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I HAD NOT BEEN to the hospital since I had walked out a few months earlier, while the nurse was chatting with the sissy city lieutenant, and she had given up trying to get me to come back for a checkup. But one afternoon, during a table tennis match at which the entire staff was present, I felt someone tap me on the shoulder. It was the nurse. She was wearing a white uniform and a white hat. It was the first time I had looked at her directly. Her white teeth contrasted with her dark, shiny skin, and when she smiled, her face not only increased in beauty, it also glowed with charm. She was tall and had big brown eyes that were kind and inviting. She handed me a bottle of Coca-Cola. "Come and see me whenever you feel like it," she said, smiling, as she walked away. The Coca-Cola bottle was cold and it shocked me. I left the game hall with Alhaji and we went outside and sat on a rock drinking the soft drink. "She likes you," Alhaji teased me. I didn't say anything.

"Well, do you like her?" he asked.

"I don't know. She is older and she is our nurse," I said.

"You mean you are afraid of women," Alhaji replied, nodding.

"I don't think she likes me the way you are thinking about it." I looked at Alhaji, who was laughing at what I had said.

After we finished the bottle, Alhaji left and I decided to go to the hospital. When I got to the entrance, I peeked in and saw the nurse on the phone. She motioned for me to come inside and sit. She smiled and made sure that I noticed that it was because of my presence and not her phone conversation. I looked around and saw a chart on the wall with all the names of the boys at the center. In the boxes beside most of the names there was a check indicating that they had been to at least one session. There was nothing in the boxes across from my name. The nurse took the chart down and put it into a drawer as she hung up the phone. She pulled her chair closer to me and I thought she was going to ask me a question about the war, but instead she calmly asked, "What is your name?" I was surprised, since I was certain that she knew my name. "You know my name," I angrily said.

"Maybe I do, but I want you to tell me your name," she insisted, widening her eyes.

"Okay, okay. Ishmael," I said.

"Great name." She nodded and continued. "My name is Esther and we should be friends."

"Are you sure you want to be friends with me?" I asked. She thought for a while and said, "Maybe not."

I was quiet for a bit, as I didn't know what to say and also didn't trust anyone at this point in my life. I had learned to survive and take care of myself. I had done just that for most of my short life, with no one to trust, and frankly, I liked being alone, since it made surviving easier. People like the lieutenant, whom I had obeyed and trusted, had made me question trusting anyone, especially adults. I was very suspicious of people's intentions. I had come to believe that people befriended only to exploit one another. So I ignored the nurse and began to stare out the window.

"I am your nurse and that's all. If you want to be friends with me, you will have to ask me and I will have to trust you first," she said. I smiled, because I was thinking the same thing. She was perplexed at first by the sudden smile. But then she said, "You have a great smile, you should smile more." I stopped immediately and tensed my face.

"Is there anything that you want from the city?" she asked, but I didn't answer.

"That's it for today," she said.

A few days after that first conversation, the nurse gave me a present. I was watching some of the boys roll a volleyball net onto the yard. Alhaji returned from his session at the hospital and told me that nurse Esther said I should go see her. I wanted to watch the volleyball game, but Alhaji began to pull me and didn't let go until we were at the doorway of the hospital. He then shoved me inside and ran away giggling. Lying on the floor, I looked up to see Esther sitting behind her desk, smiling.

"Alhaji said you want to see me," I said, getting to my feet.

She threw a package at me. I held it in my hand, wondering what it was and why she had gotten it for me. She was looking at me, waiting for me to open it. When I unwrapped it, I jumped up and hugged her, but immediately held back my happiness. I sternly asked, "Why did you get me this Walkman and cassette if we are not friends? And how did you know that I like rap music?"

"Please sit down," she said, taking the package from me, putting the battery and cassette in the Walkman, and handing it to me. I put the headphones on and there was Run-D.M.C.: "*It's like that, and that the way it is* . . ." coming through the headphones. I began to shake my head, then Esther lifted the headphones off my ears and said, "I have to examine you while you listen to the music." I agreed, and took off my shirt, stood on a scale, and she checked my tongue, used a flashlight to look into my eyes . . . I didn't care because the song had taken hold of me, and I listened closely to every word. But when she began examining my legs and saw the scars on my left shin, she took my headphones off again and asked, "How did you get these scars?"

"Bullet wounds," I casually replied.

Her face filled with sorrow and her voice was shaking when she spoke: "You have to tell me what happened so I can prescribe treatment." At first I was reluctant, but she said she would be able to treat

me effectively only if I told her what had happened, especially about how my bullet wounds were treated. So I told her the whole story about how I got shot, not because I really wanted to, but because I thought that if I told her some of the gruesome truth of my war years she would be afraid of me and would cease asking questions. She listened attentively when I began to talk. Her eyes were glued to my face, and I bowed my head as I delved into my recent past.

During the second dry season of my war years, we were low on food and ammunition. So, as usual, we decided to attack another village. First, I went with my squad to spy on a village. We watched the village all day and saw that there were more men than us and that they were well armed and had newer guns. I am not sure if they were rebels, because they had fewer boys than any of the other groups we had attacked. Half wore army uniforms and half civilian clothes. We returned to base and I reported my squad's findings to the lieutenant. We immediately left for the village, which was about three days' walk. The plan was to first secure the village, then remain there and form a new base instead of bringing the goods back.

We left our village that night, alternately walking fast and jogging on the path all night. During the three-day journey, we stopped once a day to eat, drink, and take drugs. We carried with us all the ammunition, guns, and semiautomatic machine guns. Each of us had two guns, one strapped to our back, the other held in our hands. We left only two men behind to guard the base. On the morning of the third day, the lieutenant made us rest longer than we had during the previous days. Afterward, we walked all day and into the evening until the village was in sight.

There were many mango, orange, and guava trees in the village, and it looked as if it had been a farm. Surrounding it, we waited for the lieutenant's command. As we lay in ambush, we began to realize that the place was empty. I was lying next to the lieutenant and he looked at me with a puzzled face. I whispered to him that the village had been full of gunmen a few days ago, even though it now looked deserted. As

we continued to watch, a dog strolled across the village, barking as it went down the path. About an hour later, five gunmen entered the village. They took buckets from the verandah of one of the houses and headed toward the river. We were beginning to suspect that something was amiss when a shot was fired from behind us. It was clear now: we were being ambushed. The attackers wanted to push us toward the village so they could have us in the open.

We exchanged fire all night, until morning arrived, at which point we had no choice but to retreat into the village where they wanted us. We had already lost about five men, and the rebels were coming at the rest of us. They were up in the mango, orange, and guava trees, ready to rain bullets down on us. My squad scattered, running from one end of the village to the other, crouching behind houses. We had to get out before it was too late, but first we had to get rid of the attackers in the trees, which we did by spraying bullets into the branches to make the rebels fall off them. Those who didn't immediately die we shot before they landed on the ground. To avoid the open area and regroup in the nearby forest, we had to make an opening for ourselves; there was too much firepower surrounding us. So we concentrated our firepower on one area of the forest until everyone was dead. As soon as we had time to gather, the lieutenant once again gave us his little talk about how we had to fight fiercely to capture the village, otherwise we would have to roam the forest looking for another base.

Some people were injured, but not so severely as to keep them from fighting; others, like myself, had received many bullet wounds that they ignored. Our first counterattack was carried out in order to secure ammunition from the dead. Then we launched a second fierce attack to gain some control of the village. For more than twenty-four hours we retreated and attacked, using the arms and ammunition from those we had killed. Finally it seemed we had overpowered our rivals. The gunshots had stopped. The bushes behind the mango trees were still. The village, it seemed, was ours.

I was filling my backpack with ammunition from a hut when bullets began to rain on the village again. I was hit three times on my left foot. The first two bullets went in and out, and the last one stayed inside my foot. I couldn't walk, so I lay on the ground and shot into the bush where the bullets that hit me had come from. I released the entire round of the magazine into that one area. I remember feeling a tingle in my spine, but I was too drugged to really feel the pain, even though my foot had begun to swell. The sergeant doctor in my squad dragged me into one of the houses and tried to remove the bullet. Each time he raised his hands from my wound, I saw my blood all over his fingers. He constantly wiped my forehead with a soaked cloth. My eyes began to grow heavy and I fainted.

I do not know what happened, but when I woke up the next day I felt as if I had had nails hammered into the bones of my foot and my veins were being chiseled. I felt so much pain that I was unable to cry out loud; tears just fell from my eyes. The ceiling of the thatched-roof house where I was lying on a bed was blurry. My eyes struggled to become familiar with my surroundings. The gunfire had ceased and the village was quiet, so I assumed that the attackers had been successfully driven away. I felt a brief relief for that, but the pain in my foot returned, causing the veins in my entire body to tighten. I tucked my lips in, closed my heavy eyelids, and held tight to the edges of the wooden bed. I heard footsteps of people entering the house. They stood by my bed, and as soon as they began to speak, I recognized their voices.

"The boy is suffering and we have no medicine here to lessen his pain. Everything is at our former base." The sergeant doctor sighed and continued. "It will take six days to send someone to get the medicine and return. He will die from the pain by then."

"We have to send him to the former base, then. We need those provisions from that base, anyway. Do all you can to make sure that the boy stays alive," the lieutenant said, and walked out.

"Yes, sir," the sergeant doctor said, and sighed even longer. I slowly opened my eyes, and this time I could see clearly. I looked at his sweaty face and tried to smile a little. After having heard what they said, I

swore to myself that I would fight hard and do anything for my squad after my foot was healed.

"We will get you some help. Just be strong, young man," the sergeant doctor said gently, sitting by my bed and examining my leg.

"Yes, sir," I said, and tried to raise my hand to salute him, but he tenderly brought my hand down.

Two soldiers came into the house and told the sergeant doctor that the lieutenant had sent them to help take me back to our former base. They took me off the bed, placed me in a hammock, and carried me outside. The sun blinded me at first, and then the treetops of the village began to spin around as they carried me out of the village. The journey felt as if it took a month. I fainted and awoke many times, and each time I opened my eyes, it seemed as if the voices of those who carried me were fading into the distance.

Finally, we got to the base and the sergeant doctor went to work on me. I was injected with something. I had no idea we had needles at the base, but in my condition I couldn't ask what was happening. I was given cocaine, as I frantically demanded it. The doctor started operating on me before the drugs took effect. The other soldiers held my hands and stuffed a cloth into my mouth. The doctor stuck a crooked-looking scissors inside my wound and fished for the bullet. I could feel the edge of the metal inside me. My entire body was racked with pain. My bones became sour. Just when I thought I had had enough, the doctor abruptly pulled the bullet out. A piercing pain rushed up my spine from my waist to the back of my neck. I fainted.

When I regained consciousness, it was the morning of the next day and the drugs had kicked in. I looked about the room and saw on the table the instruments that had been used for my operation. Next to the instruments was a piece of cloth soaked with blood and I wondered how much blood I had lost during the operation. I reached my hands down to my foot and felt the bandage before I stood up and limped outside, where some soldiers and the sergeant were sitting. "Where is my weapon?" I asked them. The sergeant handed me the G3 that was on top of the mortar, and I began cleaning it. I shot a couple of rounds

sitting against a wall, ignoring the bandage on my foot and everyone else. I smoked marijuana, ate, and snorted cocaine and *brown brown*. That was all I did for three days before we left for the new base we had captured. When we left, we threw kerosene on the thatched-roof houses, lit them with matches, and fired a couple of RPGs into the walls. We always destroyed the bases we abandoned so that other squads wouldn't be able to use them. Two soldiers carried me in the hammock, but this time I had my gun and I looked left and right as we traveled the forest path.

At the new base, I stayed put for three weeks and appointed Alhaji to be in charge of my expedition squad. I busied myself with drugs and cleaning my gun. The sergeant doctor cleaned my wounds and would always say, "You are lucky." At that time I didn't think I was lucky, I thought I was brave and knew how to fight. Little did I know that surviving the war that I was in, or any other kind of war, was not a matter of feeling trained or brave. These were just things that made me feel I was immune from death.

At the end of the three weeks, we had the first batch of attackers; the lieutenant knew they were coming. I tightened the bandage around my foot, picked up my gun, and followed my squad to ambush the attackers before they got anywhere near our village. We killed most of them and captured a few whom we brought back to base. "These are the men responsible for the bullet holes in your foot. It's time to make sure they never shoot at you or your comrades." The lieutenant pointed at the prisoners. I am not sure if one of the captives was the shooter, but any captive would do at that time. So they were all lined up, six of them, with their hands tied. I shot them on their feet and watched them suffer for an entire day before finally shooting them in the head so that they would stop crying. Before I shot each man, I looked at him and saw how his eyes gave up hope and steadied before I pulled the trigger. I found their somber eyes irritating.

When I finished telling Esther the story, she had tears in her eyes and she couldn't decide whether to rub my head or hug me. In the end she

did neither, but said, "None of what happened was your fault. You were just a little boy, and anytime you want to tell me anything, I am here to listen." She stared at me, trying to catch my eye so she could assure me of what she had just said. I became angry and regretted that I had told someone, a civilian, about my experience. I hated the "It is not your fault" line that all the staff members said every time anyone spoke about the war.

I got up, and as I started walking out of the hospital, Esther began to speak. "I will arrange for a full checkup at the Connaught hospital." She paused and then continued, "Let me keep the Walkman. You don't want the others to envy you and steal it. I will be here every day, so you can come and listen to it anytime." I threw the Walkman at her and left, putting my fingers in my ears so I couldn't hear her say "It is not your fault."

That night, as I sat on the verandah listening to some of the boys discuss the volleyball game I had missed, I tried to think about my childhood days, but it was impossible, as I began getting flashbacks of the first time I slit a man's throat. The scene kept surfacing in my memory like lightning on a dark rainy night, and each time it happened, I heard a sharp cry in my head that made my spine hurt. I went inside and sat on my bed facing the wall and tried to stop thinking, but I had a severe migraine that night. I rolled my head on the cold cement floor, but it didn't stop. I went to the shower room and put my head under the cold water, but that didn't help either. The headache became so severe that I couldn't walk. I began to cry out loud. The night nurse was called. She gave me some sleeping tablets, but I still couldn't fall asleep, even after my migraine stopped. I couldn't face the nightmares I knew would come.

Esther got me to tell her some of my dreams. She would just listen and sit quietly with me. If she wanted to say anything, she would first ask, "Would you like me to say something about your dream?" Mostly I would say no and ask for the Walkman.

One afternoon Esther wasn't supposed to work, but she came to the center wearing a jeans skirt instead of her normal white uniform. She came in a white Toyota with two men. One of the men was the driver and the other was a field-worker for Children Associated with the War (CAW). This was a Catholic organization that partnered with UNICEF and NGOs to create centers like ours.

"We are going to the hospital for your examination, and after that we will give you a tour of the city." Esther was excited. "What do you say?" she asked me.

"Okay," I agreed. I was always excited to go to the city. "Can my friend Alhaji come?" I asked.

"Sure," she said, as if she knew I would ask.

As we drove into Freetown, the field-worker introduced himself: "My name is Leslie, it is a pleasure to meet you gentlemen." He turned around from the front seat and shook our hands. He sat back and studied us in the rearview mirror. Esther sat between Alhaji and me in the backseat. She tickled us and sometimes put her arms around us. I resisted this affection, and she would put both her arms around Alhaji. I would look away and she would softly elbow me before putting her arms around me again.

At the center of the city, Esther pointed out the post office, shops, the UN building, and the Cotton Tree. On Wallace Johnson Street, traders played loud music and rang bells to attract customers. Boys and girls carried coolers on their heads, shouting, "Cold ice, cold ice . . ." "Cold ginger beer . . ." The city always amazed me, with its busy people hurrying up and down and its traders noisily creating its unique sound. I was watching one ringing a bell and throwing the secondhand clothes he was selling up in the air to attract passersby, when our car stopped at the hospital where I was to be examined.

The doctor kept asking, "You feel anything?" as he touched and squeezed parts of my body where I had been wounded or shot. I was beginning to get upset, when he told me he was finished. I put my clothes on and came into the waiting area where Esther, Leslie, and Al-

haji sat. They were smiling, and Esther walked up and pulled on my nose to cheer me up. We strolled over to the market area we had driven past. I spent most of my time studying a rack of cassettes under a kiosk. Esther and Alhaji looked at soccer jerseys, and she bought him one. Leslie bought me a Bob Marley cassette. It was the *Exodus* album. I grew up on reggae music but had not heard it for a while. As I looked at the cassette, trying to remember the songs, my head began to hurt. Esther must have noticed what was happening to me, because she took the cassette from me and put it in her bag. "Who wants Coca-Cola?" she asked. I was excited and ran ahead to the Coca-Cola stand. She bought us each a bottle. It was cold and it teased my teeth. I savored it as we drove back to the center. I was in high spirits, smiling all the way.

Leslie took this opportunity to tell me that he had been assigned to me and a few other boys. Part of his job was to find a place for me to live after I had completed my rehabilitation. "If you ever need to talk to me at any time, go to Esther's office and she will call me, okay?" I nodded in agreement, with the Coca-Cola bottle in my mouth.

Before Esther got into the car that evening to go home, she pulled me aside and crouched down to look at me directly. I avoided eye contact, but she wasn't discouraged. She said, "I will keep the Bob Marley tape and bring it back tomorrow. So come by and listen to it."

She got in the car and waved as they drove off. Alhaji had already put on his jersey and was running around playing imaginary soccer. When we got back to the verandah, everyone marveled at Alhaji's new jersey. It was green, white, and blue, the colors of the national flag, and it had number 11 on the back. Alhaji walked up and down the verandah showing off. He finally stopped and announced, "I know the city like the back of my hand. I know where to get the goods."

He wore the jersey for almost a week without taking it off except to shower, because he knew that someone would try to steal it. He began doing business with his shirt. He would lend it to the boys for a few hours in exchange for toothpaste, soap, lunch, and so on. At the end of the week, he had a lot of toothpaste and other items that he sold at an outdoor market farther away from the center.

The day after we returned from the city, I went to the hospital immediately after class and waited for Esther. She was surprised to find me waiting for her at the doorstep. She rubbed my head and said, "I have good news. Your results from the test came. The doctor said nothing is seriously wrong. I just have to make sure you take certain medicines and in a few months we will do another checkup." She opened the door and I followed her without saying a word. She knew what I wanted. She gave me the Bob Marley cassette and the Walkman, along with a really nice notebook and pen.

"You can write the lyrics of the songs you like on the album and we can learn to sing them together, if you want." She began making a call.

How did she know I loved to write song lyrics? I thought, but didn't ask. Later, after I had been rehabilitated, I learned that Esther knew what I was interested in through the informal schooling at the center. In the short classes that we attended, we had been given questionnaires as a form of exam. The questions were general in the beginning. They didn't provoke any difficult memories. What kind of music do you like? Do you like reggae music? If so, who do you like? What do you listen to music for? These were the sorts of questions we would either discuss in class or write a short answer to. Our answers were then given to the nurses or whoever was in charge of our individual counseling sessions.

I began to look forward to Esther's arrival in the afternoons. I sang for her the parts of songs I had memorized that day. Memorizing lyrics left me little time to think about what had happened in the war. As I grew comfortable with Esther, I talked to her mainly about Bob Marley's lyrics and Run-D.M.C.'s, too. She mostly listened. Twice a week Leslie came and went over the lyrics with me. He loved telling me the history of Rastafarianism. I loved the history of Ethiopia and the story of the meeting of the Queen of Sheba and King Solomon. I related to the long distance they traveled and their determination to reach their

chosen destination. I wished that my journey had been as meaningful and as full of merriment as theirs.

It happened one night after I had fallen asleep while reading the lyrics of a song. I had not slept well for months now, and so far I had been able to avoid my nightmares by busying myself day and night with listening to and writing the lyrics of Bob Marley's songs. But that night I had a nightmare that was different from the ones I had been having. It began with my swimming in a river at Mattru Jong with my brother Junior. We dove to the bottom of the river and brought out oysters. We placed them on a rock and plunged to the deep again. We were competing with each other. In the end Junior got more oysters than I did. We ran home for dinner, racing each other. When we got there, the food was sitting in pots, but no one was around. I turned to ask my brother what was happening, but he was gone. I was alone and it was dark. I searched for a lamp and found it, but I was afraid. My forehead was sweating. I took the lamp to the living room, where a box of matches sat on the table. I lit the lamp, and as soon as the room was bright, I saw men standing all around. They had circled me in the dark. I could see their bodies—except for their faces, which were darker, as if they were headless walking beings. Some were barefoot and others wore army boots. All had guns and knives. They began to shoot, stab, and slice each other's throats. But they would rise and then get killed again. Their blood began to fill the room, its tide quickly rising. They wailed, causing me great anguish. I held my ears to stop hearing them, but I began to feel their pain. Each time a person was stabbed, I felt it worse; I saw the blood dripping from the same part of my body as that of the victim. I began to cry as the blood filled the room. The men disappeared and the door immediately opened, letting the blood out with a rush. I went outside with the blood all over me and saw my mother, father, older and younger brother. They were all smiling as if nothing had happened, as if we had been together all this time.

"Sit down, Mr. Troublesome," my father said.

"Don't mind him," my mother chuckled.

I sat down facing my father, but couldn't eat with them. My body had gotten numb, and my family didn't seem to notice that I was covered with blood. It began to rain and my family ran into the house, leaving me outside. I sat in the rain for a while, letting it clean the blood off me. I got up to go into the house, but it wasn't there. It had disappeared.

I was looking around confused when I woke up from the dream. I had fallen off my bed.

I got up and went outside and sat on the stoop looking into the night. I was still confused, as I couldn't tell whether I had had a dream or not. It was the first time I had dreamt of my family since I started running away from the war.

The next afternoon I went to see Esther, and she could tell that something was bothering me. "Do you want to lie down?" she asked, almost whispering.

"I had this dream last night. I don't know what to make of it," I said, looking away.

She came and sat next to me and asked, "Would you like to tell me about it?"

I didn't reply.

"Or just talk about it out loud and pretend I am not here. I won't say anything. Only if you ask me." She sat quietly beside me. The quietness lasted for a while, and for some reason I began to tell her my dream.

At first she just listened to me, and then gradually she started asking questions to make me talk about the lives I had lived before and during the war. "None of these things are your fault," she would always say sternly at the end of every conversation. Even though I had heard that phrase from every staff member—and frankly I had always hated it—I began that day to believe it. It was the genuine tone in Esther's voice that made the phrase finally begin to sink into my mind and heart. That didn't make me immune from the guilt that I felt for what I had done. Nonetheless, it lightened my burdensome

memories and gave me strength to think about things. The more I spoke about my experiences to Esther, the more I began to cringe at the gruesome details, even though I didn't let her know that. I didn't completely trust Esther. I only liked talking to her because I felt that she didn't judge me for what I had been a part of; she looked at me with the same inviting eyes and welcoming smile that said I was a child.

One evening Esther took me to her house and made me dinner. After dinner we went for a walk in the city. We went to the wharf at the end of Rawdon Street. The moon was out that night and we sat at the jetty and watched it. I told Esther about the shapes I used to see in the moon when I was much younger. She was fascinated. We looked at the moon and described the shapes we saw to each other. I saw the woman cradling the baby in her arms, just as I used to. On our way back to her house, I didn't look at the city lights any longer. I looked into the sky and felt as if the moon was following us.

When I was a child, my grandmother told me that the sky speaks to those who look and listen to it. She said, "In the sky there are always answers and explanations for everything: every pain, every suffering, joy, and confusion." That night I wanted the sky to talk to me.

18

One day during my fifth month at Benin Home, I was sitting on a rock behind the classrooms when Esther came by. She sat next to me without uttering a word. She had my lyrics notebook in her hand. "I feel as if there is nothing left for me to be alive for," I said slowly. "I have no family, it is just me. No one will be able to tell stories about my childhood." I sniffled a bit.

Esther put her arms around me and pulled me closer to her. She shook me to get my full attention before she started. "Think of me as your family, your sister."

"But I didn't have a sister," I replied.

"Well, now you do. You see, this is the beauty of starting a new family. You can have different kinds of family members." She looked at me directly, waiting for me to say something.

"Okay, you can be my sister—temporarily." I emphasized the last word.

"That is fine with me. So will you come to see your temporary sister tomorrow, please." She covered her face as if she would be sad if I said no.

"Okay, okay, no need to be sad," I said, and we both laughed a bit.

Esther's laugh always reminded me of Abigail, a girl I had seen during my first two semesters of secondary school in Bo Town. Sometimes I wished Esther was Abigail, so that we could talk about past times before the war. I wanted us to laugh with all our beings, longer and without any worries, as I had done with Abigail but couldn't anymore. At the end of each laugh there was always some feeling of sadness that I couldn't escape.

At times I stared at Esther while she was busy doing paperwork. Whenever she sensed my eyes examining her face, she would throw a folded paper at me without looking in my direction. I would smile and put the folded paper in my pocket, pretending that the blank paper was a special note she had written to me.

That afternoon, as Esther walked away from where I sat on the rock, she continually turned around to wave at me, until she disappeared behind one of the halls. I smiled back and forgot about my loneliness for the time being.

The following day Esther told me that there were visitors coming to the center. The staff had asked the boys to hold a talent show. Basically, we were all supposed to do anything that we were good at.

"You can sing your reggae songs," Esther suggested.

"How about a Shakespeare monologue?" I asked.

"Okay, but I still think you should do some music." She put her arms around me. I had become very fond of Esther, but refused to show it. Whenever she hugged me or put her arms around me, I would quickly break loose. Whenever she left, though, I watched her go. She had a unique and graceful walk. It was almost as if she sailed on the ground. I would always run to see her after class to tell her about my day. My friends Mambu and Alhaji made fun of me. "Your girlfriend is here, Ishmael. Are we going to see you at all this afternoon?"

The visitors from the European Commission, the UN, UNICEF, and several NGOs arrived at the center in a convoy of cars one afternoon. They wore suits and ties and shook hands with each other before they started walking around the center. Some of the boys followed behind

them, and I sat on the verandah with Mambu. All of the visitors were smiling, sometimes adjusting their ties or taking notes on the writing pads they carried. Some of them looked into our sleeping places, and the others took off their jackets and played hand-wrestling games and tug-of-war with boys. Afterward, they were shepherded into the dining room, which had been set up quite nicely for the talent show. Mr. Kamara, the director of the center, gave a few remarks, and then boys started telling Bra Spider and monster stories and performing tribal dances. I read a monologue from *Julius Caesar* and performed a short hip-hop play about the redemption of a former child soldier that I had written with Esther's encouragement.

After that event, I became popular at the center. Mr. Kamara called me to his office one morning and said, "You and your friends really impressed those visitors. They know now that it is possible for you boys to be rehabilitated." I was just happy to have had the chance to perform again, in peace. But Mr. Kamara was in high spirits.

"How would you like to be the spokesperson for this center?" he asked me.

"Ah! What will I have to do or say?" I hesitantly asked. I was beginning to think that this whole thing was being blown out of proportion.

"Well, to begin with, if there is an event on the issue of child soldiers, we will write you something to read. Once you get comfortable, you can begin writing your own speech, or whatever you want." Mr. Kamara's serious face told me he meant what he was saying. Not more than a week later, I was talking at gatherings in Freetown about child soldiering and how it must be stopped. "We can be rehabilitated," I would emphasize, and point to myself as an example. I would always tell people that I believe children have the resilience to outlive their sufferings, if given a chance.

I was at the end of my sixth month when my childhood friend Mohamed arrived at the center. The last time I had seen him was when I left Mogbwemo with Talloi and Junior for a performance in Mattru Jong. He couldn't come with us that day as he was helping his father

work on their kitchen. I had often wondered about what had happened to him, but I never thought I would see him again. I was returning from a gathering at St. Edward's Secondary School that evening when I saw this light-skinned, skinny boy with bony cheeks sitting on the stoop by himself. He looked familiar, but I wasn't sure if I knew him. As I approached, he jumped up.

"Hey, man, remember me?" he exclaimed, and began doing the running man and singing "Here Comes the Hammer."

I joined him, and we did some of the moves we had learned together for a group dance to this particular song. We high-fived each other and then hugged. He was still taller than me. We sat together on the stoop and briefly talked about our childhood pranks. "Sometimes I think about those great times we had dancing at talent shows, practicing new dances, playing soccer until we couldn't see the ball . . . It seems like all those things happened a very long time ago. It is really strange, you know," he said, looking away for a bit.

"I know, I know . . ." I said.

"You were a troublesome boy," he reminded me.

"I know, I know . . ."

It was at the beginning of my seventh month at the rehabilitation center when Leslie came again to have a chat. I was called to a room in the hospital where he waited. When I walked into the room, he stood up to greet me. His face showed both grief and happiness. I had to ask him what the matter was.

"Are you all right?" I studied him.

"Yes." He scratched his head and mumbled something to himself. "I am sorry about bringing up this matter again. I know it will upset you, but I have to be honest with you," Leslie said. He walked around the room and began: "We cannot locate any immediate family member of yours, so we have to find you a foster family here in the city. I hope that will be fine with you. I will check on you after you've completed your rehabilitation to see how you are doing in your new life."

He sat down and, looking at me, continued, "Well, do you have any concerns or questions?"

"Yes, I think so," I said. I told him that before the war my father had spoken about my uncle, who lived in the city. I did not even know what he looked like, much less where he lived.

"What is his name?" Leslie asked.

"His name is Tommy and my father told me he is a carpenter," I replied.

Leslie was writing my mysterious uncle's name in his notebook. After he was done scribbling his notes, he said, "No promises, but I will see what I can find out. I will get back to you soon." He paused, tapped me on the shoulder, and continued, "I hear you are doing great. Keep it up."

He walked out of the room. I didn't count on him being able to find my uncle in such a big city, especially with the little information I had provided. I left the room and went to see Esther at the other side of the building. She was busy putting away the new supplies of bandages and medicines in the cabinets that hung on the walls of the room. As soon as she noticed that I was standing in the doorway, she began to smile, but continued doing her work. I sat and waited for her to finish.

"So how did the meeting with Leslie go?" she asked as she put the last box of medicine away. I told her everything he had said, ending with my skepticism about whether Leslie would be able to find my uncle. She listened carefully and said, "You never know. He might find him."

One Saturday afternoon, as I chatted with Esther and Mohamed, Leslie walked in, smiling widely. I suspected he had found me a foster home and that I was going to be "repatriated"—the term used to describe the process of reuniting ex–child soldiers with their former communities.

"What is the good news?" Esther asked. Leslie examined my curious face, then walked back to the door and opened it. A tall man

walked in. He had a wide, genuine smile that made his face look like a little boy's. His hands were long and he looked at me directly, smiling. He wasn't as light-skinned as my father.

"This is your uncle," Leslie proudly announced.

"How de body, Ishmael?" the man said, and walked over to where I was sitting. He bent over and embraced me long and hard. My arms hung loose at my sides.

What if he is just some man pretending to be my uncle? I thought. The man let go of me. He was crying, which is when I began to believe that he was really my family, because his crying was genuine and men in my culture rarely cried.

He crouched on his heels next to me and began, "I am sorry I never came to see you all those years. I wish I had met you before today. But we can't go back now. We just have to start from here. I am sorry for your losses. Leslie told me everything." He looked at Leslie with thankful eyes and continued, "After you are done here, you can come and live with me. You are my son. I don't have much, but I will give you a place to sleep, food, and my love." He put his arms around me.

No one had called me son in a very long time. I didn't know what to say. Everyone, it seemed, was waiting for my response. I turned to my uncle, smiled at him, and said, "Thank you for coming to see me. I really appreciate that you have offered me to stay with you. But I don't even know you." I put my head down.

"Like I said, we cannot go back. But we can start from here. I am your family and that is enough for us to begin liking each other," he replied, rubbing my head and laughing a little.

I got up and hugged my uncle, and he embraced me harder than he had the first time and kissed me on my forehead. We briefly stood in silence before he began to speak again. "I can't stay long, because I have to finish some work at the other part of the city. But from now on, I will visit you every weekend. And if it is okay, I would like you to come home with me at some point, to see where I live and to meet my wife and children—your family." My uncle's voice trembled; he was

trying to hold back sobs. He rubbed my head with one hand and shook Leslie's hand with the other.

"Sir, from now on, you will be informed about how this young man is doing," Leslie said.

"Thank you," my uncle replied. He held my hand and I walked with him toward the van that he and Leslie had arrived in. Before my uncle got into the car with Leslie, he hugged me again and said, "You look like your father, and you remind me of him when we were growing up. I hope you are not as stubborn as he was." He laughed, and I did, too. Esther, Mohamed, and I waved them off.

"He seems like a nice man," Esther said as soon as the van disappeared from our sight.

"Congratulations, man, you have a family member in the city away from all the madness," Mohamed said.

"I guess so," I said, but I didn't know what to do in my happy state. I was still hesitant to let myself let go, because I still believed in the fragility of happiness.

"Come on, man, cheer up." Mohamed pulled my ears, and he and Esther lifted me up and carried me back to the hospital, laughing. At the hospital Esther put the Bob Marley cassette on the tape player, and we all began to mime "Three Little Birds" together. "Don't worry about a thing," we sang, "'cause every little thing gonna be all right . . ."

That night I sat on the verandah with Mambu, Alhaji, and Mohamed. We were quiet, as usual. The sound of an ambulance somewhere in the city took over the silence of the night. I began to wonder about what my uncle was doing at that moment. I imagined him gathering his family to tell them about me. I could see him sobbing during his account and his family gradually joining him in crying. Part of me wanted them to cry as much as they could before I met them, as I always felt uncomfortable when people cried because of what I had been through. I looked at Alhaji and Mambu, who were staring into the dark night. I wanted to tell them about the discovery of my uncle, but I felt guilty, since no

one from their families had been found. I also didn't want to destroy the silence that had returned after the ambulance's wailing died down.

As my uncle promised, he came to visit every weekend.

"My uncle is coming. I saw him down the road by the mango tree," I told Esther the first weekend after his initial visit.

"You sound excited." She put her pen down. She examined my face for a while and then continued. "I told you he seemed like a good man."

My uncle walked through the door and wiped his sweaty forehead with his handkerchief before hugging me. He said hello to Esther during our embrace. As soon as we stood apart, he began to smile so widely that my face relaxed and I too began to smile. He put his bag on the floor and pulled out some biscuits and a bottle of cold ginger beer.

"I thought you might need some fuel for our walk," he said as he handed me the presents.

"You two should take the gravel road up the hill," Esther suggested. My uncle and I nodded in agreement.

"I won't be here when you return. It is nice meeting you again, sir," she said, looking at my uncle. She turned toward me. "I will see you tomorrow."

My uncle and I left the hospital room and started walking in the direction Esther had suggested. We were quiet at first. I listened to the sound of our footsteps on the dusty road. I could hear the rattling of lizards crossing the road to climb the nearby mango tree. I could feel my uncle's eyes on me.

"How is everything? Are they treating you well at this place?" my uncle asked.

"Everything is fine here," I replied.

"I hope you are not as quiet as your father." He wiped his forehead again and then asked, "Did your father ever talk about his home?"

"Sometimes he did, although not as much as I wished he had." I raised my lowered head and briefly met my uncle's kind, inviting eyes

before looking away. The gravel road was getting narrower as we approached the bottom of the hill. I told him that my father had mentioned him in every one of his stories of a troublesome childhood. Told him that my father had recounted to me about the time they went to the bush to fetch firewood and accidentally shook a beehive. The bees chased them and they ran toward the village. Since my father was shorter, most of the bees concentrated on my uncle's head. They ran and dove into a river, but the bees circled on top of the water waiting for them to resurface. They had to catch their breath, so they got out of the water and ran to their village, bringing the bees with them.

"Yes, I remember. Everyone was upset with us for bringing the bees to the village, because they stung the old men who couldn't run fast and some younger children. Your father and I locked the door, hid under the bed, and laughed at the commotion." My uncle was giggling and I couldn't help but laugh. After he stopped laughing, he sighed and said, "Ah, your father and I, we did too many troublesome things. If you are as troublesome as we were, I will give you some leeway, because it wouldn't be fair for me to get down on you." He put his arm around my shoulder.

"I think my troublesome days are long gone," I said sadly.

"Ah, you are still a boy, you have time to be a little more troublesome," my uncle said. We became quiet again and listened to the evening wind whizzing through the trees.

I loved the walks with my uncle, because they gave me a chance to talk about my childhood, about growing up with my father and older brother. I needed to talk about those good times before the war. But the more I talked about my father, the more I missed my mother and little brother, too. I didn't grow up with them. I felt as if I missed that chance and would never get it again, and that made me sad. I spoke to my uncle about it, but he just listened, because he knew neither my mother nor my little brother. So in order to balance things out for me, he made me talk about the time my family lived in Mattru Jong, when my parents were together. Even then, there wasn't that much to say, as my parents separated when I was very young.

I got to know my uncle quite well during our walks, and I began to eagerly await his arrival on weekends. He always brought me a present and would tell me about his week. He talked about the roof he had built for someone's house, the beautiful table he had to complete the next day by polishing it, how well my cousins were doing in school. He said hello from his wife. I in turn would tell him about the table tennis and soccer tournaments I had participated in, the performance we had given for visitors, if there was any that week. We walked so many times on the same gravel road that I could close my eyes and still avoid all the big rocks on the road.

One weekend my uncle took me to meet his family. It was a Saturday and the sun was so bright that we couldn't see our shadows on the ground. He lived in New England Ville, a hilly area in the western part of Freetown. My uncle came to Benin Home earlier than usual to get me. We took a noisy lorry to the center of the city. My uncle and I were quiet for a while, but began to laugh, because the two men sitting next to us were discussing which palm wine was better, one that was tapped from a standing palm tree or one from a fallen tree. The men were still arguing when we got off the lorry. We walked slowly toward my uncle's house, his arm around my shoulders. I was happy walking with my uncle, but I worried whether his family would accept me the way he had—without asking me anything about my war years.

As we walked up the hill, nearing my uncle's home, he pulled me aside and said, "I told only my wife about your past life as a soldier. I kept it secret from my children. I don't think they will understand now as my wife and I do. I hope it is okay with you." Relieved, I nodded, and we continued on.

Immediately after a bend and a rise on the gravel road we came upon my uncle's house. It overlooked the city, and from the verandah one could see the ships in the bay. It was a beautiful view of the city, this place that was to become my home. The house had no electricity or running water, and the kitchen that stood apart from the house was made entirely of zinc. Under a mango tree a few meters from the yard

was the latrine and the *kule*—open-air shower. It reminded me of Mattru Jong.

When we walked onto the verandah, my uncle's wife came out, her face glowing as if she had polished it all her life. She stood at the doorway and tied her wrapper before proceeding to embrace me so tightly that I felt my nose and lips being squashed against her arms. She released me, stood back, and pinched my cheeks.

"Welcome, my son," she said. She was a short woman with very dark skin, round cheekbones, and bright eyes. My uncle didn't have children of his own, so he raised the children of family members as his own. There were four of them—Allie, the oldest one; Matilda; Kona; and Sombo, the littlest, who was six years old. They had all stopped doing their chores and came onto the verandah to hug their "brother," as my uncle explained my relation to them.

"It is good to have another boy in the family," Allie said after he hugged me. He and my uncle laughed and I smiled. I was very quiet that afternoon. After the introduction, everyone went about his or her business. I was left with my aunt and uncle, and we sat on the verandah. I loved the view from the house and kept looking toward the city. Each time I turned to look at my uncle, he was smiling widely. My aunt continually brought us huge plates of rice, fish, stew, and plantains. She made me eat so much that my stomach became too big. After we had finished eating, my uncle showed me his carpentry tools and his worktable, which was outside, occupying most of the little yard.

"If you are interested in carpentry, I will be glad to have you as my apprentice. But knowing your father, I could probably guess that you want to go to school," my uncle said. I smiled and didn't say a word. Allie came back and asked Uncle if it was okay for me to go with him to a local soccer match. My uncle said only if I wanted to. I went with Allie down the street to a field in an area called Brookfields.

"I am happy that you will be staying with us, we can share my room," Allie said as we waited for the game to begin. He was older than I was and had finished secondary school. He was jovial and very disciplined. It showed in his manners. He spoke well and to the point.

Before the game started, a girl waved to us from the other side of the field. She had the most beautiful and open smile, and she was laughing a lot. I was about to ask who she was when Allie spoke. "She is our cousin, but she lives across the street with a foster family. Her name is Aminata. You will get to meet her." Aminata was the daughter of my father's second brother, who had a different mother. I later became closer to her and Allie than to the other children in my new family.

During my many walks with my uncle, I learned that my grandfather had many wives and that my father had brothers he never talked about. My father was the only child from his mother's side.

At the soccer match, all I could think about was the discovery of a family I never thought existed. I was happy, but I had become accustomed to not showing it. Allie laughed throughout the game, and I couldn't even get myself to smile. When we returned, my uncle was on the verandah, waiting to take me back to the center. He held my hand as we walked to the bus station. I was quiet the entire trip. I spoke only to thank my uncle after he had given me transportation money to use if I decided to visit on my own. At the entrance of the center, my uncle hugged me, and as we parted, he turned around and said, "I'll see you soon again, my son."

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TWO WEEKS EARLIER, Leslie had told me that I was to be "repatriated" and reinstated into normal society. I was to live with my uncle. Those two weeks felt longer than the eight months I had spent at Benin Home. I was worried about living with a family. I had been on my own for years and had taken care of myself without any guidance from anyone. I was afraid that I might look ungrateful to my uncle, who didn't have to take me in, if I distanced myself from the family unit. I was worried about what to do when my nightmares and migraines took hold of me. How was I going to explain my sadness, which I am unable to hide as it takes over my face, to my new family, especially the children? I didn't have answers to these questions, and when I told Esther about them, she told me that everything was going to be fine, but I wanted more than just a reassurance.

I lay in my bed night after night staring at the ceiling and thinking, Why have I survived the war? Why was I the last person in my immediate family to be alive? I didn't know. I stopped playing soccer and table tennis. I went to see Esther every day, though, and would say hello, ask how she was, and then get lost in my own head thinking about what life was going to be like after the center. Sometimes Esther would

have to snap her fingers in front of my face to bring me back. At night, I quietly sat on the verandah with Mohamed, Alhaji, and Mambu. I wouldn't notice when they left the bench that we all sat on.

When the day of my repatriation finally came, I packed my few belongings in a plastic bag. I had a pair of sneakers, four T-shirts, three shorts, toothpaste, a toothbrush, a bottle of Vaseline lotion, a Walkman and some cassettes, two long-sleeved shirts, and two pairs of pants and a tie—these had been bought for me to wear for my conference talks. I waited, my heart beating faster, the way it had when my mother dropped me off for the first time at a boarding school. The van was heard galloping on the gravel road, making its way to the center. Picking up my plastic bag, I walked to the hospital building where I was to wait. Mohamed, Alhaji, and Mambu were sitting on the front steps, and Esther emerged, smiling. The van made a turn and halted at the side of the road. It was late afternoon, the sky was still blue, but the sun was dull, hiding behind the only cloud. Leslie sat in the front seat and waited for me to board, so he could take me to my new home.

"I have to go," I said to everyone, my voice shaking. I extended my hand to Mohamed, but instead of shaking it, he leapt up and hugged me. Mambu embraced me while Mohamed was still holding me. He squeezed me hard, as if he knew it was goodbye forever. (After I left the center, Mambu went back to the front lines, because his family refused to take him in.) At the end of the hug, Alhaji shook hands with me. We squeezed each other's hand and stared into each other's eyes, remembering all that we had been through. I tapped him on the shoulder and he smiled, as he understood that I was saying we were going to be fine. I never saw him again, since he continually moved from one foster home to another. At the end of our handshake, Alhaji stepped back, saluted me, and whispered, "Goodbye, squad leader." I tapped him on the shoulder again; I couldn't salute him in return. Esther stepped forward, her eyes watery. She hugged me tighter than she ever had. I didn't return her hug very well, as I was busy trying to hold back my tears. After she let go, she gave me a piece of paper. "This is my address. Come by anytime," she said.

I went to Esther's home several weeks after that. My timing wasn't good, as she was on her way to work. She hugged me, and this time I squeezed back; this made her laugh after we stood apart. She looked me straight in the eyes. "Come and see me next weekend so we can have more time to catch up, okay?" she said. She was wearing her white uniform and was on her way to take on other traumatized children. It must be tough living with so many war stories. I was just living with one, mine, and it was difficult, as the nightmares about what had happened continued to torment me. Why does she do it? Why do they all do it? I thought as we went our separate ways. It was the last time I saw her. I loved her but never told her.

My uncle picked me up in his arms as soon as I got off the van and carried me onto the verandah. "I welcome you today like a chief. Your feet may touch the ground when you lose your chieftaincy, which begins now," my uncle said, laughing, as he set me down. I smiled but was nervous. My four cousins—Allie and the three girls, Matilda, Kona, and Sombo—took turns hugging me, their faces bright with smiles.

"You must be hungry; I cooked you a welcome home *sackie thomboi*," my aunt said. She had made cassava leaves with chicken just to welcome me. To have chicken prepared for anyone was a rarity, and it was considered an honor. People ate chicken only on holidays like Christmas or New Year's. Auntie Sallay held my hand and made me sit on a bench next to my uncle. She brought the food out, and my uncle and I ate together from the same plate with our hands. It was a good meal and I licked my fingers, enjoying the rich palm oil. My uncle looked at me, laughing, and said to his wife, "Sallay, you have done it again. This one is here to stay."

After we washed our hands, my cousin Allie, twenty-one years old, was called to the verandah and asked to show me where I was to sleep. I took my plastic bag and followed him to another house that was behind the one with my uncle's bedroom. The passageway between the houses was like a pathway with stones carefully placed on each side of the walkway.

Allie held the door for me as I entered the clean, organized room. The bed was made, the clothes that hung on a post were ironed, the shoes were properly lined on a rack, and the brown tile floor was shiny. He pulled a mattress from under the bed and explained to me that I would sleep on the floor, as he and his roommate shared the bed. I was to fold the mattress and put it back under the bed every morning. After he was done explaining how I could contribute to keeping the room clean and in order, I went back to the verandah and sat with my uncle. He put his arm around me and pulled on my nose.

"Are you familiar with the city?" Uncle asked.

"Not really."

"Allie will take you around sometime, if you like. Or you can venture out there yourself, get lost, and find your way. It will be a good way to get to know the city." He chuckled. We heard a call for prayer that echoed throughout the city.

"I have to go for prayers. If you need anything, ask your cousins," he said, taking a kettle from the stoop and beginning to perform ablution. After he was done, he walked down the hill to a nearby mosque. My aunt came out of the room, tying her head with a cloth, and followed my uncle.

I sighed, sitting alone on the verandah. I was no longer nervous, but I missed Benin Home. Later that night, when my uncle and aunt returned from prayers, all my new family gathered around a cassette player on the verandah to listen to stories. My uncle rubbed his hands, pressed the play button, and a famous storyteller named Leleh Gbomba began telling a story about a man who had forgotten his heart at home when he went traveling around the world. I had heard the story in my grandmother's village when I was younger. My new family laughed throughout the telling of the story. I only smiled and was very quiet that night, as I was to be for a while more. But gradually I adjusted to being around people who were happy all the time.

A day or two after I had started living with my uncle, Allie gave me my first pair of dress shoes, a dress belt, and a stylish shirt.

"If you want to be a gentleman, you have to dress like one." He laughed. I was about to ask him why he had given me these things when he began to explain: "This is a secret. I want to take you to a dance tonight so you can enjoy yourself. We will leave after Uncle goes to bed."

That night we snuck out and went dancing at a pub. As Allie and I walked, I remembered when I used to go dancing back in secondary school with friends. It seemed so long ago, but I still recalled the different names of the dance nights: "Back to School," "Pens Down," "Bob Marley Night," and many more. We would dance until cockcrow, then take off our sweaty shirts, enjoying the cool morning breeze as we walked back to our dorms. I was truly happy back then.

"We are here," Allie said, shaking my hand and snapping his fingers. There were lots of young people waiting in line to get into the pub. The boys were well dressed, their pants ironed and shirts tucked in. The girls wore beautiful flowered dresses and high heels that made them taller than some of the boys they were with. Their lips were also painted with bright colors. Allie was excited and he chatted with the people in front of us. I was quiet, looking at the different colored lights that hung at the entrance. There was one big blue light that made people's white shirts especially beautiful. We finally made it to the entrance and Allie paid for the two of us. The music was extremely loud inside, but then again, I had not been to a pub for many years. I followed Allie to the bar area, where we found a table and sat on two high stools.

"I am going to the dance floor," Allie announced, screaming so that I could hear him. He disappeared into the crowd. I sat for a while scoping out the place, and slowly began dancing by myself in the corner of the dance floor. Suddenly an extremely dark girl whose smile illuminated the dance floor pulled me and led me to the middle of the floor before I could resist. She started dancing close to me. I looked back at Allie, who was standing at the bar. He gave me a thumbs-up, and I began to move slowly until the rhythm took over. I danced one *raggamorphy* song with the girl, and then there was a slow jam. She pulled me toward her and I held her hand delicately as we swayed to

the music. I could feel her heart beat. She tried to catch my eyes, but I looked away. In the middle of the song, some older boy pulled her away from me. She waved as she was being escorted through the crowd and toward the door.

"You are smooth, man. I saw that." Allie was now standing next to me. He began walking toward the bar, and I followed him. We leaned against the counter, facing the dance floor. He was still smiling.

"I really didn't do anything. She just wanted to dance with me and I couldn't say no," I said.

"Exactly, you say nothing and the women come to you," he teased. I didn't want to talk anymore. A memory of a town we had attacked during a school dance had been triggered. I could hear the terrified cries of teachers and students, could see the blood cover the dance floor. Allie tapped me on the shoulder and brought me back to the present. I smiled at him, but I was deeply sad for the rest of our stay. We danced all night and returned before Uncle woke up.

A few nights later, I returned to the pub alone and saw the same girl. She told me her name was Zainab.

"Sorry about last time," she said. "My brother wanted to go home and I had to go with him, otherwise my parents would have gotten worried."

Like me, she was alone this night.

I dated her for three weeks, but then she began to ask too many questions. Where was I from? What was it like growing up *upline*? *Upline* is a Krio word mostly used in Freetown to refer to the backwardness of the inner country, its inhabitants, and their mannerisms. I was unwilling to tell her anything, so she broke it off. That was the story of my relationship with girls in Freetown. They wanted to know about me, and I wasn't ready to tell them. It was okay. I liked being alone.

Leslie came to see me. He asked how I was doing and what I had been up to. I wanted to tell him that I had had one severe migraine wherein the image of a burning village flashed in my mind, followed by wailings of many voices; that I had felt the back of my neck tighten and my

head become heavy, as if a huge rock had been placed on it. Instead, I told him only that everything was fine. Leslie pulled out a pad and began writing something on it. When he was done he turned to me and said, "I have a proposition for you. It is important."

"Always the bearer of news, aren't you?" I joked.

"This is important." He studied the pad he held in his hand and continued. "There is an interview for two children to be sent to the United Nations in New York, in America, to talk about the lives of children in Sierra Leone and what can be done about it. Mr. Kamara, the director of your former rehabilitation center, recommended that you go for the interview. Here is the address, if you are interested." He tore the paper off and handed it to me. As I was looking at it, he went on: "If you want me to go with you, come by the office. Dress up for the interview, okay?" He searched my face for an answer. I didn't say anything. Afterward, he left with a smile on his face that said he knew I would show up for the interview.

The day of the interview finally arrived, and I dressed casually for it. I wore sneakers, nice black pants, and a green long-sleeved shirt. I tucked my shirt in as I walked down to Siaka Stevens Street to the address that Leslie had given me. I told no one where I was going. I had wanted to talk to Allie about it, but hesitated, because I knew that if I did, I would have to tell him more than he knew about me, more than my uncle had told him.

It was almost midday, but the tar road was already too hot. I watched a flying plastic bag land on the road and immediately begin to melt. *Poda podas* went by, their apprentices shouting the names of their destinations to attract customers. A few feet ahead a vehicle had stopped on the side of the street and the driver was pouring water from a jerrican into its overheated engine. "This car drinks more water than a cow," he grumbled. I was walking slowly, but my undershirt got soaked with sweat.

When I arrived at the address, I stood in front of the tall building and marveled at its height before entering. In the lobby there were about twenty boys, all dressed better than I. Their parents were giving

them last-minute points for the interview. I studied the big cement columns in the building. I liked thinking about how people had managed to create and erect such large cement pillars. I was busy examining one pillar when a man tapped me on the shoulder and asked if I was there for the interview. I nodded, and he pointed to the open metal box that all the boys now stood in. I hesitantly walked into the congested box and the boys laughed at me, as I stood there unaware that I had to press the button for the box to start moving. I had never been in a box like this before. Where was it taking us? A boy in a blue shirt squeezed his way past me and pressed the number 5 button. It lit up, and the box closed on us. I looked about me and saw that everyone was calm, so I knew that there was no need to worry. The box began to move up, fast. The other boys remained calm, adjusting their ties and shirts. When the doors opened, I was the last to step out into a large open room with brown leather couches. There was a man sitting at the desk at the far wall and he motioned for me to find a place to sit. The other boys had already seated themselves. I sat away from them and looked about the room. Through the window I could see the tops of other buildings, and I decided to get up and look around to see how high up from the ground we were. As I was making my way to the window, my name was called.

A really light-skinned man (I couldn't tell if he was Sierra Leonean or not) sat in a big black leather chair. "Please have a seat and I will be with you in a moment," he said in English, and he shuffled through some papers, picked up a phone, and dialed a number. When the person picked up on the other end, the man just said, "It is a go-ahead," and hung up.

He turned toward me and eyed me for a bit before he began to question me, speaking very slowly, in English.

"What is your name?" he asked, looking at the list of names on his desk.

"Ishmael," I said, and he checked my name before I could tell him my last name.

"Why do you think you should go to the UN to present the situation affecting children in this country?" He raised his head from the list and looked at me.

"Well, I am from the part of the country where I have not only suffered because of the war but I have also participated in it and undergone rehabilitation. So I have a better understanding, based on my experience of the situation, than any of these city boys who are here for the interview. What are they going to say when they go over there? They don't know anything about the war except the news of it." I looked at the man, who was smiling, and it made me a bit angry.

"What else do you have to say?" he asked.

"Nothing, except that I am wondering why you are smiling." I sat back in the soft leather chair.

"You can go now," the man said, still smiling.

I got up and left the room, leaving the door open behind me. I walked toward the box and stood by it. I stood there and waited for several minutes, but nothing happened. I didn't know what to do to make the box come upstairs. The boys who were waiting for the interview began to laugh. Then the man who sat behind the desk walked toward me and pushed a button on the wall. The doors immediately opened and I walked in. The man pressed the number 1 button and waved to me as the doors closed. I tried to find something to hold on to, but the box was already at street level. I walked out of the building and stood outside examining its structure. I have to tell Mohamed about the inside of this marvelous building when I see him, I thought.

I walked home slowly that afternoon, watching the cars go by. I didn't think much about the interview except that I still wondered why the man who had interviewed me had smiled. I meant what I said and it was not a funny matter. At some point during my walk, a convoy of cars, military vans, and Mercedes-Benzes festooned with national flags passed by. Their windows were tinted, so I couldn't see who rode in them, and they were too fast, anyway. When I got home, I asked Allie

if he knew of a powerful man who parades the city in such a way. He told me that it was Tejan Kabbah, the new president, who had won the election under the banner of the Sierra Leone Peoples Party (SLPP) in March 1996, eight months earlier. I had never heard of this man.

That night my uncle brought home a bag of groundnut. Auntie Sallay boiled the groundnut and put it out on a large tray. All of us, my uncle, his wife, Allie, Kona, Matilda, Sombo, and I, sat around the tray and ate the groundnut, listening to another recording of Leleh Gbomba's. He was telling a story about how he became friends with another boy before they were born. Their mothers were neighbors and were pregnant at the same time, so the two of them met while they were still in their mothers' bellies. The storyteller vividly described the landscape of their pre-infant life: the hunting they did, the games they played, how they listened to our world . . . It was a very funny story that took shockingly impossible twists and turns and left us in awe. My uncle, aunt, and cousins laughed so hard that they couldn't stop for hours, even after the story had ended. I began to laugh, too, because my uncle was trying to say something and he was so possessed with laughter that he couldn't say a complete word without launching into another fit of laughter. "We should do this again. Laughing like this is good for the soul," my uncle said, still laughing a little. We wished one another a good night and went to our different sleeping places.

One morning Mr. Kamara turned up at my uncle's house in the Children Associated with the War (CAW) van. He had told me I had been chosen to go to the UN a few days before, but I had only told Mohamed about this, as I didn't actually believe that I was going to travel to New York City. It was before midday when Mr. Kamara arrived and my uncle had left for work. My aunt was in the kitchen; the look on her face told me that my uncle would learn about Mr. Kamara's visit. I knew then that I would have to tell my uncle about the trip.

"Good morning," Mr. Kamara said, checking his watch to make sure it was still morning.

"Good morning," I replied.

"Are you ready to go to town and begin preparation for the trip?" he asked in English. Since Mr. Kamara had found out that I had been chosen to go to the UN, he had spoken only English to me. I said goodbye to my aunt and jumped in the van, and we took off to get me a passport. It seemed as if everyone in the city had decided to get passports that day, perhaps preparing to leave the country. Luckily, Mr. Kamara had made an appointment, so we didn't have to wait in line. At the counter he presented my photo, the necessary forms, and the fee. A round-faced man carefully examined the documents and asked for my birth certificate. "You have to show me proof that you were born in this country," the man said. I became really upset and almost slapped the man, who insisted that I must present proof of birth in Sierra Leone even after I had told him that no one had the chance to assemble documents of that nature when the war reached them. He was naïve about the reality I was trying to explain to him. Mr. Kamara pulled me aside and gently asked me to sit on a bench while he chatted with the man. Eventually he demanded to see his boss. After hours of waiting, someone was able to dig up a copy of my birth certificate, and they told Mr. Kamara to come back for the passport in four days.

"The first step is completed. Now we will have to get you the visa," Mr. Kamara said as we walked out of the passport office. I didn't reply, because I was still upset, exhausted, and just wanted to go home.

My uncle was home when I was dropped off that evening. When I greeted him, he had a smile on his face that said, "Tell me what is going on." I did. I told him that I was to go to the United Nations in New York City and talk about the war, as it relates to children. My uncle didn't believe it. "People are always lying to others with such promises. Don't let them get your hopes up, my son," he said.

Every morning before he left for work, he would say jokingly, "So what are we doing today in planning to go to America?"

Mr. Kamara took me shopping. He bought me a suitcase and some clothes, mostly long-sleeved shirts, dress pants, and traditionally waxed, colorful cotton suits with intricate embroidery on the collars, sleeves,

and hems of pants. I showed these things to my uncle, but still he didn't believe that I would be going on the trip.

"Maybe they just want to give you a new look, a more African look, instead of those big pants you always wear," he joked.

Sometimes my uncle and I went for strolls after work. He would ask how I was doing; I always told him I was fine. He would put his long arms around me and pull me closer. I felt he knew that I wanted to tell him certain things but couldn't find the right words. I hadn't told him that whenever I went to the bush with my cousins to fetch firewood, my mind would begin to wander to things I had seen and done in the past. Standing next to a tree with red frozen sap on its bark would bring flashbacks of the many times we executed prisoners by tying them to trees and shooting them. Their blood stained the trees and never washed off, even during the rainy season. I hadn't told him that often I was reminded of what I had missed by watching the daily activities of families, a child hugging his father, holding his mother's wrap, or holding two parents' hands, swinging over gutters. It made me wish I could go back to the beginning and change things.

I had been told to meet a man by the name of Dr. Tamba at the American embassy on Monday morning. As I walked to the embassy, I listened to the gradual wakening of the city. The call for prayer from the central mosque echoed throughout the city, *poda podas* crowded the streets, their apprentices hanging on the open passenger doors and calling out the names of their destinations: "Lumley, Lumley" or "Congo Town . . ." It was still too early when I arrived, but there was already a long line of people waiting outside the embassy gates. Their faces were sad and filled with uncertainty, as if they awaited some trial that would determine whether they would die or stay alive. I didn't know what to do, so I stood in line. After an hour or so, Dr. Tamba arrived with another boy and asked me to follow him. He looked like a

dignified man, so I guess we didn't have to wait in line. The other boy, who was also a former child soldier, introduced himself. "My name is Bah. I am happy to be going on this journey with you," he said, shaking my hand. I thought about what my uncle's reply would be to him: "Don't let them get your hopes up, young man."

We sat down on one of the few decent benches in a small open area in the embassy and waited for our interview. A white woman stood behind a transparent glass window; her voice came through the speakers underneath it. "What is the purpose of your visit to the United States?" she asked, never looking up from the papers before her.

When it was our turn, the woman behind the glass already had our passports. She didn't look at me; rather, she flipped through the pages of my new passport. I was very confused about why the window was set up in such a way that the human connection was lost between the interviewer and the interviewee.

"Speak into the microphone," she said, and she continued, "What is the purpose of your visit to the United States?"

"For a conference," I said.

"What is the conference about?"

"It is generally about issues affecting children around the world," I explained.

"And where is this conference?"

"At the UN in New York City."

"Do you have any guarantee that you will come back to your home country?" I was thinking, when she continued, "Do you have any property, a bank account that will guarantee your return?"

I frowned. Do you know anything about people's lives in this country? I thought of asking her. If she could only look at me directly, perhaps she wouldn't have asked the last two questions. No one my age in my country has a bank account or even dreams of having one, much less property to declare. Mr. Tamba told her that he was the CAW chaperon going on the trip with us and that he would make sure that we returned to Sierra Leone at the end of the conference.

The woman asked me the final question: "Do you know anyone in the United States?"

"No, I have never been anywhere out of this country, and this is actually my first time in this city," I told her. She closed my passport and put it aside. "Come back at four-thirty."

Outside, Dr. Tamba told us that we had gotten the visas and that he would pick up the passports and hold on to them until the day of our departure. It had finally begun to look as if we were going to travel, even though I had seen my passport only at a glance.

I held my suitcase in my right hand and was wearing brown traditional summer pants with zigzag thread patterns at the bottom and a T-shirt. My uncle was sitting on the verandah when I came from Allie's room.

"I am on my way to the airport," I said, smiling, as I knew my uncle was going to be sarcastic.

"Sure. Give me a call when you get to America. Well, I don't have a phone, so call Aminata's house and she can come and get me." My uncle giggled.

"Okay, I will," I said, giggling as well.

"Ah, children, come and say goodbye to your brother. I do not know where he is going, but he needs our blessings," my uncle said. Matilda, Kona, and Sombo came to the verandah holding buckets in their hands. They were on their way to fetch water. They hugged me and wished me luck on my journey. My aunt came out of the kitchen smelling of smoke and hugged me. "Wherever you are going, you will need to smell like your home. This is my perfume to you." She giggled and stepped back. My uncle stood up and hugged me, put his arm around my shoulder and said, "My good wishes are with you. So I will see you later for dinner, then." He went back to sit in his chair on the verandah.

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My conception of New York City came from rap music. I envisioned it as a place where people shot each other on the street and got away with it; no one walked on the streets, rather people drove in their sports cars looking for nightclubs and for violence. I really wasn't looking forward to being somewhere this crazy. I had had enough of that back home.

It was dark when the plane landed at John F. Kennedy International Airport. It was 4:30 p.m. I asked Dr. Tamba why it was dark so early in this country. "Because it is winter," he said. "Oh!" I nodded, but the early darkness still didn't make sense to me. I knew the word "winter" from Shakespeare's texts and I thought I should look up its meaning again.

Dr. Tamba took our passports and did all the talking at immigration. We got our bags and headed toward the sliding doors. Maybe we shouldn't just venture into the streets like that, I thought, but Dr. Tamba was already outside. When Bah and I stepped through the sliding doors, we were greeted by an extremely cold wind. I felt my skin tighten, I couldn't feel my face, and it seemed my ears had fallen off; my fingers hurt, and my teeth chattered. The wind penetrated through the summer pants and T-shirt I was wearing, and it felt as though I wasn't wearing

anything. I was shivering as I ran back into the terminal. I had never in my life felt this cold. How can anyone survive in this country? I thought, rubbing my hands together and jumping around to generate some heat. Bah stood outside with Dr. Tamba, his hands wrapped around himself and shaking uncontrollably. For some reason, Dr. Tamba had a jacket but Bah and I didn't. I waited in the terminal while Dr. Tamba hailed a taxi, then I ran outside and jumped in, quickly closing the door behind me. There were little white things falling out of the sky, and they seemed to be accumulating on the ground. What is this white stuff falling from the sky? I thought to myself. Dr. Tamba told the driver our destination, reading it off a piece of paper he held in his hand.

"Is this your first time in the city, and are you guys enjoying the beautiful snowfall?" the taxi driver asked.

"Yes, it is their first time in the city," Dr. Tamba replied, and busied himself putting away our documents. I had never heard of the word "snow" before. It is not exactly something that we discuss in Sierra Leone. But I had seen movies about Christmas, and this white fluffy stuff was in those movies. It must be Christmas here every day, I thought.

When we entered the city, it seemed as if someone had lit the many tall buildings that shot into the sky. From afar, some of the buildings looked as if they were made of colorful lights. The city glittered, and I was so completely overwhelmed that I couldn't decide where to look. I thought I had seen tall buildings in Freetown, but these were beyond tall, it seemed they were poking the sky. There were so many cars on the street, and they impatiently honked, even when the light was red. And then I saw people walking on the sidewalks. I rubbed my eyes to make sure that I was really seeing people on the streets of New York City. It wasn't as dangerous as I had heard it was. Not so far. The lights were brighter than the ones back home, and I kept looking for the utility poles that the electric wires hung on, but I couldn't see any.

We arrived at the Vanderbilt YMCA hotel on Forty-seventh Street and entered the lobby holding our luggage. We followed Dr. Tamba to the front desk and got our room keys. I had a room to myself for the first

time in my life. To top that, I had a television, which I watched all night long. It was really hot in the room, so I took my clothes off and sweated in front of the television. Two days later I learned that the reason the room was so hot was that the radiator was on full blast. I didn't know what it looked like, least of all how to turn the heat down or off. I remember thinking about the strangeness of this country: it is very cold outside and extremely hot inside.

On the morning following our arrival, I went downstairs to the cafeteria, where fifty-seven children from twenty-three countries were waiting to have breakfast and to begin the United Nations First International Children's Parliament. There were children from Lebanon, Cambodia, Kosovo, Brazil, Norway, Yemen, Mozambique, Palestine, Guatemala, the U.S. (New York), South Africa, Peru, Northern Ireland, India, Papua New Guinea, Malawi, to name a few. While I was looking around for Bah and Dr. Tamba, a white woman pulled me to the side and introduced herself.

"My name is Kristen. I am from Norway." She extended her hand.

"I am Ishmael from Sierra Leone." I shook her hand, and she opened an envelope of name tags and placed one on my shirt. She smiled and motioned for me to join the breakfast line as she walked away, looking for other children without name tags. I followed behind two boys who were speaking a strange language. They knew what they wanted, but I had no idea what to get or what the names of the foods were that the cooks were making. Throughout my stay, I was baffled by the food. I would simply order "the same thing," or put on my plate whatever I'd seen others put on theirs. Sometimes I was lucky to like what landed there. That was usually not the case. I asked Dr. Tamba if he knew where we could get some rice and fish stew in palm oil, some cassava leaves or okra soup. He smiled and said, "When you are in Rome, you do as the Romans do."

I should have brought my own food from home to hold me until I learn about the food in this country, I thought as I drank my glass of orange juice.

After breakfast we walked two blocks in the freezing weather down

to a building where most of the meetings took place. It was still snowing outside, and I was wearing summer dress pants and a long-sleeved shirt. I told myself that I wouldn't want to live in such an unpleasantly cold country, where I would always have to worry about my nose, ears, and face falling off.

That first morning in New York City, we learned about each other's lives for hours. Some of the children had risked their life to attend the conference. Others had walked hundreds of miles to neighboring countries to be able to get on a plane. Within minutes of talking to each other, we knew that the room was filled with young people who had had a very difficult childhood, and some were going to return to these lives at the end of the conference. After the introductions, we sat in a circle so that the different facilitators could tell us about themselves.

Most of the facilitators worked for NGOs, but there was a short white woman with long dark hair and bright eyes who said, "I am a storyteller." I was surprised at this and gave her all my attention. She used elaborate gestures and spoke very clearly, enunciating every word. She said her name was Laura Simms. She introduced her co-facilitator, Therese Plair, who was light-skinned, had African features, and held a drum. Before Laura finished talking, I had already decided that I would take her workshop. She said she would teach us how to tell our stories in a more compelling way. I was curious to find out how this white woman, born in New York City, had become a storyteller.

That same morning Laura kept looking at Bah and me. I didn't know that she had noticed we were wearing only our light African shirts and pants and sat closer to the radiators, our hands wrapped around our tiny bodies, and every now and then shaking from the cold that seemed to have settled in our bones. In the afternoon before lunch, she approached us. "Do you have winter jackets?" she asked. We shook our heads. A painful concern passed over her face, making her smile look forced. That evening she returned with winter jackets, hats, and gloves for us. I felt I was wearing a heavy green costume that made my body bigger than it looked. But I was happy, because now I

could venture outside to see the city after the daily workshops. Years later, when Laura offered me one of her winter jackets, I refused to accept it because it was a woman's jacket. She joked with me about the fact that when she had first met me I was so cold that I didn't care that I was wearing a woman's winter jacket.

Bah and I became a little close with Laura and Therese over the course of the conference. Sometimes Laura would talk to us about stories I had heard as a child. I was in awe of the fact that a white woman from across the Atlantic Ocean, who had never been to my country, knew stories so specific to my tribe and upbringing. When she became my mother years later, she and I would always talk about whether it was destined or coincidental that I came from a very storytelling-oriented culture to live with a mother in New York who is a storyteller.

I called my uncle in Freetown during my second day. Aminata answered the phone.

"Hi. This is Ishmael. Could I please speak to Uncle?" I asked.

"I will go get him. Call back in two minutes." Aminata hung up the phone. When I called back, my uncle picked up.

"I am in New York City," I told him.

"Well," he said, "I guess I believe you, because I haven't seen you in a few days." He giggled. I opened the hotel window to let him hear the sounds of New York.

"That doesn't sound like Freetown," he said, and was silent for a bit before he continued. "So what is it like?"

"It is excruciatingly cold," I said, and he began to laugh.

"Ah! Maybe it is your initiation to the white people's world. Well, tell me all about it when you return. Stay inside if you have to." As he spoke, I pictured the dusty gravel road by his house. I could smell my aunt's groundnut soup.

Every morning we would quickly walk through the snow to a conference room down the street. There we would cast our sufferings aside and intelligently discuss solutions to the problems facing children in

our various countries. At the end of these long discussions, our faces and eyes glittered with hope and the promise of happiness. It seemed we were transforming our sufferings as we talked about ways to solve their causes and let them be known to the world.

On the night of the second day, Madoka from Malawi and I walked west along Forty-seventh Street without realizing we were heading straight into the heart of Times Square. We were busy looking at the buildings and all the people hurrying by when we suddenly saw lights all over the place and shows playing on huge screens. We looked at each other in awe of how absolutely amazing and crowded the place was. One of the screens had a woman and a man in their underwear; I guess they were showing it off. Madoka pointed at the screen and laughed. Others had music videos or numbers going across. Everything flashed and changed very quickly. We stood at the corner for a while, mesmerized by the displays. After we were able to tear our eyes away from them, we walked up and down Broadway for hours, staring at the store windows. I didn't feel cold, as the number of people, the glittering buildings, and the sounds of cars overwhelmed and intrigued me. I thought I was dreaming. When we returned to the hotel later that night, we told the other children about what we had seen. After that, we all went out to Times Square every evening.

Madoka and I had wandered off to a few places in the city before our scheduled sightseeing days. We had been to Rockefeller Plaza, where we saw a huge decorated Christmas tree, statues of angels, and the people ice-skating. They kept going around and around, and Madoka and I couldn't understand why they enjoyed this. We had also gone to the World Trade Center with Mr. Wright, a Canadian man we had met at the hotel. One evening, when the fifty-seven of us got on the subway on our way to the South Street Seaport, I asked Madoka, "How come everyone is so quiet?" He looked around the train and replied, "It is not the same as public transportation back home." Shantha, the cameraperson for the event, who later became my aunt when I returned to live in New York, pointed the camera at us, and Madoka

and I posed for her. On every trip I would make mental notes on things I needed to tell my uncle, cousins, and Mohamed. I didn't think they would believe any of it.

On the last day of the conference, a child from each country spoke briefly at the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) chamber about their country and experiences. There were diplomats and all sorts of influential people. They wore suits and ties and sat upright listening to us. I proudly sat behind the Sierra Leone name plaque, listening and waiting for my turn to speak. I had a speech that had been written for me in Freetown, but I decided to speak from my heart, instead. I talked briefly about my experience and my hope that the war would end—it was the only way that adults would stop recruiting children. I began by saying, "I am from Sierra Leone, and the problem that is affecting us children is the war that forces us to run away from our homes, lose our families, and aimlessly roam the forests. As a result, we get involved in the conflict as soldiers, carriers of loads, and in many other difficult tasks. All this is because of starvation, the loss of our families, and the need to feel safe and be part of something when all else has broken down. I joined the army really because of the loss of my family and starvation. I wanted to avenge the deaths of my family. I also had to get some food to survive, and the only way to do that was to be part of the army. It was not easy being a soldier, but we just had to do it. I have been rehabilitated now, so don't be afraid of me. I am not a soldier anymore; I am a child. We are all brothers and sisters. What I have learned from my experiences is that revenge is not good. I joined the army to avenge the deaths of my family and to survive, but I've come to learn that if I am going to take revenge, in that process I will kill another person whose family will want revenge; then revenge and revenge and revenge will never come to an end . . ."

After all our presentations, we sang a chant we had come up with. Then we began to sing other songs; we cried, we laughed, and we danced. It was an exceptionally moving afternoon. We were all sad to leave each other, as we had learned that we were not returning to

peaceful places. Madoka and I put our arms around each other and jumped around to the music. Bah was dancing with another group of boys. Dr. Tamba sat in the audience smiling for the first time since we had arrived in New York City. After the dance, Laura pulled me aside and told me that she was moved by what I had said.

That night we went out to an Indian restaurant, and I was happy that someone in this part of the world serves rice. We ate a lot, chatted, exchanged addresses, and then went to Laura's house in the East Village. I couldn't understand why she called the area a village, because it didn't look like any village I knew. Our chaperons didn't come with us; they went back to the hotel. I didn't know that Laura's house was going to be my future home. There were traditionally woven cloths from all over the world hanging on the walls; statues of animals sat on large bookshelves that contained storybooks; clay vases with beautiful and exotic birds on them stood on tables; and there were bamboo instruments and other strange ones. The house was big enough to hold all fifty-seven of us. First, we sat around in Laura's living room and told stories; then we danced into the night. It was our last night in New York and it was the perfect place to spend it, because the house was as interesting and filled with amazing stories as our group was. Everyone felt comfortable and saw something from their home. Being in the house felt as though we had left New York City and entered a different world.

The next evening, Laura and Shantha accompanied Bah, Dr. Tamba, and me to the airport. At first we were all quiet in the car, but gradually we all, except Dr. Tamba, began to sob. At the terminal the sobbing intensified as we said goodbye, hugging each other. Laura and Shantha gave us their addresses and telephone numbers so that we could keep in touch. We left New York City on November 15, 1996. My sixteenth birthday was eight days away, and throughout the flight back home I still felt as if I was dreaming, a dream that I didn't want to wake up from. I was sad to leave, but I was also pleased to have met people outside of Sierra Leone. Because if I was to get killed upon my return, I knew that a memory of my existence was alive somewhere in the world.

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Some evenings I told my family (including Mohamed, who now lived with us) stories about my trip. I described everything to them—the airfield, the airport, the plane, what it felt like to see clouds from the window of the plane. I would have a tingling sensation in my stomach as I remembered walking on a moving sidewalk in the Amsterdam airport. I had never seen so many white people, all hurriedly dragging their bags and running in different directions. I told them about the people I had met, the tall buildings of New York City, how people cursed on the street; I did my best to capture the snow and how it grew dark so early.

"It sounds like a strange trip," my uncle would remark. It felt, to me, like something that had all happened in my mind.

Mohamed and I started school again, at St. Edward's Secondary School. I was excited. I remembered the morning walks to my primary school; the sound of brooms sweeping fallen mango leaves, startling the birds, who would chatter in even higher pitches as if inquiring from each other the meaning of the harsh sound. My school had only a small building, which was made of mud bricks and a tin roof. There

were no doors, no cement on the floor inside, and it was too small to hold all the pupils. Most of my classes were conducted outside under mango trees that provided shade.

Mohamed mostly remembered the lack of school materials in our primary and secondary schools, and how we had to help the teachers grow crops in their farms or gardens. It was the only way the teachers, who hadn't been paid for years, could make a living. The more we talked about it, the more I realized that I had forgotten what it felt like to be a student, to sit in class, to take notes, do homework, make friends, and provoke other students. I was eager to return. But on the first day of school in Freetown, all the students sat apart from us, as if Mohamed and I were going to snap any minute and kill someone. Somehow they had learned that we had been child soldiers. We had not only lost our childhood in the war but our lives had been tainted by the same experiences that still caused us great pain and sadness.

We always walked to school slowly. I liked it because I was able to think about where my life was going. I was confident that nothing could get any worse than it had been, and that thought made me smile a lot. I was still getting used to being part of a family again. I also began telling people that Mohamed was my brother, so that I wouldn't have to explain anything. I knew I could never forget my past, but I wanted to stop talking about it so that I would be fully present in my new life.

As usual, I had gotten up early in the morning, and I was sitting on the flat stone behind the house waiting for the city to wake up. It was May 25, 1997. But instead of the usual sounds that brought the city to life, it was woken that morning by gunshots erupting around the State House and the House of Parliament. The gunshots woke everyone, and I joined my uncle and neighbors on the verandah. We didn't know what was going on, but we could see soldiers running along Pademba Road and army trucks speeding up and down in front of the prison area.

The gunshots increased throughout the day, spreading across the city. The city folks stood outside on their verandahs, tensed up, shaking with fear. Mohamed and I looked at each other: "Not again." By early afternoon the central prison had been opened and the prisoners set free. The new government handed them guns as they got out. Some went straight to the houses of the judges and lawyers who had sentenced them, killing them and their families or burning their houses if they were not around. Others joined the soldiers, who had started looting shops. The smoke from the burning houses filled the air, draping the city in fog.

Someone came on the radio and announced himself as the new president of Sierra Leone. His name, he said, was Johnny Paul Koroma, and he was leader of the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC), which had been formed by a group of Sierra Leone Army (SLA) officers to overthrow the democratically elected President Tejan Kabbah. Koroma's English was as bad as the reason he gave for the coup. He advised everyone to go to work by saying that everything was in order. In the background of his speech, gunshots and angry soldiers, cursing and jubilating, almost drowned him out.

Later in the night another announcement came over the radio, this one declaring that the rebels (RUF) and the army had collaborated in ousting the civilian government "for the benefit of the nation." Rebels and soldiers on the front lines started pouring into the city. The entire nation crumbled into a state of lawlessness. I hated what was happening. I couldn't return to my previous life. I didn't think I could make it out alive this time.

The AFRC/RUF, "Sobels," as they were called, had begun blowing up bank vaults using RPGs and other explosives and looting the money. Sometimes the Sobels halted people as they walked by, searched them, and took whatever they could find. They occupied the secondary schools and university campuses. There was nothing to do during the day except sit on the verandah. Uncle decided to finish building a house we had been working on since I came to live with him. In the morning we walked up to the land and worked until the early-afternoon gunshots sent us running back home to take cover under beds. But day by day, it got too dangerous to be in the open, as stray bullets had killed many people. So before long we stopped working on it.

Armed men had forcefully taken most of the food in the city from shops and markets, and imports of food from outside the country and from the provinces to the city had been stopped. What little was left had to be sought in the midst of the madness. Laura Simms had been sending me money and I had saved some of it, so Mohamed and I decided to go to town to try and buy some *gari*, cans of sardines, rice, anything we could find. I knew that I would risk running into my former military friends, who would kill me if I told them I wasn't part of the war anymore. But at the same time I couldn't just stay home. I had to find food.

We had heard of a secret market in town conducted in a yard behind an abandoned house where otherwise unavailable food items were sold to civilians. They sold the items at twice the regular price, but the trip seemed worth the risk and expense. We headed out early in the morning, terrified of seeing someone we knew. We kept our heads down as we hurried past young rebels and soldiers. We arrived as the vendors were just beginning to put their food products out. We bought some rice, some palm oil, salt, and fish; by the time we were done, the market was filling up with people hurriedly trying to buy whatever they could afford.

As we were about to leave, an open Land Rover roared up and armed men jumped off before it came to a halt. They ran into the crowd of civilians, firing a warning shot. Over a megaphone the commander ordered everyone to put down their bags of food, put their hands behind their heads, and lie flat, facing the ground. A woman in the crowd panicked and decided to run. An armed man in a red headband shot her in the head. She screamed and fell, loudly hitting the stony ground. This caused more panic, and everyone scattered in different directions. We grabbed our goods and ran crouching. This was beginning to be too familiar.

While we were running away from the area, another Land Rover full of more armed men arrived, and they began firing and knocking people's heads with the butts of their guns. We hid behind a wall separating the marketplace and the main street, then kept to a fast but cautious path behind the houses off the bay. Almost at the end of the bay, where the tide slammed a sunken boat, we jumped on the main

street with our goods tucked under our arms and began the final walk home. We were approaching the Cotton Tree at the center of town when we saw a group of protesters run by, holding posters that read STOP THE KILLING and the like. They wore white shirts and their heads were tied with white cloths. We tried to ignore them, but as we turned a corner to continue home, a group of armed men, half in civilian and half in military clothing, ran toward us, firing into the crowd. There was no way to break from the crowd, so we joined them. The armed men began tossing tear gas. Civilians began to vomit on the sidewalks and bleed through their noses. Everyone started running toward Kissy Street. It was impossible to breathe. I put my hand over my nose, which felt as if it had been dipped in hot spices. I held tight to the bag of food and ran with Mohamed, trying not to lose him in the crowd. Tears ran down my cheeks, and my eyeballs and eyelids felt heavy. I was getting furious, but I tried to contain myself, because I knew I couldn't afford to lose my temper. The result would be death, since I was now a civilian; I knew that.

We continued to run with the crowd, trying to find a way out and head home. My throat began to ache. Mohamed was coughing until the veins on his throat were visible. We managed to break free, and he put his head under the public pump. Suddenly another group of people came running toward us, as fast as they could. Soldiers were pursuing them, so we too began to charge ahead, still carrying our food.

We were now in the midst of student protesters on a street lined with tall buildings. A chopper that had been cycling above started to descend and move toward the crowd. Mohamed and I knew what was going to happen. We ran for the nearest gutter and dove in. The chopper swept down to street level. As soon as it was about twenty-five meters from the protesters, it spun around and faced them sideways. A soldier sitting in the open side opened fire with a machine gun, mowing down the crowd. People ran for their lives. The street that a minute before had been filled with banners and noise was now a silent graveyard full of restless souls fighting to reconcile their sudden deaths.

Mohamed and I ran head down through alleyways. We came to a

fence that faced a main street on which there was a roadblock. Armed men patrolled the area. We lay in the gutter for six hours, waiting for nightfall. Chances to escape death were better at night, because the red track of the bullets could be seen in the dark. There were others with us. One, a student in a blue T-shirt, had a sweaty face, and every few seconds he wiped his forehead with his shirt. A young woman, probably in her early twenties, sat with her head between her knees, trembling and rocking. Against the wall of the gutter, a bearded man whose shirt was stained with someone else's blood sat holding his head in his hands. I felt bad about what was happening, but was not as scared as these people, who had not experienced war before. It was their first time, and it was painful to watch them. I hoped that Uncle would not worry too much about our whereabouts. More gunshots and a cloud of tear gas floated by. We held our noses until the wind took the gas away. Nightfall seemed so far away, it felt like waiting for Judgment Day. But as it must, night finally came, and we made it home, crouching behind houses and jumping fences.

My uncle was sitting on the verandah, tears in his eyes. When I greeted him, he jumped up as if he had seen a ghost. He embraced us for a long time and told us not to go to the city anymore. But we had no choice. We would have to, in order to get food.

The gunshots didn't cease for the next five months; they became the new sound of the city. In the morning, families sat on their verandahs and held their children close, staring at the city streets where gunmen roamed in groups, looting, raping, and killing people at will. Mothers wrapped their trembling arms around their children each time the gunshots intensified. People mostly ate soaked raw rice with sugar or plain *gari* with salt, and listened to the radio, hoping to hear some good news. Sometimes during the day, there were several plumes of smoke rising from houses that had been set on fire by gunmen. We could hear them excitedly laughing at the sight of the burning houses. One evening, a neighbor who lived a few doors down from my uncle's house was listening to a pirate radio station that accused the new government of committing crimes against civilians. A few minutes later, a

truck full of soldiers stopped in front of the man's house, dragged him, his wife, and his two older sons outside, shot them, and kicked their bodies into the nearby gutter. My uncle vomited after we had seen the act.

For the first three weeks people were so afraid that they didn't dare to leave their houses. But soon enough, everyone got used to the gunshots and the madness. People began going about their daily business of searching for food, even though stray bullets were likely to kill them. Children played guessing games, telling each other whether the gun fired was an AK-47, a G3, an RPG, or a machine gun. I mostly sat outside on the flat rock with Mohamed and we were both quiet. I was thinking about the fact that we had run so far away from the war, only to be caught back in it. There was nowhere to go from here.

I had lost contact with Laura in New York for more than five months. Before that, she and I had constantly written letters to each other. She would tell me what she was doing and ask that I take good care of myself. Her letters came from all over the world, where she had storytelling projects. Recently I had tried calling her collect every day, but was unsuccessful. The phones at Sierra-tel, the national telephone company, weren't going through anymore. Each day I sat on the verandah with my uncle and cousins looking toward the city. We had stopped listening to the storytelling cassette, as curfews started before dark. My uncle laughed less and less, and sighed more and more. We continued to hope that things would change, but they kept getting worse.

My uncle became sick. One morning we were sitting on the verandah when he complained he wasn't feeling very well. In the evening he developed a fever and he lay inside, groaning. Allie and I went to a nearby shop and bought medicine, but Uncle's fever grew worse day after day. Auntie Sallay would force him to eat, but he would vomit everything the moment she was done feeding him. All the hospitals and pharmacies were closed. We searched the city for doctors or nurses, but those who hadn't left would not leave their homes for fear they might not be able to return to their families again. One evening I was sitting by my uncle, wiping his forehead, when he fell off the bed.

I caught his long body in my arms and held his head on my lap. His cheekbones stood out of his round face. He looked at me and I could see in his eyes that he had given up hope. I begged him not to leave us. His lips were about to utter something, but they stopped shaking, and he was gone. I held him in my arms and thought about how I was going to break the news to his wife, who was boiling him some water in the kitchen. She came in soon afterward and dropped the hot water, splashing it on both of us. She refused to believe that her husband had died. I still held my uncle in my arms, tears running down my face. My entire body had gone numb. I couldn't move from where I sat. Mohamed and Allie came in and took Uncle away from me and put him on the bed. After a few minutes, I was able to get up. I went behind the house and punched the mango tree until Mohamed took me away from it. I was always losing everything that meant something to me.

My cousins cried, asking, Who is going to take care of us now? Why did this happen to us in these difficult times?

Down in the city, the gunmen fired off their guns.

My uncle was buried the next morning. Even in the midst of the madness, many people came for his burial. I walked behind the coffin, the sound of my footsteps clinging to my heart. I held hands with my cousins and Mohamed. My aunt had tried to come to the cemetery, but she collapsed right before we left the house. At the cemetery the imam read a few suras and my uncle was lowered into the hole and covered with mud. People quickly dispersed to continue their lives. I stayed behind with Mohamed. I sat on the ground next to the grave and talked to my uncle. I told him that I was sorry that we couldn't find him any help, that I hoped he knew that I really loved him and wished he could have been alive to see me as an adult. After I was done, I placed my hands on the heap of mud and quietly wept. I didn't realize how long I had been at the cemetery until after I had stopped crying. It was late in the evening and the curfew was about to begin. Mohamed and I ran as fast as we could back home before the soldiers started shooting.

A few days after my uncle was buried, I was finally able to make a collect call to Laura. I asked her if I could stay with her if I made my way to New York City. She said yes.

"No. I want you to really think about this. If I make my way to New York, can I stay with you at your house?" I asked again.

"Yes," she said again, and I told her that "I would visualize it" and would call her when I was in Conakry, the capital of Guinea, the one neighboring country that was peaceful and the only way out of Sierra Leone at that time. I had to leave, because I was afraid that if I stayed in Freetown any longer, I was going to end up being a soldier again or my former army friends would kill me if I refused. Some friends who had undergone rehabilitation with me had already rejoined the army.

I left Freetown early in the morning of the seventh day after my uncle passed away. I didn't tell anyone that I was leaving except Mohamed, who was to relay my departure to my aunt after she was done grieving. She had turned herself away from the world and everyone in it after Uncle's death. I left on October 31, 1997, while it was still a little dark outside. The curfew was still in place, but I needed to leave the city before the sun came out. It was less dangerous to travel at this hour, as some of the gunmen were dozing off and the night made it difficult for the militiamen to see me from afar. Gunshots echoed in the quiet city, and the morning breeze felt harsh against my face. The air smelled of rotten bodies and gunpowder. I shook hands with Mohamed. "I'll let you know where I end up," I told him. He tapped me on my shoulder and said nothing.

I had only a small dirty bag containing a few clothes. It was risky to travel with a big or fancy bag, as armed men would think that you were carrying something valuable and would possibly shoot you. As I walked into the last remains of the night, leaving Mohamed standing on the verandah, I became afraid. This was becoming too familiar. I stopped next to a utility pole for a bit, exhaled heavily, and threw some angry punches in the air. I have to try to get out, I thought, and if that doesn't work, then it is back to the army. I didn't like thinking this way.

I hurriedly walked near the gutters and took cover when I heard a vehicle approaching. I was the only civilian on the street, and I sometimes had to bypass checkpoints by either crawling in gutters or crouching behind houses. I safely made it to an old bus station that was no longer in use at the edge of the city. I was sweating and my eyelids trembled as I looked around the station. There were a lot of men—in their thirties, I presumed—some women, and a few families with children five years of age and older. They all stood in line against the dilapidated wall, some holding bundles of things and others their children's hands.

I walked to the back of the line and sat on my heels to make sure my money was still inside my sock, under my right foot. The man in front of me kept mumbling things to himself and pacing away from the wall and back. He was making me more nervous than I already was. After several minutes of quietly waiting, a man who had been standing in line with everyone else proclaimed himself the bus driver and asked everyone to follow him. We walked farther into the abandoned station, making our way over falling cement walls into an open area where we got on a bus, which was painted dark, even its rims, so that it would blend with the night. The bus rolled out of the station, its lights off, and took the back road out of the city. The road hadn't been used for years, so it seemed the bus was moving through bushes, as leaves and branches heavily slapped its side. It slowly galloped in the dark until the sun began to rise. At some point, we had to get off and walk behind it so that it would be able to climb a little hill. We were all very quiet, our faces tensed with fear, as we hadn't yet safely left the city area. We got back on the bus, and about an hour later it dropped us off at an old bridge.

We paid the driver and walked across the rusty bridge two at a time, and then had to walk all day to a junction where we waited for another bus that would arrive the next morning. This was the only way to get out of Freetown without being killed by the armed men and boys of the new government, who hated it when people left the city.

There were over thirty of us at the junction. We sat on the ground

near the bushes and waited all night. No one said a word to one another, as we all knew that we hadn't completely escaped the madness. Parents whispered things in the ears of their children, afraid to let out their voices. Some people stared at the ground and others played with stones. Gunshots were faintly heard in the breeze. I sat at the edge of the gutter and chewed on some raw rice I had in a plastic bag. When will I stop running from this war? What if the bus doesn't show up? A neighbor in Freetown had told me about this only way out of the country. So far it seemed to be safe, but I was worried, as I knew how quickly things change for the worse in such circumstances.

I put the raw rice back into my bag and started walking down the dirt road to find a suitable place to sit for the night. There were people sleeping under the bushes near the bus stop. This way, they would be able to hear the bus if it pulled up during the night. Farther down, there were others clearing spaces under branches of plum trees that had woven into each other. They pushed the dried leaves aside with their hands and piled up fresh leaves to make headrests on the ground. One of the men made a broom from the branches of a tree, which he used to effectively push the leaves aside. I jumped over the gutter, sat against a tree, and, throughout the night, thought about my uncle and then my father, mother, brothers, friends. Why does everyone keep dying except me? I walked up and down the road trying not to be angry.

In the morning people stood up and dusted themselves off with their hands. Some of the men washed with dew. They shook leaves of little plants and trees, rubbing the residue of water onto their faces and heads. After hours of waiting impatiently, we heard the clunking of an engine down the road. We weren't sure if it was the bus, so we gathered our bags and hid in the bushes near the road. The sound of the whining engine grew until the bus could finally be seen. Everyone ran out of hiding and hailed the bus until it came to a stop. We hurriedly piled on and were off. As the bus proceeded, the apprentice came around to collect the fare. I paid half price, because I was under eighteen, but half price in those times was more than full price when everything was peaceful. I looked out the window and watched the trees go by. And

then the bus began to slow down and the trees were replaced by soldiers with big guns, all aiming at the road, at the bus. They asked everyone to step out of the bus; then they made us walk through a barricade. I looked around, and in the bushes I saw there were more men with submachine guns and grenade launchers. I was observing the formation they had and almost ran into a soldier who was making his way to the bus. He looked at me with bloodshot eyes and a face that said, "I will kill you if I want to and nothing will come of it." The look was familiar to me.

They checked the bus for reasons nobody understood. After a few minutes, everyone was on board again. As we gradually started moving, I watched the barricade disappear and I recalled when we used to attack such barricades. I dismissed the thoughts before I was transported back to those times. There were too many barricades, and at every one of them the soldiers behaved differently. Some demanded money even when passengers had the correct documents. Refusing to pay, one risked being sent back to the city. Those who didn't have money had their watches or jewelry or anything of value taken from them. Whenever we were approaching a roadblock, I would quietly start reciting prayers that I hoped would aid my passing through it.

At about four in the afternoon, the bus reached a town called Kambia, its final destination. For the first time since we left the city, I saw some of the passengers' faces relax a bit. But soon enough, our faces tensed again, and we all grumbled as the immigration officers also asked us to pay before we could cross the boundary. Everyone reached into their socks, the hems of pants, under headties, to get the remainder of their money. A woman with two seven-year-old boys pleaded with the officer, telling him that she needed the money to feed her boys in Conakry. The man just kept his hand out and yelled at the woman to step aside. It sickened me to see that Sierra Leoneans asked money from those who had come from the war. They were benefiting from people who were running for their lives. Why does one have to pay to leave his own country? I thought, but I couldn't argue. I had to pay the money. The immigration officers were asking for three hundred leones, almost two months' pay, to put a departure stamp in passports. As soon as my passport was stamped, I crossed the border into Guinea. I had a long way, over fifty miles, to get to Conakry, the capital, so I walked fast to take another bus that would get me there. I hadn't thought about the fact that I didn't know how to speak any of the languages in Guinea. I became worried a bit but I was relieved to have made it out of my country alive.

The buses to Conakry waited on the other side of a checkpoint that had been erected by Guinean soldiers. There were men standing near the checkpoint selling Guinean currency at whatever rate they pleased. I thought the soldiers would be against such black-market foreign exchange, but they didn't seem to care. I changed my money and walked toward the checkpoint. The border was crowded with soldiers who either didn't speak English or pretended not to. They had their guns in ready positions, as if they expected something to happen. I avoided eye contact, afraid that they might see in my eyes that I had once been a soldier in the war that I was now leaving behind.

There was a dark brown wooden house through which I had to pass to get to the bus. Inside this house the soldiers searched people's bags, and the people would then go outside and present their documents to the officers. When I was in the wooden house, the soldiers tore open my bag and threw all its contents on the floor. I didn't have much, so I had little difficulty repacking: two shirts, two undershirts, and three pairs of pants.

I emerged from the wooden house and felt as if all the soldiers were looking at me. We were to present our documents, but to whom? There were too many tables. I didn't know which one to go to. The soldiers sat under the shade of mango trees dressed in full combat gear. Some had their guns hanging by the straps on their chairs, and others placed theirs on the table, the muzzle facing the wooden house. This way, they made people nervous before they asked them for money.

A soldier who sat on the far right of the lined tables, a cigar in his mouth, motioned for me to come over. He put his hand out for my

passport. I gave it to him without looking at his face. The soldier spoke a language that I couldn't understand. He put my passport in his chest pocket, took the cigar out of his mouth, placed his hands on the table, and sternly looked at me. I looked down, but the soldier lifted my chin. He took the cigar out of his mouth and examined my passport again. His eyes were red, but he had a grin on his face. He folded his hands and sat back in his chair, looking at me. I smiled a bit and the soldier laughed at me. He said something in his language and put his hand out on the table again. This time the grin on his face had disappeared. I placed some money in his hands. He smelled the money and put it in his pocket. He pulled my passport out of his pocket and motioned for me to go through the gate.

On the other side were a lot of buses. I was confused about which one to take to Conakry. Everyone I tried to ask for directions didn't understand what I was saying. The only word I knew in French was *bonjour*, which did me no good.

I was confusedly looking for a bus to the capital when I bumped into a passerby.

"Watch wussai you dae go," the passerby grumbled in Krio.

"Me na sorry, sir," I replied. "How de body," I continued, shaking hands with the stranger.

"Me body fine en waitin you dae do na ya so me pekin?" the man asked me.

I told him that I was looking for the right bus to Conakry. He told me that he was heading there as well. The bus was overcrowded, so I stood for most of the trip. In over fifty miles to the capital there were more than fifteen checkpoints and the soldiers were unmerciful. All of the roadblocks looked the same. Jeeps with mounted guns were parked along the road. Two soldiers stood by the metal pole stretched across the road from one gutter to another. On the right, more soldiers sat under a shack covered with tarp. There were a few compartments of the shack, where the soldiers searched people. They had set a fixed price for all Sierra Leoneans; those who couldn't pay were kicked off the bus. I wondered if they sent the people back to the other side of

the border. Under the auspices of the man I had boarded the bus with, I was able to pass some of the roadblocks for free. Most of the soldiers thought I was the man's son, so they checked his documents and not mine and charged him for both of us. I don't think he noticed; he just wanted to get to Conakry, and it seemed money wasn't a problem for him. At one of the roadblocks the soldiers took me into a room and made me undress. At first I didn't want to take off my clothes, but I saw them kick a man to the floor and rip his shirt and pants. One of the soldiers took my belt. The belt buckle had the head of a lion on it and it was my favorite. I held my pants with one hand and ran back to the bus. I pressed my teeth hard together and folded my fist, holding back my anger.

At the last roadblock a soldier asked me to put my hands on my head so that he could search me. When I raised my hands, my pants fell down and some of the passengers laughed. The soldier picked up my pants and tied them with a shoelace that he had in his pocket. After he was done, he put his hands in my pocket and took out my passport. He flipped the pages and gave it back to me. I followed behind the people who waited in line to get their entry stamps. I was shaking with anger, but I knew I had to calm myself down if I wanted to make it into Conakry. I overheard people saying that the cost of the entry fee was the equivalent of three hundred leones. I had only a hundred leones and needed it for the rest of my journey. What am I going to do? I thought. I had come all this way for nothing. I couldn't even afford to return to Freetown if I wanted to. Tears had begun to form in my eyes. I was nervous and couldn't see a way out of this. I was beginning to feel anxious when a man whose passport had just been stamped accidentally dropped two of the many bags he carried as he was going around the checkpoint to reboard the bus. I hesitated for a bit but decided to take the chance. I left the line and picked up his bags, following him to the bus. I sat in the backseat, slouching in my seat, and peeked to see if the soldiers were looking in my direction. I sat on the bus until everyone had reboarded it; the soldiers didn't come looking for me. The bus began to pull away slowly and then gathered

speed. I had entered the country illegally, which I knew would later become a problem.

As the bus headed for Conakry, I began to worry, since I didn't actually know what to do once I got there. I had heard that the Sierra Leonean ambassador let refugees sleep temporarily in the compound of the embassy, but I had no idea where the embassy itself was located. I was sitting next to a Fulani fellow by the name of Jalloh, who said he had lived in Freetown. We talked about what the war had done to the country. Afterward, he gave me his phone number and asked me to call him if I needed help getting around the city. I wanted to tell him that I had no place to stay, but he got off before I could summon the nerve to confide in him. I looked about the bus for the Sierra Leonean man I had bumped into but I couldn't find him. A few minutes later, the bus came to a halt at a huge station, its final destination. I got out and watched everyone go. I sighed and placed my hands on my head, then walked to a bench and sat down. I covered my face with my hands. "I can't sit here all night," I kept mumbling to myself.

There were lots of taxis, and all the people who arrived at the bus station took them. I didn't want to stand out as a lost foreigner, so I took a taxi, too. The driver said something in French. I knew that he was asking where I wanted to go. "Sierra Leone consulate, ahh, embassy," I told the driver. I looked out the window at the utility poles and the sloppily hung streetlights; their lights seemed brighter than the moonlight. The taxi stopped in front of the embassy and the driver pointed to the green, white, and blue flag to make sure that I was at the right place. I nodded and paid him. When I got out, the guards at the embassy door, speaking Krio, asked me for my passport. I showed it to them and they let me into the compound.

Inside were more than fifty people, probably in the same situation as I. Most were lying on mats in the open compound. Their bundles or bags stood next to them. Others were removing their mats from their luggage. I assumed people only slept here at night and went out during the daytime. I found a spot in the corner, sat on the ground, and leaned against the wall, breathing heavily. The sight of all these

people reminded me of a few villages I had passed through while running away from the war. I was scared and worried about what turmoil the next day might bring. Nonetheless, I was happy to have made it out of Freetown, to have escaped the possibility of becoming a soldier again. This gave me some comfort. I took out the remaining raw rice from my bag and started chewing on it. There was a woman sitting with her two children, a boy and a girl no more than seven years old, a few paces from me. She was whispering a story to them, as she didn't want to disturb other people. As I watched the elaborate movements of her hands, the tide of my thoughts took me to a particular telling of a story I had heard many times as a boy.

It was nighttime and we sat by the fire stretching our arms toward the flames as we listened to stories and watched the moon and the stars retire. The red coal from the firewood lit our faces in the dark and wisps of smoke continuously rose toward the sky. *Pa* Sesay, one of my friends' grandfather, had told us many stories that night, but before he began telling the last story, he repeatedly said, "This is a very important story." He then cleared his throat and began:

"There was a hunter who went into the bush to kill a monkey. He had looked for only a few minutes when he saw a monkey sitting comfortably in the branch of a low tree. The monkey didn't pay him any attention, not even when his footsteps on the dried leaves rose and fell as he neared. When he was close enough and behind a tree where he could clearly see the monkey, he raised his rifle and aimed. Just when he was about to pull the trigger, the monkey spoke: 'If you shoot me, your mother will die, and if you don't, your father will die.' The monkey resumed its position, chewing its food, and every so often scratched its head or the side of its belly.

"What would you do if you were the hunter?"

This was a story told to young people in my village once a year. The storyteller, usually an elder, would pose this unanswerable question at the end of the story in the presence of the children's parents. Every child who was present at the gathering was asked to give an answer,

but no child ever did, since their mother and father were both present. The storyteller never offered an answer either. During each of these gatherings, when it was my time to respond, I always told the storyteller that I would think it over, which of course was not a good enough answer.

After such gatherings, my peers and I—all the children between the ages of six and twelve—would brainstorm several possible answers that would avoid the death of one of our parents. There was no right answer. If you spared the monkey, someone was going to die, and if you didn't, someone would also die.

That night we agreed on an answer, but it was immediately rejected. We told *Pa* Sesay that if any of us was the hunter, we wouldn't have gone hunting for monkeys. We told him, "There are other animals such as deer to hunt."

"That is not an acceptable answer," he said. "We are assuming that you as the hunter had already raised your gun and have to make the decision." He broke his kola nut in half and smiled before putting a piece in his mouth.

When I was seven I had an answer to this question that made sense to me. I never discussed it with anyone, though, for fear of how my mother would feel. I concluded to myself that if I were the hunter, I would shoot the monkey so that it would no longer have the chance to put other hunters in the same predicament.

CHRONOLOGY

It is believed, though not recorded in written form, that the Bullom (Sherbro) people were present along the coast of Sierra Leone before the 1200s, if not earlier—before European contact with Sierra Leone. By the beginning of the 1400s, many tribes from other parts of Africa had migrated and settled in what came to be known as Sierra Leone. Among these tribes were the Temne. They settled along the northern coast of present-day Sierra Leone, and the Mende, another major tribe, occupied the south. There were fifteen additional tribes scattered in different parts of the country.

1462 The written history of Sierra Leone begins when Portuguese explorers land, naming the mountains surrounding what is now Freetown Serra Lyoa (Lion Mountains) due to their leonine shape.

1500–early 1700s European traders stop regularly on the Sierra Leone Peninsula, exchanging cloth and metal goods for ivory, timber, and a small number of slaves.

1652 The first slaves in North America are brought from Sierra Leone to the Sea Islands, off the coast of the southern United States.

1700–1800 A slave trade thrives between Sierra Leone and the plantations of South Carolina and Georgia, where the slaves' rice-farming skills make them particularly valuable.

1787 British abolitionists help four hundred freed slaves from the United States, Nova Scotia, and Britain return to Africa to settle in what they call the "Province of Freedom," in Sierra Leone. These Krio, as they come to be called, are from all areas of Africa.

1791 Other groups of freed slaves join the "Province of Freedom" settlement, and it soon becomes known as Freetown, the name of the current capital of Sierra Leone.

1792 Freetown becomes one of Britain's first colonies in West Africa.

1800 Freed slaves from Jamaica arrive in Freetown.

1808 Sierra Leone becomes a British crown colony. The British government uses Freetown as its naval base for antislavery patrols.

1821–1874 Freetown serves as the residence of the British governor, who also rules the Gold Coast (now Ghana) and Gambia settlements.

1827 Fourah Bay College is established and rapidly becomes a magnet for English-speaking Africans on the West Coast. For more than a century, it is the only European-style university in western sub-Saharan Africa.

1839 Slaves aboard a ship called the *Amistad* revolt to secure their freedom. Their leader, Sengbe Pieh—or Joseph Cinque, as he becomes known in the United States—is a young Mende man from Sierra Leone.

1898 Britain imposes a hut tax in Sierra Leone, decreeing that the inhabitants of the new protectorate be taxed on the size of their huts as payment for the privilege of British administration. This sparks two rebellions in the hinterland: one by the Temne tribe and the other by the Mende tribe.

1951 A constitution is enacted by the British to give some power to the inhabitants, providing a framework for decolonization.

1953 Local ministerial responsibility is introduced, and Sir Milton Margai is appointed chief minister.

1960 Sir Milton Margai becomes prime minister following the completion of successful constitutional talks in London.

April 27, 1961 Sierra Leone becomes independent, with Sir Milton Margai as its first prime minister. The country opts for a parliamentary system within the Commonwealth of Nations. The following year, Sir Milton Margai's Sierra Leone Peoples Party (SLPP), which led the country to independence, wins the first general election under universal adult franchise.

1964 Sir Milton Margai dies, and his half brother Sir Albert Margai succeeds him as prime minister.

May 1967 In closely contested elections, the All People's Congress (APC) wins a plurality of the parliamentary seats. Accordingly, the governor general (representing the British monarch) declares Siaka Stevens—APC leader and mayor of Freetown—the new prime minister. Within a few hours, Stevens and Albert Margai are placed under house arrest by Brigadier David Lansana, the commander of the Republic of Sierra Leone Military Forces (RSLMF), on grounds that the determination of office should await the election of the tribal representatives to the house. Another group of officers soon stages

another coup, only to be later ousted in a third coup, the "sergeants' revolt."

1968 With a return to civilian rule, Siaka Stevens at last assumes office as prime minister. However, tranquility is not completely restored. In November, a state of emergency is declared after provincial disturbances.

1971 The government survives an unsuccessful military coup. Also, a republican constitution is adopted, and Siaka Stevens becomes the first president of the republic.

1974 Another failed military coup is launched against the government.

1977 Students demonstrate against government corruption and embezzlement of funds.

1978 The constitution is amended, and all political parties, other than the ruling APC, are banned. Sierra Leone becomes a one-party state, with the APC as its sole legal party.

1985 Siaka Stevens retires and appoints Major General Joseph Saidu Momoh the next president of Sierra Leone. Momoh's APC rule is marked by increasing abuses of power.

March 1991 A small band of men who call themselves the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), under the leadership of a former corporal, Foday Sankoh, begin to attack villages in eastern Sierra Leone, on the Liberian border. The initial group is made up of Charles Taylor's rebels and a few mercenaries from Burkina Faso. Their goal is to rid the country of the corrupt APC government. Fighting continues in the ensuing months, with the RUF gaining control of the diamond mines in the Kono district and pushing the Sierra Leone army back toward Freetown.

April 1992 A group of young military officers, led by Captain Valentine Strasser, launches a military coup that sends Momoh into exile. They establish the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC) as the ruling authority in Sierra Leone. The NPRC proves to be nearly as ineffectual as the Momoh government at repelling the RUF. More and more of the country falls into the hands of the RUF fighters.

1995 The RUF holds much of the countryside and are on the doorstep of Freetown. To control the situation, the NPRC hires several hundred mercenaries from private firms. Within a month, they have driven the RUF fighters back to enclaves along Sierra Leone's borders.

1996 Valentine Strasser is ousted and replaced by Brigadier General Julius Maada Bio, his defense minister. As a result of popular demand and mounting international pressure, the NPRC, under Maada Bio, agrees to hand over power to a civilian government via presidential and parliamentary elections, which are held in March 1996. Ahmad Tejan Kabbah, a diplomat who worked at the UN for more than twenty years, wins the presidential election under the banner of the SLPP.

May 1997 Kabbah is overthrown by the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC), a military junta headed by Lieutenant Colonel Johnny Paul Koroma, and the junta invites the RUF to participate in the new government.

March 1998 The AFRC is ousted by the Nigerian-led ECOWAS Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) forces, and the democratically elected government of President Kabbah is reinstated.

January 1999 The RUF launches another attempt to overthrow the government. Fighting reaches parts of Freetown again, leaving thousands dead and wounded. ECOMOG forces drive back the RUF attack several weeks later.

July 1999 The Lomé Peace Accord is signed between President Kabbah and Foday Sankoh of the RUF. The agreement grants the rebels seats in a new government and all forces a general amnesty from prosecution. The government has largely ceased to function effectively, however, and at least half of its territory remains under rebel control. In October, the UN Security Council establishes the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL) to help implement the peace agreement.

April/May 2000 Violence and rebel activity return, most notably when RUF forces hold hundreds of UNAMSIL personnel hostage, taking possession of their arms and ammunition. In May, members of the RUF shoot and kill as many as twenty people demonstrating outside Sankoh's house in Freetown against RUF violations. As a result of these events, which violate the peace agreement, Sankoh and other senior members of the RUF are arrested, and the group is stripped of its position in the government. In early May, a new cease-fire agreement is signed in Abuja. However, disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) does not resume, and fighting continues.

May 2000 The situation in the country has deteriorated to such an extent that British troops are deployed in Operation Palliser to evacuate foreign nationals. They stabilize the situation and are the catalyst for a cease-fire and the end of the civil war.

2001 A second Abuja Peace Agreement is signed to set the stage for a resumption of DDR on a wide scale. This brings about a significant reduction in hostilities. As disarmament progresses, the government begins to reassert its authority in formerly rebel-held areas.

January 2002 President Kabbah declares the civil war officially over.

May 2002 President Kabbah and his party, the SLPP, win landslide victories in the presidential and legislative elections. Kabbah is re-elected for a five-year term.

July 28, 2002 The British withdraw a 200-man military contingent that had been in the country since the summer of 2000, leaving behind a 105-man-strong team to train the Sierra Leone army.

Summer 2002 Both the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) and the Special Court begin to function. The Lomé Accord calls for the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to provide a forum for both victims and perpetrators of human rights violations to tell their stories, and to facilitate genuine reconciliation. Subsequently, the Sierra Leonean government asks the UN to help set up a Special Court for Sierra Leone, which will try those who "bear the greatest responsibility for the commission of crimes against humanity, war crimes and serious violations of international humanitarian law, as well as crimes under relevant Sierra Leonean law within the territory of Sierra Leone since November 30, 1996."

November 2002 UNAMSIL begins a gradual reduction in personnel, from a peak level of 17,500.

October 2004 The Truth and Reconciliation Commission releases its final report to the government, although widespread public distribution is delayed until August 2005 because of editing and printing problems. The government releases a white paper in June 2005, accepting some and rejecting or ignoring a number of other recommendations. Civil society groups dismiss the response as too vague and continue to criticize the government for its failure to follow up on the report's recommendations.

December 2005 The UNAMSIL peacekeeping mission formally ends, and the UN Integrated Office in Sierra Leone (UNIOSIL) is established, assuming a peace-building mandate.

March 25, 2006 After discussions with the newly elected Liberian president, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, President Olusegun Obasanjo of Nige-

ria says that Liberia is free to take Charles Taylor, who has been living in exile in Nigeria, into custody. Two days later, Taylor attempts to flee Nigeria, but is apprehended and transferred to Freetown under UN guard by nightfall on March 29. He is currently incarcerated in a UN jail, awaiting trial at the Special Court for Sierra Leone (SCSL) on eleven counts of war crimes.

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