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Published in *Art from Trauma: Genocide and Healing Beyond Rwanda*,
ed. Rangira Béa Gallimore & Gerise Herndon. University of Nebraska
Press, Lincoln, 2019.

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ONE

Baby Steps

MARGARET JACOBS

I was rushing down the pasta aisle at five in the evening at Leon's, a small neighborhood grocery store in Lincoln, Nebraska, when I ran into Chantal Kalisa. I had met her recently at a Women's and Gender Studies program faculty event at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, but we hadn't had a chance to talk. After the usual day of hurrying from classes to meetings to more classes, I was trying to grab something quick for dinner before heading home to my hungry third-grade and sixth-grade boys. Chantal strolled along the aisle, her newborn, Jacob, lashed to her chest in a bright African wrap as she pushed her cart. She smiled warmly. I tossed some linguine into my basket and stopped to chat. Chantal slowed me down and brought me back to what is important—children, friendship, food.

In the next year or two Chantal and I started co-chairing a new group, Transnational Feminism. Soon we were meeting to share lunch or coffee. As we both careened into midlife and realized we lived just a half mile from one another, we made dates to walk in our tree-canopied neighborhood. Over the years and the miles, we shared our intellectual pursuits and passions and our daily triumphs and tribulations. One minute we talked of our favorite movie stars (Mads Mikkelsen, Denzel Washington) and the next we pondered truth and reconciliation after genocide. We texted feverishly about our favorite contestants on *The Voice*, and one winter we tried to see all the Oscar-nominated films (but only made it to *The Descendants* and *The Artist*). Chantal and her fam-

ily came to our house for Thanksgiving feasts and summer dinners in the backyard. We celebrated graduations of her nieces and nephews at her home, a large circle of us dancing in her living room. We turned to each other whenever we needed help—with workplace conflicts, with parenting, with our health, with writing blocks, with intellectual conundrums.

One day I was particularly upset about something; I don't even remember what. Chantal and I were walking through the gardens of Antelope Valley Park. Suddenly she asked, "Have you seen *What about Bob?*" No, I hadn't. "It's my favorite movie," she continued. A friend had recommended it to her, and she had watched it many times. But Chantal, I thought, I am upset about X. Why are you talking about a movie?

"It's so funny," Chantal went on. "Bill Murray plays this guy named Bob who goes to see this psychologist. He feels like he's finally made a breakthrough, but his psychologist goes on vacation, and Bob doesn't know how he will cope. So Bob shows up at the psychologist's lakeside cottage and becomes good friends with the psychologist's family. It drives the psychologist mad! It is so hilarious! You should watch it." Okay, I thought, was Chantal trying to tell me I was like Bob and she was the psychologist? Or was I the psychologist who was letting a Bob in my life get to me?

"Anyway," she said, "the psychologist gives Bob this advice. He even writes a book on it. And whenever I am having trouble, I always think of it." Yes? I waited eagerly. "Baby steps," Chantal declared. Huh, I thought. "Baby steps," she repeated. Chantal's words slowly sank in.

Maybe our problems seem insurmountable. Perhaps we have aspirations that cannot be achieved in a morning, a week, a month, a year, or even a lifetime. Maybe there are some mysteries we can never fully comprehend. Still, we stand up, we let go of the safe and familiar—if only for an instant—and we toddle forward. We might only take a few steps before we fall, but we eventually get up and walk again. Baby steps.

For a while "baby steps" became a kind of coded ritual between Chantal and me. Passing each other on campus with no time to

stop and talk, one of us would mouth “baby steps.” She might lean over and whisper “baby steps” at a meeting. We might both blurt out “baby steps” at the same time as we discussed a challenging situation. It became a small gesture of recognition and care—I see your pain, I see your difficulty. But I also see your strength and power. It helped to ease tense moments, slow us down, and bring us back to what was important.

The world is overwhelming. Life can seem impossible. The Hutu murdered hundreds of thousands of Tutsi, including a large part of your family. How do you ever heal from this? Baby steps. A dear friend, a beloved mother, sister, niece dies just a few days after her fiftieth birthday. How can you go on? Baby steps.