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The Making, and Unmaking, of a Child Soldier

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Sometimes I feel that living in New York City, having a good family and friends, and just being alive is a dream, that perhaps this second life of mine isn't really happening. Whenever I speak at the [United Nations](#), [Unicef](#) or elsewhere to raise awareness of the continual and rampant recruitment of children in wars around the world, I come to realize that I still do not fully understand how I could have possibly survived the civil war in my country, Sierra Leone.

Most of my friends, after meeting the woman whom I think of as my new mother, a Brooklyn-born white Jewish-American, assume that I was either adopted at a very young age or that my mother married an African man. They would never imagine that I was 17 when I came to live with her and that I had been a child soldier and participated in one of the most brutal wars in recent history.

In early 1993, when I was 12, I was separated from my family as the Sierra Leone civil war, which began two years earlier, came into my life. The rebel army, known as the Revolutionary United Front (R.U.F.), attacked my town in the southern part of the country. I ran away, along paths and roads that were littered with dead bodies, some mutilated in ways so horrible that looking at them left a permanent scar on my memory. I ran for days, weeks and months, and I couldn't believe that the simple and precious world I had known, where nights were celebrated with storytelling and dancing and mornings greeted with the singing of birds and cock crows, was now a place where only guns spoke and sometimes it seemed even the sun hesitated to shine. After I discovered that my parents and two brothers had been killed, I felt even more lost and worthless in a world that had become pregnant with fear and suspicion as neighbor turned against neighbor and child against parent. Surviving each passing minute was nothing short of a miracle.

After almost a year of running, I, along with some friends I met along the way, arrived at an army base in the southeastern region. We thought we were now safe; little did we know what lay ahead.

1994: The First Battle

I have never been so afraid to go anywhere in my life as I was that first day. As we walked into the arms of the forest, tears began to form in my eyes, but I struggled to hide them and gripped my gun for comfort. We exhaled quietly, afraid that our own breathing could cause our deaths. The lieutenant led the line that I was in. He raised his fist in the air, and we stopped moving. Then he slowly brought it down, and we sat on one heel, our eyes surveying the forest. We began to move swiftly among the bushes until we came to the edge of a swamp, where we formed an ambush, aiming our guns into the bog. We lay flat on our stomachs and waited. I was lying next to my friend Josiah. At 11, he was even younger than I was. Musa, a friend my age, 13, was also nearby. I looked around to see if I could catch their eyes, but they were concentrating on the invisible target in the swamp. The tops of my eyes began to ache, and the pain slowly rose up to my head. My ears became warm, and tears were running down my cheeks, even though I wasn't crying. The veins on my arms stood out, and I could feel them pulsating as if they had begun to breathe of their own accord. We waited in the quiet, as hunters do. The silence tormented me.

The short trees in the swamp began to shake as the rebels made their way through them. They weren't yet visible, but the lieutenant had passed the word down through a whisper that was relayed like a row of falling dominos: "Fire on my command." As we watched, a group of men dressed in civilian clothes emerged from under the tiny bushes. They waved their hands, and more fighters came out. Some were boys, as young as we were. They sat together in line, waving their hands, discussing a strategy. My lieutenant ordered a rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) to be fired, but the commander of the rebels heard it as it whooshed its way out of the forest. "Retreat!" he called out to his men, and the grenade's blast got only a few rebels, whose split bodies flew in the air. The explosion was followed by an exchange of gunfire from both sides.

I lay there with my gun pointed in front of me, unable to shoot. My index finger became numb. I felt as if the forest had turned upside down and I was going to fall off, so I clutched the base of a tree with one hand. I couldn't think, but I could hear the sounds of the guns far away in the distance and the cries of people dying in pain. A splash of blood hit my face. In my reverie I had opened my mouth a bit, so I tasted some of the blood. As I spat it out and wiped it off my face, I saw the soldier it had come from. Blood poured out of the bullet holes in him like water rushing through newly opened tributaries. His eyes were wide open; he still held his gun. My eyes were fixed on him when I heard Josiah screaming for his mother in the most painfully piercing voice I had ever heard. It vibrated inside my head to the point that I felt my brain had shaken loose from its anchor.

I searched for Josiah. An RPG had tossed his tiny body off the ground, and he had landed on a tree stump. He wiggled his legs as his cry gradually came to an end. There was blood

everywhere. It seemed as if bullets were falling into the forest from all angles. I crawled to Josiah and looked into his eyes. There were tears in them, and his lips were shaking, but he couldn't speak. As I watched him, the water in his eyes was replaced with blood that quickly turned his brown eyes red. He reached for my shoulder as if to pull himself up. But midway, he stopped moving. The gunshots faded in my head, and it was as if my heart had stopped and the whole world had come to a standstill. I covered his eyes with my fingers and lifted him from the tree stump. His backbone had been shattered. I placed him flat on the ground and picked up my gun. I didn't realize that I had stood up to take Josiah off the tree stump. I felt someone tugging at my foot. It was the corporal; he was saying something that I couldn't understand. His mouth moved, and he looked terrified. He pulled me down, and as I hit the ground, I felt my brain shaking in my skull again, and my deafness gave way.

"Get down," he was screaming. "Shoot," he said, as he crawled away from me to resume his position. As I looked to where he lay, my eyes caught Musa, whose head was covered with blood. His hands looked too relaxed. I turned toward the swamp, where there were gunmen running, trying to cross over. My face, my hands, my shirt and my gun were drenched in blood. I raised my gun and pulled the trigger, and I killed a man. Suddenly all the death I had seen since the day I was touched by war began flashing in my head. Every time I stopped shooting to change magazines and saw my two lifeless friends, I angrily pointed my gun into the swamp and killed more people. I shot everything that moved, until we were ordered to retreat because we needed another plan.

We took the guns and ammunition off the bodies of my friends and left them there in the forest, which had taken on a life of its own, as if it had trapped the souls that had departed from the dead. The branches of the trees seemed to be holding hands and bowing their heads in prayer. In the swamp, crabs had already begun feasting on the eyes of the dead. Limbs and fragmented skulls lay on top of the bog, and the water in the swamp was stagnant with blood. I was not afraid of these lifeless bodies. I despised them and kicked them to flip them and take their guns. I found a G3 and some ammunition. I noticed that most of the dead gunmen and boys wore lots of jewelry on their necks and wrists.

We arrived in the village, our base, with nightfall and sat against the walls of houses. It was quiet, and perhaps afraid of the silence, we began cleaning the blood off our guns, oiling their chambers, and shooting them into the air to test their effectiveness. I went for supper that night but was unable to eat. I only drank water and felt nothing. I lay on my back in the tent with my AK-47 on my chest and the G3 I had taken from a dead rebel leaning on the peg of the tent. Nothing happened in my head. It was a void, and I stared at the roof of the tent until I was miraculously able to doze off. I had a dream that I was picking up Josiah from the tree stump

and a gunman stood on top of me. He placed his gun against my forehead. I immediately woke up from my dream and began shooting inside the tent, until the 30 rounds in the magazine were finished. The corporal and the lieutenant came in afterward and took me outside. I was sweating, and they threw water on my face and gave me a few white capsules. They were the same capsules that we'd all been given before we had gone into battle, and to this day, I do not know what they contained. I stayed up all night and couldn't sleep for days. We went out two more times that week, and I had no problem shooting my gun.

Rebel Raids

After that first week of going out on raids to kill people we deemed our rebel enemies or sympathizers of the rebels, our initiation was complete. We stayed put at the base, and we boys took turns guarding posts around the village. We smoked marijuana and sniffed "brown brown," cocaine mixed with gunpowder, which was always spread out on a table near the ammunition hut, and of course I took more of the white capsules, as I had become addicted to them. The first time I took all these drugs at the same time, I began to perspire so much that I took off all my clothes. My body shook, my sight became blurred and I lost my hearing for several minutes. I walked around the village restlessly. But after several doses of these drugs, all I felt was numbness to everything and so much energy that I couldn't sleep for weeks. We watched war movies at night, Rambo "First Blood," "Rambo, First Blood, Part II," "Commando" and so on, with the aid of a generator or a car battery. We all wanted to be like Rambo; we couldn't wait to implement his techniques.

When we ran out of supplies, we raided rebel camps in towns, villages and forests. "We have good news from our informants" the lieutenant would announce. "We are moving out in five minutes to kill some rebels and take their supplies, which really belong to us." He often made speeches about how we were defending our country, how honorable we were. At these times, I would stand holding my gun and feeling special because I was part of something that took me seriously and I was not running from anyone anymore. The lieutenant's face evinced confidence; his smiles disappeared before they were completed. We would tie our heads with the green cloths that distinguished us from the rebels, and we boys would lead the way. There were no maps and no questions asked. We were simply told to follow the path until we received instructions on what to do next. We walked for long hours and stopped only to eat sardines and corned beef with gari, sniff brown brown and take more white capsules. The combination of these drugs made us fierce. The idea of death didn't cross my mind, and killing had become as easy as drinking water. After that first killing, my mind had stopped making remorseful records, or so it seemed.

Before we got to a rebel camp, we would deviate from the path and walk in the forest. Once the camp was in sight, we would surround it and wait for the lieutenant's command. The rebels roamed about; some sat against walls, dozing off, and others, boys as young as we, stood at guard posts passing around marijuana. Whenever I looked at rebels during raids, my entire body shook with fury; they were the people who had shot my friends and family. So when the lieutenant gave orders, I shot as many as I could, but I didn't feel better. After every gunfight, we would enter the rebel camp, killing those we had wounded. We would then search the houses and gather gallons of gasoline, enormous amounts of marijuana and cocaine, bales of clothes, watches, rice, salt, gari and many other things. We rounded up any civilians — men, women, boys and young girls — hiding in the huts and houses and made them carry our loot back to the base. We shot them if they tried to run away.

On one of these raids, we captured a few rebels after a long gunfight and a lot of civilian casualties. We undressed the prisoners and tied their arms behind their backs until their chests were tight as drums. "Where did you get all this ammunition from?" the corporal asked one of the prisoners, a man with an almost dreadlocked beard. He spat in the corporal's face, and the corporal immediately shot him in the head at close range. He fell to the ground, and blood slowly leaked out of his head. We cheered in admiration of the corporal's action and saluted him as he walked by. Suddenly, a rebel hiding in the bushes shot one of our boys. We dispersed around the village in search of the shooter. When the young muscular rebel was captured, the lieutenant slit his neck with his bayonet. The rebel ran before he fell to the ground and stopped moving. We cheered again, raising our guns in the air, shouting and whistling.

During that time, a lot of things were done with no reason or explanation. Sometimes we were asked to leave for war in the middle of a movie. We would come back hours later after killing many people and continue the movie as if we had just returned from intermission. We were always either on the front lines, watching a war movie or doing drugs. There was no time to be alone or to think. When we conversed with one another, we talked only about the movies and how impressed we were with the way either the lieutenant, the corporal or one of us had killed someone. It was as if nothing else existed.

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

Taken From the Front

In my head my life was normal. But everything began to change in January 1996. I was 15.

One morning that month, a truck came to the village where we were based. Four men dressed in clean blue jeans and white T-shirts that said "Unicef" in big blue letters jumped out. They were shown to the lieutenant's house. It seemed as if he had been expecting them. As they sat talking on the veranda, we watched them from under the mango tree, where we sat cleaning our guns. Soon all the boys were told to line up for the lieutenant who selected a few of us and asked the adult soldiers to take away our guns and ammunition. A bunch of boys, including my friend Alhaji and me, were ushered to the truck. I stared back at the veranda where the lieutenant now stood, looking in the other direction, toward the forest, his hands crossed behind his back. I still didn't know exactly what was going on, but I was beginning to get angry and anxious. Why had the lieutenant decided to give us up to these civilians? We thought that we were part of the war until the end.

We were on the road for hours. I had gotten used to always moving and hadn't sat in one place idly for a long time. It was night when the truck stopped at a center, where there were other boys whose appearances, red eyes and somber faces resembled ours. Alhaji and I looked at this group, and he asked the boys who they were. A boy who was sitting on the stoop angrily said: "We fought for the R.U.F.; the army is the enemy. We fought for freedom, and the army killed my family and destroyed my village. I will kill any of those army bastards every time I get a chance to do so." The boy took off his shirt to fight, and on his arm was the R.U.F. brand. Mambu, one of the boys on our side, shouted, "They are rebels," and reached for his bayonet, which he had hidden in his army shorts; most of us had hidden either a knife or a grenade before our guns were taken from us. Before Mambu could grab his weapon, the R.U.F. boy punched him in the face. He fell, and when he got up, his nose was bleeding. The rebel boys drew out the few bayonets they had in their shorts and rushed toward us. It was war all over again. Perhaps the naïve men who had taken us to the center thought that removing us from the war would lessen our hatred for the R.U.F. It hadn't crossed their minds that a change of environment wouldn't immediately make us normal boys; we were dangerous, brainwashed to kill.

One boy grabbed my neck from behind. He was squeezing for the kill, and I couldn't use my bayonet effectively, so I elbowed him with all my might until he let go. He was holding his stomach when I turned around and stabbed him in his foot. The bayonet stuck, so I pulled it out with force. He fell, and I began kicking him in the face. As I went to deliver the final blow with my bayonet, someone came from behind me and sliced my hand with his knife. It was a

rebel boy, and he was about to kick me down when he fell on his face. Alhaji had stabbed him in the back. He pulled the knife out, and we started kicking the boy until he stopped moving. I wasn't sure whether he was unconscious or dead. I didn't care. No one screamed or cried during the fight. After all, we had been doing such things for years and were all still on drugs.

We continued to stab and slice one another until a bunch of MPs came running through the gate toward the fight. The MPs fired a few rounds into the air to get us to stop, but we were still fighting, so they had to part us by force. They placed some of us at gunpoint and kicked others apart. Six people were killed: two on our side and four on the rebel side.

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

That night we were moved to a rehabilitation center called Benin Home. Benin Home was run by a local NGO called Children Associated With the War, in Kissy neighborhood, on the eastern outskirts of Freetown, the capital. This time, the MPs made sure to search us thoroughly before we entered. The blood of our victims and enemies was fresh on our arms and clothes. My lieutenant's words still echoed in my head: "From now on, we kill any rebel we see, no prisoners." I smiled a bit, happy that we had taken care of the rebel boys, but I also began to wonder again: Why had we been taken here? I walked up and down on the veranda, restless in my new environment. My head began to hurt.

Relearning Boyhood

It was infuriating to be told what to do by civilians. Their voices, even when they called us for breakfast, enraged me so much that I would punch the wall, my locker or anything nearby. A few days earlier, we could have decided whether they would live or die.

We refused to do anything that we were asked to do, except eat. At the end of every meal, the staff members and nurses came to talk to us about attending the scheduled medical checkups and the one-on-one counseling sessions that we hated at the minihospital that was part of Benin Home. As soon as the live-in staff, mostly men, started telling us what to do, we would throw bowls, spoons, food and benches at them. We would chase them out of the dining hall and beat them. One afternoon, after we had chased off several staff members, we placed a bucket over the cook's head and pushed him around the kitchen until he burned his hand on a

boiling pot and agreed to put more milk in our tea. During that same week, the drugs were wearing off. I craved cocaine and marijuana so badly that I would roll a plain sheet of paper and smoke it. Sometimes I searched the pockets of my army shorts, which I still wore, for crumbs of marijuana or cocaine. We broke into the minihospital and stole some painkillers — white tablets and off-white — and red and yellow capsules. We emptied the capsules, ground the tablets and mixed them together. But the mixture didn't give us the effect we wanted. We got more upset day by day and, as a result, resorted to more violence. We began to fight one another day and night. We would fight for hours for no reason at all. At first the staff would intervene, but after a while they just let us go. They couldn't really stop us, and perhaps they thought that we would get this out of our systems. During these fights, we destroyed most of the furniture and threw the mattresses out in the yard. We would stop to wipe the blood off our lips, arms and legs only when the bell rang for mealtime.

It had been more than a month, and some of us had almost gone through the withdrawal stage, even though there were still instances of vomiting and collapsing at unexpected moments. These outbreaks ended, for most of us, at the end of the second month. But we now had time to think; the fastened mantle of our war memories slowly began to open. We resorted to more violence to avoid summoning thoughts of our recent lives.

Whenever I turned on the faucet, all I could see was blood gushing out. I would stare at it until it looked like water before drinking or taking a shower. Boys sometimes ran out of the hall screaming, "The rebels are coming." Other times, the younger ones sat weeping and telling us that nearby rocks were their dead families.

It took several months before I began to relearn how to sleep without the aid of medicine. But even when I was finally able to fall asleep, I would start awake less than an hour later. I would dream that a faceless gunman had tied me up and begun to slit my throat with the zigzag edge of his bayonet. I would feel the pain that the knife inflicted as the man sawed my neck. I'd wake up sweating and throwing punches in the air. I would run outside to the middle of the soccer field, sit on a stone and rock back and forth, my arms wrapped around my legs. I would try desperately to think about my childhood, but I couldn't. The fighting memories seemed to have formed a barrier that I had to break in order to think about any moment before the war. On those mornings, I would feel one of the staff members wrap a blanket around me, saying: "This isn't your fault, you know. It really isn't. You'll get through this." He would then pull me up and walk me back to the hall.

Past and Present

One day after I'd been in Benin Home for more than three months, I was sent to the

minihospital for a checkup. The nurse on duty was named Esther. I had met her once before when I was sent to the minihospital after cutting my hand punching a window. Esther wore a white uniform and a white hat. Her white teeth contrasted with her dark, shiny skin, and when she smiled, her face glowed. She was tall and had big brown eyes that were kind and inviting. She must have been about 30, which I thought was too old.

That day, before Esther examined me, she gave me a present, a Walkman and a Run-DMC tape. I used to listen to rap music a lot before the war and loved it because of its poetic use of words. I put the headphones on and didn't mind being examined because the song had taken hold of me, and I listened closely to every word. But when she began examining my legs and saw the nasty scars on my left shin, she took my headphones off and asked, "How did you get these scars?"

"Bullet wounds," I casually replied.

Her face filled with sorrow, and her voice was shaking when she spoke: "You have to tell me what happened so I can prescribe treatment." At first I was reluctant, but she said she would be able to treat me effectively only if I told her what happened, especially about how my bullet wounds were treated. So I told her the whole story not because I really wanted to but because I thought that if I told her some of the truth of my war years, she would be afraid of me and would cease asking questions. She listened attentively when I began to talk:

During the second dry season of my war years, we were low on food and ammunition. So as usual, we decided to attack another village, which was a three-day walk away. We left our base that evening, stopping once a day to eat, drink and take drugs. Each of us had two guns, one strapped to our backs, the other held in our hands. On the evening of the third day, the village was in sight.

Surrounding it, we waited for the lieutenant's command. As we lay in ambush, we began to realize that the place was empty. We were beginning to suspect that something was amiss when a shot was fired from behind us. It was clear now: we were being ambushed. We ended up in a fight that lasted more than 24 hours. We lost several men and boys. When we finally seemed to have captured the village, we began to look around for anything we could find. I was filling my backpack with ammunition from a hut when bullets began to rain on the village again. I was hit three times in my left shin. The first two bullets went in and out, and the last one stayed inside. I couldn't walk, so I lay on the ground and released an entire round of the magazine into the bush where the bullets had come from. I remember feeling a tingle in my spine, but I was too drugged to really feel the pain, even though my leg had begun to swell. The sergeant doctor in my squad dragged me into one of the houses and tried to remove the bullet. Each time he

raised his hands from my wound, I saw my blood all over his fingers. My eyes began to grow heavy, and I fainted.

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

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

"We have to send him to the former base, then," I heard my lieutenant saying. "We need those provisions from that base, anyway. Do all you can to make sure that the boy stays alive," he said and walked out. "Yes, sir," the sergeant doctor said. I slowly opened my eyes, and this time I could see clearly. I looked at his sweaty face and tried to smile a little. After having heard what they said, I swore to myself that I would fight hard and do anything for my squad after my leg was healed.

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

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

Two soldiers came into the house, took me off the bed, placed me in a hammock and carried me outside. The treetops of the village began to spin around as they carried me out. The journey felt as if it took a month. I fainted and awoke many times, and each time I opened my eyes, it seemed as if the voices of those who carried me were fading into the distance.

Finally we got to the base, and the sergeant doctor, who had come along, went to work on me. I was injected with something. I was given cocaine, which I frantically demanded. The doctor started operating on me before the drugs took effect. The other soldiers held my hands and stuffed a cloth into my mouth. The doctor stuck a crooked-looking scissorslike tool inside my

wound and fished for the bullet. I could feel the edge of the metal inside me. My entire body was racked with pain.

Just when I thought I had had enough, the doctor abruptly pulled the bullet out. A piercing pain rushed up my spine from my waist to the back of my neck. I fainted.

When I regained consciousness, it was the morning of the next day, and the drugs had kicked in. I reached my hands down to my leg and felt the bandage before I stood up and limped outside, where some soldiers and the sergeant were sitting. "Where is my weapon?" I asked them. The sergeant handed me my G3, and I began cleaning it. I shot a couple of rounds sitting against a wall, ignoring the bandage on my leg and everyone else. I smoked marijuana, ate and snorted cocaine and brown brown. That was all I did for a few days before we went back to the new base we had captured. When we left, we threw kerosene on the thatched-roof houses, lighted them with matches and fired a couple of RPGs into the walls. We always destroyed the bases we abandoned so that rebel squads wouldn't be able to use them. Two soldiers carried me in the hammock, but this time I had my gun, and I looked left and right as we traveled the forest path.

At the new base, I stayed put for three weeks. Then one day, we heard that a rebel group was on its way to attack our village. I tightened the bandage around my shin, picked up my gun and followed my squad to ambush them. We killed most of the attackers and captured a few whom we brought back to base. "These are the men responsible for the bullet holes in your leg. It's time to make sure they never shoot at you or your comrades." The lieutenant pointed at the prisoners. I was not sure if one of the captives was the shooter, but any captive would do at that time. They were all lined up, six of them, with their hands tied. I shot them in their shins and watched them suffer for an entire day before finally deciding to shoot them in the head so that they would stop crying. Before I shot each man, I looked at him and saw how his eyes gave up hope and steadied before I pulled the trigger. I found their somber eyes irritating.

When I finished telling Esther the story, she had tears in her eyes, and she couldn't decide whether to rub my head, a traditional gesture indicating that things would be well, or hug me. In the end she did neither but said: "None of what happened was your fault. You were just a little boy, and anytime you want to tell me anything, I am here to listen." She stared at me, trying to catch my eye so she could assure me of what she had just said. I became angry and regretted that I had told someone, a civilian, about my experience. I hated the "It is not your fault" line that all the staff members said every time anyone spoke about the war.

I got up, and as I started walking out of the hospital, Esther said, "I will arrange a full checkup for you." She paused and then continued: "Let me keep the Walkman. You don't want the

others to envy you and steal it. I will be here every day, so you can come and listen to it anytime." I threw the Walkman at her and left, putting my fingers in my ears so I couldn't hear her say, "It is not your fault."

After that, whenever Esther would see me around, she'd smile and ask me how I was doing. At first I detested her intrusions. But slowly I came to appreciate them, even looked forward to them. It was like this at the center; most boys found a staff member whom they eventually began to trust. Mine was Esther.

Over the next few months, I started to visit Esther occasionally at the minihospital, which was just across the dirt road from the dorm that I shared with more than 35 boys. During that time, Esther got me to tell her some of my dreams. She would just listen and sit quietly with me. If she wanted to say anything, she would first ask, "Would you like me to say something about your dream?" Mostly I would say no and ask for the Walkman.

One day Esther gave me a Bob Marley tape and a really nice notebook and pen and suggested that I use them to write the lyrics of the songs and that we could learn them together. After that I visited Esther at the minihospital every day, to show her what I had written. I would sing her the parts of songs I had memorized. Memorizing lyrics left me little time to think about what happened in the war. As I grew comfortable with Esther, I talked to her mainly about Bob Marley's lyrics and Run-DMC's too. She mostly listened.

One night, close to my fifth month at the center, I fell asleep while reading the lyrics of a song. I startled awake after having a dream that involved lots of people stabbing and shooting one another, and I felt all their pain. The room I stood in filled with their blood. In the dream, I then went outside to sit at dinner with my father, mother and two brothers. They didn't seem to notice that I was covered with blood.

It was the first time I dreamed of my family since I started running away from the war. The next afternoon I went to see Esther, and she could tell that something was bothering me. "Do you want to lie down?" she asked, almost whispering.

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

She came and sat next to me and asked, "Would you like to tell me about it?" I didn't reply.

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

At first she just listened to me, and then gradually she started asking questions to make me talk about the lives I had lived before and during the war. "None of these things are your fault," she said, as she had repeated sternly at the end of every conversation. Even though I had heard that phrase from every staff member — and had always hated it — I began that day to believe it. That didn't make me immune to the guilt that I felt for what I had done. But it somehow lightened my burdensome memories and gave me strength to think about things. The more I spoke about my experiences to Esther, the more I began to cringe at the gruesome details, even though I didn't let her know that. I still didn't completely trust her. I only liked talking to her because I felt that she didn't judge me for what I had been a part of; she looked at me with the inviting eyes and welcoming smile that said I was still a child.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rejoining the Civilian World

Soon after, a group of visitors from the [European Union](#), the United Nations, Unicef and several NGOs arrived at the center in a convoy of cars. At the request of the staff, we boys had prepared a talent show for them. I read a monologue from "Julius Caesar" and performed a short hip-hop play about the redemption of a former child soldier that I had written with Esther's encouragement. After that event, the head of the center asked me to be the spokesman for Benin Home and to speak about my experiences.

I was at the beginning of my seventh month at Benin Home when one of the field agents, Leslie, came to tell me that he was responsible for “repatriating” me — the term used to describe the process of reuniting ex-child soldiers with their former communities. My family was dead, but I knew that my father had a brother whom I had never met who lived somewhere in Freetown. Leslie said he would try to find him, and if he couldn’t, he’d find me a foster family to live with.

One Saturday afternoon about two weeks later, as I chatted with Esther at the minihospital, Leslie walked in, smiling widely. “What is the good news?” Esther asked. Leslie examined my curious face, then walked back to the door and opened it. A tall man walked in.

“This is your uncle,” Leslie proudly announced.

The man walked over to where I was sitting. He bent over and embraced me long and hard. My arms hung loose at my sides.

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

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

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

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

I got up and hugged my uncle, and he embraced me harder than he had the first time and kissed me on my forehead. We briefly stood in silence before he began to speak again. “I will visit you every weekend. And if it is O.K., I would like you to come home with me at some point, to see where I live and to meet my wife and children — your family.” My uncle’s voice trembled; he was trying to hold back sobs. He rubbed my head with one hand and shook

Leslie's hand with the other.

As my uncle promised, he came to visit every weekend. We would take long walks together, and they gave me a chance to get to know him. He told me about what my father was like when he was a child, and I told him about my childhood. I needed to talk about those good times before the war. But the more I heard and talked about my father, the more I missed my mother and brothers too.

About a month or so later at Benin Home, Leslie told me it was time for me to go live with my uncle. I was happy, but I was also worried about living with a family. I had been on my own for years and had taken care of myself without any guidance from anyone. If I distanced myself from the family, I was afraid that I might look ungrateful to my uncle, who didn't have to take me in; I was worried about what would happen when my nightmares took hold of me. How was I going to explain my sadness, which I was unable to hide when it took over my face, to my new family, especially the children?

I lay in my bed night after night staring at the ceiling and thinking, Why have I survived the war? Why was I the last person in my immediate family to be alive? I went to see Esther every day, though, and would say hello, ask how she was and then get lost in my own head thinking about what life was going to be like after the center. At night, I sat quietly on the veranda with my friends. I wouldn't notice when they left the bench that we all sat on.

When the day of my repatriation finally came, I walked to the minihospital building where I was to wait, my heart beating very fast. My friends Alhaji and Mambu and a boy named Mohamed were sitting on the front steps, and Esther emerged, smiling. Leslie sat in a nearby van waiting to take me to my new home.

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

I went to Esther's home several weeks after that. But my timing wasn't good. She was on her

way to work. She hugged me, and this time I squeezed back; this made her laugh after we stood apart. She looked me straight in the eyes. "Come and see me next weekend so we can have more time to catch up, O.K.?" she said. She was wearing her white uniform and was on her way to take on other traumatized children. It must be tough living with so many war stories. I was living with just one, mine, and it was difficult. Why does she do it? Why do they all do it? I thought as we went our separate ways. It was the last time I saw her. I loved her but never told her.

Ishmael Beah is the author of "A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier," which will be published next month by Sarah Crichton Books, an imprint of Farrar, Straus & Giroux, and from which this article is adapted. He now lives in Brooklyn.

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