippers. Over

the *umucyenyero*, the *umwitero*, a broad sash tied diagonally across the shoulder, on whose warm yellow and earth tones a bird pattern of brilliant blue repeated the color of the dress underneath. The same colorfully patterned material was used for the *igitambaro*, a cloth wound around the head, which Grandmother wore like a turban.

Before Nyogokuru sat down in her chair, her eyes traveled carefully over her grandchildren's heads. They were alert, dark brown eyes under broad, prominent cheekbones in an almost wrinkleless face. The unusual form of the cheekbones, which made the lower part of her face look like a triangle, was a characteristic of the women in the family. Jeanne had also inherited it and therefore her face already lacked any childish roundness.

After Nyogokuru sat down, she lit her pipe with deliberation. Turning her clear gaze on the children, she took a deep drag.

They all waited eagerly for what she would say. When she finally opened her mouth to speak, Jeanne saw her words sail away into the evening with a little puff of smoke.

"Now, how did you spend the day?" Grandmother asked.

Many mouths opened at the same time, jabbering excitedly, and over the babble of answers Teya's clear, bright little voice, distinctly audible to all, announced: "Dédé fell out of a tree!"

Traitor, thought Jeanne, filled with stormy thoughts of vengeance. Well, just you wait!

Quickly she dropped her eyelids to conceal the spark of

anger in her eyes. For if she challenged fate or the anger of her grandmother too much, it could happen that she would have to pack her things and return to her parents early.

It wasn't always easy for Jeanne to behave the way a girl of her age was expected to. Gentle and yielding she was not. And not always obedient, either. Protest dwelt in her, a small, steadily flickering flame, which could suddenly flare up brightly and burst out of her in hot words. Words that were better left unsaid.

Now Jeanne surreptitiously pulled the hem of her dress over the scrapes on her knees and bent her head, because she expected a sharp reprimand to rattle down on her the next moment.

But the reproof didn't come.

Instead, Nyogokuru asked, "What would you like to hear today?"

Jeanne lifted her head in surprise and saw her grandmother smiling.

"The fairy tale of Snow White!" crowed Teya.

"Not that again!" Saphina grumbled. "Instead, let's have the story of the girl from the Kalebasse who had to stay with her prince. We haven't heard that one for a terribly long time. Please, Nyogokuru!"

Lionson, one of the only two boys in the group, jumped up. He was Aunt Pascasia's youngest, a half a head smaller than Jeanne, but he acted like his name, "Son of the Lion." Nothing could be gruesome or dangerous enough for him.

Now he bared his teeth and bellowed aloud. "The story of the monster that ate up his ten children!" he

demanded, rolling his eyes wildly.

"Eeeh, no, not that one!" squealed the girls.

The ringing of a bell and the dull trampling of hooves joined in with the noise. At the same time, a slight vibration of the ground revealed that Gatori, the herdboy, was back from the mountains with the cows and would be coming through the big gate any minute. The children forgot the argument about their story. They turned their heads to watch the drama that was about to unfold.

A little later Nyampinga's brindled head, with its long, curving horns, appeared in the entrance. As the oldest cow of all, she was the leader. She walked heavily ahead of the others. Her huge udder, full to bursting, was obviously a burden to her. She headed purposefully for the barn, where she was already awaited by Muzehe, the old farmhand with the big feet.

Muzehe was one of those who had to earn the right to live and eat with Grandmother by working. He had come one day and stayed. His job was primarily the milking of the cows.

He received Nyampinga and led her into the stall, in the quiet certainty that the other three would follow her, as would the two calves.

Now Gatori also appeared. He strode smartly through the gate, a lanky fourteen-year-old, whose bare arms and legs were covered with a thick layer of dust. He drove the calves ahead of him with a small stick, carefully watching to see that none of them danced out of line. His day's work was done. Right after washing, he would join the big boys.