

village. As we jogged to catch up with him, we jokingly tripped and pushed each other into the bushes.

At the village we were asked to quickly service our AK-47s. As we cleaned our guns, backpacks and waist packs were distributed among us. Two crates of ammunition were set out, one containing loaded magazines, the other loose bullets. The corporal commanded us to take as much ammunition as we could carry. "Don't take too much, though. We want you to be able to run fast," he said. As I loaded my backpack and waist pack, I looked up and saw that some of the older soldiers were doing the same. My hand began to shake and my heart beat faster. All the other boys, except for Alhaji, were having fun, because they thought they were gearing up for more drills, but I knew we weren't going for training, and Alhaji leaned on the wall of the building clutching his gun like a mother would hold her baby. He knew it, too.

"Stand up on your feet, soldiers," the corporal said. He had left us briefly to change. He was fully dressed in army uniform and carried a backpack and a waist pack full of ammunition. He held a G3 weapon and his helmet under his arms. We stood in line for inspection. All of the boys wore army shorts and green T-shirts. The corporal handed us green head ties and said, "If you see anyone without a head tie of this color or a helmet like mine, shoot him." He screamed the last two words. Now it was clear to all that we weren't going for training. As we tied our head cloths, Sheku, standing next to me, fell backward. He had taken too much ammunition. The corporal emptied some of the magazines from his backpack and stood him up. Sheku's forehead was sweating and his lips trembled. The corporal patted him on the head and continued talking. "The other men"—he pointed to the older soldiers—"will carry spare boxes of ammunition, so do not overload yourselves. Now relax, we will be on our way in a few minutes."

The corporal walked away. We sat down on the ground, and everyone seemed to wander into their own thoughts. The daily bird-songs were gone, replaced now by the raising of firing levers as the older soldiers readied themselves. Sheku and Josiah sat next to me, their eyes watery and dull. All I could do was rub their heads to assure

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## 13

IT MUST HAVE BEEN a Sunday morning when the corporal told us to take the day off training. He tapped the palm of his hand with the flat edge of his bayonet. "If you are religious, I mean a Christian, worship your Lord today, because you might not have another chance. Dismissed."

We went to the square wearing our army shorts and the *crapes* that had been given to us. We started a soccer game, and as we played, the lieutenant came out to sit on the verandah of his house. We stopped the game and saluted him. "Carry on with the game. Right now I want to see my soldiers play soccer." He sat on the stoop and began reading

*Julius Caesar*.

When we were done with soccer, we decided to go to the river for a swim. It was a sunny day, and as we ran down to the river, I felt the cool breeze drying the sweat on my body. We played swimming games for a few minutes, then divided into two teams for an ambush game. The first group to capture all the members of the other group would win.

"Let's go, soldiers, the holiday is over," the corporal called out from the banks of the river. We stopped our playing and followed him to the

them it might be okay. I got up and walked over to Alhaji and the rest of my friends. We made a pact that no matter what, we would try and stay together.

A young soldier came by with a plastic bag full of some kind of tablets. They looked like capsules, but they were plain white. He handed them to each of us with a cup of water. "The corporal said it will boost your energy," the soldier announced with a secretive smile on his face. As soon as we had taken the tablets, it was time to leave. The adult soldiers led the way. Some carried ammunition boxes; the length of two cement bricks, between them, and others had semi-automatic machine guns and RPGs. I held my AK-47 with my right hand, its mouth pointing to the ground. I had attached an extra magazine with adhesive tape to the one inside the gun. I had my bayonet on my left hip and some magazines and loose bullets in my side pack. In my backpack I had more magazines and loose bullets. Josiah and Sheku dragged the tip of their guns, as they still weren't strong enough to carry them and the guns were taller than they were. We were supposed to come back that evening, so we carried no food or water. "There are a lot of streams in the forest," the lieutenant had said, walking away, leaving the corporal to finish what he had started. "It is better to carry more ammunition than food and water. Because with more ammo, we will be able to find water and food, but with more water and food, we will not make it to the end of the day," the corporal explained.

The women and older people in the village stood on their verandahs and watched as we were led away by the adult soldiers into the clearing toward the forest. A baby cried uncontrollably in his mother's arms, as if he knew what lay ahead of us. The sun's brightness painted our shadows on the ground.

I have never been so afraid to go anywhere in my life as I was that day. Even the scuttle of a lizard frightened my entire being. A slight breeze blew and it went through my brain with a sharp swoop that made me grit my teeth in pain. Tears had begun to form in my eyes, but I struggled to hide them and gripped my gun for comfort.

We walked into the arms of the forest, holding our guns as if they were the only thing that gave us strength. We exhaled quietly, afraid that our own breathing could cause our death. The lieutenant led the line that I was in. He raised his fist in the air and we stopped moving. Then he slowly brought it down and we sat on one heel, our eyes surveying the forest. I wanted to turn around to see my friends' faces, but I couldn't. We began to move swiftly among the bushes until we came to the edge of a swamp, where we formed an ambush, aiming our guns into the swamp. We lay flat on our stomachs and waited. I was lying next to Josiah. Then there was Sheku and an adult soldier between myself, Jumah, and Musa. I looked around to see if I could catch their eyes, but they were concentrated on the invisible target in the swamp. The top of my eyes began to ache and the pain slowly rose up to my head. My ears became warm and tears were running down my cheeks, even though I wasn't crying. The veins on my arms stood out and I could feel them pulsating as if they had begun to breathe of their own accord. We waited in the quiet, as hunters do, our fingers gently caressing the triggers. The silence tormented me.

The short trees in the swamp began to shake as the rebels made their way through them. They weren't yet visible, but the lieutenant had passed the word down through a whisper that was relayed like a domino effect: "Fire on my command." As we watched, a group of men dressed in civilian clothes emerged from under the tiny bushes. They waved their hands and more fighters came out. Some were boys, as young as we were. They sat together in line, waving their hands, planning a strategy. The lieutenant ordered an RPG to be fired, but the commander of the rebels heard it as if whooshed its way out of the forest. "Retreat!" he told his men, and the grenade's blast got only a few men, whose split bodies flew in the air. The explosion was followed by an exchange of fire from both sides. I lay there with my gun pointed in front of me, unable to shoot. My index finger had become numb. The forest had begun to spin. I felt as if the ground had turned upside down and I was going to fall off, so I clutched the base of a tree with one hand. I couldn't think, but I could hear the sounds of the guns far

away in the distance and the cries of people dying in pain. I had begun to fall into some sort of nightmare. A splash of blood hit my face. In my reverie I had opened my mouth a bit, so I tasted some of the blood. As I spat it out and wiped it off my face, I saw the soldier it had come from. Blood poured out of the bullet holes in him like water rushing through newly opened tributaries. His eyes were wide open; he still held his gun. My eyes were fixed on him when I heard Josiah scream. He cried for his mother in the most painfully piercing voice that I had ever heard. It vibrated inside my head to the point that I felt my brain had shaken loose from its anchor.

The sun showed flashes of the tips of guns and bullets traveling toward us. Bodies had begun to pile on top of each other near a short palm tree, where fronds dripped blood. I searched for Josiah. An RPG had tossed his tiny body off the ground and he had landed on a tree stump. He wiggled his legs as his cry gradually came to an end. There was blood everywhere. It seemed as if bullets were falling into the forest from all angles. I crawled to Josiah and looked into his eyes. There were tears in them and his lips were shaking, but he could not speak. As I watched him, the water in his eyes was replaced with blood that quickly turned his brown eyes into red. He reached for my shoulder as if he wanted to hold it and pull himself up. But midway, he stopped moving. The gunshots faded in my head, and it was as if my heart had stopped and the whole world had come to a standstill. I covered his eyes with my fingers and pulled him from the tree stump. His back-bone had been shattered. I placed him flat on the ground and picked up my gun. I did not realize that I had stood up to take Josiah off the tree stump. I felt someone tugging at my foot. It was the corporal; he was saying something that I couldn't understand. His mouth moved and he looked terrified. He pulled me down, and as I hit the ground, I felt my brain shaking in my skull again and my deafness disappeared. "Get down," he was screaming. "Shoot," he said, as he crawled away from me to resume his position. As I looked to where he lay, my eyes caught Musa, whose head was covered with blood. His hands looked too relaxed. I turned toward the swamp, where there were gunmen

running, trying to cross over. My face, my hands, my shirt and gun were covered with blood. I raised my gun and pulled the trigger, and I killed a man. Suddenly, as if someone was shooting them inside my brain, all the massacres I had seen since the day I was touched by war began flashing in my head. Every time I stopped shooting to change magazines and saw my two young lifeless friends, I angrily pointed my gun into the swamp and killed more people. I shot everything that moved, until we were ordered to retreat because we needed another strategy.

We took the guns and ammunition off the bodies of my friends and left them there in the forest, which had taken on a life of its own, as if it had trapped the souls that had departed from the dead. The branches of the trees looked as if they were holding hands and bowing their heads in prayer. We crouched into the forest and formed another ambush a few meters away from our initial position. Once again, we waited. It was between evening and nighttime. One lonely cricket tried to start singing, but none of its companions joined in, so it stopped to let silence bring night. I lay next to the corporal, whose eyes were redder than normal. He ignored my stare. We heard footsteps on the dried grasses and immediately took aim. A group of gunmen and boys emerged from under the bushes, crouched, and took quick cover behind trees. As they got closer, we opened fire, dropping those who stood in front. The rest we chased into the swamp, where we lost them. There, crabs had already begun feasting on the eyes of the dead. Limbs and fragmented skulls lay on top of the bog, and the water in the swamp had been replaced by blood. We flipped the bodies over and took their ammunition and guns.

I was not afraid of these lifeless bodies. I despised them and kicked them to flip them. I found a G3, some ammunition, and a handgun that the corporal kept for himself. I noticed that most of the dead gunmen and boys wore lots of jewelry on their necks and wrists. Some even wore more than five gold watches on one wrist. One boy, whose un-combed hair was now soaked with blood, wore a Tupac Shakur T-shirt that said: "All eyes on me." We lost a few adult soldiers on our side and

my friends Musa and Josiah. Musa, the storyteller, was gone. There was no one around to tell us stories and make us laugh at times when we needed it. And Josiah—if only I had let him continue sleeping on the first day of training, perhaps he wouldn't have gone to the front line in the first place.

We arrived in the village with nighfall and sat against the walls of the army house. It was quiet, and as if we were afraid of silence, we began cleaning the blood off our guns and the ones we had brought with us, cleaning and oiling their chambers. We shot the weapons into the air to test their effectiveness. I went for supper that night, but was unable to eat. I only drank water and felt nothing. As I walked back to my tent, I stumbled into a cement wall. My knee bled, but I didn't feel a thing. I lay on my back in the tent with my AK-47 on my chest and the G3 I had brought with me leaning on the peg of the tent. Nothing happened in my head. It was void, and I stared at the roof of the tent until I was miraculously able to doze off. I had a dream that I was picking up Josiah from the tree stump and a gunman stood on top of me. He placed his gun on my forehead. I immediately woke up from my dream and began shooting inside the tent, until the thirty rounds in the magazine were finished. The corporal and the lieutenant came in afterward and took me outside. I was sweating, and they threw water on my face and gave me a few more of the white capsules. I stayed up all night and couldn't sleep for a week. We went out two more times that week and I had no problem shooting my gun.

THE SHARP ACHES IN MY HEAD, or what I later came to know as migraines, stopped as my daily activities were replaced with more soldierly things. In the daytime, instead of playing soccer in the village square, I took turns at the guarding posts around the village, smoking marijuana and sniffing *brown brown*, cocaine mixed with gunpowder, which was always spread out on the table, and of course taking more of the white capsules, as I had become addicted to them. They gave me a lot of energy. The first time I took all these drugs at the same time, I began to perspire so much that I took off all my clothes. My body shook, my sight became blurred, and I lost my hearing for several minutes. I walked around the village aimlessly, as I felt restless because I simultaneously felt a tremendous rush of energy and numbness. But after several doses of these drugs, all I felt was numbness to everything and so much energy that I couldn't sleep for weeks. We watched movies at night. War movies, *Rambo: First Blood*, *Rambo II*, *Com-mundo*, and so on, with the aid of a generator or sometimes a car battery. We all wanted to be like Rambo; we couldn't wait to implement his techniques.

When we ran out of food, drugs, ammunition, and gasoline to

watch war films, we raided rebel camps, in towns, villages, and forests. We also attacked civilian villages to capture recruits and whatever else we could find.

"We have good news from our informants. We are moving out in five minutes to kill some rebels and take their supplies, which really belong to us," the lieutenant would announce. His face evinced confidence; his smiles disappeared before they were completed. We tied our heads with the green cloths that distinguished us from the rebels, and we boys led the way. There were no maps and no questions asked. We were simply told to follow the path until we received instructions on what to do next. We walked for long hours and stopped only to eat sardines and corned beef with *gari*, sniff cocaine, *brown brown*, and take some white capsules. The combination of these drugs gave us a lot of energy and made us fierce. The idea of death didn't cross my mind at all and killing had become as easy as drinking water. My mind had not only snapped during the first killing, it had also stopped making remorseful records, or so it seemed. After we ate and did drugs, we would guard the perimeter while the adults rested for a bit. I shared a post with Alhaji, and we would time each other on how fast we could take out a magazine and replace it.

"Sometime I am going to take on a whole village by myself, just like Rambo," Alhaji told me, smiling at the new goal he had set for himself.

"I'd like to have some bazookas of my own, like the ones in *Com-manda*. That would be beautiful," I said, and we laughed.

Before we got to a rebel camp, we would deviate from the path and walk inside the forest. Once the camp was in sight, we would surround it and wait for the lieutenant's command. The rebels roamed about; some sat against walls, dozing off, and others, boys as young as we, stood at guard posts passing around marijuana. Whenever I looked at rebels during raids, I got angrier, because they looked like the rebels who played cards in the ruins of the village where I had lost my family. So when the lieutenant gave orders, I shot as many as I could, but I didn't feel better. After every gunfight we would enter the rebel camp, killing those we had wounded. We would then search the houses and

gather gallons of gasoline, enormous amounts of marijuana and cocaine, bales of clothes, *crapes*, watches, rice, dried fish, salt *gari*, and many other things. We rounded up the civilians—men, women, boys, and young girls—hiding in the huts and houses, and made them carry our loot back to the base.

On one of these raids, we had captured a few rebels after a long gunfight and a lot of civilian casualties. We undressed the prisoners and tied them until their chests were tight as drums.

"Where did you get all this ammunition from?" the corporal asked one of the prisoners, a man with an almost dreadlocked beard. He spat at the corporal's face, and the corporal immediately shot him in the head at close range. He fell onto the ground and blood slowly leaked out of his head. We cheered in admiration of the corporal's fierceness and saluted him as he walked by. Suddenly Lansana, one of the boys, was shot in the chest and head by a rebel hiding in the bushes. We dispersed around the village in search of the shooter. When the young muscular rebel was captured, the lieutenant slit his neck with his bayonet. The rebel ran up and down the village before he fell to the ground and stopped moving. We cheered again, raising our guns in the air, shouting and whistling.

"If anyone starts any funny business, shoot him." The lieutenant eyed the prisoners. We set the thatched roofs on fire and left, taking the prisoners with us. The flames on the thatched roofs waved us off as they danced with the afternoon breeze, swaying as if in agony.

"We"—the lieutenant pointed to us—"are here to protect you and will do all we can to make sure nothing happens to you." He pointed to the civilians.

"Our job is a serious one and we have the most capable soldiers, who will do anything to defend this country. We are not like the rebels, those riffraffs who kill people for no reason. We kill them for the good and betterment of this country. So respect all these men—he pointed to us again—"for offering their services." The lieutenant went on and on with his speech, which was a combination of instilling

in the civilians that what we were doing was right and boosting the morale of his men, including us, the boys. I stood there holding my gun and felt special because I was part of something that took me seriously and I was not running from anyone anymore. I had my gun now, and as the corporal always said, "This gun is your source of power in these times. It will protect you and provide you all you need, if you know how to use it well."

I cannot remember what prompted the lieutenant to make this speech. A lot of things were done with no reason or explanation. Sometimes we were asked to leave for war in the middle of a movie. We would come back hours later after killing many people and continue the movie as if we had just returned from intermission. We were always either at the front lines, watching a war movie, or doing drugs. There was no time to be alone or to think. When we conversed with each other, we talked only about the war movies and how impressed we were with the way either the lieutenant, the corporal, or one of us had killed someone. It was as if nothing else existed outside our reality.

The morning after the lieutenant's speech, we proceeded to practice killing the prisoners the way the lieutenant had done it. There were five prisoners and many eager participants. So the corporal chose a few of us. He picked Kanei, three other boys, and me for the killing exhibition. The five men were lined up in front of us on the training ground with their hands tied. We were supposed to slice their throats on the corporal's command. The person whose prisoner died quickest would win the contest. We had our bayonets out and were supposed to look in the faces of the prisoners as we took them out of this world. I had already begun staring at my prisoner. His face was swollen from the beating he had received, and his eyes looked as if they were watching something behind me. His jaws were the only tense part of his facial expression; everything else seemed calm. I didn't feel a thing for him, didn't think that much about what I was doing. I just waited for the corporal's order. The prisoner was simply another rebel who was responsible for the death of my family, as I had come to truly believe.

The corporal gave the signal with a pistol shot and I grabbed the man's head and slit his throat in one fluid motion. His Adam's apple made way for the sharp knife, and I turned the bayonet on its zigzag edge as I brought it out. His eyes rolled up and they looked me straight in the eye before they suddenly stopped in a frightful glance, as if caught by surprise. The prisoner leaned his weight on me as he gave out his last breath. I dropped him on the ground and wiped my bayonet on him. I reported to the corporal, who was holding a timer. The bodies of the other prisoners fought in the arms of the other boys, and some continued to shake on the ground for a while. I was proclaimed the winner, and Kanei came second. The boys and the other soldiers who were the audience clapped as if I had just fulfilled one of life's greatest achievements. I was given the rank of junior lieutenant and Kanei was given junior sergeant. We celebrated that day's achievement with more drugs and more war movies.

I had a tent to myself, which I never slept in because sleep never came to me. Sometimes late in the night, the quiet wind brought to my ears the humming of Lansana. It seemed as if the trees whispered the tunes of the songs he had sung. I would listen for a bit and then fire a few rounds into the night, driving the humming away.

## 15

THE VILLAGES THAT WE CAPTURED and turned into our bases as we went along and the forests that we slept in became my home. My squad was my family, my gun was my provider and protector, and my rule was to kill or be killed. The extent of my thoughts didn't go much beyond that. We had been fighting for over two years, and killing had become a daily activity. I felt no pity for anyone. My childhood had gone by without my knowing, and it seemed as if my heart had frozen. I knew that day and night came and went because of the presence of the moon and the sun, but I had no idea whether it was a Sunday or a Friday.

In my head my life was normal. But everything began to change in the last weeks of January 1996. I was fifteen.

I left one morning with twenty members of my squad for Bauya, a small town a day's walk south of us, to get ammunition. My friends Alhaji and Kanei came, too. We were excited to see Jumah, who was now stationed there. We wanted to hear his war stories, hear how many people he had killed. I was also looking forward to seeing the lieutenant. I hoped we might find some time to talk about Shakespeare.

We walked in two lines on the sides of a dusty path, looking into

the dense bushes with our bloodshot eyes. We arrived at the outskirts of Bauya just before sunset and waited in the bushes as our commander went ahead to make sure our colleagues wouldn't shoot at us. We sat against trees and watched the path. The commander returned after several minutes and motioned for us to move into town. I hoisted my gun on my shoulder and walked next to Kanei and Alhaji as we entered the base. The cement houses in the town were bigger than the ones I had seen in other villages, and everywhere we looked were unfamiliar faces. We nodded to acknowledge other soldiers as we walked around town looking for Jumah. We found him sitting in a hammock on the verandah of a cement house that faced the forest. There was a semiautomatic machine gun next to him and he seemed lost in thought. We slowly walked up to him, but before we could scare him, he heard our footsteps and turned toward us. His face seemed to have gotten older and he had stopped nodding when he spoke. We shook hands with him and examined his gun.

"I see that you carry heavy weapons these days," Alhaji joked with him.

"Well, what can I say, I am moving up from the AKs," he replied, and we all laughed.

We told him that we would return to sit with him in a few minutes and went to load our bags with ammunition and food to take back. While we were in the ammunition house, our commander told us that the lieutenant had asked us to stay the night and that dinner was ready. I wasn't hungry, so I returned by myself to see Jumah while Kanei and Alhaji went to eat. We sat quietly for a while before he started talking.

"I am going on a raid tomorrow morning, so I might not see you before you leave." He paused, fingered the side of the machine gun, and continued: "I killed the owner of this gun in our last raid. He took out a lot of us before I could get him. Since then I have used it to do some damage myself." He chuckled, and we high-fived each other and laughed. Immediately after that, we were ordered to report for the nightly gathering in the yard at the center of town. It was a social event

for commanders to mingle with everyone else. Jumah picked up his gun and put his arm around my shoulder as we walked to the yard. Alhaji and Kanei were there; they had already started smoking. Lieutenant Jabati was present, too, and he was a little jovial that night. Most of his colleagues, Staff Sergeant Mansaray and Corporal Gadafi, had died, but the lieutenant had miraculously managed to stay alive unscathed. He had also been able to replace his dead colleagues with other men who were fierce and disciplined. I wanted to talk to the lieutenant about Shakespeare, but he was busy going about the gathering, shaking everyone's hand. When he finally stood in front of me, he held my hand tight and said, "Machbeth shall never vanquished be until great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane hill shall come against him." He nodded at me and said loudly to everyone, "I shall take leave of you fine gentlemen." He bowed and waved as he left. We raised our guns in the air and cheered. After the lieutenant had gone, we began singing the national anthem, "*High we exalt thee, realm of the free, great is the love we have for thee . . .*" and marching, smoking and sniffing the cocaine and *brown brown* that was in abundance at Bauya. We chatted all night, mostly about how good the drugs were.

Before morning, Jumah and a few others left for their raid. Alhaji, Kanei, and I shook hands with him and promised that we would catch up more on our next visit. Jumah smiled, clutched his machine gun, and went running into the darkness.

A few hours later a truck came to the village. Four men dressed in clean blue jeans and white T-shirts that said UNICEF on them in big blue letters jumped out. One of them was a white man and another was also light-skinned, maybe Lebanese. The other two were nationals, one with tribal marks on his cheeks, the other with marks on his hands just like the one my grandfather gave me to protect me from snakebite. The men were all too clean to have been in the war. They were shown to the lieutenant's house. He had been expecting them. As they sat talking on the verandah, we watched them from under the mango tree, where we sat cleaning our guns. After a while, the lieutenant shook hands with the two foreigners and he called over the private

who was guarding the meeting. The private ran toward us and told us to form a line. He went around the town gathering all the boys, exclaiming: "This is an order from the lieutenant!" We were accustomed to taking orders and did what we were told. We formed a horizontal line and waited.

The lieutenant stood before us and we saluted him, expecting to hear about our next raid on a rebel camp. "Stand at ease, boys," he said. He slowly walked along the line, the visitors a few paces behind him, smiling.

"When I point at you, fall out and form a line by the private. Understand." The lieutenant gave his orders from the far end of the line. "Yes, sir," we shouted, and saluted. The smiles on the visitors' faces disappeared. "At ease."

"You, you . . ." the lieutenant pointed as he walked down the line. When the lieutenant picked me, I stared at his face, but he ignored me and continued his selection process. Alhaji was also picked, but Kanei was left behind, maybe because he was older. Fifteen of us were chosen. The lieutenant then ordered us, "Remove your magazines, put your weapons on safety, and put them on the ground." We laid our weapons down, and the visitors, especially the two foreigners, began smiling again. "Attention. Forward march," a private ordered us, and we followed the lieutenant toward the truck the visitors had arrived in. We stopped when the lieutenant turned around and faced us. "You have been great soldiers and you all know that you are part of this brotherhood. I am very proud to have served my country with you boys. But your work here is done, and I must send you off. These men will put you in school and find you another life." That was all he said; then he smiled and walked away, asking the other soldiers to strip us of our military equipment. I hid my bayonet inside my pants and a grenade in my pocket. When one of the soldiers came to search me, I pushed him and told him that if he touched me I would kill him. He walked away and searched a boy standing next to me instead.

What was happening? Our faces followed the lieutenant as he walked to his house. Why had the lieutenant decided to give us up to



these civilians? We thought that we were part of the war until the end. The squad had been our family. Now we were being taken away, just like that, without any explanation. A few soldiers gathered our weapons and others guarded us, to make sure that we didn't try to run for our guns. As we were ushered to the truck, I stared back at the verandah where the lieutenant now stood, looking in the other direction, toward the forest, his hands crossed behind his back. I still didn't know what was going on, but I was beginning to get angry, anxious. I hadn't parted with my gun since the day I became a soldier.

In the truck were three MPs—city soldiers. I could tell by how clean their uniforms and guns were. Their pants were tucked inside their boots and their shirts were tucked into their pants. Their faces weren't hardened, and their guns were so clean I assumed they hadn't fired a shot. The weapons were on safety. The MPs jumped off the truck and motioned for us to climb in. We divided ourselves onto two long benches in the truck that faced each other, and two of the men, the one with the marks on his cheeks and the Lebanese-looking foreigner, climbed in back with us. Then the three MPs swung up on the back door panel, one foot inside the truck, the other hanging out.

As the truck began to pull away from the base, I started boiling with anger, because I couldn't make sense of what was happening. Alhaji looked at me with a puzzled face. I looked at the guns the MPs carried and envied them. The men who had come to get us smiled as the truck sped along the dirt road, raising light brown dust that covered the bushes on the sides of the road. I had no idea where we were going.

We were on the road for hours. I had gotten used to walking to places and hadn't sat in a truck or been in one place idly for this long in a while. I hated it. I thought about hijacking the truck and driving it back to Bauya. But whenever I was ready to snatch a gun from the MPs, the truck slowed down at a checkpoint and the soldiers jumped off. I had forgotten about the grenade in the side pocket of my army shorts. I was restless throughout the journey and actually began to look forward to the checkpoints (there were many of them, too many)

so that I could get up from the boredom of the truck. We didn't speak to each other at all. We sat quietly, except at times when I winked at Alhaji as we waited for the right moment to take the guns from the MPs and push them off the truck.

The last checkpoint we passed that day was manned by soldiers well dressed in complete army gear. The brown polished wooden panels of their AKs were shiny and new. They were city soldiers who, like the MPs who were in the truck with us, hadn't yet been to war. They had no idea, I thought, what was really happening in the bushes in the entire country.

We drove past the checkpoint, off the dusty road, and onto a busy tar street. Everywhere I looked there were cars going in every direction. I had never seen that many cars, trucks, and buses in my life. Mercedes, Toyotas, Mazdas, Chevrolers were impatiently honking, music blasting. I still didn't know where we were going, but I was sure now that we were in Freetown, Sierra Leone's capital. But I didn't know why.

It was getting dark outside. As the truck slowly rocked along the busy street, streetlights flickered on. Even the shops and kiosks were lit. I was amazed at how many lights there were without the sound of a generator. I was marveling at the glittering cityscape when the truck turned off the street and began galloping so heavily that we were all shaking as if we'd been placed on a vibrating machine. This went on for a few minutes, and then we stopped. The MPs asked us to get out of the truck and follow the four beaming men in the UNICEF shirts.

We entered a fenced compound that had several rows of houses. There were lights on in the houses and boys our age, fifteen and above, sat on the verandahs and stoops. They ignored us, as they, too, looked baffled about why they were there. The Lebanese-looking foreigner motioned for us to follow him into the house, his face glowing. It was an open hall and there were two rows of twin-size beds. He excitedly showed each of us the bed that was going to be ours and lockers that

contained soap, toothpaste, toothbrush, a towel, a clean shirt, and T-shirts. The beds had pillows, clean sheets, and blankets. None of us were as interested in the things he showed us as he seemed to be. "We have a bale of new *crapes* for you. Tomorrow you will pick your size." He left us in the room and went outside, whistling a melody. We just stood there looking at the beds as if we had never seen anything like them.

"Come with me to the kitchen for some food," the Sierra Leonean man with the tribal marks said. We followed him past the curious faces of boys who had arrived before us. Their eyes were as red as ours, and even though they wore civilian clothes, they looked dirty and had intense expressions like us. I could smell the forest on them.

In the kitchen we sat on one side of the long dining table. The man went into a little room at the end of the kitchen, where he hummed a familiar song, dished out rice into many bowls, and brought them out on a tray. We took a bowl each and started eating. He went back into the little room, and by the time he returned to the table with his own bowl of food to eat with us, we had already finished. He was shocked and looked around to see if we had done something else with the food. He pulled himself together, and as he was about to take his first bite, the two happy-face foreigners walked into the dining room and asked him to come with them. He took his bowl of rice with him and followed the foreigners, who were already walking out of the kitchen. We sat quietly for a minute before Alhaji asked if anyone happened to bring some marijuana or cocaine. One of the boys had some marijuana that we passed around, but it wasn't enough. "Where can we get ourselves some good drugs in this place?" one of the boys asked.

As we pondered this question, the man who had brought us to the kitchen returned, bringing with him another group of boys, over twenty of them. "These are the new arrivals," he said to us. Turning to the new boys, he said, "I'll bring you some food, and please, take your time. There is no need to eat fast." The boys sat on the opposite side of the dining table and ate as fast as we had. The man sniffed the air

and asked, "Who was smoking marijuana in here?" But no one paid him any attention, so he sat down and kept quiet. We stared at the new boys and they at us.

Alhaji broke the silence. "Where are you boys from?" he asked. The boys widened their eyes and stared at Alhaji as if he had just asked them the wrong question. One of the boys, who looked a little older and had no hair on his head, stood up, clenching his fist.

"And who the fuck are you? Do we look like we are here to answer questions for *bastar pekin lek yori?*" He leaned across the table and looked down on Alhaji. Alhaji got up and pushed him. The boy fell, and when he got up, he pulled a bayonet and jumped on the table toward Alhaji. All of us stood up, ready to fight. The man screamed, "Stop it, boys!" but no one listened to him. I took out my grenade and put my fingers inside the pin.

"Do you boys want this to be your last meal, or do you want to answer his question?" I threatened the other boys.

"We are from Kono district," the boy who held the bayonet said.

"Ah, the diamond area!" Alhaji said. I was still holding the grenade.

"Did you fight in the army or for the rebels?" I sternly asked.

"Do I look like a rebel to you?" he said. "I fought for the army. The rebels burned my village and killed my parents, and you look like one of them."

"So we all fought on the same side of the war," Alhaji said, and we all sat down, still glaring at each other. Upon learning that we had all fought for the so-called army, in different parts of the country, we calmed down and talked about what bases we were from. Neither of us had ever heard of the others' squad or base or the lieutenants who were in charge of the squads. I explained to the other boys that we had arrived just a few minutes before them. They told me that they had been randomly selected, too, and asked by their commander to follow the men who visited their base. None of us knew why our commanders had let us go. We were excellent fighters and were ready to fight the war till the end. One boy was telling us that he thought the foreigners gave our commanders money in exchange for us. No

one said anything to this. I still had the grenade in my hand as we conversed. Sometime during the conversation I turned to the man who had brought us to the kitchen. He was sitting at the edge of the table, shaking. His forehead perspired profusely. "Do you know why our commanders gave us up to you sissy civilians?" I asked the man, pointing the grenade at him. He put his head under the table as if I was going to throw the grenade at him. He was too nervous to answer me.

"He is a sissy civilian, let's go ask the other boys," the boy who had pulled his bayonet suggested. His name was Mambu, and I later became friends with him. We left the man, still under the kitchen table, and headed for the verandah. As we walked up the steps, we saw the three MPs sitting at the entrance of the compound, chatting and ignoring us. The two foreigners had left. We walked up to the boys sitting quietly on the verandah.

"Do you boys know why your commanders gave you up to these civilians?" Alhaji asked, and all the quiet boys stood up and turned their angry faces to him, staring silently.

"Are you boys deaf?" Alhaji continued. He turned to me: "They don't know anything."

"We do not want to be bothered by anyone," one of the boys said in a deep voice. "And we do not want to answer any questions from a civilian."

"We are not civilians," Mambu said angrily, walking toward the boy. "If anyone is a civilian, it is you boys. You are wearing civilian clothes. What kind of army person wears only civilian clothes? Did these sissy civilians who brought you here make you wear those clothes? You must be a weak soldier, then."

"We fought for the RUF; the army is the enemy. We fought for freedom, and the army killed my family and destroyed my village. I will kill any of those army bastards every time I get a chance to do so." The boy took off his shirt to fight Mambu, and on his arm was the RUF tattoo.

"They are rebels," Mambu shouted, and before he could reach for his bayonet, the boy punched him in the face. He fell, and when he

got up, his nose was bleeding. The rebel boys drew out the few bayonets they had and rushed toward us. It was war all over again. Perhaps the naïve foreigners thought that removing us from the war would lessen our hatred for the RUF. It hadn't crossed their minds that a change of environment wouldn't immediately make us normal boys; we were dangerous, and brainwashed to kill. They had just started this process of rehabilitation, so this was one of the first lessons they had to learn.

As the boys rushed toward us, I threw the grenade among them, but the explosion was delayed. We leaped out from underneath the stoop where we had taken cover and charged into the open yard, where we began to fight. Some of us had bayonets, others didn't. A boy without a bayonet grabbed my neck from behind. He was squeezing for the kill and I couldn't use my bayonet effectively, so I elbowed him with all my might until he let go of my neck. He was holding his stomach when I turned around. I stabbed him in his foot. The bayonet stuck, so I pulled it out with force. He fell and I began kicking him in the face. As I went to deliver the final blow with my bayonet, someone came from behind me and sliced my hand with his knife. It was a rebel boy, and he was about to kick me down when he fell on his face. Alhaji had stabbed him in the back. He pulled the knife out, and we continued kicking the boy until he stopped moving. I wasn't sure whether he was unconscious or dead. I didn't care. No one screamed or cried during the fight. After all, we had been doing such things for years and were all still on drugs.

The three MPs and the two nationals who had brought us to the center came running into the yard a few minutes into the fight. "Stop, stop," they yelled, pushed boys apart, and carried the wounded to the side. It was a bad idea. We pounced on the MPs, pulled them to the ground, and took their guns away from them. The army boys, we, got one; the rebel boys had the other. The other MP ran away before either group could catch him.

Mambu had the gun, and before the rebel boy who had the other gun could switch the safety off, Mambu shot him. He fell, dropping

the gun. Other rebel boys tried to grab it, but Mambu shot each one who attempted to. He killed a few and wounded some. But the rebel boys were persistent, and finally one of them got the gun and shot two boys on our side. The second boy, who was shot at close range, stabbed the rebel boy in his stomach before he fell. The rebel boy dropped the gun and fell to the ground as well.

More MPs were running through the gate now, toward the fight. We had fought for almost twenty minutes, stabbing and slicing each other and the men who tried to part us. The MPs fired a few rounds into the air to get us to stop, but we were still fighting, so they had to part us by force. They placed some of us at gunpoint and kicked others apart. Six people were killed: two on our side and four on the rebel side; and several were wounded, including two of the men who had brought us. The military ambulances took off, wailing into the still newborn night with the dead and the wounded. Their strobe lights made me dizzy. I had a little wound on my hand. I hid it because I didn't want to be taken to the hospital and it was just a small cut. I washed the blood off, put some salt on it and tied it with a cloth. During the fight Mambu had blinded one boy by plucking out his eye with a bayonet. We later heard that the boy was taken out of the country for surgery and that his eye was to be replaced by a cat's eye or something. Following the night of the fight, we praised Mambu for his lethal behavior. I would have liked him to be in my squad, I thought.

As MPs stood guard to make sure we didn't start another fight, we, the army boys, went to the kitchen to look for food. We ate and chatted about the fight. Mambu told us that when he plucked the boy's eye out, the boy ran to punch him, but he couldn't see him, so he ran into the wall, banging his head hard, and fainted. We laughed and picked up Mambu, raising him in the air. We needed the violence to cheer us after a whole day of boring traveling and contemplation about why our superiors had let us go.

The jubilation was stopped by a group of MPs who walked into the kitchen and asked us to follow them. They had their guns pointed at us, but we laughed at them and walked outside to where military vehi-

cles waited to transport us somewhere. We were so happy to have dealt with the rebel boys that we didn't think of attacking the MPs. Plus there were too many of them. It seemed they had gotten the message that we were not children to play with. Some of the MPs stood by the vehicle holding their guns tightly and carefully eyeing us. "Maybe they are taking us back to the front," Alhaji said, and for some reason we all started singing the national anthem, marching to the vehicles.

But we were not taken back to the front lines; instead, they took us to Benin Home, another rehabilitation center in Kissy Town at the eastern outskirts of Freetown, away from the rest of the city. Benin Home had once been called Approve School and been a government-run juvenile center. The MPs made sure to search us thoroughly before we entered. The blood of our victims and enemies was fresh on our arms and clothes. The lieutenant's words still echoed in my head: "From now on, we kill any rebel we see, no prisoners." I smiled a bit, happy that we had taken care of the rebel boys, but I also began to wonder again: why had we been brought here? The MPs guarded us that night as we sat on the verandah of our halls staring into the night. All I could think about was what was going to happen with my G3 weapon and what movie my squad was watching that night, what good marijuana and cocaine were at their disposal. "Hey, you fellows have any *zaffe* [marijuana] for us?" Mambu asked the MPs, who ignored him. I was beginning to shake. The drugs from the previous nights, before we were brought to the city, had begun to subside in my system. I walked up and down on the verandah, restless in my new environment. My head began to hurt.

## 16

IT WAS INFURIATING to be told what to do by civilians. Their voices, even when they called us for breakfast, enraged me so much that I would punch the wall, my locker, or anything that I was standing next to. A few days earlier, we could have decided whether they would live or die. Because of these things, we refused to do anything that we were asked to do, except eat. We had bread and tea for breakfast, rice and soup for both lunch and dinner. The assortment of soups consisted of cassava leaves, potato leaves, okra, and so forth. We were unhappy because we needed our guns and drugs.

At the end of every meal, the nurses and staff members came to talk to us about attending the scheduled medical checkups in the mini-hospital at Benin Home and the one-on-one counseling sessions in the psychosocial therapy center that we hated. As soon as they started speaking, we would throw bowls, spoons, food, and benches at them. We would chase them out of the dining hall and beat them up. One afternoon, after we had chased off the nurses and staff members, we placed a bucket over the cook's head and pushed him around the kitchen until he burned his hand on a hot boiling pot and agreed to put more milk in our tea. Because of these things, we were basically

left to wander aimlessly about our new environment for the entire first week. During that same week, the drugs were wearing off. I craved cocaine and marijuana so badly that I would roll a plain sheet of paper and smoke it. Sometimes I searched in the pockets of my army shorts, which I still wore, for crumbs of marijuana or cocaine. We broke into the mini-hospital and stole some pain relievers—white tablets and off white—and red and yellow capsules. We emptied the capsules, ground the tablets, and mixed them together. But the mixture didn't give us the effect we wanted. We got more upset day by day and, as a result, resorted to more violence. In the morning, we beat up people from the neighborhood who were on their way to fetch water at a nearby pump. If we couldn't catch them, we threw stones at them. Sometimes they dropped their buckets as they ran away from us. We would laugh as we destroyed their buckets. The neighbors stopped walking near our center, as we had sent a few of them to the hospital. The staff members avoided us all the more. We began to fight each other day and night.

We would fight for hours in between meals, for no reason at all. During these fights, we destroyed most of the furniture and threw the mattresses out in the yard. We would stop to wipe the blood off our lips, arms, and legs only when the bell rang for mealtime. At night, after we had exhausted fighting, we would bring our mattresses outside in the yard and sit on them quietly until morning arrived and it was time for breakfast. Every time we returned from breakfast, the mattresses we had brought outside the previous night were back on our beds. We would angrily bring them out again in the yard, cursing whoever had taken them inside. One night, as we sat outside on the mattresses, it began to rain. We sat in the rain wiping it off our faces and listening to its sound on the tile roof and the gushing of torrents onto the ground. It rained for only about an hour, but even after it had stopped, we continued sitting outside all night on the wet sponges that were once our mattresses.

The following morning, when we returned from breakfast, the mattresses were still outside. It wasn't much of a sunny day, so they didn't dry by nighttime. We became angry and went to look for Poppay, the

man in charge of storage. He was an ex-military man with a wandering eye. When we found him, we demanded dry mattresses.

"You will have to wait for the ones you left outside to dry," he said.

"We cannot allow a civilian to talk to us like that," someone said, and we all shouted in agreement and rushed at Poppay. We unleashed blows on him. One of the boys stabbed his foot and he fell down. He put his hands over his head as we kicked him relentlessly and left him lying on the floor bleeding and unconscious. We shouted in excitement as we walked back to our verandah. Gradually, we became quiet. I was angry, because I missed my squad and needed more violence.

A security guy who watched the center took Poppay to the hospital. Several days later, Poppay returned during lunchtime, limping but with a smile on his face. "It is not your fault that you did such a thing to me," he said, as he strolled through the dining hall. This made us angry, because we wanted "the civilians," as we referred to the staff members, to respect us as soldiers who were capable of severely harming them. Most of the staff members were like that; they returned smiling after we hurt them. It was as if they had made a pact not to give up on us. Their smiles made us hate them all the more.

My hands had begun to shake uncontrollably and my migraines had returned with a vengeance. It was as if a blacksmith had an anvil in my head. I would hear and feel the hammering of metal in my head, and these unbearable sharp sounds made my veins and muscles sour. I cringed and rolled around on the floor by my bed or sometimes on the verandah. No one paid any attention, as everyone was busy going through their own withdrawal stages in different ways. Ahaji, for example, punched the cement pillar of one of the buildings until his knuckles bled and his bone began to show. He was taken to the mini-hospital and put to sleep for several days so that he would stop hurting himself.

One day we decided to break the glass windows in the classrooms. I do not remember why, but instead of finding rocks to break the windows like everyone else, I punched the glass with my fist. I managed to break several panes before my hand got stuck in the glass. I drew it out and began to bleed uncontrollably. I had to go to the hospital. My plan

was to steal a first-aid kit and treat myself, but the nurse was there. She made me sit on the counter as she removed pieces of glass from my skin. She twisted her face whenever she was removing a piece of glass that was buried deep in my skin. But when she looked at me, I was still. She searched my face to see if I was in pain. She was confused, but continued to gently remove the pieces of glass from my bleeding hand. I didn't feel a thing. I just wanted to stop my blood from flowing.

"This is going to hurt," the nurse said when she was about to clean the cuts.

"What is your name?" she asked as she dressed my hand. I didn't answer her.

"Come back tomorrow so that I can change the bandage. Okay?" She began to rub my head, but I pushed her hand away and walked out.

I didn't go back to the hospital the next day, but on that same day, I fainted from a migraine while I was sitting on the verandah. I woke up in bed in the hospital. The nurse was wiping my forehead with a soaked cloth. I caught her hand, pushed her away, and walked out again. I sat outside in the sun, rocking back and forth. My entire body was aching, my throat was dry, and I felt nauseated. I threw up something green and slimy, then fainted again. When I woke up hours later, the same nurse was there. She handed me a glass of water. "You can go if you want to, but I suggest that you stay in bed tonight," she said, pointing her finger at me, the way a mother would talk to a stubborn child. I took the water from her and drank it, then threw the glass against the wall. The nurse leapt from her chair. I tried to get up to leave, but was unable to sit up in bed. She smiled and walked over to my bed and injected me. She covered me with a blanket and began sweeping up the broken glass. I wanted to throw the blanket off, but I couldn't move my hands. I was getting weaker and my eyelids grew heavier.

I woke to the whispers of the nurse and someone else. I was confused, as I wasn't sure what day or time it was. I felt my head pulsating a little. "How long have I been here?" I asked the nurse, banging my hand on the side of the bed to get her attention.

"Look who's talking, and be careful with your hand," she said. When I sat up a bit, I saw that there was a soldier in the room. I thought for a minute that he was there to take me back to the front lines. But when I looked at him again, I knew he was at the hospital for other reasons. He was clearly a city soldier, well dressed and without a gun. He was a lieutenant and supposedly there to check on how we were being treated medically and psychologically, but he seemed more interested in the nurse. I was once a lieutenant, I thought, a "junior lieutenant," to be precise.

As a junior lieutenant I had been in charge of a small unit made up of boys to carry out quick missions. The lieutenant and Corporal Gadafi had selected all my remaining friends—Alhaji, Kanei, Jumah, and Moriba—to form the unit, and once again we were back together. Only this time we weren't running away from the war. We were in it and went out scouting potential villages that had food, drugs, ammunition, gasoline, and other things we needed. I would report our findings to the corporal, and then the entire squad would attack the village we had spied on, killing everyone so that we would stay alive.

On one of our scouting expeditions, we accidentally came upon a village. We had thought that the village was more than three days away, but after only a day and a half of walking, we began to smell the scent of cooking palm oil in the air. It was a beautiful day, as summer was giving us its last sunshine. We immediately got off the path and walked in the bushes toward the village. When we began to see the thatched roofs, we crawled until we were closer to the village, to be able to look at what was going on. There were a few gunmen lazily lounging about. Also, there were piles of bundles outside every house. It seemed that the rebels were getting ready to move out of the village. If we had gone back to base to get the rest of the squad, we would have missed capturing their supply of food. So we decided to attack. I gave orders for everyone to deploy around the village at strategic positions from where they could see the entire place. Alhaji and I gave the three other boys a few minutes to take their positions before we started

crawling even closer to the village to initiate the attack. The two of us went back to the main path and started crawling on either side of it. We had two RPG tubes and five propelled grenades. We had gotten close enough, and I had aimed my gun at the group that I intended to start with, when Alhaji tapped me on my shoulder. He whispered that he wanted to practice his Rambo moves before we started firing. Before I said a word, Alhaji was already rubbing mud on his face, using a combination of saliva and some of the water from his backpack to wet the mud. He tied his gun to his back and took out his bayonet, rubbing his finger on the flat edge, holding it in front of his face. He began to crawl slowly under the midday sun that illuminated the village one last time before we brought darkness to it.

When Alhaji was out of sight, I aimed the RPG at the village where most of the gunmen sat, to cover him. A few minutes later, I saw him crawling and crouching behind and among houses. He would quickly sit against walls to avoid being seen. He crawled slowly behind a lazy guard basking in the sunlight with his gun on his lap. Alhaji grabbed the guard's mouth and sliced his neck with his bayonet. He did the same to a few more guards. But he had made one mistake: he didn't hide the bodies of those he had successfully killed. I was enjoying his maneuver when one of the guards, upon returning to his post, saw the body of his colleague and began running back to tell the others. I couldn't let him do that, so I shot him with my G3 and quickly released two RPGs among the gunmen.

We began exchanging fire. I didn't know where Alhaji was, but as I was shooting, he crawled toward me. I almost shot him, but recognized his dirty Rambo face. We went to work, killing everyone in sight. We didn't waste a single bullet. We had all gotten better at shooting, and our size gave us an advantage, because we could hide under the tiniest bushes and kill men who wondered where the bullets were coming from. To gain complete control of the village, Alhaji and I shot the remaining RPGs before we descended on it.

We walked around the village and killed everyone who came out of the houses and huts. Afterward, we realized that there was no one to

carry the loads. We had killed everyone. So I sent Kanei and Moriba back to base to get help. They left, taking some ammunition from the dead gunmen; some of them still clung to their guns. The three of us remained in the village. Instead of sitting among the dead bodies, the bundles of food, crates of ammunition, and bags of drugs, we took cover in the nearby bushes and guarded the village. Also, we took turns going down to the village to get something to eat and some drugs. We sat quietly under the bushes and waited.

Two days later, Kanei and Moriba returned with the corporal, some soldiers, and civilians who carried the bundles of food, drugs, and ammunition back to base.

"We have enough of everything to last us for a few months. Good job, soldiers," the corporal congratulated us. We saluted him and were on our way. Because of this raid, Alhaji acquired the name "Little Rambo," and he did all he could in other raids to live up to that name. My nickname was "Green Snake," because I would situate myself in the most advantageous and sneaky position and would take out a whole village from under the tiniest shrub without being noticed. The lieutenant gave me the name. He said, "You don't look dangerous, but you are, and you blend with nature like a green snake, deceptive and deadly when you want to be." I was happy with my name, and on every raid I made sure I did as my name required.

There was a crack on the white ceiling of the room, and I could faintly hear the deep voice of the city lieutenant and the quick laughs of the nurse. I turned my head to the side and looked in their direction. The nurse had a wide smile on her face and seemed to be interested in the lieutenant's jokes. I got up and started walking out of the hospital.

"Drink a lot of water and you will be fine. Come back tomorrow night for a checkup," the nurse called after me.

"How do you like being here?" the lieutenant asked.

I looked at him with disgust and spat on the ground. He shrugged. Just another sissy city soldier, I thought as I walked back to the hall. When I got there, two boys were playing table tennis on the verandah.

Everyone seemed to be interested in what was happening. It had been more than a month and some of us had almost gone through the withdrawal stage, even though there were still instances of vomiting and collapsing at unexpected moments. These outbreaks ended, for most of us, at the end of the second month. But we were still traumatized, and now that we had time to think, the fastened mantle of our war memories slowly began to open.

Whenever I turned on the tap water, all I could see was blood gushing out. I would stare at it until it looked like water before drinking or taking a shower. Boys sometimes ran out of the hall screaming, "The rebels are coming." Other times, the younger boys sat by rocks weeping and telling us that the rocks were their dead families. Then there were those instances when we would ambush the staff members, tie them up, and interrogate them about the whereabouts of their squad, where they got their supplies of arms and ammunition, drugs, and food. It was also during this time that we were given school supplies—books, pens, and pencils—and told that we would have classes from 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. on weekdays. We made campfires with them, and the next morning another set of supplies was handed to us. We burned them again. The staff members kept resupplying the school materials. This time they didn't say, "It's not your fault," as they usually did after we had done things they considered wrong and not childlike.

One afternoon, after the staff members had set some school supplies on the verandah, Mambu suggested that we sell them. "Who will buy them? Everyone is afraid of us," some of the boys asked. "We can find a trader who wants to do business," Mambu assured the boys. We loaded the supplies in plastic bags, and six of us went to the nearest market, where we sold them to a vendor. The man was excited and told us that he would buy from us anytime. "I don't care whether you stole this; I have the money and you have the goods, we do business," the man told us as he handed Mambu a wad of cash. Mambu counted the crisp notes with a wide smile on his face. He held the bills to our noses so that we could smell them. "This is good money. I can tell," he said. We then ran back to the center to make it in time for lunch. Im-



mediately after we were finished eating. Mambu gave each boy his share of the money. The halls became noisy as everybody talked about what they were going to do with their money. This was definitely more exciting than burning the supplies.

While some of the boys bought Coca-Cola, toffee, and other such things with their money, Mambu, Alhaji, and I planned a trip to Freetown. All we knew was that we had to take public transportation to the city center.

That morning we gulped our breakfast and left the dining hall one at a time. I pretended I was going for a checkup at the mini-hospital, Mambu went into the kitchen as if to get more food and climbed out the window. Alhaji walked toward the latrine. We didn't want the other boys to know, as we were worried that they would all come along and the staff would panic. The three of us met at the junction down by the center and stood in line, waiting for the bus.

"Have you ever been to the city?" Alhaji asked us.

"No," I replied.

"I was supposed to come to Freetown for school, but then the war came. I heard it is a beautiful city," Alhaji said.

"Well, we'll find out soon enough. The bus is here," Mambu announced.

*Sonkeus* music was blasting inside the bus, and people were chatting loudly, as if at a marketplace. We sat in the back and watched the houses and kiosks go by. A man standing in the aisle began to dance to the music. Then a few passengers, including Mambu, joined in. We laughed and clapped for the dancers.

We got off the bus on Kissy Street, a busy area near the heart of the city. People were hurriedly going about their daily lives as if nothing were happening in the country. There were big shops on both sides of the street, and vendors crowded the tiny sidewalks. Our eyes feasted on everything, and we were quickly overwhelmed.

"I told you it would be great." Mambu jumped up in the air.

"Look at that tall building." I pointed at one.

"And that one is so tall," Alhaji called out.

"How do people get up there?" Mambu asked.

We walked slowly, admiring the number of cars, the Lebanese shops filled with all kinds of foods. My neck was hurting just from looking at the tall buildings. There were mini-markets everywhere, selling clothes, food, cassettes, stereos, and many other things. The city was too noisy, as if people were having arguments everywhere simultaneously. We wandered about all the way to the Cotton Tree, the national symbol of Sierra Leone and the landmark of the capital. We stared openmouthed at the huge tree that we had seen only on the back of currency. We now stood under it at the intersection of Siaka Stevens Street and Pademba Road, the center of the city. Its leaves were green, but the bark looked very old. "No one will believe us when we tell them this," Alhaji said as we walked away.

We walked around all day, buying ice cream and Vimto drinks. The ice cream was difficult to enjoy, as it melted too quickly under the hot sun. I spent most of my time licking the sticky residue on my elbows and between my fingers instead of eating it from the cone. As we walked around the city center, the numbers of people and cars increased. We knew no one and everyone seemed to be in a hurry. Mambu and Alhaji walked behind me the whole time and consulted with me about which way to proceed, when to stop . . . It seemed as if we were still in the front line and I was their squad leader.

It was almost evening and we had to return to the center in time for dinner. As we walked back to catch the bus, we realized that we didn't have money to pay the fare. "We should sit in front and when we get to our stop, we can jump off and run away," Mambu told us. We quietly sat on the bus, eyeing the apprentice (the conductor) who collected the fare before every stop. When the bus was about to reach our destination, the apprentice asked those getting off to raise their hands. He walked down the aisle collecting money. Then the bus stopped and the apprentice stood at the doorway, to make sure that no one got out without paying. I walked toward him, my hand in my pocket, as if I was pulling out the cash. Then I shoved him to the side and we ran away laughing. He chased us for a bit and then gave up. That night we told

all the boys about the tall buildings in the city, the noise, the cars, and the markers. Everyone was excited and wanted to go to the city after that. The staff had no choice but to arrange weekend trips to the city center so that we would stop going on our own. But that wasn't enough for some of us, who wanted to visit the city more than once a week.

I do not know what happened, but people stopped buying our school supplies. Even when we offered them for a cheaper price, we were unable to get buyers. Since we didn't have any other means of getting money, we could no longer go into the city center on our own, or as frequently as we wanted. Also, attending class became the requirement for the weekend trips to the city. Because of these things, we began going to class.

It was an informal school. For mathematics, we learned addition, multiplication, and long division. For English, we read passages from books, learned to spell words, and sometimes the teacher read stories out loud and we would write them in our notebooks. It was just a way of "refreshing our memories," as the teacher put it. We didn't pay attention in class. We just wanted to be present so we wouldn't miss the trips to the city. We fought each other during lessons, sometimes stabbed each other's hands with pencils. The teacher would continue on and we would eventually stop fighting. We would then start talking about the ships we had seen from the banks of Kroo Bay, the helicopter that flew by as we walked on Lightfoot Boston Street, and at the end of class the teacher would say, "It's not your fault that you cannot sit still in class. You will be able to do so in time." We would get angry and throw pencils at him as he left the hall.

Afterward, we would have lunch, then busy ourselves playing table tennis or soccer. But at night some of us would wake up from nightmares, sweating, screaming, and punching our own heads to drive out the images that continued to torment us even when we were no longer asleep. Other boys would wake up and start choking whoever was in the bed next to theirs; they would then go running into the night after they had been restrained. The staff members were always on guard to

control these sporadic outbursts. Nonetheless, every morning several of us were found hiding in the grasses by the soccer field. We didn't remember how we had gotten there.

It took several months before I began to relearn how to sleep without the aid of medicine. But even when I was finally able to fall asleep, I would start awake less than an hour later. I would dream that a faceless gunman had tied me up and begun to slit my throat with the zigzag edge of his bayonet. I would feel the pain that the knife inflicted as the man sawed my neck. I'd wake up sweating and throwing punches in the air. I would run outside to the middle of the soccer field and rock back and forth, my arms wrapped around my legs. I would try desperately to think about my childhood, but I couldn't. The war memories had formed a barrier that I had to break in order to think about any moment in my life before the war.

The rainy season in Sierra Leone falls between May and October, with the heaviest rainfalls in July, August, and September. My squad had lost the base where I had trained, and during that gunfight Moriba was killed. We left him sitting against the wall, blood coming out of his mouth, and didn't think much about him after that. Mourning the dead wasn't part of the business of killing and trying to stay alive. After that, we wandered in the forest searching for a new base before the wet season started. But we couldn't find one early enough. Most of the villages we came upon weren't suitable, since we had burned them or another group of fighters had destroyed them at some point. The lieutenant was very upset that we hadn't found a base, so he announced that we would keep walking until we found one.

At first it began to rain on and off. Then it started to rain continuously. We walked into the thickest forest and tried to escape the downpour by standing under big trees, but it rained to the point where the leaves couldn't hold off the water anymore. We walked through damp forests for weeks.

It was raining too hard one morning, and all of a sudden we were

under fire. The RPGs we had failed to explode when they were fired. As a result, we retreated. The attackers didn't follow us far enough, so we regrouped again and the lieutenant said we had to counterattack immediately so that we could follow the attackers. "They will lead us to their base," he said, and we advanced toward them. We fought all day in the rain. The forest was wet and the rain washed the blood off the leaves as if cleansing the surface of the forest, but the dead bodies remained under the bushes and the blood that poured out of the bodies stayed on top of the soaked soil, as if the soil had refused to absorb any more blood for that day.

At about nightfall, the attackers began to retreat. As they were running back, they left one of their wounded men behind. We came upon him, and the lieutenant asked him where their base was. He didn't answer, so someone dragged him, with a rope around his neck, as we chased the attackers. He didn't survive the drag. At night the attackers stopped retreating. They had come to the outskirts of their base and were fighting fiercely, because they didn't want to give it up. "Hir-and-run *kala kala* tactics," the lieutenant ordered. We made two groups and launched the attack. The first group opened fire and pretended to retreat. The attackers chased after them, running past the ambush formed by the second group. We quietly got up and ran after the rebels, shooting them from behind. We repeated these tactics throughout the night and severely weakened the rebels. In the morning we entered the village and killed the remaining fighters, who didn't want to leave. We captured eight of their men, tied their hands and legs, and left them in the rain.

There were fireplaces in the village and lots of wood and food. The rebels had stocked up for the rainy season, but now we were the beneficiaries of the looted food and provisions. We changed into the dry clothes we could find and sat around the fire, warming ourselves and drying our shoes. I clutched my gun and smiled for a second, happy that we had found shelter. I extended my toes toward the fire to warm them and saw that they were pale and had begun to rot.

We had been in the village for only a few minutes when the rebels attacked again. They didn't want to give up the village easily. We looked

at each other sitting around the fire and angrily changed our magazines and went out to get rid of the attackers for good. We fought them throughout the night and the following day. None of us wanted to give up the village to the other, but in the end we killed most of the rebels and captured a few more. The others ran away into the cold and rainy forest. We were so angry with the prisoners that we didn't shoot them but, rather, decided to punish them severely. "It will be a waste of bullets to shoot them," the lieutenant said. So we gave them shovels and demanded, at gunpoint, that they dig their own graves. We sat under the huts smoking marijuana and watched them dig in the rain. Each time they slowed down, we would shoot around them and they would resume digging faster. When they were done digging, we tied them and stabbed their legs with bayonets. Some of them screamed, and we laughed and kicked them to shut them up. We then rolled each man into his hole and covered him with the wet mud. All of them were frightened, and they tried to get up and out of the hole as we pushed the dirt back on them, but when they saw the tips of our guns pointed into the hole, they lay back and watched us with their pale sad eyes. They fought under the soil with all their might. I heard them groan underneath as they fought for air. Gradually, they gave up, and we walked away. "At least they are buried," one of the soldiers said, and we laughed. I smiled a bit again as we walked back to the fire to warm ourselves.

By the fire, I realized that I had bruises on my arms, back, and foot. Alhaji helped me attend to them with some bandages and medical supplies that the rebels had left behind. It turned out that the bruises were from bullets that had merely torn my flesh as they missed killing me. I was too drugged and traumatized to realize the danger of what had just happened. I laughed as Alhaji pointed out the number of bruises on my body.

In the morning I would feel one of the staff members wrap a blanket around me saying, "This isn't your fault, you know. It really isn't. You'll get through this." He would then pull me up and walk me back to the hall.