swallowed the sun and gave birth to the moon. The bullets continued to fly behind us, but now their redness could be seen as they pierced through the bushes. The moon disappeared and took the stars with it, making the sky weep. Its tears saved us from the red bullets.

We spent the night breathing heavily under bushes soaked with rain. The hunters had given up. Gasemu began to cry like a child. It always made me afraid when such things happened. In my younger years I had learned that grown men cry only when they have no other choice. Gasemu rolled on the ground in pain. When we finally summoned the courage to pick him up, we found out why he was crying. He had been shot sometime as we ran away the previous night. His right leg was bleeding and had begun to swell. He was holding his side and didn't want to remove his hand. Alhaji lifted Gasemu's hand; his side was bleeding as well. It was as if his hand had been holding his blood from flowing. It rushed out of him like water breaking banks. He began to sweat. Alhaji asked me to contain the blood by placing my hand on Gasemu's side. I did, but his blood continued to slip through my fingers. He looked at me, his eyes sadly beginning to sink deeper into their sockets. He managed to raise his weak right hand to hold the wrist of my hand that was on his side. He had stopped sobbing, even though tears still ran down his eyes, but not as much as the blood that he was losing. Musa couldn't bear the sight of blood any longer. He fainted. Alhaji and I took Gasemu's shirt off and tied it around his side to contain his blood. The rest of our companions watched with tense faces. Musa woke up and joined them.

In between Gasemu's gasps, he told us that there was a *wahlee** nearby and that if we went back toward the farm, he would show us how to rejoin the path and get to it. We had taken the wrong turn during the night. Gasemu put his arms around my shoulder and Alhaji's. We lifted him up and began walking slowly through the bushes. We set him down every few minutes and wiped his sweaty forehead.

It was past midday when Gasemu began heaving, his entire body

*A place outside villages where people processed coffee or other crops.

shaking. He asked us to set him down. He held his stomach and began to roll in pain from one side to the other. His heaving increased, and he stopped rolling. He lay flat on his back, staring at the sky. His eyes were fixed on something and his legs vibrated and stopped, his hands did the same, and then finally his fingers, but his eyes remained open, transfixed on the top of the forest.

"Let's pick him up." Alhaji's voice was shaking. I put Gasemu's arm around my neck. Alhaji did the same, and we walked with him, his feet dragging on the ground. His arms were cold. His body was still sweating and he continued bleeding. We didn't say a word to each other. We all knew what had happened.

When we finally got to the *wahlee*, Gasemu's eyes were still open. Alhaji closed them. I sat by him. His blood was on my palm and my wrist. I regretted hitting him with the pestle. The dry blood was still in his nose. I began to cry softly. I couldn't cry as much as I wanted to. The sun was getting ready to leave the sky. It had come out to take Gasemu with it. I just sat by him, unable to think. My face began to harden. When the breeze blew against it, I felt how my flesh resisted enjoying the cool wind. All through the night no sleep came to me. My eyes watered and dried over and over again. I did not know what to say. For a few minutes I tried to imagine what it felt like for Gasemu when his fingers vibrated to let the last air out of his body.

vain. I didn't know what was happening to me. I got up, walked behind Gasemu, and locked his neck under my arms. I squeezed him as hard as I could. "I can't breathe," he said, fighting back. He pushed me off, and I fell next to a pestle. I picked it up and hit Gasemu with it. He fell, and when he got up, his nose was bleeding. My friends held me back. Gasemu looked at me and said sadly, "I didn't know this was going to happen." He walked toward a mango tree and sat by it, wiping the blood falling from his nose.

My friends had pinned me to the ground and were vehemently arguing. Some said it was Gasemu's fault that we didn't get to see our parents. Others said it wasn't, and that if it hadn't been for him, we would all be dead. I didn't care. I wanted to see my family, even if it meant dying with them. My friends started fighting among themselves, kicking, punching, throwing each other to the ground. Alhaji pushed Jumah into one of the houses and his pants caught on fire. He screamed as he rolled in the dirt, slapping the fire off. When Jumah got up, he picked up a stone and threw it at Alhaji. It hit Alhaji on the back of his head. Blood ran down his neck. When Alhaji saw his blood, he became furious and ran toward Jumah, but Gasemu intervened. He pulled Alhaji away and tied his bleeding head with a piece of cloth. We were all quiet and angry in the ruins of the village, where it seemed our journey had ended.

"None of this is anyone's fault," Gasemu said slowly. His words made me angry, and I wanted to rush him again. But we heard loud voices of people approaching the village. We ran into the nearby coffee farm and lay in the dirt watching the village.

A group of more than ten rebels walked into the village. They were laughing and giving each other high fives. Two looked slightly older than me. They had blood on their clothes, and one of them carried the head of a man, which he held by the hair. The head looked as if it was still feeling its hair being pulled. Blood dripped from where the neck had once been. The other rebel carried a gallon of gasoline and a big box of matches. The rebels sat on the ground and started playing cards, smoking marijuana, and boasting about what they had done that day.

"We burned about three villages today." One skinny guy, who was perhaps enjoying himself more than everyone else, laughed.

Another rebel, the only one dressed in full army gear, agreed with him. "Yes, three is impressive, in just a few hours in the afternoon." He paused, playing with the side of his G3 weapon. "I especially enjoyed burning this village. We caught everyone here. No one escaped. That is how good it was. We carried out the command and executed everyone. Commander will be pleased when he gets here." He nodded, looking at the rest of the rebels, who had stopped the game to listen to him. They all agreed with him, nodding their heads. They gave each other high fives and resumed their game.

"Some people escaped in the other two villages," the other rebel who was standing up said. He paused, rubbing his forehead, as if pondering why that had happened, and then continued: "They probably saw the smoke from this village and knew something was happening. We should change our strategy. Next time we must attack all the villages at the same time." The others didn't pay him as much attention as they did when the rebel dressed in the army suit spoke. The rebels went on with their card games, chatting for hours, and then for no apparent reason they shot a couple of rounds into the air. Someone in my group moved and the dried coffee leaves made some noise. The rebels stopped playing their game and ran in different directions to take cover. Two started walking toward us, aiming their guns. They walked fast and then crouched. As if planned, we all got up and started running. Bullets followed us out of the coffee farm and into the forest. Gasemu was in front and he knew where he was going. We all followed him.

When we reached the forest's edge, Gasemu stopped and waited for us to catch up. "Follow the path straight," he told us. When I reached him he tried to smile at me. I do not know why, but it made me angrier. I ran past him and followed the narrow path on which grass had grown. I was behind Alhaji, who parted the bushes like a diver heading to the surface for air. Some of the bushes slapped me, but I didn't stop. The gunshots grew louder behind us. We ran for hours, deeper into the forest. The path had ended, but we kept running until the sky

for my family. Gasemu and my friends had followed me, and we all stood looking at the flaming village. I was sweating because of the heat, but I wasn't afraid to run in between the houses. Nails were popping off tin roofs, and they flew, landing on nearby thatched roofs, increasing the wrath of the fire. As we were watching a flaming tin roof in flight, we heard screams and loud banging a few houses away. We ran behind the houses at the edge of the coffee trees and came upon the house where the cries were coming from. There were people locked in it. The fire was already too much inside. It showed its face through the windows and the roof. We picked up a mortar and banged the door open, but it was too late. Only two people came out, a woman and a young child. They were on fire, and ran up and down the village, slamming themselves against everything in their way and going back in the other direction to do the same. The woman fell and stopped moving. The child gave a loud screech and sat next to a tree. He stopped moving. It all happened so fast that we just stood there, rooted to the ground. The child's yelp was still echoing in my head, as if it had taken on a life of its own inside me.

Gasemu had wandered away from where I stood. He began screaming from another side of the village. We ran to where he was. More than twenty people lay facedown in the earth. They were all lined up, and blood still poured out of their bullet wounds. A stream of it had begun running along the ground, making its way under each body, as if joining them together. Gasemu's sobs grew louder as he turned each body over. Some of their mouths and eyes were open in shapes that showed how much they had cringed as they waited for the bullets from behind. Some had inhaled dirt, perhaps while taking their last breath. The bodies were mostly men in their late and early twenties. A few were younger.

On other paths of the village were the half-burnt remains of those who had fought fiercely to free themselves, only to die outside. They lay on the ground in different postures of pain, some reaching for their

heads, the white bones in their jaws visible, others curled up like a child in a womb, frozen.

The fire had begun to die down, and I was running around the village looking for something, something I did not want to see. I hesitantly tried to make out the faces of burnt bodies, but it was impossible to tell who they had been. Besides, there were too many of them.

"They stayed in that house," Gasemu said to me as he pointed toward one of the charred houses. The fire had consumed all the door and window frames, and the mud that had been pushed in between the sticks was falling off, revealing the ropes through which the remaining fire was making its way.

My entire body went into shock. Only my eyes moved, slowly opening and closing. I tried to shake my legs to get my blood flowing, but I fell to the ground, holding my face. On the ground I felt as if my eyes were growing too big for their sockets. I could feel them expanding, and the pain released my body from the shock. I ran toward the house. Without any fear I went inside and looked around the smoke-filled rooms. The floors were filled with heaps of ashes; no solid form of a body was inside. I screamed at the top of my lungs and began to cry as loudly as I could, punching and kicking with all my might into the weak walls that continued to burn. I had lost my sense of touch. My hands and feet punched and kicked the burning walls, but I couldn't feel a thing. Gasemu and the rest of the other boys began pulling me away from the house. I kept kicking and punching as they dragged me out.

"I have looked around for them, but I can't see them anywhere," Gasemu said. I was sitting on the ground with my legs spread in the dirt, holding my head in my hands. I was filled up with anger. I hissed and boiled, and my heart felt as if it was going to explode. At the same time, I felt as if something had literally been placed on my head, heavier than I could ever imagine, and my neck was beginning to ache.

If we hadn't stopped to rest on that hill, if we hadn't run into Gasemu, I would have seen my family, I thought. My head was burning as if on fire. I put my hands on both ears and squeezed them in

asked in that manner that adults usually ask young people, so that we knew he wouldn't take no for an answer.

"Come on, boys." He motioned for us to follow him into the banana farm. All of us started walking past him as he continued waving his hand as if he was pulling us with an invisible rope. When I approached him, he put his hand on my shoulder and rubbed my head.

"Are you still a troublesome boy?" He pulled on my nose.

"There is no time to be troublesome these days," I said.

"I see that you look very sad. Your forehead used to glow naturally when you were just a child. Your parents and I used to discuss how unusual that was. We thought it was because you were happy all the time. Your mother said you even smiled while you slept. But when you started your troublesomeness and were angry, your forehead glowed even more. We didn't have any other explanations for your forehead and how it related to your character. And here you are, it isn't shining anymore." He paused for a moment, looking at me.

He walked away and began instructing my traveling companions how to pick up a hand of bananas and carry it on their shoulders instead of their heads. "This way you won't break them in half," he explained.

I picked up some of the bananas and waited for Gasemu to gather his water jug, machete, and the last bunch. "So how did you get . . ." I started, but he interrupted.

"Your parents and brothers will be happy to see you. They have been talking about you every day and praying for your safety. Your mother cries every day, begging the gods and ancestors to return you to her. Your older brother left to look for you, but he returned about a week ago. His face was sad when he returned. I think he blames himself for losing you."

I dropped the hand as he started giving me this news. He continued walking, so I quickly picked up the bananas and followed him. "They will indeed be surprised to see you."

He walked slowly in front of me. I was breathing fast and couldn't bring out a word. I wanted to drop the hand and run as fast as I could

to the village. My eyelids were twitching, and I felt as if the breeze was passing through my brain. It made me feel light-headed. Excitement and sadness made me feel as if my heart would explode if I waited any longer, but on such a narrow path I couldn't walk past all those in front of me.

After a few minutes we came to a river and I was happy, because at the edge of most villages there was a river, so I thought we should be there any minute now. But we weren't yet.

"The village is just over the hill," Gasemu said. It was a long hill, with rocks on either side of the path and some unmovable ones the road makers had left in the middle. The path zigzagged up to the top, where, when we finally made it, everyone had to rest for a few minutes. I became angry that we had to rest, and I sat on a big rock away from the group. My eyes followed the brown dusty path that continued down the hill to the thick forest, through which I caught a glimpse of the thatched and tin roofs of the village. Part of me was on the way to the village, the other impatiently waited on the hill. Gasemu passed around his jug of water, which I refused. When it got back to him, we picked up the banana hands and started down the hill. I started before everyone else, so that I could walk fast and be in front.

As I was going down the hill, I heard gunshots. And dogs barking. And people screaming and crying. We dropped the bananas and began running in order to avoid the open hillside. A thick smoke started rising from the village. At the top of it, sparks of flames leapt into the air.

We hid in the nearby bushes and listened to gunshots and the screams of men, women, and children. The children wailed, men screamed at high pitches that pierced through the forest and covered the shrieks of women. The gunshots finally ceased, and the world was very quiet, as if listening. I told Gasemu that I wanted to go to the village. He held me back, but I shoved him into the bushes and ran down the path as fast as I could. I didn't feel my legs. When I got to the village, it was completely on fire and bullet shells covered the ground like mango leaves in the morning. I did not know where to begin looking

looked at Alhaji, who was smiling uncontrollably. "I heard you have a beautiful sister. I am still just your friend, right?" We all started laughing. Alhaji jumped on Kanei's back, and they began to wrestle in the grass. When they were done, they followed us on the path, singing one of S. E. Rogie's songs, "*Nor look me bad eye, nor weigh me lek dat . . .*" We joined in and sang as if we were having one of life's most glorious moments. But slowly silence returned and took over.

One side of the sky was completely blue and the other was filled with stagnant clouds. The quiet breeze caused a branch to snap in the forest. The echo sounded like a cry, a wailing. I wasn't the only one who noticed it, because my friends stopped briefly and listened attentively. The breeze picked up its pace. The leaves of the trees began to rub against each other, resisting the wind. More branches snapped in the forest and the wailing intensified. The trees looked as if they were in pain. They swayed in all directions and slapped each other with their branches. The clouds rolled over the blue sky and it became dark. A heavy rain followed, with thunder and lightning that lasted for less than fifteen minutes. Afterward, the sky returned to its bluest. I walked, perplexed, in my soaked clothes under the sun. At nighttime it began to rain again. The strands of rain fell brutally from the sky, whipping us. We walked for most of the night, wiping the water off our faces in order to see. It became unbearable to continue, so we sat at the foot of huge trees and waited. Whenever the lightning lit the forest, I could see where everyone was sitting. We all had our faces resting on our knees and our arms were crossed.

The last hours of the night were long. By the time the rain stopped, it was light. We were all shivering, our fingertips pale and wrinkled.

"We look like soaked chickens," Musa said, laughing, as we emerged from under the trees. We found an opening where the sun had begun penetrating, and we squeezed and spread our shirts on the tops of the bushes and sat in the sun to dry ourselves.

It was almost midday when we put on our damp clothes and continued walking. A few hours later we heard a cockcrow in the distance. Musa jumped in the air and we all began to laugh.

Finally, we were approaching the village where seeing our families was actually a possibility. I couldn't stop smiling. Coffee trees began to replace forest, and footprints appeared on the path. We heard rice being pounded and whispers in the breeze. We quickened our pace as these sounds assured us that life was ahead. On the opposite side of the coffee farm was a small banana farm, and there we came across a man cutting down hands of ripe bananas. We couldn't see his face, as his head was behind the leaves.

"Good afternoon," Kanei said.

The man peeped at us from behind a banana leaf. He wiped the sweat off his forehead and walked toward us. As he approached, slowly making his way through the noisy dried banana leaves, the sight of his face awakened my memory.

His face was a little wrinkled now and he was much skinnier than when I had last seen him. His name was Gasemu, Ngor* Gasemu. He used to be one of the notorious single men in my town. Back then, everyone talked about him not being married. The older people always remarked, "He is old enough and responsible enough to find himself a good wife, but he likes to be alone, he likes that loose life." He never said anything back then and didn't get upset by what they said. He cooked his own food, and when he was too tired to cook, he ate *gari*† with honey. There was a period of time when he ate *gari* with honey for over a week. My mother decided to dish him out a plate every evening. "That food is unhealthy for you," she had said to him, and he smiled, rubbing his head.

When Gasemu was by the path, he stopped and examined our faces. He smiled, and that was when I became sure that he was the Ngor Gasemu I knew, because he was missing a front tooth.

"You boys want to help me carry some bananas to the village?" he

*A respectful term placed before the first name of adults.

†A grated and dried food made from cassava.

lage, making its way to the sky. I watched it as it disappeared. We were leaving our friend, or as my grandmother would put it, "His temporary journey in this world had ended." We, on the other hand, had to continue.

When we started to walk away, we all began to sob. The cockcrows faded, only to make us aware of our silence, the silence that asked, Who will be next to leave us? The question was in our eyes when we looked at each other. We walked fast as if trying to stay in the daytime, afraid that nightfall would turn over the uncertain pages of our lives.

11

We had been walking in silence through the night until we stopped to listen to the singing of morning birds shattering the silence of the day. As we sat on the side of the path, Moriba began to sob. He was sitting away from us, something he usually did with Saidu. He played with a piece of branch, trying to distract himself from what he was feeling. Everyone except me started to sob and moved next to Moriba, who was now crying loudly. I sat by myself, covering my face with the palms of my hands to hold back my tears. After a few minutes, my friends stopped crying. We continued on without saying a word to each other. We all knew that we could grieve only for a short while in order to continue staying alive.

"I look forward to getting to this village. Ah, I will give my mother a very tight hug." Alhaji smiled and then continued. "She always complains, though, when I give her a tight hug: 'If you love me, stop squeezing my old bones so I can be alive longer.' She is funny."

We giggled.

"I have a feeling that we will find our families, or at least news of them." Kanei stretched his hands as if trying to catch the sun. He

"Are any of you his family?" a tall, slender, muscular man asked. He was in charge of the burial ceremonies in the village. We all shook our heads no. I felt as if we were denying Saidu, our friend, our traveling companion. He had become our family, but the man wanted a real family member who could authorize his burial.

"Does any one of you know his family?" The man looked at us.

"I do." Kanei raised his hand.

The man called him over to where he stood on the other side of the coffin. They began talking. I tried to figure out what they were saying by reading the elaborate gestures that the man made with his right hand. His left hand was on Kanei's shoulder. Kanei's lips moved for a while, and then he began nodding until the conversation was over.

Kanei came back and sat with us on the stools that were provided for the funeral service, which only we attended, along with the man on whose verandah Saidu had left us. The rest of the people in the village quietly sat on their verandahs. They stood up as we walked through part of the village to the cemetery.

I was in disbelief that Saidu had actually left us. I held on to the idea that he had just fainted and would get up soon. It hit me that he wasn't going to get up only after he was lowered into the hole, just in the shroud, and the diggers started covering him with the earth. What was left of him was only a memory. The glands in my throat began to hurt. I couldn't breathe well, so I opened my mouth. The man who had asked earlier if any of us were Saidu's family began to read suras. It was then that I began to weep quietly. I let my tears drip on the earth and the summer dust absorb them. The men who had carried Saidu began placing rocks around the grave to hold the mounds of earth.

After the burial, we were the only ones left in the cemetery. There were mounds of earth all over. Very few had sticks with something written on them. The rest were anonymous. Saidu had just joined them. We sat in the cemetery for hours, as if expecting something. But we were young—all of us were now thirteen, except for Kanei, who was three years older—and our emotions were in disarray. I couldn't comprehend what or how I felt. This confusion hurt my head and made my stomach tense. We left the cemetery as night approached. It was quiet in the village. We sat outside on the log we had first sat on when we entered the village. None of us thought of going to sleep on a verandah. Kanei explained to us that Saidu had had to be buried, as the custom in the village was that the dead couldn't be kept overnight. It was either that or we would have had to take Saidu out of the village. No one responded to Kanei. He stopped talking and the dogs began to cry again. They did all night, until we became restless.

We walked up and down the village. Most people weren't asleep; we could hear them whispering when the dogs took breaks or went to cry on opposite ends of the village. I remembered a few weeks back when Saidu had spoken about parts of him slowly dying each passing day, as we carried on with our journey. Perhaps all of him had died that night when he spoke in that strange voice after we had survived that attack by men with machetes, axes, and spears, I thought. My hands and feet began to shake, and they continued to do so throughout the night. I was worried and kept calling out my friends' names, so that they wouldn't fall asleep. I was afraid if any did, he was going to leave us. Early in the morning, Kanei told us that we were going to leave after sunrise and head for the next village. "I can't stand another night listening to these dogs. They terrify me," he said.

That morning we thanked the men who had helped bury Saidu. "You will always know where he is laid," one of the men said. I nodded in agreement, but I knew that the chances of coming back to the village were slim, as we had no control over our future. We knew only how to survive.

As we left the village, everyone lined up to watch us go. I was scared, as this reminded me of when we had walked through the village with Saidu's body. We went by the cemetery, which was at the edge of town, by the path that led to where we hoped to reunite with our families. The sun penetrated the graveyard, and as we stood there, a slight breeze blew, causing the trees surrounding the mounds of earth to sway gracefully. I felt a chill at the back of my neck, as if someone were softly blowing on me. A strand of smoke was rising from the vil-

lots of people from Mattru Jong and the Sierra Rutile mining area. All of you might be able to find your families or news about them."

She got up and began dancing to the *soukous* music that was playing as she left us. We all began laughing. I wanted to leave right away, but we decided to spend the night in the village. Also, we wanted Saidu to rest, even though he kept telling us that he was fine. I was so happy that my mother, father, and two brothers had somehow found one another. Perhaps my mother and father have gotten back together, I thought.

We went to the river for a swim, and there we played hide-and-seek swimming games, running along the river's edge screaming "*Cocoo*" to commence the game. Everyone was smiling.

That night we stole a pot of rice and cassava leaves. We ate it under coffee trees at the edge of the village, washed the pots, and returned them. We had no place to sleep, so we chose a verandah on one of the houses after everyone had gone inside.

I didn't sleep that night. My hands began shaking as soon as my friends started snoring. I had a feeling that something bad was going to happen. The dogs began to cry and ran from one end of the village to the other.

Alhaji woke up and sat by me. "The dogs woke me up," he said.

"I couldn't sleep to begin with," I replied.

"Maybe you are just anxious about seeing your family." He chuckled. "I am, too."

Alhaji stood up. "Don't you think it is strange, the way the dogs are crying?"

One dog had come near the verandah on which we sat and was vigorously crying. A few more dogs joined in. Their crying pierced my heart.

"Yes. They sound very human," I said.

"That is the same thing I was thinking." Alhaji yawned. "I think dogs see things we do not see. Something must be wrong." He sat down.

We became quiet, just staring into the night. The dogs cried all night long, one continuing till the sky was completely clear. Babies then began to take up the cry. People started getting up, so we had to vacate the verandah. Alhaji and I began waking our friends. When he shook Saidu, Saidu was still.

"Get up, we have to go now." He shook Saidu harder as we heard the people on whose verandah we had slept getting ready to come outside.

"Saidu, Saidu," Kanei coaxed him. "Maybe he fainted again," he said.

A man came out and greeted us. He carried a small bucket of water. He had a smile on his face that told us he had known all along that we were on the verandah.

"This will do it." The man sprinkled some of the cold water from his bucket on Saidu.

But Saidu didn't move. He just lay on his stomach, his face buried in the dust. His palms were turned upside down and they were pale. The man turned him around and checked his pulse. Saidu's forehead was sweaty and wrinkled. His mouth was slightly opened and there was a path of dried tears at the corners of his eyes down to his cheeks.

"Do you boys know anyone in this village?" the man asked.

We all said no, shaking our heads. He exhaled heavily, put his bucket down, and placed both his hands on his head.

"Who is the oldest?" he asked, looking at Alhaji.

Kanei raised his hand. They stepped outside the verandah and the man whispered something in his ear. Kanei began to cry on the man's shoulder. It was then that we admitted that Saidu had left us. Everyone else was crying, but I couldn't cry. I felt dizzy and my eyes watered. My hands began shaking again. I felt the warmth inside my stomach, and my heart was beating slowly, but at a heavy rate. The man and Kanei walked away, and when they returned, they brought with them two men, who carried a wooden stretcher. They placed Saidu on it and asked us to follow them.

Saidu's body was washed and prepared for burial that same day. He was wrapped in white linen and placed in a wooden coffin that was set on a table in the living room of the man whose verandah we had slept on.

something was obstructing their noses. After they were done mumbling, the two taller people began pulling the shorter one. One wanted them to go the way we were going and the other insisted that they continue in the opposite direction. Their quarrel caused my heart to begin beating faster, and I was trying hard to make out their faces; but it was too dark. After about a minute, they decided to continue going in the direction we had come from.

It took us a few minutes to rise from under the bushes. Everyone was breathing hard and couldn't speak. Kanei began whispering our names. When he called out Saidu's name, Saidu didn't answer. We searched for him among the bushes. He was lying there quietly. We shook him hard, calling out his name, but he was silent. Alhaji and Jumah began to cry. Kanei and I dragged Saidu onto the path and sat by him. He was just lying there. My hands began trembling uncontrollably as we sat there throughout the night in silence. My head became heavy as I thought about what we were going to do. I do not remember who it was among us that whispered, "Maybe it was the bird that we ate." Most of my travel companions began to cry, but I couldn't. I just sat there staring into the night as if searching for something.

There wasn't a gradual change between night and day. The darkness just swiftly rolled away, letting the sky shine its light on us. We were all sitting in the middle of the path. Saidu was still quiet. His forehead had residues of sweat and his mouth was slightly open. I put my hand by his nose just to see if he was breathing. Everyone stood up, and when I removed my hand, they were all looking at me, as if expecting me to say something.

"I don't know," I said.

They all put their hands on their heads. Their faces looked as if they wanted to hear something else, something that we knew could be possible but were afraid to accept.

"What are we going to do now?" Moriba asked.

"We cannot just stand here forever," Musa remarked.

"We will have to carry him to the next village, however far that might be," Kanei said slowly. "Help me stand him up," he continued.

We stood Saidu up, and Kanei carried him on his back across the bridge. The quiet river started flowing loudly through rocks and palm kernels. As soon as we had crossed the bridge, Saidu coughed. Kanei set him down and we all gathered around him. He vomited for a few minutes, and wiping his mouth, he said, "Those were ghosts last night. I know it."

We all agreed with him.

"I must have fainted after they started speaking." He tried to get up, and we all aided him.

"I am fine. Let's go." He pushed us away.

"You woke from the dead with some attitude," Musa said.

We all laughed and started walking. My hands began trembling again, I didn't know why this time. It was a gloomy day and we kept asking Saidu if he was okay all the way to the next village.

It was past midday when we arrived at a crowded village. We were shocked by how noisy it was in the middle of the war. It was the biggest village we had been to so far. It sounded like a marketplace. People were playing music and dancing, children were running around, and there was that familiar good smell of cooked cassava leaf in rich palm oil.

As we walked through the village trying to find a place to sit away from the crowd, we saw some familiar faces. People hesitantly waved to us. We found a log under a mango tree and sat down. A woman whose face wasn't among the familiar ones came and sat facing us.

"You." She pointed at me. "I know you," she said.

I did not know her face, but she insisted that she knew my family and me. She told me that Junior had come to the village a few weeks earlier looking for me and that she had also seen my mother, father, and little brother in the next village, which was about two days' walk. She told us the direction and ended by saying, "In that village there are

their journey, when the rebels stormed in. Saidu sat in the attic, holding his breath and listening to the wailing of his sisters as the rebels raped them. His father shouted at them to stop, and one of the rebels hit him with the butt of his gun. Saidu's mother cried and apologized to her daughters for having brought them into this world to be victims of such madness. After the rebels had raped the sisters over and over, they bundled the family's property and made the father and mother carry it. They took the three girls with them.

"To this day, I carry the pain that my sisters and parents felt. When I climbed down after the rebels were gone, I couldn't stand and my tears froze in my eyes. I felt like my veins were being harshly pulled out of my body. I still feel like that all the time, as I can't stop thinking about that day. What did my sisters do to anyone?" Saidu said after he was done telling us the story one night in an abandoned village. My teeth became sour as I listened to his story. It was then that I understood why he was so quiet all the time.

"We should keep walking," Kanei said sadly as he dusted his pants. We had agreed to walk at night. During the day we would search for food and take turns sleeping. At night it felt as if we were walking with the moon. It followed us under thick clouds and waited for us at the other end of dark forest paths. It would disappear with sunrise but return again, hovering on our path, the next night. Its brightness became dull as nights passed. Some nights the sky wept stars that quickly floated and disappeared into the darkness before our wishes could meet them. Under these stars and sky I used to hear stories, but now it seemed as if it was the sky that was telling us a story as its stars fell, violently colliding with each other. The moon hid behind clouds to avoid seeing what was happening.

During the day the sun refused to rise gradually, as it had before. It became bright from the minute it surfaced from behind the clouds, its golden rays darkening my eyes. The clouds in the blue sky sailed violently, destroying each other's formation.

One afternoon, while we were searching for food in a deserted village, a crow fell out of the sky. It wasn't dead, but it was unable to fly. We knew this was unusual, but we needed food and anything at that point would do. As we took the feathers off the bird, Moriba asked what day it was. We all thought about it for a while, trying to remember the name of the last day when our lives were normal. Kanei broke the silence.

"It is a holiday." He laughed. "You can call it any day you want," he continued.

"But it is not just a day, it is a strange one. I don't feel too good about it," Musa said. "Maybe we shouldn't eat this bird."

"Well now, if the falling of this bird is a sign of a curse or bad luck, we are in both. So I am eating every bit of it. You can do as you please." Kanei began humming.

After Kanei stopped humming, the world became eerily silent. The breeze and the clouds had stopped moving, the trees were still, as if they all awaited something unimaginable.

Sometimes night has a way of speaking to us, but we almost never listen. The night after we ate the bird was too dark. There were no stars in the sky, and as we walked, it seemed as if the darkness was getting thicker. We weren't on a dense forest path, but we could barely see each other. We held on to one another's hands. We kept on walking because we couldn't stop in the middle of nowhere, even though we wanted to. After hours of walking we came upon a bridge made of sticks. The river below was flowing quietly, as if asleep. As we were about to set foot on the bridge, we heard footsteps on the other side, coming toward us. We let go of one another's hands and hid in the nearby bushes. I was lying with Alhaji, Jumah, and Saidu.

There were three people. They were wearing white shirts. Two of them were about the same height and the third was shorter. They carried cloths under their arms. They too were holding hands, and when they stepped off the bridge around where we lay, they stopped as if they sensed our presence. They mumbled something. It was difficult to hear what they were saying because their voices sounded like bees, as if

the smoked meat. Upon seeing us, it began barking and guarding the meat with its hind legs.

"You bad dog. That is ours." Alhaji took the stick from Saidu and started chasing the animal. The dog still held on to the last bit of meat as it disappeared among the bushes. With a shake of the head, Saidu picked up the gallon of water and started heading down the path. We all followed him, Alhaji still holding the stick.

That afternoon we began rummaging the bushes for whatever fruit looked edible. We didn't converse much as we walked.

In the evening we stopped to rest along the path.

"I should have killed that dog," Alhaji said slowly, as he rolled on his back.

"Why?" I asked.

"Yes. Why? What good would it have done?" Moriba sat up.

"I just wanted to kill it because it ate the only food we had," Alhaji angrily replied.

"It would have made good meat," Musa said.

"I don't think so. Plus, it would have been difficult to prepare it, anyway." I turned to Musa, who was lying on his back next to me.

"You guys disgust me just thinking about something like that." Jumah spat.

"Well." Musa stood up.

"He is going to tell another story." Alhaji sighed.

Musa turned to Alhaji. "Yes, well, not really a story." He paused and then continued. "My father used to work for these Malaysians, and he told me that they ate dogs. So if Alhaji had killed that dog, I would have loved to try some. So when I see my father again, I can tell him how it tasted. And he will not be angry with me, because I had a good excuse for eating dog meat," Musa concluded.

We all became quiet, thinking about our own families. Musa had triggered in all of us what we were afraid of thinking.

Musa was home with his father in Mattru Jong when the attack took place. His mother had gone to the market to buy fish for the evening

meal. He and his father had run toward the market and found his mother, but as they ran out of town, his mother had somehow been left behind. They realized that she wasn't with them only after they stopped for a rest at the first village they reached. His father cried and told Musa to stay there while he went to look for his wife. Musa told his father that he wanted to go back down the path with him. "No, my son, stay here and I'll bring back your mother." As soon as his father left, the village was attacked and Musa ran away. He had been running ever since.

Alhaji was at the river fetching water when the rebels attacked. He ran home, only to stand in front of the empty house shouting the names of his parents, two brothers, and sister.

Kanei had escaped with his parents, but lost his two sisters and three brothers in the chaos. He and his parents had jumped in a boat along with many others to cross the Jong River. When the boat reached the middle of the river, the rebels on shore began shooting at the people in the boat, and everyone panicked, causing the boat to capsize. Kanei swam to the other side of the river as fast as he could. When he pulled himself ashore, he could see people drowning in the water, screaming as they fought to stay afloat. The rebels laughed at the dying people. He had wept all night as he followed the survivors, who made their way to a village down the river. There, people had told Kanei that his parents had passed through. The hope of finding his family had kept Kanei moving over the months.

Jumah and Moriba lived next to each other. RPGs had destroyed their houses during the attack. They had run toward the wharf to find their parents, who were traders, but their parents were nowhere to be found. They ran to the forest where their families had earlier hidden, but they weren't there either.

Saidu's family was unable to leave town during the attack. Along with his parents and three sisters, who were nineteen, seventeen, and fifteen, he hid under the bed during the night. In the morning the rebels broke into the house and found his parents and three sisters. Saidu had climbed to the attic to bring down the remaining rice for

the yard welcoming each other with firm handshakes, laughing, each man clearing his throat as loud as he could before he started talking. Boys who hung about and eavesdropped on the men's conversations would be called upon to perform certain tasks—slaughter chickens behind the cooking huts, chop firewood.

Near the thatched-roof cooking huts, women sang while they pounded rice in mortars. They did tricks with pestles. They flipped them in the air and clapped several times before they caught them, and continued pounding and singing. The women who were older and more experienced not only clapped several times before they caught their pestles but also made elaborate "thank you" gestures, all in harmony with the songs they sang. Inside the huts, girls sat on the ground fanning red charcoals with a bamboo fan or an old plate, or simply by blowing to start the fire under the big pots.

By nine o'clock in the morning the food was ready. Everyone dressed up in his or her finest clothing. The women were especially elegant in their beautiful patterned cotton skirts, dresses, shirts, and *lappei*—a big cotton cloth that women wrap around their waist—and extravagant head wraps. Everyone was in high spirits and ready to commence the ceremony that was to last until noon.

"The imam arrived late," said my grandmother. A large metal tray containing *leweh* (rice paste), kola nuts lined on the side, and water in a calabash was handed over to him, and after settling himself on a stool in the middle of the yard, and rolling up the sleeves of his white gown, he mixed the *leweh* and separated it into several carefully molded portions, each topped with a kola nut. The imam then proceeded to read several suras from the Quran. After the prayer he sprinkled some water on the ground to invite the spirits of the ancestors.

The imam waved to my mother, motioning her to bring me to him. It was my first time outside in the open. My mother knelt before the imam and presented me to him. He rubbed some of the water from the calabash on my forehead and recited more prayers, followed by the proclamation of my name. "Ishmael he shall be called," he said, and everyone clapped. Women started singing and dancing. My mother

passed me to my father, who raised me high above the crowd before passing me around to be held by everyone present. I had become a member of the community and was now owned and cared for by all.

The food was brought out on humongous plates. The elders started to feast first, all eating from one plate. The men did the same, then the boys, before the women and girls had their share. Singing and dancing followed the feast. While the jubilation was going on, I was placed in the hands and care of older women who couldn't dance much anymore. They held me, smiled at me, and called me "little husband." They started telling me stories about the community. Whenever I gave them a smile, they remarked, "He loves stories. Well, you came to the right place."

I smiled a bit, as I could visualize my grandmother's happy face at the end of this story. Some of my traveling companions were snoring as the late-night breeze caused my eyes to become heavy.

When we woke up the next morning, all the smoked meat was gone. We started blaming each other. Kanei inspected Musa's lips. Musa became angry, and they started throwing blows at each other. I was about to part them when Saidu pointed to the tattered bag at the edge of the verandah.

"This is the bag, right?" he said, pointing to its chewed edges. "This was not done by any of us. See, the bag is still tied." He showed it to us. "Something else ate the meat, and whatever ate this meat is still around somewhere." He picked up a stick and began walking toward the bushes.

"You see, it wasn't me." Musa pushed Kanei out of his way as he joined Saidu.

"It is some kind of animal," Moriba said, inspecting the prints the creature's feet had left on the ground. Some of us looked around the village while others followed the tracks of the creature down the path to the river. We were about to give up looking when Saidu shouted from behind the storage house in the village:

"I found the thief and he is angry."

We ran to see what it was. It was a dog munching on the last bit of

"My mother told me that whenever a story is told, it is worth listening to. So please listen. I will tell it quickly." He coughed and began.

"Bra Spider lived in a village that was surrounded by many other villages. At the end of the harvest season, all the villages had a feast in celebration of their successful harvest. Wine and food were in abundance and people ate until they could see their reflections on each other's stomach."

"What?" we all said in shock at this extra detail he had added to the story.

"I am telling the story, so I can tell *my* version. Wait for your turn." Musa stood up. We listened attentively to see if he was going to embellish the story with more striking details. He sat down and continued:

"Each village specialized in one dish. Bra Spider's village made okra soup with palm oil and fish. Mmm . . . mmm . . . mmm. The other villages made cassava leaves with meat, potato leaves, and so on. Each village boasted about how good their meal was going to be. All the villages had an open invitation to their feasts. But Bra Spider took it to the extreme. He wanted to be present at all the feasts. He had to come up with a plan. He began collecting ropes around his village and weaving them several months before the feast. While people carried bushels of rice, bundles of wood, to the square and women pounded rice in mortars, removing the husk from its seeds, Bra Spider was stretching the ropes on his verandah and measuring their length. When men went hunting, he was busy laying out his ropes by the paths from his village to all the surrounding villages. He gave the ends of his ropes to the chiefs, who tied them to the nearest trees at their village squares. 'Tell your people to pull the rope when their meal is ready,' he told every chief in his nasal voice. Bra Spider starved for a week as he readied himself. When the day finally came, Bra Spider rose up earlier than everyone else. He sat on his verandah and securely tied all the ropes at his waist. He was shaking and saliva dripped out of his mouth as the smell of smoked meat, dried fish, and various stews wafted out from the cooking huts.

"Unluckily for Bra Spider, all the feasts started at the same time and

the chiefs ordered the ropes to be pulled. He was suspended in the air above his village, pulled from all directions. Bra Spider screamed for help, but the drums and songs from his village square drowned his voice. He could see people gathering around plates of food and licking their hands at the end of the meal. Children walked across the village on their way to the river, munching on pieces of stewed chicken, goat, and deer meat. Each time Bra Spider tried to loosen the ropes, the villages pulled harder, as they thought it was a signal that he was ready to visit their feast. At the end of the celebration in Bra Spider's village, a boy saw him and called on the elders. They cut the ropes and brought Bra Spider down. In a barely audible voice he demanded some food, but there was nothing left. The feasts had ended everywhere. Bra Spider remained hungry, and because he was pulled so tight for so long, this explains why spiders have a thin waistline."

"All this food in the story is making me hungry. Good story, though. I have never heard it told like this," Alhaji said, stretching his back. We all laughed, as we knew he was mocking Musa for adding some details to the tale.

As soon as Musa was done, night took over the village. It was as if the sky had quickly rolled over, changing its bright side to dark, bringing sleep with it for my companions. We placed the smoked meat and the gallon of water by the door of the room we occupied. I stayed in the room with my friends, even though I didn't fall asleep until the very last hours of the night. I remembered nights I had spent sitting with my grandmother by the fire. "You are growing up so fast. It feels like yesterday when I was at your name-giving ceremony." She would look at me, her shiny face glowing, before she told me the story of my name-giving ceremony. Growing up, I had been to several of these ceremonies, but Grandmother always told me about mine.

Everyone in the community was present. Before things started, food was prepared in abundance with everyone's help. Early in the morning, the men slaughtered a sheep, skinned it, and shared the meat among the finest women cooks, so that each would cook her best dish for the ceremony. While the women cooked, the men stood around in

laughter when we played soccer together and when he sometimes chased me in the evening with a bowl of cold water to get me to take a shower; my older brother's arms around me when we walked to school and when he sometimes elbowed me to stop me from saying things I would regret; and my little brother, who looked exactly like me and would sometimes tell people that his name was Ishmael when he did something wrong. I had trouble conjuring up these thoughts, and when I finally ventured into these memories, I became so sad that the bones in my body started to ache. I went to the river, dove into the water, and sat at the bottom, but my thoughts followed me.

In the evening after everyone had returned to the village, the food was brought outside to the village square. It was divided among plates and seven people ate from each plate. After the meal, the villagers started playing drums, and we all joined hands and danced in circles under the moonlight. During an interval after several songs, one of the men announced that when the dancing had been exhausted, "whenever that will be," he jokingly said, "the strangers will tell us stories about where they are from." He lifted his hands and motioned for the drummers to continue. During the festivities I thought about the biggest celebration we used to have in my town at the end of the year. The women would sing about all the gossip, the dramas, the fights, and everything that had happened that year.

Would they be able to sing about all that will happen by the end of this war? I thought.

I also wondered a bit why the villagers were so kind to us, but I didn't dwell on these thoughts, because I wanted to enjoy myself. The dance never ended that night and we had to leave early the next day, so we left as most of the villagers slept. We carried with us a plastic gallon of water and some smoked meat we had been given, and the old people we passed, sitting on their verandahs, waiting to be warmed by the morning sun, waved and said, "May the spirit of the ancestors be with you, children."

When we were walking, I turned around to see the village one last

time. It was yet to be born for that day. A cock crowed to dispatch the last remains of night and to mute the crickets that couldn't let go of the darkness of their own accord. The sun was slowly rising but had already begun casting shadows on the huts and houses. I could still hear the drums echoing in my head from the previous night, but I refused to be happy. When I turned away from the village, my traveling companions were dancing in the sand, mimicking some of the dances we had seen.

"Show us what you've got," they said, clapping and circling me. I couldn't refuse. I started gyrating my hips to their claps, and they joined me. We placed our hands on each other's shoulders and walked forward, dancing to sounds we made with our mouths. I was carrying the smoked meat in a small bag that I waved in the air to increase the speed at which we kicked our feet from side to side. We danced and laughed into the morning. But gradually we stopped. It was as if we all knew that we could be happy for only a brief moment. We weren't in a hurry, so we walked slowly and quietly after we stopped dancing. At the end of the day we had finished drinking the water we were carrying.

Around nightfall we arrived at a very peculiar village. I am in fact not sure if it was a village. There was one large house and one kitchen less than a kilometer from the house. The pots were moldy, and there was a small storage house. The place was located in the middle of nowhere.

"Now, this will be an easy village for the rebels to capture," Jumah said, laughing.

We walked around trying to find a sign of someone's presence. Some sort of production of palm oil had taken place here; there were the remains of palm nut seeds everywhere. On the river floated a deserted canoe in which spirogyra had grown. Back at the old house, we debated where to sleep. We sat outside on logs at the foot of the verandah and Musa offered to tell a story about Bra Spider.

"No!" we protested—we all knew it too well—but he still continued.

"Bra Spider stories are always good no matter how many times you have heard them," Musa said.

pear again and again to shine all night long. In some way my journey was like that of the moon—although I had even more thick clouds coming my way to make my spirit dull. I remembered something that Saidu had said one evening after we had survived another attack by men with spears and axes. Jumah, Moriba, and Musa were asleep on the verandah we occupied. Alhaji, Kanei, Saidu, and I were awake and quietly listening to the night. Saidu's heavy breathing made our silence less unbearable. After a few hours had gone by, Saidu spoke in a very deep voice, as if someone were speaking through him. "How many more times do we have to come to terms with death before we find safety?" he asked.

He waited a few minutes, but the three of us didn't say anything. He continued: "Every time people come at us with the intention of killing us, I close my eyes and wait for death. Even though I am still alive, I feel like each time I accept death, part of me dies. Very soon I will completely die and all that will be left is my empty body walking with you. It will be quieter than I am." Saidu blew on the palms of his hands to warm them and lay on the floor. His heavy breathing intensified and I knew he had fallen asleep. Gradually, Kanei and then Alhaji fell asleep. I sat on a wooden bench against the wall and thought about Saidu's words. Tears formed in my eyes and my forehead became warm, thinking about what Saidu had said. I tried not to believe that I too was dying, slowly, on my way to find safety. The only time I was able to fall asleep that night was when the last morning breeze, the one containing the irresistible urge to sleep, saved me from my wandering mind.

Even though our journey was difficult, every once in a while we were able to do something that was normal and made us happy for a brief moment. One morning we arrived at a village where the men were getting ready to go hunting. They invited us to join them. At the end of the hunt, one of the older men shouted, pointing at us, "We are going to feast tonight, and the strangers are welcome to stay." The other men clapped and began walking on the path back to the village.

We walked behind them. They sang, carrying their nets and the animals—mostly porcupines and deer—that had been caught on their shoulders.

Upon our arrival at the village, the women and children clapped to welcome us. It was past midday. The sky was blue and the wind was beginning to pick up. Some of the men shared the meat among several households, and the rest was given to the women to be cooked for the feast. We hung about in the village and fetched water for the women who were preparing the food. Most of the men had returned to work the farms.

I walked around the village by myself and found a hammock on one of the verandahs. I lay in it, swinging slowly to get my thoughts in motion. I began to think about the times when I visited my grandmother and I would sleep in the hammock at the farm. I would wake up staring into her eyes as she played with my hair. She would tickle me and then hand me a cucumber to eat. Junior and I would sometimes fight for the hammock, and if he got it, I would trick him by loosening its ropes so that he would fall once he sat in it. This would discourage him, and he would go about the farm doing something else. My grandmother knew about my tricks and made fun of me, calling me *carseloi*, which means spider. In many Mende stories the spider is the character that tricks other animals to get what he wants, but his tricks always backfire on him.

As I was thinking about these things, I fell out of the hammock. I was too lazy to get up, so I sat on the ground and thought about my two brothers, my father, mother, and grandmother. I wished to be with them.

I put my hands behind my head and lay on my back, trying to hold on to the memories of my family. Their faces seemed to be far off somewhere in my mind, and to get to them I had to bring up painful memories. I longed for the gentle, dark, and shiny old hands of my grandmother; my mother's tight enclosed embrace, during the times I visited her, as if hiding and protecting me from something; my father's

was just a child. At the end of the song, he rubbed his beard and said that he was impressed with my dancing and found the singing "interesting." He asked for the next cassette to be played. It was LL Cool J. I mimed the song "I Need Love."

When I'm alone in my room sometimes I stare at the wall
and in the back of my mind I hear my conscience call

The chief turned his head from side to side as if trying to understand what I was saying. I watched him to see if his face was going to change for the worse, but a look of amusement flickered on his face. He ordered that all my friends be untied and given back their clothes. The chief explained to everyone that there had been a misunderstanding and that we were only children looking for safety. He wanted to know if we had stayed in the hut of our own accord or if the owner knew about us. I told him that we had stayed there on our own and that we hadn't come in contact with anyone until that morning. The chief told us that he was letting us go, but that we had to leave the area immediately. He gave me back my cassettes and we were on our way. As we walked, we examined the rope marks on our wrists and laughed about what had happened to avoid crying.

10

One of the unsettling things about my journey, mentally, physically, and emotionally, was that I wasn't sure when or where it was going to end. I didn't know what I was going to do with my life. I felt that I was starting over and over again. I was always on the move, always going somewhere. While we walked, I sometimes lagged behind, thinking about these things. To survive each passing day was my goal in life. At villages where we managed to find some happiness by being treated to food or fresh water, I knew that it was temporary and that we were only passing through. So I couldn't bring myself to be completely happy. It was much easier to be sad than to go back and forth between emotions, and this gave me the determination I needed to keep moving. I was never disappointed, since I always expected the worst to happen. There were nights when I couldn't sleep but stared into the darkest night until my eyes could see clearly through it. I thought about where my family was and whether they were alive.

One night while I sat outside in a village square thinking about how far I had come and what might lie ahead, I looked into the sky and saw how the thick clouds kept trying to cover the moon, yet it would reap-

dle. The chief examined us for a while, and when he caught my eye, I gave him half a smile, which he dismissed by spitting on the ground from the kola nut he chewed. His voice was hoarse.

"You children have become little devils, but you came to the wrong village." He used his staff to gesture instead of his hands. "Well, this is the end of the road for devils like you. Out there in the ocean, even you rascals cannot survive."

"Undress them," he commanded the men who had caught us. I was trembling with fear but unable to cry. Alhaji, who stammered with terror, tried to say something, but the chief kicked the side of the stool that he sat on and proclaimed, "I do not want to hear any word from a devil."

Our nameless host and his mother stood in the crowd. His mother squeezed his hand each time the chief called us devils or screamed at us. As I was being undressed, the rap cassettes fell out of my pockets and the man who undressed me picked them up and handed them to the chief. The chief looked closely at the faces on the covers of the cassette cases. He carefully examined the Naughty by Nature cassette cover over and over, looking at the militant stance and tough expression on the faces of the three guys standing on broken rocks with a lamppost in the background, puzzled by their poses. He demanded that a cassette player be brought. One of the men told the chief that the only way we could possess such foreign cassettes was either by having looted them or if we were mercenaries. The chief may have bought the man's first point, but he disregarded his second point, as it was utterly stupid.

"These boys are no mercenaries, look at them." The chief went back to inspecting the cassettes. I was a little glad that he had called us boys and refrained from the word "devil." But I was extremely uncomfortable sitting naked in the sand. It was not a pleasant experience. Just the thought of what was happening was enough to get me agitated. I fought hard mentally to let my face show the opposite of what I felt. The flesh on my face twitched as we waited for the chief to grant us life or death.

When the cassette player was brought, the chief put the cassette in and pressed "play."

OPP how can I explain it
I'll take you frame by frame it
To have y'all jumpin' shall we singin' it
O is for Other P is for People scratchin' temple . . .

Everyone listened attentively, raising their eyebrows and cocking their heads as they tried to understand what kind of music this was. The chief abruptly stopped the song. Some of the villagers leaned against their round mud huts and others sat on the ground or on mortars. The men rolled the legs of their taffeta pants, women adjusted their wrappers, and the children stared at us, their hands inside their pockets or in their runny noses.

"Stand him up and bring him here," the chief commanded.

When I was brought closer, he asked me where I had gotten this type of music and what was the point of having it. I explained to him that it was called rap music and that myself, my brother, and my friends—not the ones I was with—used to listen to it and perform the songs at talent shows. I could tell that he found this interesting, as his face was beginning to relax. He asked the men to untie me and give me my pants.

"Now you show me how you, your brother, and friends did it," the chief said.

I rewound the tape, mimed, and danced to "OPP" barefoot in the sand. I didn't enjoy it, and for the first time I found myself thinking about the words of the song, closely listening to the subtle instruments in the beat. I had never done such a thing before, because I knew the words by heart and felt the beat. I didn't feel it this time. As I hopped up and down, hunched and raising my arms and feet to the music, I thought about being thrown in the ocean, about how difficult it would be to know that death was inevitable. The wrinkles on the chief's forehead began to ease. He still didn't smile, but he gave a sigh that said I

didn't need to go anywhere. If I had to guess, I would say he was in his early twenties. He said he was going to get married the next month and was looking forward to it. I asked why his hut was removed from the village. He explained that it was his fishing hut, where he kept his nets and other fishing items and where he dried fish during the rainy season.

When we got to the ocean, we walked to an inlet where the sea wasn't rough. We sat on the banks. "Put you foot nah de wahter, make de salt wahter soakam." He also said the salt water was good for healing the pain and preventing tetanus. Our host sat aside, looking at us, and each time I looked at him he was smiling and his white teeth stood out against his dark face. The dry breeze from inland coupled with the cool ocean air was perfectly soothing. I wanted to know his name so badly, but I restrained myself.

"You boys must come here every night to put your feet in the ocean. This way you will be healed in less than a week," he said.

He looked in the sky, where the stars were beginning to be covered by fast-moving clouds. "I have to go take care of my canoe. It will rain soon, so you must go back to the hut." He started running in the sand toward the main village.

"I wish I could be that man. He is just so happy and content with his life," Alhaji said.

"He is a very nice man, too. I really want to know his name," Kanei said softly.

"Yes, yes." We all agreed with Kanei and went wandering into our own thoughts, which were interrupted by a sudden burst of rain. We hadn't listened to our host and left when he'd told us to. We hastened to the hut. There, we sat around the fire to dry ourselves and eat dried fish.

We had been with our host for two weeks and were feeling better when very early one morning, an older woman came to the hut. She woke us and told us to leave immediately. She said she was the mother of our host and that the people in the village had found out about us and

were on their way to capture us. From the way she spoke, I could tell that she had known about us all along. She brought with her dried fish and fresh water for us to take on our journey. We didn't have enough time to thank her and tell her to thank her son for his hospitality. But from what she said, it was clear that she knew we were thankful and she cared about our safety more than anything else.

"My children, you must hurry now, and my blessings are with you." Her voice was trembling with sadness, and she wiped her disconsolate face as she disappeared behind the hut and headed back to the main village.

We were not fast enough to escape the men who came for us. Twelve of them ran after the seven of us, wrestling us to the sand. They tied our hands.

In truth, realizing that I would eventually be caught, I had stopped running and offered my hands to be tied. The man chasing me was a little taken aback. He approached me with caution and motioned another man walking behind me with a stick and machete to pay attention. As the man tied my hands, we exchanged a glance that lasted a few seconds. I opened my eyes wide, trying to tell him that I was just a twelve-year-old boy. But something in his eyes told me that he didn't care for my safety but only for his and his village's.

The men walked us to their village and made us sit outside in the sand in front of their chief. I had been through this before, and wondered if it was a new experience for my present traveling companions. They were all heaving as they tried to hold back their cries. I began to worry, because last time I had found someone in the village who had gone to school with us and saved us. This time we were a long way from Mattru Jong. A long way gone.

Most of the men were shirtless, but the chief was elegantly dressed. He wore traditional cotton clothes with intricate designs on the collar made of yellow and brown thread, zigzagged vertically across his chest. His brown leather sandals looked new and he carried a staff with carvings of birds, canoes, all sorts of animals, and a lion's head on the han-

sleeping mats were and that he was going fishing and would be back in the morning. He didn't even bother to ask our names. I guess he didn't think it was necessary or important at that moment. Before he left, he gave us ointment to rub on our feet and stressed that we do it before going to sleep. We were very quiet that night. No one said a word.

The following morning our nameless host came again with food and a smile on his face that said he was glad that we were doing fine. We couldn't walk well, so we just hobbled around the hut and made fun of each other to avoid boredom.

Kanei boasted about being an excellent soccer player. Musa threw him a groundnut shell; Kanei moved his foot to kick it, but then realized that it would hurt and abruptly swung his foot back, dragging it against a stone. He began to blow on his sole, in pain.

"What kind of soccer player are you going to be if you are afraid to kick an empty groundnut shell?" Musa laughed. We all gradually began to laugh.

Musa had a round face, and he was short and bulky, with tiny round ears that matched his face. His eyes were big and looked as if they wanted to leave his face. Whenever he wanted to convince us of something, they would brighten.

Kanei had a long and calm face, and unlike Musa he was skinny and had short, really dark hair that he took great care of every morning, or whenever we stopped at a river or a stream. He would rub water on his head and take his time to carefully arrange his hair. "Are you meeting a girl somewhere?" Alhaji would ask, giggling. Kanei, with his soft yet authoritative voice, always seemed to know what to say and how to handle certain situations better than the rest of us.

Whenever Alhaji spoke, he used elaborate gestures. It was as if he wanted his already long hands to extend toward whomever he was talking to. He and Jumah were friends. They walked next to each other. Jumah was always nodding his head, agreeing to whatever the lanky Alhaji said to him as we walked. Jumah used his head to gesture,

rather than his hands. Whenever he spoke, he waved his head left to right. He kept his hands crossed behind his back most of the time, like an old man.

Saidu and Moriba were almost as quiet as I. They always sat next to each other, away from the group. Saidu breathed hard as we walked. His ears were large, and when he was listening, they stood up like a deer's. Moriba always told him that he must have extra hearing ability. Moriba mostly played with his hands, examining the lines on his palm and rubbing his fingers as he whispered to himself.

I barely spoke.

I knew Alhaji, Kanei, and Musa from my former secondary school. We never talked much about our past, especially our families. The few conversations we had that weren't related to our journey were mostly about soccer and school before we resumed our silence.

The pains we felt from our feet subsided on the fourth night. We went for a walk around the hut, and during our stroll I found out that the hut was only about half a mile from the main village; at night we could see smoke rising from the tiny village's cooking huts.

We stayed in the hut for a week. Our host brought us water and food every morning and night. He had the whitest teeth that I had ever seen, and he was shirtless all the time. Sometimes when he came to check on us in the morning, he had chewing sap in his mouth. I asked him one morning for his name. He laughed softly. "It is not necessary. This way we will all be safe."

The following night, our host decided to take us to a part of the Atlantic Ocean that was nearby. As we walked, he engaged us in conversation. We learned that he was Sherbro, one of the many tribes in Sierra Leone. When he heard the stories of how we had walked from Mattru Jong, he couldn't believe us. He said he had heard about the war but still had difficulty believing that people could do the things that he had heard they did. Our host had been born in the main village and never left. Traders came to his village with clothing items, rice, and other cooking ingredients to exchange for salt and fish, so he

sprang from behind huts with machetes, fishing spears, and nets in their hands. We were so shocked by this sudden uproar that none of us was able to run. Instead, we shouted, "Please, we are harmless and just passing by," in every possible one of the eighteen local languages that each of us knew. The fishermen jabbed us with the flat edges of their weapons until we fell on the ground. They sat on top of us, tied our hands, and took us to their chief.

The villagers had heard a rumor that some young people, believed to be rebels, were heading their way. Upon hearing this, they had armed themselves and hid, waiting to defend their homes and protect their families. This should not have been a big shock to us, but we didn't expect it to happen here, since we thought we were now far from harm. They asked us several questions along the lines of where were we from? where were we going? and why did we choose that direction? Alhaji, the tallest among us and sometimes mistaken for the oldest, tried to explain to the chief that we were just passing by. Afterward, the men yanked our torn *crapes* off our feet, untied us, and chased us out of their village, waving their spears and machetes, and screaming after us.

We didn't realize what sort of punishment the fishermen had given us until we stopped running away from their village. The sun was in the middle of the sky, it was over 120 degrees, and we were barefoot. The humidity by the sea was less than inland, but since there were no trees to provide shade, the sun penetrated right into the sand, making it hot and loose. Walking barefoot on the sand was like walking on a hot tar road. The only escape from this pain was to keep walking and hope for something miraculous. We couldn't walk in the water or the wet sand near its edge. It was very deep between where we walked and where the water met the land, and the waves were dangerous. After I had cried for several hours, my feet became numb. I continued walking but couldn't feel the soles of my feet.

We walked on the hot, burning sand until sunset. I have never longed for a day to conclude as I did that day. I thought the arrival of sunset would heal my pain. But as the heat died down, the anesthesia also wore away. Each time I lifted my feet, the veins in them tightened and I felt the sand particles digging into my bleeding soles. The next several miles were so long that I didn't think I would be able to make it. I perspired and my body shuddered from the pain. Finally, we came upon a hut that was on the sand. None of us was able to talk. We walked inside and sat down on logs around a fireplace. There were tears in my eyes, but I was unable to cry because I was too thirsty to make a sound. I looked around to see the faces of my traveling companions. They were crying as well, without a sound. Hesitantly, I looked under my feet. Peeled flesh hung down and congealed blocks of blood and particles of sand clung to each hanging bit of skin. It looked as if someone had literally used a blade to cut the flesh under my feet from the heel to the toes. Discouraged, I looked into the sky through a tiny hole in the thatched roof, trying not to think about my feet. As we sat in silence, the man whose hut we had occupied came in. He stopped at the door, and was about to turn around when he noticed our suffering. His eyes met our frightened faces. Musa had just lifted his foot and was trying to separate the sand from his flesh. The rest of us were holding our knees so that our feet wouldn't touch the ground. The man motioned for Musa to stop what he was about to do. He shook his head and left.

A few minutes later, he returned, carrying a basket full of some type of grass. He quietly made a fire and heated the grasses and then placed them underneath each of our hanging feet. The steam from the grass rose to our soles, and it gradually lessened the pain. The man left without saying anything.

Later he returned with fried-fish soup, rice, and a bucket of water. He put the food before us and motioned for us to eat. Again he disappeared, returning a few minutes later, this time smiling widely. He had a fishing net on his shoulder and held a pair of oars and a big flashlight.

"You peekin dem dae feel betteh, right?" Without waiting to hear whether we were feeling better or not, he went on to tell us where the

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ONE MORNING, immediately after we had passed a deserted village, we started hearing something like the roar of big engines, the rolling of metal drums on a tar road, a thunder exploding, roll after roll. All these sounds reached our ears simultaneously. We hurriedly deviated from the path, running into the bushes and lying on the ground. We searched one another's faces for an explanation of this strange sound. Even Kanei, who sometimes had answers, couldn't tell us what we were hearing. We all looked at him and his face contorted with confusion.

"We have to find out what it is or we can't continue on to Yele," Kanei whispered, and then began to crawl toward the sound. We followed him, quietly dragging our bodies on rotten leaves. As we got closer, the sound intensified and a heavy breeze shook the trees above us. We could clearly see the blue sky, but nothing else. Kanei hesitantly sat on his heels and surveyed the area.

"It is just water, lots of it, and sand, lots of it." Kanei was still looking.

"What is making the noise, then?" Alhaji asked.

"All I am looking at is water and sand," Kanei replied, and then waved us to come closer and take a look. We sat on our heels for a while, looking in different directions, trying to locate what was making the sound. Without saying anything to us, Kanei crawled out of the bushes and started walking on the sand, toward the water.

It was the Atlantic Ocean. The sounds we had heard were those of the waves hitting the shore. I had seen parts of the ocean but had never stood at the shore of one this vast. It spread out beyond the vision of my eyes. The sky was at its bluest and seemed to curve down and join with the ocean in the distance. My eyes widened, a smile forming on my face. Even in the middle of the madness there remained that true and natural beauty, and it took my mind away from my current situation as I marveled at this sight.

We walked closer and sat at the edge of the sand and stared at the ocean, admiring the display of the waves in succession. They came in three folds. The first was small but powerful enough to break a person's leg. The second was high and more powerful than the first, and the third was a spectacle. It rolled and rose higher than the shoreline as it moved forward. We ran away from where we sat. The wave hit the shore so hard that it sent sand particles flying high up in the sky. When we went back to look, the waves had thrown out unwanted flotsam from the ocean, including some big crabs that I guess weren't strong enough to cling to the ocean floor, but they were still alive.

It was a calm walk along the sand, since we didn't expect trouble in this part of the country. We chased and wrestled each other in the sand, played somersault and running games. We even bundled up Alhaji's old shirt and tied a rope around it to make a soccer ball. We then played a game, and each time one of us scored a goal, he would celebrate with a *soukous* dance. We shouted, laughed, and sang our secondary-school songs.

We started walking on the sandy beach early in the morning and saw the sunrise. At midday we saw a cluster of huts ahead and raced each other toward them. When we arrived there, we suddenly became worried. There was no one in the village. Mortars lay in the sand, rice spilling out of them; jerry cans leaked water, and fires were left unattended under cooking huts. Our first guess was that the rebels might have been there. Before we could think of anything else, fishermen

but this made them more scared. We hoped to ask people for directions. It was impossible.

We had traveled for more than six days when we came in contact with a very old man who could barely walk. He sat on the verandah of a house in the middle of the village. His face was too wrinkled to still be alive, yet his dark skin was shiny and he spoke slowly, gobbling the words in his jaws before he let them out. As he spoke, the veins on his forehead became visible through his skin.

"Everyone ran when they heard of the 'seven boys' on their way here. I couldn't run at all. So they left me behind. No one was willing to carry me and I didn't want to be a burden," he said.

We explained to him where we were from and where we wanted to go. He asked us to stay for a while and keep him company.

"You young fellows must be hungry. There are some yams in that hut over there. Can you boys cook some for me and yourselves?" he politely asked. When we were almost finished eating the yams, he said slowly, "My children, this country has lost its good heart. People don't trust each other anymore. Years ago, you would have been heartily welcomed in this village. I hope that you boys can find safety before this untrustworthiness and fear cause someone to harm you."

He drew a map on the ground with his walking stick. "This is how you get to Yele," he said.

"What is your name?" Kanei asked the old man.

He smiled as if he knew that one of us would ask this question. "There is no need to know my name. Just refer to me as the old man who got left behind when you get to the next village." He looked at all our faces and spoke softly, with no sadness in his voice.

"I will not be alive to see the end of this war. So, to save a place in your memories for other things, I won't tell you my name. If you survive this war, just remember me as the old man you met. You boys should be on your way." He pointed his staff toward the path that lay ahead of us. As we walked away, he erased the map with his foot and waved us off with a raised right hand and a nod. Before the village disappeared from our sight, I turned around to take one last look at the old man. His head was down and he had both hands on his staff. It was clear to me that he knew his days would soon be over, and he didn't bother to be afraid for himself. But he was for us.

Someone had started a rumor about the "seven boys," us. Many times during our journey we were surrounded by muscular men with machetes who almost killed us before they realized that we were just children running away from the war. Sometimes I looked at the blades of the machetes and thought about how much it would hurt to be chopped with one. Other times I was so hungry and tired that I didn't care. At crowded villages where we sometimes stopped to spend the night, the men stayed up to keep an eye on us. When we went to the river to wash our faces, mothers would grab their children and run home.

ing. But he couldn't find the plant to become human again. The pigs tore him to pieces. Since that day, the wild pigs have distrusted all humans, and whenever they see a person in the forest, they think he or she is there to avenge the hunter.

After the pigs had gone and I had surveyed the terrain to my satisfaction, I climbed down and continued walking. I wanted to be away from that area before dawn, since I feared that if I stayed I might run into the wild pigs again. I walked all night and continued during the day. At the beginning of night, I saw owls coming from their hiding places, revolving their eyes, and stretching to become familiar with their surroundings and get ready for the night. I was walking very fast but very quietly, until I accidentally stepped on the tail of a snake. It started hissing and scuttling toward me. I ran as fast as I could for a long time. When I was six, my grandfather had inserted a medicine into my skin that protected me from snakebite and enabled me to control snakes. But as soon as I started school, I began to doubt the power of the medicine. After that, I was no longer able to make snakes stop in their tracks until I went by.

When I was very little, my father used to say, "If you are alive, there is hope for a better day and something good to happen. If there is nothing good left in the destiny of a person, he or she will die." I thought about these words during my journey, and they kept me moving even when I didn't know where I was going. Those words became the vehicle that drove my spirit forward and made it stay alive.

I had spent more than a month in the forest when I finally ran into people again. The only living things I had met were monkeys, snakes, wild pigs, and deer, none of which I could have a conversation with. Sometimes I watched the little monkeys practice jumping from tree to tree or watched the curious eyes of a deer that sensed my presence. The sounds of branches snapping off trees became my music. There were certain days when the sounds of the branches breaking made a consistent rhythm that I would enjoy very much, and the sonority of it would echo for a while and would gradually fade into the depths of the forest.

I was walking slowly, staggering from hunger, back pain, and fatigue, when I ran into some young people my age at an intersection where two paths merged into one. I was wearing a pair of trousers I had recently found hanging on a pole in an abandoned village. They were extremely big for me, so I had tied them with ropes so they wouldn't fall off while I walked. We all arrived at the junction at the same time, and upon seeing each other, we became paralyzed with fear. As I stood there, unable to run, I recognized a few of the faces and I smiled to break the tension and uncertainty. There were six boys, and three of them, Alhaji, Musa, and Kanei, had attended Centennial Secondary School with me in Mattru Jong. They weren't close friends, but the four of us had been flogged once for talking back to the senior prefect. We had nodded at one another after that punishment, which we all agreed was unnecessary. I shook hands with the boys.

I could tell who was from what tribe by the marks on their cheeks and their features. Alhaji and Saidu were Temne, and Kanei, Jumah, Musa, and Moriba were Mende. They told me they were heading for a village called Yele in Bonthe district that they had heard was safe because it was occupied by the Sierra Leone Armed Forces.

Quietly I followed them as I tried to remember all their names, especially the names of the faces I recognized among them. I walked in the back, creating a little distance between us. I began to realize how uncomfortable I felt being around people. Kanei, who was older, perhaps sixteen, asked me where I'd been. I smiled without answering. He tapped me on the shoulder as if he knew what I had experienced. "Circumstances will change and things will be fine, just hold on a little more," he said, tapping my shoulder again and nodding. I responded with a smile.

Once again I was with a group of boys. This time there were seven of us. I knew this was going to be a problem, but I didn't want to be by myself anymore. Our innocence had been replaced by fear and we had become monsters. There was nothing we could do about it. Sometimes we ran after people shouting that we were not what they thought,

my *crapes* were rotten, and my body was sticky with dirt. When I first threw water on my skin, it became slimy. There was no soap, but in the forest there was an area that had a particular kind of grass that could be used as a substitute. I had learned about this grass during one of the summers when I visited my grandmother. When I squeezed a bunch of the grasses together, they provided foam that left my body with a fresh scent. After I had finished taking a bath, I washed my clothes or, rather, soaked and spread them on the grass to dry. I sat naked, cleaning my teeth with sapwood. A deer came by and watched me suspiciously before it went about its affairs. I resisted thinking by listening to the sound of the forest as songs of birds collided with the shouting of monkeys and the cackle of baboons.

By evening, my clothes were still damp, so I put them on so that the heat of my body would dry them faster before night fell. I was still alive, despite eating the nameless fruit, so I ate some more for dinner. The following morning, I ate some more for breakfast and later for lunch and dinner again. The nameless fruit became my only source of food. The fruit was plentiful, but I knew that sooner or later there would be no more. Sometimes I felt as if the birds gave me angry looks for eating so much of their food.

The most difficult part of being in the forest was the loneliness. It became unbearable each day. One thing about being lonesome is that you think too much, especially when there isn't much else you can do. I didn't like this and I tried to stop myself from thinking, but nothing seemed to work. I decided to just ignore every thought that came to my head, because it brought too much sadness. Apart from eating and drinking water and once every other day taking a bath, I spent most of my time fighting myself mentally in order to avoid thinking about what I had seen or wondering where my life was going, where my family and friends were. The more I resisted thinking, the longer the days became, and I felt as if my head was becoming heavier each passing day. I became restless and was afraid to sleep for fear that my suppressed thoughts would appear in my dreams.

As I searched the forest for more food and to find a way out, I feared coming in contact with wild animals like leopards, lions, and wild pigs. So I stayed closer to trees that I could easily mount to hide myself from these animals. I walked as fast as I could, but the more I walked, the more it seemed I was getting deeper into the thickness of the forest. The harder I tried to get out, the bigger and taller the trees became. This was a problem, because it got difficult to find a tree that was easy to climb and had suitable branches to sleep in.

One evening, as I searched for a tree with a forked branch to sleep in, I heard grunts. I wasn't exactly sure what animals were producing such noisy grunts, but they became louder. I climbed a tree to be safe. As I sat there, a herd of wild pigs came running. It was the first time I had seen wild pigs and they were huge, all of them. If they stood up, they would all be taller than me. Each had forked teeth extending out of its mouth. As they passed underneath me, one of the biggest pigs stopped and sniffed the air in all directions. It must have sensed my presence. When they were gone, I climbed down, and all of a sudden a couple of enormous pigs came running at me. They chased me for about half a mile as I looked for a tree to climb. Fortunately, I found one that I was able to mount in one jump. The pigs stopped and started charging at the bottom of the tree. They grunted loudly and the rest of the herd came back. They all started charging at the tree and tried to chew the bottom. I climbed higher and higher. After a while they finally gave up as a cricket started calling for night to commence.

My grandmother once told me a story about a notorious hunter of wild pigs who used magic to transform himself into a wild boar. He would then lead the herd into an open area of the forest where he would change back into human form, then trap and shoot the pigs. One day during his trickery, a small pig saw the hunter biting a plant that enabled him to return to his human form. The pig told all its companions what it had seen. The herd searched the forest for the hunter's magic plant and destroyed every single one of them. The next day the hunter performed his trickery and lured the herd into an open-

see the sky. I didn't remember how I had gotten there. Night was approaching, so I found a suitable tree that wasn't too high to climb; it had weaved branches with another to form something like a hammock. I spent the night in the arms of those trees, between earth and sky.

The next morning I was determined to find my way out of the forest, even though my back ached painfully from sleeping in the trees. On my way, I came to a spring that ran from under a gigantic rock. I sat by it to rest, and there I had eye contact with a huge dark snake that retreated behind the bush. I found a long strong stick to protect myself as I sat playing with leaves on the ground to avoid bringing up thoughts that occupied my mind. But my mind continued to torment me, and every effort to clear away the terrible thoughts was in vain. So I decided to walk, tapping the ground with the stick I held. I walked all morning and into the evening, but in the end found myself at the same place where I had slept the previous night. That was when I finally came to accept that I was lost and it was going to take a while to get out of where I was. I decided to make my new home a little bit more comfortable by adding leaves to the weaved branches to make them less hard to sleep on.

I walked around to familiarize myself with my vicinity. As I was getting acquainted with my new home, I cleared the dried leaves. Then I took a stick and drew lines on the ground from my sleeping place to the spring where I had met my new neighbor, the snake. There was another one drinking water and it became motionless upon seeing me. As I went about my business, I heard it crawling away. I drew lines by parting the dried leaves on the ground. These lines helped me from getting lost in between the spring and my sleeping place. After I finished familiarizing myself with the area, I sat down and tried to think about how I was going to get out of the forest. But that didn't go well, since I was afraid of thinking. I eventually decided that maybe it was better to be where I was. Even though I was lost and lonely, it was safe for the time being.

Along the spring there were several trees with a ripe fruit that I had never seen. Birds came to eat this strange fruit every morning. I decided to try some of it, since it was the only edible thing around. It was either take the chance and eat this fruit that might poison me or die of hunger. I decided to eat the fruit. I thought if the birds ate it and lived, maybe I could, too. The fruit was shaped like a lemon, with an outer layer of mixed colors of yellow and red. Inside was a crusty, watery, fruity part with a very tiny seed. It smelled like a mixture of ripe mango, orange, and something else that was irresistibly inviting. Hesitantly, I plucked one and took a bite. It didn't taste as good as it smelled, but it was satisfying. I must have had about twelve of them. Afterward, I drank some water and sat waiting for the result.

I thought about when Junior and I had visited Kabati and would take walks with our grandfather on paths around the coffee farms by the village. He would point out medicinal leaves and trees whose barks were important medicines. During each visit, Grandfather always gave us a special medicine that was supposed to enhance the brain's capacity to absorb and retain knowledge. He made this medicine by writing a special Arabic prayer on a *waleh* (slate) with ink that was made of another medicine. The writing was then washed off the slate, and that water, which they called *Nessie*, was put in a bottle. We took it with us and were supposed to keep it a secret and drink it before we studied for exams. This medicine worked. During my primary-school years and part of my secondary-school years, I was able to permanently retain everything that I learned. Sometimes it worked so well that during examinations I could visualize my notes and all that was written on each page of my textbooks. It was as if the books had been imprinted inside my head. This wonder was one of many in my childhood. To this day, I have an excellent photographic memory that enables me to remember details of the day-to-day moments of my life, indelibly.

I looked around the forest for one of the medicinal leaves that Grandfather had said remove poison from the body. I might need it if the fruit I had eaten was poisonous. But I couldn't find the plant.

Nothing happened after a couple of hours, so I decided to take a bath. I hadn't had time to take one for a while. My clothes were dirty,

and I thought maybe he didn't speak Krio. So I said hello in Mende, my tribal language.

"Bu-wah. Bi ga huin ye na." He still didn't respond. I took my clothes off and dived into the river. When I rose to the surface, all of them had stopped swimming but remained in the water. The man, who must have been the father, asked me, "Where are you from and where are you going?" He was Mende and he understood Krio very well.

"I am from Mattru Jong and I have no idea where I am going." I wiped the water off my face and then continued, "Where are you and your family headed?" He ignored my question by pretending he didn't hear me. I proceeded to ask him if he knew the fastest way to Bonthe, an island in the south of Sierra Leone and one of the safest places at that time, according to hearsay. He told me that if I kept walking toward the sea, I would eventually find people who might have a better understanding about how to get to Bonthe. It was clear from the tone of his voice that he didn't want me around and didn't trust me. I looked at the curious and skeptical faces of the children and the woman. I was glad to see other faces and at the same time disappointed that the war had destroyed the enjoyment of the very experience of meeting people. Even a twelve-year-old couldn't be trusted anymore. I got out of the water, thanked the man, and was on my way, heading in the direction he had pointed that led toward the sea.

Sadly, I do not know the names of most of the villages that sheltered and provided me food during those times. No one was there to ask, and in those parts of the country there weren't any signs that said the name of this or that village.

8

I WALKED for two days straight without sleeping. I stopped only at streams to drink water. I felt as if somebody was after me. Often, my shadow would scare me and cause me to run for miles. Everything felt awkwardly brutal. Even the air seemed to want to attack me and break my neck. I knew I was hungry, but I didn't have the appetite to eat or the strength to find food. I had passed through burnt villages where dead bodies of men, women, and children of all ages were scattered like leaves on the ground after a storm. Their eyes still showed fear, as if death hadn't freed them from the madness that continued to unfold. I had seen heads cut off by machetes, smashed by cement bricks, and rivers filled with so much blood that the water had ceased flowing. Each time my mind replayed these scenes, I increased my pace. Sometimes I closed my eyes hard to avoid thinking, but the eye of my mind refused to be closed and continued to plague me with images. My body twitched with fear, and I became dizzy. I could see the leaves on the trees swaying, but I couldn't feel the wind.

On the third day, I found myself in the middle of a thick forest, standing beneath huge trees whose leaves and branches made it difficult to

thing. The silence in the village was too scary. I was scared when the wind blew, shaking the thatched roofs, and I felt as if I were out of my body wandering somewhere. There weren't footprints of any kind. Not even a lizard dared to crawl through the village. The birds and crickets didn't sing. I could hear my footsteps louder than my heartbeat. During these visits, we brought with us brooms so that we could sweep away our footprints as we went back to our hiding place to avoid being followed. The last time Kaloko and I visited the village, dogs were feasting on the burnt remains of the imam. One dog had his arm and the other his leg. Above, vultures circled, preparing to descend on the body as well.

I became frustrated with living in fear. I felt as if I was always waiting for death to come to me, so I decided to go somewhere where at least there was some peace. Kaloko was afraid to leave. He thought that by leaving the bush we would be walking toward death. He decided to stay in the swamp.

I had nothing to carry, so I filled my pockets with oranges, tied the laces of my tattered *crapes*, and I was ready to go. I said goodbye to everyone and headed west. As soon as I left the hiding area and was on the path, I felt as if I was being wrapped in a blanket of sorrow. It came over me instantly. I started to cry. I didn't know why. Maybe it was because I was afraid of what might lie ahead. I sat on the side of the path for a while until my tears were gone, and then moved on.

I walked all day and didn't run into a single person on the path or in the villages that I passed through. There were no footprints to be seen, and the only sounds I heard were those of my breathing and my footsteps.

For five days, I walked from dawn to dusk, never coming in contact with any human being. At night I slept in abandoned villages. Every morning I made my own fate by deciding which way I was going to go. My goal was to avoid walking in the direction from where I had come. I ran out of oranges on the first day, but I collected more at every village that I slept in. Sometimes I would come across cassava

farms. I would uproot some and eat them raw. The other food that was available in most villages was coconut. I didn't know how to climb a coconut tree. I had tried, but it was just impossible, until one day when I was very hungry and thirsty. I arrived at a village where there was nothing to eat except for the coconuts that sloppily hung from the trees, as if teasing me, daring me to pluck them. It is difficult to explain how it happened, but I mounted the coconut tree quite fast and unexpectedly. By the time I realized what I was doing and thought about my inexperience in this particular art, I was already at the top of the branches and plucking coconuts. I climbed down just as quickly and looked around for something to crack them with. Luckily, I found an old machete and got to work on the coconut shells. After I was done snacking, I found myself a hammock and rested for a while.

I got up well rested and thought, I think I have enough energy now to climb and pick more coconuts for the road. But it was impossible. I couldn't even climb past the middle of the trunk. I tried again and again, but each attempt was more pitiful than the last. I hadn't laughed for a long time, but this made me laugh uncontrollably. I could have written a science paper on the experience.

On the sixth day, I came in contact with humans. I had just left the village that I slept in the previous night and was on my way to look for another one when I heard voices ahead of me, rising and fading as the wind changed direction. I got off the path and walked carefully, minding my footstep on dried leaves in the forest to avoid making any sound. I stood behind the bushes, watching the people I had heard. There were eight of them down at the river, four young boys about twelve years old—my age—two girls, a man, and a woman. They were swimming. After observing for a while and determining that they were harmless, I decided to go down to the river for a swim as well. In order to avoid scaring them, I walked back to the path and headed toward them.

The man was the first to see me. "Kushe-oo. How de body, sir?" I greeted him. His eyes searched my smiling face. He didn't say anything

7

THE ATTACK HAPPENED unexpectedly one night. There hadn't even been any rumors that the rebels were as close as fifty miles from Kamator. They just walked into the village from out of nowhere.

It was about 8:00 p.m., when people were performing the last prayer of the day. The imam was oblivious to what was going on until it was too late. He stood in front of everyone, facing east, vigorously reciting a long sura, and once prayer had started, no one was allowed to say anything that was not related to the performance of the prayer. I didn't go to the mosque that night, but Kaloko did. He said that upon realizing that the rebels were in the village, everyone quickly and silently left the mosque, one at a time, leaving the imam by himself as he stood there leading the prayer. Some people tried to whisper to him, but he ignored them. The rebels captured him and demanded to know what parts of the forest people were hiding in, but the imam refused to tell them. They bound his hands and feet with wire, tied him to an iron post, and set fire to his body. They didn't burn him completely, but the fire killed him. His semi-burnt remains were left in the village square. Kaloko said he saw this from the nearby bush where he hid.

During the attack, Junior was in the verandah room where all five

of us slept. I was outside, sitting on the steps. I had no time to go look for him, since the attack was sudden, but instead had to run into the bush alone. That night I slept by myself, leaning on a tree. In the morning I found Kaloko, and together we returned to the village. The semi-burnt body of the imam, as Kaloko had described it, was there in the village square. I could see the pain he had felt by looking at the way his teeth were bared. All the houses were burned. There wasn't a sign of life anywhere. We looked in the thick forest for Junior and our friends, but they weren't anywhere to be found. We stumbled across a family we knew and they let us hide with them in the bush by the swamp. We stayed with them for two weeks, two weeks that felt like months. Each day went by very slowly as I busied myself thinking about what other possibilities lay ahead. Was there an end to this madness, and was there any future for me beyond the bushes? I thought about Junior, Gibrilla, Talloi, and Khalilou. Had they been able to escape the attack? I was losing everyone, my family, my friends. I remembered when my family moved to Mogbwemo. My father held a ceremony to bless our new home. He invited our new neighbors, and my father stood up during the ceremony and said, "I pray to the gods and ancestors that my family will always be together." He looked at us, my mother held my little brother, and Junior and I stood next to each other with toffee in our mouths.

One of the elders stood up and added to what my father had said: "I pray to the gods and ancestors that your family will always be together, even when one of you crosses into the spirit world. To family and community." The old man raised his open hands in the air. My father came over and stood by my mother and motioned for Junior and me to come closer. We did, and my father put his arms around us. The gathering clapped and a photographer took a few snapshots.

I pressed my fingers on my eyelids to hold back my tears and wished that I could have my family together again.

Once every three days we visited Kamator to see if people had returned, but each visit was in vain, as there wasn't a sign of a living

On the first morning of clearing, Gibrilla's uncle assigned each of us a portion of the bush to be cut down. We spent three days cutting down our portions. He was done in less than three hours.

When I held the cutlass in my hand to start attacking the bush, Gibrilla's uncle couldn't help himself. He burst out laughing before he showed me how to hold the cutlass properly. I spent restless minutes swinging the cutlass with all my might at trees that he would cut with one strike.

The first two weeks were extremely painful. I suffered from back pains and muscle aches. Worst of all, the flesh on the palms of my hands was peeled, swollen, and blistered. My hands were not used to holding a machete or an ax. After the clearing was done, the bush was left to dry. Later, when the cut bush was dried, we set fire to it and watched the thick smoke rise to the blue summer sky.

Next we had to plant cassava. To do this, we dug mini-holes in the ground using hoes. To take a break from this task, which required us to bend our upper bodies toward the ground for hours, we fetched cassava stalks, cut them into shorter pieces, and placed them in the holes. The only sounds we heard as we worked were the humming of tunes by expert farmers, the occasional flapping of a bird, the snaps of tree branches breaking in the nearby forest, and hellos from neighbors traveling the path either to their own farms or back to the village. At the end of the day, I sometimes would sit on a log at the village square and watch the younger boys play their wrestling games. One of the boys, about seven, always started a fight, and his mother would pull him away by his ear. I saw myself in him. I was a troublesome boy as well and always got into fights in school and at the river. Sometimes I stoned kids I couldn't beat up. Since we didn't have a mother at home, Junior and I were the misfits in our community. The separation of our parents left marks on us that were visible to the youngest child in our town. We became the evening gossip.

"Those poor boys," some would say.

"They aren't going to have any good complete training," others would worriedly remark as we walked by.

I was so angry at the way they pitied us that I would sometimes kick their children's behinds at school, especially those who gave us the look that said, My parents talk about you a lot.

We farmed for three months at Kamator and I never got used to it. The only times that I enjoyed were the afternoon breaks, when we went swimming in the river. There, I would sit on the clear sandy bottom of the river and let the current take me downstream, where I would resurface, put on my dirty clothes, and return to the farm. The sad thing about all that hard labor was that, in the end, it all went to ruin, because the rebels did eventually come and everyone ran away, leaving their farms to be covered by weeds and devoured by animals.

It was during that attack in the village of Kamator that my friends and I separated. It was the last time I saw Junior, my older brother.

sitting on the verandah of a house in an unknown village, I wanted him to ask me if I was fine.

Gibrilla, Talloi, Kaloko, and Khalilou were all looking at the top of the forest that engulfed the village. Gibrilla's nose twitched as he sat with his chin on his knee. When he exhaled, his whole body moved. Talloi continuously tapped his foot on the floor, as if trying to distract himself from thinking about the present. Kaloko was restless. He couldn't sit still and kept switching positions, and sighed each time he did so. Khalilou sat quietly. His face showed no emotion and his spirit seemed to have wandered away from his body. I wanted to know how Junior was feeling, but I couldn't find the right moment to break into the silence of that evening. I wish I had.

The following morning, a large group of people passed through the village. Among the travelers was a woman who knew Gibrilla. She told him that his aunt was in a village about thirty miles from where we were. She gave us directions. We filled our pockets with unripe oranges that were sour and unbearable to eat but the only source of food at our disposal, and we were on our way.

Kamator was very far away from Mattru Jong, where the rebels were still in control, but the villagers were on guard and ready to move anytime. In return for food and a place to sleep, the six of us were appointed watchmen. Three miles from the village was a big hill. From the top, one could see as far as a mile down the path toward the village. It was at the top of that hill that we stood watch from early in the morning until nightfall. We did this for about a month and nothing happened. Still, we knew the rebels well enough to brace for their arrival. But we lost our vigilance to the gradual passing of time.

The season for planting was approaching. The first rain had fallen, softening the soil. Birds began building their nests in the mango trees. Dew came down every morning and left the leaves wet and soaked the soil. The odor of the soaked soil was irresistibly sharp at midday. It made me want to roll on the ground. One of my uncles used to joke

that he would like to die at this time of year. The sun rose earlier than usual and was at its brightest in the blue, almost cloudless sky. The grass on the side of the path was half dry and half green. Ants could be seen on the ground carrying food into their holes. Even though we tried to convince them otherwise, the villagers grew certain the rebels weren't coming, and so they ordered us from our scouting posts and out into the fields. It wasn't easy.

I had always been a spectator of the art of farming and as a result never realized how difficult it was until those few months of my life, in 1993, when I had to assist in farming in the village of Kamator. The village inhabitants were all farmers, so I had no way to escape this fate.

Before the war, when I visited my grandmother during harvest season, the only thing she let me do was pour wine on the soil around the farm before harvest commenced, as part of a ceremony to thank the ancestors and the gods for providing fertile soil, healthy rice, and a successful farming year.

The first task we were given was to clear a massive plot of land the size of a football field. When we went to look at the bush that was supposed to be cut, I knew tough days lay ahead. The bush was thick and there were lots of palm trees, each surrounded by trees that had woven their branches together. It was difficult to get around them and chop them down. The ground was covered with decayed leaves that had changed the top color of the brown soil to dark. Termites could be heard rummaging under the rotten leaves. Every day we would repeatedly stoop and stand under the bushes, swinging machetes and axes at the trees and palms that had to be cut lower to the ground so that they wouldn't grow fast again and disrupt the crop that was to be planted. Sometimes when we swung the machetes and axes, their weight would send us flying into the bushes, where we would lie for a bit and rub our aching shoulders. Gibrilla's uncle would shake his head and say, "You lazy town boys."

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ordered us to stop. The men were the voluntary guards of their village and had been asked by their chief to bring us back.

A large crowd had gathered in the chief's compound for our arrival. The huge men pushed us to the ground in front of them and tied our feet with strong ropes. Then our hands were pulled behind our backs until our elbows touched, making our chests tight from the pressure. I was in tears from the pain. I tried to roll on my back, but that made it even worse.

"Are you rebels or spies?" The chief stamped his staff on the ground.

"No." Our voices trembled.

The chief became very angry. "If you do not tell me the truth, I am going to have these men tie stones to your bodies and throw you in the river," he roared.

We told him we were students and this was a big misunderstanding.

The crowd shouted, "Drown the rebels."

The guards walked into the circle and started searching our pockets. One of them found a rap cassette in my pocket and handed it to the chief. He asked for it to be played.

You down with OPP (Yeah you know me)
You down with OPP (Yeah you know me)
You down with OPP (Yeah you know me)
Who's down with OPP (Every last homie)

The chief stopped the music. He stroked his beard, thinking.

"Tell me," he said, turning to me, "how did you get this foreign music?"

I told him that we rapped. He didn't know what rap music was, so I did my best to explain it to him. "It is similar to telling parables, but in the white man's language," I concluded. I also told him that we were dancers and had a group in Mattru Jong, where we used to attend school.

"Mattru Jong?" he asked, and called for a young man who was from that village. The boy was brought before the chief and asked if he knew us and if he had ever heard us speak parables in the white man's language. He knew my name, my brother's, and those of my friends. He remembered us from performances we had done. None of us knew him, not even by his face, but we warmly smiled as if we recognized him as well. He saved our lives.

We were untied and treated to some cassava and smoked fish. We ate, thanked the villagers, and got ready to move on. The chief and some of the men who had tied our hands and feet offered us a place to stay in the village. We thanked them for their generosity and left. We knew that the rebels would eventually reach the village.

Slowly, we walked on a path through a thick forest. The trees hesitantly swayed with the quiet wind. The sky looked as if it was filled with smoke, endless gray smoke that made the sun dull. Around sunset we arrived at an abandoned village with six mud houses. We sat on the floor of the verandah of one of the houses. I looked at Junior, whose face was sweating. He had been so quiet lately. He looked at me and smiled a little before his face resumed its dullness. He got up and walked out to the yard. Never moving, he stared at the sky until the sun disappeared. On his way back to sit on the verandah, he picked up a stone and played with it throughout the evening. I kept looking at him, hoping that we could have another eye contact and maybe he would then say something about what was going on in his head. But he wouldn't look up. He only played with the stone in his hand and stared at the ground.

Once, Junior taught me how to skip a stone on a river. We had gone to fetch water and he told me he had learned a new magic that let him make stones walk on water. Bending his body sideways, he threw stones out, and each one walked on the water farther than the last. He told me to try, but I couldn't do it. He promised to teach me the magic some other time. As we were walking back home with buckets of water on our heads, I slipped and fell, spilling the water. Junior gave me his bucket, took my empty one, and returned to the river. When he came home, the first thing he did was ask me if I was hurt from falling. I told him I was fine, but he examined my knees and elbows anyway, and when he was done, he tickled me. As I looked at him that evening

spoke quickly. They got quieter. "Junior, can you hear me?" I called out again. "Yes, we are here by the rotten log," he replied. They guided me toward them. We then crawled closer to the village to get to the path. Once we found the path, we started walking back toward the village where we had spent most of our hunger days. Junior and I exchanged a look, and he gave me that smile he had held back when I was about to face death.

That night's journey was very quiet. None of us spoke. I knew we were walking, but I couldn't feel my feet touching the ground.

When we got to the village, we sat around the fire until dawn. Not a word was said. Everyone seemed to be in a different world or seemed to be pondering something. The following morning, we started speaking to each other as if awakened from a nightmare or a dream that had given us a different take on life and the situation we were in. We decided to leave the village the next day and go somewhere safe, somewhere far away from where we were. We had no idea where we would go or even how to get to a safe place, but we were determined to find one. During that day, we washed our clothes. We had no soap, so we just soaked them and put them out in the sun to dry while we sat naked in a nearby bush waiting for them to be ready. We had agreed to leave early in the morning of the next day.

6

BEING IN A GROUP of six boys was not to our advantage. But we needed to stay together because we had a better chance of escaping the day-to-day troubles we faced. People were terrified of boys our age. Some had heard rumors about young boys being forced by rebels to kill their families and burn their villages. These children now patrolled in special units, killing and maiming civilians. There were those who had been victims of these terrors and carried fresh scars to show for it. So whenever people saw us, we reminded them of the massacres, and that struck fear in their hearts again. Some people tried to hurt us to protect themselves, their families and communities. Because of these things, we decided to bypass villages by walking through the nearby bushes. This way we would be safe and avoid causing chaos. This was one of the consequences of the civil war. People stopped trusting each other, and every stranger became an enemy. Even people who knew you became extremely careful about how they related or spoke to you.

One day, as soon as we had left the forested area of a village we had bypassed, a group of huge, muscular men sprang from the bushes onto the path in front of us. Raising their machetes and hunting rifles, they