

our faces away. The gunshots were getting louder. As we climbed into the boats, an RPG flew from the bushes, exploding on the shore. The top of the river was boiling. A man in army trousers came running down the path toward the boats, shooting at the soldiers. One of the men in my boat opened fire, dropping the man on the ground. The boats headed downstream, and we were let off near a tributary. A soldier led us to Yele, a village that was occupied by the military. It was a big village with more than ten houses. The soldiers occupied most of them. They had cut down the bush around the village except for the entrance from the river through which we arrived. This way, the soldiers explained to us, it would be difficult for the enemy to attack.

In the beginning, it seemed we had finally found safety at Yele. The village was always full of lively chattering and laughter. The adults, civilians and soldiers, spoke about the weather, planting seasons, hunting, and nothing about the war. At first we couldn't understand why people behaved this way. But gradually the smiles on people's faces assured us that there was nothing to worry about anymore. All that darkened the mood of the village was the sight of orphaned children. There were over thirty boys between the ages of seven and sixteen. I was one of them. Apart from this, there were no indications that our childhood was threatened, much less that we would be robbed of it.

We stayed in a big unfinished cement-brick house along with other boys. A large green tarp served as its roof, and we slept on the cement floor on tiny blankets that two people shared. The soldiers set up their garrison in another unfinished brick house, and there they socialized separate from the civilians. In the evenings they watched movies, played music, laughed, and smoked marijuana. The smell of it covered the entire village. During the day they mingled with the civilians, and we helped in the kitchen. Kanai and I fetched water and washed dishes. The rest of our friends helped by chopping eggplants, onions, meat, and the like in the kitchen. I liked busy myself with work all day, going back and forth to the river and continuously washing dishes. It was the only way I could distract myself from the thoughts

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WE MUST HAVE BEEN walking for days, I do not really remember, when suddenly two men put us at gunpoint and motioned, with their guns, for us to come closer. We walked in between two rows of men carrying machine guns, AK-47s, G3s, and RPGs. Their faces were dark, as if they had bathed them in charcoal, and they stared intensely at us with their extremely red eyes. When we got to the back of the line, there were four men lying on the ground, their uniforms soaked with blood. One of them lay on his stomach, and his eyes were wide open and still; his insides were spilling onto the ground. I turned away, and my eyes caught the smashed head of another man. Something inside his brain was still pulsating and he was breathing. I felt nauseated. Everything began to spin around me. One of the soldiers was looking at me, chewing something and smiling. He took a drink from his water bottle and threw the remaining water at my face.

"You will get used to it, everybody does eventually," he said.

Gunshots erupted nearby, and the soldiers began to move, taking the six of us with them. We came upon a river where the soldiers' aluminum boats, with motors, gently floated. We saw bodies of eleven- and thirteen-year-old boys in army shorts piled by the river. We turned

that were giving me severe headaches. But by midday all the daily chores were done; the evening meal was prepared and only awaited consumption. Everyone sat on the verandahs of the houses facing the village square. Parents picked their children's hair, girls played singing and clapping games, and some of the young soldiers played soccer with the boys. Their jubilation and clapping could be heard far down the river. Life was not lived in fear during the day in this village.

The soccer games reminded me of the league matches I used to play in when my family first moved to the mining town of Mogbwemo. In particular, I remembered a final match that my team, which consisted of Junior and some friends, won. Both my parents were at the game, and at the end, my mother applauded and smiled widely; her face glowing with pride. My father walked up to me and rubbed my head before he held my right hand and raised it up, as he declared me his champion. He did the same to Junior. My mother brought us a cup of water, and as we drank she fanned us with her head cloth. The excitement caused my heart to pound faster and I was sweating profusely. I could taste the salty sweat that ran from my forehead to my lips. Standing there with my family, I felt light, as if I were getting ready to fly. I wanted to hold the moment longer, not only to celebrate our victory, but because the smile on my parents' faces that evening made me so happy that I felt every nerve in my body had awoken and swayed to the gentlest wind that sailed within me.

I distanced myself from games in the village and sat behind houses, staring into the open space until my migraines temporarily subsided. I didn't tell anyone what was happening to me. My symptoms weren't mentioned in the morning when the "sergeant doctor"—as the civilians called him—lined up children and families for treatment. The sergeant doctor called for fever, cold, and many other illnesses, but he never asked if anyone was having nightmares or migraines.

At night, Alhaji, Jumah, Moriba, and Kanci played marbles on the cement floor under the moonlight that made its way through the open windowpanes. Musa had grown popular among the boys and would always end the night with a different story. I quietly sat in the corner

of the room clenching my teeth, as I didn't want to show my friends the pain I felt from my headache. In my mind's eye I would see sparks of flame, flashes of scenes I had witnessed, and the agonizing voices of children and women would come alive in my head. I cried quietly as my head beat like the clapper of a bell. Sometimes after the migraine had stopped, I was able to fall asleep briefly, only to be awoken by nightmares. One night I dreamt that I was shot in the head. I was lying in my blood as people hurriedly walked past me. A dog came by and began licking my blood ferociously. The dog bared its teeth as my blood sweetened its mouth. I wanted to scare it away, but I was unable to move. I woke up before it started what I was afraid it was going to do to me. I was sweating and couldn't sleep for the rest of the night.

One morning the atmosphere in the village suddenly became tense. It wasn't clear what had caused the change, but something was about to happen. All the soldiers assembled at the village square, dressed in their uniforms, carrying their weapons and ammunition in backpacks and waist belts. Their bayonets hung by the sides of their army trousers as they stood still, with their helmets underneath their arms. "Attention." "At ease." "Attention." "At ease." I heard the voice of the drill instructor as I walked to the river with Alhaji to fetch water. When we returned, the drill instructor had stopped warming up the soldiers. Instead, Lieutenant Jabati stood in front of his men, his hands crossed behind his back. He addressed them for hours before they were released for lunch. While the lieutenant was talking to his men, we quietly went about our daily chores and at the same time tried to eavesdrop on what he was saying, but in order to hear him, we would have had to get closer and join the line of soldiers, which was out of the question. We walked about all day quietly speculating about what the lieutenant could have told his men.

In the evening the soldiers cleaned their guns, sometimes firing a couple of rounds into the air. These random gunshots sent the younger children diving between the legs of their parents. The soldiers smoked cigarettes and marijuana; some sat alone, while others gambled and

joked with one another into the night. Some watched a movie under one of their big tents.

Lieutenant Jabati sat on the verandah of his house and read a book. He would not look up, not even when his men whistled loudly at the size and sophistication of a gun in the war movie they were watching. He looked up only when it was quiet. He caught me looking at him and called me to sit with him. He was a tall man, with barely any hair. His eyes were big and they complemented his full cheekbones, which looked as if he had something in his mouth. He was a quiet individual, but his quietness had a forceful authority that all his men feared and respected. His face was so dark that it took courage to have any eye contact with him.

"Are you getting enough to eat here?" he asked.

"Yes," I said, as I tried to look at what he was reading.

"It is Shakespeare." He showed me the cover. "*Julius Caesar*. Have you heard of it?"

"I read *Julius Caesar* in school," I told him.

"Do you remember any of it?" he asked.

"Towards die many times before their deaths . . ." I began, and he recited the whole speech with me. As soon as we were done, his face resumed its sternness. He ignored me and seemed to delve into his book. I watched as the veins on his forehead became transparent through his flesh and disappeared as he absorbed the contents of the book or thought about whatever else was on his mind. I tiptoed away from him as the sky exchanged sunlight for darkness.

When I was seven, I used to go to the town square to recite monologues from the works of Shakespeare for the adults of my community. At the end of every week, the male adults would gather to discuss matters of the community. They sat on long wooden benches, and at the end of their discussions I would be called upon to recite Shakespeare. My father would cough loudly to alert the other adults to be silent so that I could start. He sat in the front, with his arms crossed and a big smile on his face that looked as if it would take years to fade away. I stood on a bench and held on to a long stick as my sword. I would

then start with *Julius Caesar*. "Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears . . ." I always recited speeches from *Macbeth* and *Julius Caesar*, as those were the adults' favorites. I was always eager and excited to read for them, because it made me feel that I was really good at speaking the English language.

I was awake when the soldiers left in the middle of the night, the echo of their marching leaving an eerie air about the village that continued until dawn and through the rest of the day. There were ten soldiers left behind to protect the village, and they stood at their posts all day. Just when the evening was waving its fingers, signaling night to approach, the soldiers issued a curfew by shooting a few rounds into the air and ordering everyone to "get inside and stay low to the ground." That night Musa told no stories and Moriba didn't play marbles with the other boys. We quietly sat against the wall listening to the rapid bursts of gunfire in the distance. Just before the last hours of night, the moon sailed through the clouds, showing its face through the open window of the building before it was driven away by a cockcrow.

That morning didn't come just with sunrise; it brought with it soldiers, the few who were able to make it back to the village. Their well-polished boots were drenched in dirt and they sat away from each other, clinging tightly to their guns, as if those were the only things that comforted them. One soldier, who sat on a cement brick underneath the kitchen, bowed his head in his hands and rocked his body. He got up and walked around the village and returned to sit on the brick again. He did this over and over throughout the day. Lieutenant Jabati was on the radio, and at some point he threw it against the wall and walked into his room. We civilians didn't speak among ourselves during that day. We only watched the madness unfold in some of the soldiers.

At midday a group of over twenty soldiers arrived in the village. The lieutenant was surprised and delighted when he saw them, but he quickly hid his emotions. The soldiers prepared themselves and left for war. There was nothing to hide anymore; we knew the war was near.

Soon after the soldiers left, we began hearing gunshots closer to the village. The soldiers who guarded the village ordered everyone inside. The gunfight went on into the evening, interrupting the songs of birds and the chants of crickets. At night soldiers came running to the village for ammunition and a quick respite. Wounded soldiers were brought back only to die by lamplit surgery. The soldiers never brought back their dead colleagues. Prisoners were lined up and shot in the head.

These things went on for many days, and each time the soldiers went to the front lines, few returned. Those left behind became restless and started shooting civilians who were on their way to latrines at night. The lieutenant asked his men to gather everyone at the square.

"In the forest there are men waiting to destroy all of our lives. We have fought them as best as we can, but there are too many of them. They are all around the village." The lieutenant made a circle in the air with his hands. "They won't give up until they capture this village. They want our food and ammunition." He paused, and slowly continued: "Some of you are here because they have killed your parents or families, others because this is a safe place to be. Well, it is not that safe anymore. That is why we need strong men and boys to help us fight these guys, so that we can keep this village safe. If you do not want to fight or help, that is fine. But you will not have rations and will not stay in this village. You are free to leave, because we only want people here who can help cook, prepare ammunition, and fight. There are enough women to run the kitchen, so we need the help of able boys and men to fight these rebels. This is your time to revenge the deaths of your families and to make sure more children do not lose their families." He took a deep breath. "Tomorrow morning you must all line up here, and we will select people for various tasks that have to be carried out." He left the square, followed by his men.

We stood in silence for a while and slowly started walking to our respective sleeping places, as the curfew was approaching. Inside, Jumah, Alhaji, Kanei, Moriba, Musa, and I quietly discussed what we were going to do.

"The rebels will kill anyone from this village because they will con-

sider us their enemy, spies, or that we have sided with the other side of the war. That is what the staff sergeant said," Alhaji said, explaining the dilemma we faced. The rest of the boys, who were lying on their mats, got up and joined us as Alhaji continued: "It is better to stay here for now." He sighed. We had no choice. Leaving the village was as good as being dead.

"Attention. This is an order from the lieutenant. Everyone must gather at the square immediately." A soldier spoke into a megaphone. Before he had finished his last word, the square was filled. Everyone had waited for this moment that would determine what we were going to do for our safety. Before the announcement, I sat with my friends near the window in the kitchen. Their faces were blank; they showed no emotion, but their eyes looked pale with sorrow. I tried to make eye contact with each of them, but they all looked away. I tried to eat my breakfast, but fear had taken away my appetite.

As we found spots in the back of the crowd, gunshots filled the air, then faded to a silence even more unbearable than the reports.

The lieutenant stood on several bricks so that he could be high enough to be seen by all. He let silence settle in our bones, then waved his hands to some soldiers who brought before us two bodies—a man and a young boy who had lived in the village. The blood that soaked their clothes was still fresh, and their eyes were open. People turned their heads away, and little children and babies began to cry. The lieutenant cleared his throat and started speaking in the midst of the cries, which eventually ceased as he went on.

"I am sorry to show you these gruesome bodies, especially with your children present. But then again, all of us here have seen death or even shaken hands with it." He turned to the bodies and continued softly: "This man and this child decided to leave this morning even though I had told them it was dangerous. The man insisted that he didn't want to be a part of our war, so I gave him his wish and let him go. Look at what happened. The rebels shot them in the clearing. My men brought them back, and I decided to show you, so that you can

fully understand the situation we are in." The lieutenant went on for almost an hour, describing how rebels had cut off the heads of some people's family members and made them watch, burned entire villages along with their inhabitants, forced sons to have intercourse with their mothers, hacked newly born babies in half because they cried too much, cut open pregnant women's stomachs, took the babies out, and killed them . . . The lieutenant spat on the ground and continued on, until he was sure that he had mentioned all the ways the rebels had hurt every person in the gathering.

"They have lost everything that makes them human. They do not deserve to live. That is why we must kill every single one of them. Think of it as destroying a great evil. It is the highest service you can perform for your country." The lieutenant pulled out his pistol and fired two shots into the air. People began shouting, "We must kill them all. We must make sure they never walk this earth again." All of us hated the rebels, and we were more than determined to stop them from capturing the village. Everyone's face had begun to sadden and grow tense. The aura in the village rapidly changed after the speech. The morning sun had disappeared and the day became gloomy. It seemed as if the sky were going to break and fall on the earth. I was furious and afraid, and so were my friends. Jumah looked toward the forest with his hands behind his back, Moriba was holding his head, Kanai stared at the ground, Musa wrapped his hands around himself, Alhaji covered his eyes with his left hand, and I stood akimbo to stop my legs from shaking. All women and girls were asked to report to the kitchen; men and boys to the ammunition depot, where the soldiers watched their movies and smoked marijuana.

As we walked toward the building, a soldier who carried a G3 weapon came out and stood at the doorway. He smiled at us, lifted his gun, and fired several rounds toward the sky. We dropped to the ground, and he laughed at us as he went back inside. We walked through the door and came upon the tents inside the building. The building was roofless except for the tarpaulin that covered the boxes of ammunition and guns stacked against the wall; and in the only common space, a

huge television screen sat on top of a dilapidated drum. A few meters away from the television stood a generator, along with gallons of gasoline. The soldiers came out of their tents as the staff sergeant led us to the back of the house, where none of us had been before. There were more than thirty boys there, two of whom, Sheku and Josiah, were seven and eleven years old. The rest of us were between the ages of thirteen and sixteen, except Kanai, who was now seventeen.

A soldier wearing civilian clothes, with a whistle around his neck, stepped up to a rack of AK-47s and handed one to each of us. When the soldier stood in front of me, I avoided eye contact, so he straightened my head until my eyes met his. He gave me the gun. I held it in my trembling hand. He then added the magazine, and I shook even more.

"It seems that all of you have two things in common," the soldier said after he had finished testing all of us. "You are afraid of looking a man in the eye and afraid of holding a gun. Your hands tremble as if the gun is pointed at your head." He walked up and down the line for a bit and continued: "This gun"—he held the AK-47 high up—"will soon belong to you, so you better learn not to be afraid of it. That is all for today."

That night I stood at the entrance of my tent for a while, hoping my friends would come out to talk, but no one did. Alhaji stepped out and looked in my direction for a few minutes, but he then turned and just stared at the ground. I was about to walk toward him when he reentered his tent. I inhaled the cool night breeze, which brought with it the scent of marijuana. I sighed, went back into my tent, and sat on the tarp all night unable to sleep. I just sat with my head in my hands, thoughtless. It was the first night that I was awake alone without having a migraine. As I began to ponder why this was the case, a cock started crowing, though it was still dark outside. The confused cock crowed throughout the night until morning finally arrived.

My two tent companions, Sheku and Josiah, the two youngest boys, were still sleeping when the bell rang at 6:00 a.m. for us to rise for training. "Come on, let's go." I tried to wake them with a gentle

shake. They just rolled over on their sides and continued sleeping. I had to drag them off the mat by their legs and slap them until they woke up. The soldiers were already going from tent to tent dragging out those who were still asleep and splashing buckets of water on them.

We met at the training ground and new *crapes* were distributed, along with army shorts and T-shirts that were of all colors. Some people got Adidas and others Nikes. I got a black Reebok Pump and was happier about my new *crapes* than anything else that was going on. I took off my old pants, which contained the rap cassettes. As I was putting on my new army shorts, a soldier took my old pants and threw them into a blazing fire that had been set to burn our old belongings. I ran toward the fire, but the cassettes had already started to melt. Tears formed in my eyes, and my lips shook as I turned away.

After we had put on the new attire, we formed a horizontal line with legs apart and hands straight down at our sides. As we stood waiting, some of the soldiers returned from the front line and reloaded their guns and side packs with ammunition. Some had blood on their uniforms and faces, which they didn't seem to notice or simply ignored. They quickly ate breakfast and were on their way back to where they didn't look as if they wanted to return. Each soldier stood against the wall, took several deep breaths with his eyes closed, and gripped his gun tightly before beginning to run back toward the clearing.

Sheku and Josiah stood next to me as if sharing a tent with them meant that I had become their big brother. They watched me during the exercise and followed what I did instead of the soldier who had introduced himself as Corporal Gadafi. He was a young fellow, younger than the lieutenant and the staff sergeant, but he was bald and his countenance made him look much older. He had an intense face that looked, even smiling, as if he were chewing something sour.

First we ran around the building for a few minutes, and then we began to learn how to crawl in the bushes nearby. Corporal Gadafi would hold his fist up, and when he brought it down, we fell into the bushes

and crawled quickly, without producing much sound, until we reached a designated tree. Then we immediately got up and crouched to take cover behind other trees. Afterward, we would run back to the training ground. The corporal didn't say much during the initial stage of training. All he said was "Not bad," "Terrible," and "Faster." He mostly used hand gestures, which he said was the only thing that would be used once we were out there. He would point to the clearing, where "words could cost you a bullet in the head." He would then smile dryly and widen his eyes for us to laugh with him. After we had done the running, crawling, and crouching many times, we were allowed to have some bread and custard. The corporal gave us one minute to get the food and eat it. Whatever we hadn't eaten was taken away at the end of sixty seconds. None of us was able to finish eating on the first day, but within a week we could eat any food in a minute. It was the only part of the training that we mastered.

After the late breakfast, we lined up facing the corporal, who handed us AK-47s. When it was my turn, he looked at me intensely, as if he was trying to tell me that he was giving me something worth cherishing. He poked my chest with his finger and walked around me. When he came back to the front, he stared at me some more, his red eyes and dark face twitching. He bared his teeth as if he were preparing to attack, and my legs began to shake, when he started to smile. Before I could smile with him, he had stopped, and the veins on his forehead stood up. Still looking straight at me, he reached into a wooden crate and pulled out the gun. He took out the magazine and handed me the AK with two hands. I hesitated for a bit, but he pushed the gun against my chest. With trembling hands I took the gun, saluted him, and ran to the back of the line, still holding the gun but afraid to look at it. I had never held a gun that long before and it frightened me. The closest thing to it had been a toy gun made out of bamboo when I was seven. My playmates and I carved them and played war games in the coffee farms and unfinished buildings at my grandmother's village. *Paw paw*, we would go, and whoever did it first would announce to the rest whom he had killed.

pau, boom," and Josiah went, "One, two," the numbers we had recited as we stabbed the banana trees. But even though I was exhausted, I couldn't sleep. My ears rang with the gun sounds, my body ached, and my index finger was sore. There had been no time to think all day, but now I could. I could become angry, yes, begin to visualize scenarios of shooting or stabbing a rebel. "The rebels are responsible for everything that has happened to you." I imagined capturing several rebels at once, locking them inside a house, sprinkling gasoline on it, and tossing a match. We watch it burn and I laugh.

I was distracted by the humming of a boy named Lansana. He was three tents down from me and he sometimes hummed melodies of songs I had never heard until he fell asleep. He started doing this after our first shooting exercise. His voice would echo in the dark forest, and whenever he stopped, the night got quieter.

We continued the training exercises we had been doing earlier in the morning, but this time we carried with us AK-47s that didn't contain any ammunition. We crawled with the guns on our backs, in our hands, and ran around the building with them. The guns were a little heavy for Sheku and Josiah, who kept dropping them and picking them up as we went along. We broke for a minute lunch and began a different drill. We were taken to a nearby banana farm, where we practiced stabbing the banana trees with bayonets. "Visualize the banana tree as the enemy, the rebels who killed your parents, your family, and those who are responsible for everything that has happened to you," the corporal screamed. "Is that how you stab someone who had killed your family?" he asked. "This is how I would do it." He took out his bayonet and started shouting and stabbing the banana tree. "I first stab him in the stomach, then the neck, then his heart, and I will cut it out, show it to him, and then pluck his eyes out. Remember, he probably killed your parents worse. Continue." He wiped his knife with banana leaves. When he said this, we all got angry and drove our knives in and out of the banana trees until they fell to the ground. "Good," he said, nodding and pondering something that made him smile longer than usual. Over and over in our training he would say that same sentence: *Visualize the enemy, the rebels who killed your parents, your family, and those who are responsible for everything that has happened to you.*

That afternoon we learned how to put the magazine into the gun and other such basics. Ignore the safety pin, they said, it will only slow you down. That evening we learned to fire our guns, aiming at plywood boards mounted in the branches of tiny trees at the edge of the forest. Sheku and Josiah weren't strong enough to raise their weapons, so the corporal gave them each a high stool to keep the weapons from falling. At the end of the shooting exercise, we were taught how to dismantle our guns and oil them, because the AKs were so old that they would misfire randomly and sometimes would stop working altogether. That night, as soon as we got under the tent, my tent companions passed out. Instead of smiling in their sleep, Sheku went "*Pau*