

## Chapter One

There were all kinds of stories told about the war that made it sound as if it was happening in a faraway and different land. It wasn't until refugees started passing through our town that we began to see that it was actually taking place in our country. Families who had walked hundreds of miles told how relatives had been killed and their houses burned. Some people felt sorry for them and offered them places to stay, but most of the refugees refused, because they said the war would eventually reach our town. The children of these families wouldn't look at us, and they jumped at the sound of chopping wood or as stones landed on the tin roofs flung by children hunting birds with slingshots. The adults among these children from the war zones would be lost in their thoughts during conversations with the elders of my town. Apart from their fatigue and malnourishment, it was evident they had seen something that plagued their minds, something that we would refuse to accept if they told us all of it. At times I thought that some of the stories the passersby told were exaggerated. The only wars I knew of were those that I had read about in books or seen in movies such as Rambo: First Blood, and the one in neighboring Liberia that I had heard about on the BBC news. My imagination at ten years old didn't have the capacity to grasp what had taken away the happiness of the refugees.

The first time that I was touched by war I was twelve. It was in January of 1993. I left home with Junior, my older brother, and our friend Talloi, both a year older than I, to go to the town of Mattru Jong, to participate in our friends' talent show. Mohamed, my best friend, couldn't come because he and his father were renovating their thatched-roof kitchen that day. The four of us had started a rap and dance group when I was eight. We were first introduced to rap music during one of our visits to Mobimbi, a quarter where the foreigners who worked for the same American company as my father lived. We often went to Mobimbi to swim in a pool and watch the huge color television and the white people who crowded the visitors' recreational area. One evening a music video that consisted of a bunch of young black fellows talking really fast came on the television. The four of us sat there mesmerized by the song, trying to understand what the black fellows were saying. At the end of the video, some letters came up at the bottom of the screen. They read "Sugarhill Gang, 'Rapper's Delight.'" Junior quickly wrote it down on a piece of paper. After that, we came to the quarters every other weekend to study that kind of music on television. We didn't know what it was called then, but I was impressed with the fact that the black fellows knew how to speak English really fast, and to the beat.

Later on, when Junior went to secondary school, he befriended some boys who taught him more about foreign music and dance. During holidays, he brought me cassettes and taught my friends and me how to dance to what we came to know as hip-hop. I loved the dance, and particularly enjoyed learning the lyrics, because they were poetic and it improved my vocabulary. One afternoon, Father came home while Junior, Mohamed, Talloi, and I were learning the verse of "I Know You Got Soul" by Eric B. & Rakim. He stood by the door of our clay brick and tin roof house laughing and then asked, "Can you even understand what you are saying?" He left before Junior could

answer. He sat in a hammock under the shade of the mango, guava, and orange trees and tuned his radio to the BBC news.

“Now, this is good English, the kind that you should be listening to,” he shouted from the yard.

While Father listened to the news, Junior taught us how to move our feet to the beat. We alternately moved our right and then our left feet to the front and back, and simultaneously did the same with our arms, shaking our upper bodies and heads. “This move is called the running man,” Junior said. Afterward, we would practice miming the rap songs we had memorized. Before we parted to carry out our various evening chores of fetching water and cleaning lamps, we would say “Peace, son” or “I’m out,” phrases we had picked up from the rap lyrics. Outside, the evening music of birds and crickets would commence.

On the morning that we left for Mattru Jong, we loaded our backpacks with notebooks of lyrics we were working on and stuffed our pockets with cassettes of rap albums. In those days we wore baggy jeans, and underneath them we had soccer shorts and sweatpants for dancing. Under our long-sleeved shirts we had sleeveless undershirts, T-shirts, and soccer jerseys. We wore three pairs of socks that we pulled down and folded to make our crapes\* look puffy. When it got too hot in the day, we took some of the clothes off and carried them on our shoulders. They were fashionable, and we had no idea that this unusual way of dressing was going to benefit us. Since we intended to return the next day, we didn’t say goodbye or tell anyone where we were going. We didn’t know that we were leaving home, never to return.

To save money, we decided to walk the sixteen miles to Mattru Jong. It was a beautiful summer day, the sun wasn’t too hot, and the walk didn’t feel long either, as we chatted about all kinds of things, mocked and chased each other. We carried slingshots that we used to stone birds and chase the monkeys that tried to cross the main dirt road. We stopped at several rivers to swim. At one river that had a bridge across it, we heard a passenger vehicle in the distance and decided to get out of the water and see if we could catch a free ride. I got out before Junior and Talloi, and ran across the bridge with their clothes. They thought they could catch up with me before the vehicle reached the bridge, but upon realizing that it was impossible, they started running back to the river, and just when they were in the middle of the bridge, the vehicle caught up to them. The girls in the truck laughed and the driver tapped his horn. It was funny, and for the rest of the trip they tried to get me back for what I had done, but they failed.

We arrived at Kabati, my grandmother’s village, around two in the afternoon. Mamie Kpana was the name that my grandmother was known by. She was tall and her perfectly long face complemented her beautiful cheekbones and big brown eyes. She always stood with her hands either on her hips or on her head. By looking at her, I could see where my mother had gotten her beautiful dark skin, extremely white teeth, and the

translucent creases on her neck. My grandfather or kamor—teacher, as everyone called him—was a well-known local Arabic scholar and healer in the village and beyond.

At Kabati, we ate, rested a bit, and started the last six miles. Grandmother wanted us to spend the night, but we told her that we would be back the following day.

“How is that father of yours treating you these days?” she asked in a sweet voice that was laden with worry.

“Why are you going to Mattru Jong, if not for school? And why do you look so skinny?” she continued asking, but we evaded her questions. She followed us to the edge of the village and watched as we descended the hill, switching her walking stick to her left hand so that she could wave us off with her right hand, a sign of good luck.

We arrived in Mattru Jong a couple of hours later and met up with old friends, Gibrilla, Kaloko, and Khalilou. That night we went out to Bo Road, where street vendors sold food late into the night. We bought boiled groundnut and ate it as we conversed about what we were going to do the next day, made plans to see the space for the talent show and practice. We stayed in the verandah room of Khalilou’s house. The room was small and had a tiny bed, so the four of us (Gibrilla and Kaloko went back to their houses) slept in the same bed, lying across with our feet hanging. I was able to fold my feet in a little more since I was shorter and smaller than all the other boys.

The next day Junior, Talloi, and I stayed at Khalilou’s house and waited for our friends to return from school at around 2:00 p.m. But they came home early. I was cleaning my crapes and counting for Junior and Talloi, who were having a push-up competition. Gibrilla and Kaloko walked onto the verandah and joined the competition. Talloi, breathing hard and speaking slowly, asked why they were back. Gibrilla explained that the teachers had told them that the rebels had attacked Mogbwemo, our home. School had been canceled until further notice. We stopped what we were doing.

According to the teachers, the rebels had attacked the mining areas in the afternoon. The sudden outburst of gunfire had caused people to run for their lives in different directions. Fathers had come running from their workplaces, only to stand in front of their empty houses with no indication of where their families had gone. Mothers wept as they ran toward schools, rivers, and water taps to look for their children. Children ran home to look for parents who were wandering the streets in search of them. And as the gunfire intensified, people gave up looking for their loved ones and ran out of town.

“This town will be next, according to the teachers.” Gibrilla lifted himself from the cement floor. Junior, Talloi, and I took our backpacks and headed to the wharf with our friends. There, people were arriving from all over the mining area. Some we knew, but they couldn’t tell us the whereabouts of our families. They said the attack had been too sudden, too chaotic; that everyone had fled in different directions in total confusion.

For more than three hours, we stayed at the wharf, anxiously waiting and expecting either to see our families or to talk to someone who had seen them. But there was no news of them, and after a while we didn't know any of the people who came across the river. The day seemed oddly normal. The sun peacefully sailed through the white clouds, birds sang from treetops, the trees danced to the quiet wind. I still couldn't believe that the war had actually reached our home. It is impossible, I thought. When we left home the day before, there had been no indication the rebels were anywhere near.

“What are you going to do?” Gibrilla asked us. We were all quiet for a while, and then Talloi broke the silence. “We must go back and see if we can find our families before it is too late.”

Junior and I nodded in agreement.

Just three days earlier, I had seen my father walking slowly from work. His hard hat was under his arm and his long face was sweating from the hot afternoon sun. I was sitting on the verandah. I had not seen him for a while, as another stepmother had destroyed our relationship again. But that morning my father smiled at me as he came up the steps. He examined my face, and his lips were about to utter something, when my stepmother came out. He looked away, then at my stepmother, who pretended not to see me. They quietly went into the parlor. I held back my tears and left the verandah to meet with Junior at the junction where we waited for the lorry. We were on our way to see our mother in the next town about three miles away. When our father had paid for our school, we had seen her on weekends over the holidays when we were back home. Now that he refused to pay, we visited her every two or three days. That afternoon we met Mother at the market and walked with her as she purchased ingredients to cook for us. Her face was dull at first, but as soon as she hugged us, she brightened up. She told us that our little brother, Ibrahim, was at school and that we would go get him on our way from the market. She held our hands as we walked, and every so often she would turn around as if to see whether we were still with her.

As we walked to our little brother's school, Mother turned to us and said, “I am sorry I do not have enough money to put you boys back in school at this point. I am working on it.” She paused and then asked, “How is your father these days?”

“He seems all right. I saw him this afternoon,” I replied. Junior didn't say anything.

Mother looked him directly in the eyes and said, “Your father is a good man and he loves you very much. He just seems to attract the wrong stepmothers for you boys.”

When we got to the school, our little brother was in the yard playing soccer with his friends. He was eight and pretty good for his age. As soon as he saw us, he came running, throwing himself on us. He measured himself against me to see if he had gotten taller than me. Mother laughed. My little brother's small round face glowed, and sweat

formed around the creases he had on his neck, just like my mother's. All four of us walked to Mother's house. I held my little brother's hand, and he told me about school and challenged me to a soccer game later in the evening. My mother was single and devoted herself to taking care of Ibrahim. She said he sometimes asked about our father. When Junior and I were away in school, she had taken Ibrahim to see him a few times, and each time she had cried when my father hugged Ibrahim, because they were both so happy to see each other. My mother seemed lost in her thoughts, smiling as she relived the moments.

Two days after that visit, we had left home. As we now stood at the wharf in Matru Jong, I could visualize my father holding his hard hat and running back home from work, and my mother, weeping and running to my little brother's school. A sinking feeling overtook me.

Junior, Talloi, and I jumped into a canoe and sadly waved to our friends as the canoe pulled away from the shores of Matru Jong. As we landed on the other side of the river, more and more people were arriving in haste. We started walking, and a woman carrying her flip-flops on her head spoke without looking at us: "Too much blood has been spilled where you are going. Even the good spirits have fled from that place." She walked past us. In the bushes along the river, the strained voices of women cried out, "Nguwor gbor mu ma oo," God help us, and screamed the names of their children: "Yusufu, Jabu, Foday . . ." We saw children walking by themselves, shirtless, in their underwear, following the crowd. "Nya nje oo, nya keke oo," my mother, my father, the children were crying. There were also dogs running, in between the crowds of people, who were still running, even though far away from harm. The dogs sniffed the air, looking for their owners. My veins tightened.

We had walked six miles and were now at Kabati, Grandmother's village. It was deserted. All that was left were footprints in the sand leading toward the dense forest that spread out beyond the village.

As evening approached, people started arriving from the mining area. Their whispers, the cries of little children seeking lost parents and tired of walking, and the wails of hungry babies replaced the evening songs of crickets and birds. We sat on Grandmother's verandah, waiting and listening.

"Do you guys think it is a good idea to go back to Mogbwemo?" Junior asked. But before either of us had a chance to answer, a Volkswagen roared in the distance and all the people walking on the road ran into the nearby bushes. We ran, too, but didn't go that far. My heart pounded and my breathing intensified. The vehicle stopped in front of my grandmother's house, and from where we lay, we could see that whoever was inside the car was not armed. As we, and others, emerged from the bushes, we saw a man run from the driver's seat to the sidewalk, where he vomited blood. His arm was bleeding. When he stopped vomiting, he began to cry. It was the first time I had seen a grown man

cry like a child, and I felt a sting in my heart. A woman put her arms around the man and begged him to stand up. He got to his feet and walked toward the van. When he opened the door opposite the driver's, a woman who was leaning against it fell to the ground. Blood was coming out of her ears. People covered the eyes of their children.

In the back of the van were three more dead bodies, two girls and a boy, and their blood was all over the seats and the ceiling of the van. I wanted to move away from what I was seeing, but couldn't. My feet went numb and my entire body froze. Later we learned that the man had tried to escape with his family and the rebels had shot at his vehicle, killing all his family. The only thing that consoled him, for a few seconds at least, was when the woman who had embraced him, and now cried with him, told him that at least he would have the chance to bury them. He would always know where they were laid to rest, she said. She seemed to know a little more about war than the rest of us.

The wind had stopped moving and daylight seemed to be quickly giving in to night. As sunset neared, more people passed through the village. One man carried his dead son. He thought the boy was still alive. The father was covered with his son's blood, and as he ran he kept saying, "I will get you to the hospital, my boy, and everything will be fine." Perhaps it was necessary that he cling to false hopes, since they kept him running away from harm. A group of men and women who had been pierced by stray bullets came running next. The skin that hung down from their bodies still contained fresh blood. Some of them didn't notice that they were wounded until they stopped and people pointed to their wounds. Some fainted or vomited. I felt nauseated, and my head was spinning. I felt the ground moving, and people's voices seemed to be far removed from where I stood trembling.

The last casualty that we saw that evening was a woman who carried her baby on her back. Blood was running down her dress and dripping behind her, making a trail. Her child had been shot dead as she ran for her life. Luckily for her, the bullet didn't go through the baby's body. When she stopped at where we stood, she sat on the ground and removed her child. It was a girl, and her eyes were still open, with an interrupted innocent smile on her face. The bullets could be seen sticking out just a little bit in the baby's body and she was swelling. The mother clung to her child and rocked her. She was in too much pain and shock to shed tears.

Junior, Talloi, and I looked at each other and knew that we must return to Mattru Jong, because we had seen that Mogbwemo was no longer a place to call home and that our parents couldn't possibly be there anymore. Some of the wounded people kept saying that Kabati was next on the rebels' list. We didn't want to be there when the rebels arrived. Even those who couldn't walk very well did their best to keep moving away from Kabati. The image of that woman and her baby plagued my mind as we walked back to Mattru Jong. I barely noticed the journey, and when I drank water I didn't feel any relief even though I knew I was thirsty. I didn't want to go back to where that woman was from; it was clear in the eyes of the baby that all had been lost.

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