

CHAPTER 2: Amidst War and Poverty

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fter gaining independence from the British Empire in 1961, my country should have become a paradise. Although a small country on the western part of the continent, Sierra Leone is one of the most resource-rich nations in Africa. Gold, bauxite, rutile, iron ore—these are all found in abundance. The red earth produces rich crops of coffee and cocoa, and the coasts welcome shoals of fish. But there is one resource more significant than any other: diamonds. Eventually, this precious gem would corrupt the hearts of many, and lead the country into bloodshed. Our greatest treasure proved our greatest curse, turning people against each other, and leading to a shocking and terrifying civil war.

This Civil War, lasting from 1991 to 2002, dominated my childhood. My family and I were ensnared by the conflict, and forced to endure its violence, fear, brutality, and loss—anywhere from 50,000 to 300,000 people were outright killed—yet we were by far the lucky ones,

the ones who survived. I continue to thank God for our survival, every day. I want to share a brief account of the war so that you can understand my story; it is the starting point of my life's trajectory, and the environment of my formation. I am no historian—and I was only a frightened child during the conflict—so my own memories are distorted. Nevertheless, I will describe some of the things I remember, and tell about the events of the war that most affected me and my family.

The seeds of the conflict were first planted in the colonial era, as those who first came as missionaries and explorers soon divided the continent among themselves. The European Empires approached Africa with their own priorities—resources to extract, and territory to claim—and ultimately marginalized the ecosystems and people. Ancient tribal and ethnic understandings were undone as diplomats, with no understanding of the continent, drew new borders. Britain, France, Germany (and to a lesser extent, Belgium, Portugal, Italy, and Spain) brutally exploited the people under guise of bringing European civilization to the “savages.” Even after The Second World War, and the following wave of hard-fought nationalistic independence achieved by the vast majority of Africans, the Western World's cultural and economic impact remained, and likely will forever.

Diamonds were mined in large numbers, starting in the twentieth century, and, by the 1980s, the wealth it generated had stratified society. At the top were the affluent few, who ran the industry against the background of a severely impoverished majority. Most of this wealth was stripped away from the nation, smuggled out to benefit outsiders; in addition, the government lost direct control of the diamond mines to smugglers and corrupt opportunists. The diamond industry was generating enormous wealth, but the government did not benefit from the illicit exports, so almost no benefit could be returned through social programs—and wages for workers were extremely small.

Sierra Leone already had a broken, one-party system, but the nation descended into full economic collapse in the 1980s under the inept and corrupt rule of Joseph Momoh. By 1991, Sierra Leone was ranked as among the poorest countries in the world. When the government was unable to pay its civil servants and teachers, the educational system collapsed alongside other civic institutions, leaving the struggling nation with a restless, impoverished, and uneducated generation of youth.

This created the perfect storm for the birth of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), which was supported by and modeled after Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia, which had recently

overthrown the Liberian government with cutthroat efficiency. The RUF promised liberation; they promised transformation of the horrible quality of life in Sierra Leone. Who knows? Perhaps, if I had been a little older, I might have been seduced by their promises.

However, the RUF quickly degraded into a band of sadistic raiders, who seized the diamond mines, and terrorized frightened noncombatants. They began to extract and sell blood diamonds. This illegal trade funded the buildup of weapons, which the fighters used equally in their crusade against the government and to slaughter civilians.

During the initial years of the conflict, I was safe with my grandmother in Dendeyadu, and the encroaching storm seemed distant. I could see disturbed looks on the adults' faces, as they talked grimly about events. From our village in Kono, where diamonds were mined, we heard reports that rebels were taking the eastern bush regions.

The RUF wanted Kono, and they began to attack with their usual tactics. Their signature was destroying the houses, so that even if the people escaped, they would return to bonfires, smoking husks and a few blackened bricks. The rebels wanted our region of Kono. They pillaged their way, arriving one moment in trucks mounted with machine guns,

screaming. Then they would burn whole streets of houses, and disappear before any government forces could possibly organize to respond.

We began to see the effects of the war in my own village: crippled refugees made their way through the village. The RUF and its affiliates committed unspeakable atrocities, conscripting child soldiers, raping, murdering—but they also began the mass severance of limbs. Tens of thousands were left without one, or both of their arms; some lost legs. I began to see small children, my age, with limbs ending in masses of scar tissue. I was too young to comprehend what was happening, but I began to fear

Soon, it was apparent that the violence would reach the village. The RUF was coming for the diamonds. None of us wanted to leave our vibrant rural village: my grandmother's house; the familiar paths where I had walked and played; everything familiar and loved. However, our only option was flight.

Early one morning, my father arrived in the village, very slowly negotiating the dirt roads and potholes in a car, which seemed to crawl like a bug over the lumpy orange earth. He planned to take us to Freetown, the government's bastion, to meet up with my mother. We would be safe there, he said.

My grandma refused to leave. She was obliged, she said, to stay with the village, and with the people who depended on her (she was an influential leader and caretaker). My father pleaded and pleaded with her. In the end, we left without her, and I kneeled on the back seat of the car and stared out the window at my childhood home as we bounced and rocked away into the jungle. Later, she was forced to leave—the rebels burned down her house, and she was lucky to escape with her life. She joined us in Freetown.

The war bled throughout the whole country, constricting roads. Although the worst of the violence was inland, away from the capital—scarcity affected everyone. Supplies reduced to a trickle, and my family persisted on next to nothing. The nation was crumbling, and even in the capital, poverty was extreme. Soldiers were everywhere in the city. I was very small, and I used to imitate them, marching and saluting them as they passed.

To survive, we lived extremely cheaply, and essentially became street vendors. We had a small table at an intersection in the city, surrounded by low buildings and some huts with tin roofs. During the day, my mom operated the shop, while my dad and I went to school. This way, my parents paid for my education. When my father got out of

his classes, he would pick me up from school and take my mother and I to a “cookery shop,” as it was called. This was like a fast food place, with fried food for very low prices. There, we ate together, the only meal we would eat most days. These were crucible moments for my family and I, moments when my parents’ resolve, determination, and resourcefulness was tested. Every day was a hustle.

Those outside the capital suffered much worse, and we began to here terrible news about our family in the villages. It is very difficult for me to meditate on these horrific, grievous events—I am reluctant to write about them. The deaths were senseless. My mother’s older brother was decapitated for “having the look of a government soldier.” Later, when the rebels stormed the village of my father’s family, his sister managed to escape into the jungle, but disappeared. Most likely, some illness killed her. My father’s brother was captured and forced to bear heavy loads on his back, day after day. Eventually, he collapsed from exhaustion. The fighters shot him and left his body on the roadside.

I could barely comprehend the loss of my aunt and my uncles, let alone the horrifying nature of their deaths, and the war just over the horizon. As Hemingway wrote, “in modern war...you will die like a dog for no good reason.” No one could be certain of their life, and everyone had relatives and friends killed in the conflict.

Then, the relative safety of the capital was shattered by a coup: a young military officer overthrew the leader of the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC). My father recognized the instability and danger that was sure to follow this political shift, and we knew that it was time to flee yet again. This time, he set his sights outside the country.

Many people ended up in sordid refugee camps, but we avoided this with the help of a relatively affluent uncle. From London, he helped us travel to the neighboring country- Guinea. We lived there with ten other relatives, and shared a fifty-pound allowance he sent us each month. We stayed there for the next nine months, until Sierra Leone seemed to be approaching relative peace. The government was winning the war, and now there was a promise of peace and recovery. We went back to Freetown.

We returned to Freetown, expecting to celebrate the end of the war soon. Unfortunately, the peace accords and the new government stalled, and frustrated soldiers overthrew their leader to seize control. Then, they released and armed six hundred prisoners from the Pademba Road Prison in Freetown. Calling themselves the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC), they welcomed the RUF rebels into Freetown to gain their alliance and seal their hold on power. The rebels, who had been

kept out of Freetown for so long, would now be allowed to do whatever they wanted. The RUF operation in the capital city was called “No Living Thing,” or “Operation: Pay Yourself;” the young fighters began storming the city, killing civilians with AK-47s and machetes. They looted homes. To them, it was another campaign of murder and rape. However, the West African military coalition was present in the city, and did not want to see it fall. On one side were the pickup trucks and mobs of rebel fighters, and on the other were smaller numbers of troops from all over West Africa, defending key streets and trying to push the rebels back out.

Our neighborhood was one of the areas caught in the crossfire, held under siege as bullets and mortars pierced the buildings and caused terrible damage. The noise—the guns, the screeching tires, the shouts, and the rumbling explosions—terrified us as we huddled together with a large crowd in our building’s basement. We hoped that, if our building were hit with a shell or a coalition airstrike, we could at least survive. Meanwhile, my mother was sick and exhausted from an appendectomy. My father’s friend Badoo lived with us during this time, but we did not know where he was when the fighting broke out. Soon, however, some neighbors found him. He was shot in the street, and lying in a ditch: one bullet in his leg, one in his shoulder, and one in his lower abdomen. The neighbors recognized Badoo, and knew he lived with us. They tried to

carry him to my father, and made it as far as the gate, shuffling along as his body grew more and more limp. However, a group of rebels intercepted them. They were running from the front line, burning houses as they went; in fact, they might have intended to burn our building down. They saw the neighbors, with the battered Bandoo in their arms, and began to shoot.

Fortunately, a Nigerian Alpha jet was nearby, perhaps pursuing fleeing skirmishers like these; it dropped a bomb that shook the neighborhood—which I remember. The group of fighters fled, and my dad ran out of the building to help bring Bandoo inside.

My mother offered drip bags and antibiotics leftover from her operation, and my father ran out into the neighborhood to get bandages and medicine from a doctor who lived nearby. Soon, the crowded basement was a makeshift hospital, where Bandoo laid on his stomach because of the pain of the gunshot in his buttocks. I remember my father talking about how much Bandoo needed a hospital, but reaching one was impossible. The rebels were outside.

The rebels liked our neighborhood; it was an urban area with big concrete buildings, where they could defend themselves against the coalition forces, with their heavier weapons. We could hear their shouts

outside—and sometimes gunfire and laughter. They were murdering our neighbors. We knew they would find us; bunched in this basement, we would be easy, helpless targets for them. Everyone held their breath, muscles clenched.

One of the tenants in our building was a young man loyal who had fought among the RUF in the villages. Before the siege, he was hiding among the civilians in the city. When the rebels came to the entrance of the basement, he stood in front, and convinced them not to attack us. If not for that young man, we would certainly have been slaughtered, and perhaps even dragged out into the street and burned alive.

For six more days, the battle continued outside the doors. The rebels controlled a smaller and smaller section of the city, so more of them came to our neighborhood to hold out. My anxiety started to be replaced by sheer exhaustion. Meanwhile, Badoo was getting worse and worse. He could barely speak, and, although my father had dressed and washed his wounds as best as he could, twice a day, the bullet holes were beginning to fester. He stunk. With no windows, it was almost unbearable. My father started to sleep by his side on the patio of the building, because the stink was too much in the cramped and muggy basement.

Finally, the rebels were cleared from the area, and we were saved. Coalition troops patrolled our neighborhood. My father took Badoo five miles to the hospital, carting him in a wheelbarrow as he fell in and out of consciousness. There were wounded and dead people everywhere. However, Badoo survived, and gained the nickname “Long Life.” I see my father’s actions during this conflict as an example of the people who did not compromise their humanity and resolve, even in the worst circumstances.

For three more years, until I was almost fourteen, the violence continued. With the RUF defeated, the process of rebuilding began. Many rebels were granted amnesty, and they uneasily reintegrated into society. Even twenty years later, the country is still in the process of recovery, finding new ways forward. I do think the scars of this war will always remain.

Finally, at least, my family could live without the fear and uncertainty of the war. However—we wanted more opportunities, and a better quality of life than the one we could find in Freetown. My father finished his education. If there was a way to emigrate, he was determined to find it no matter how slim the odds. Then, through surprising people, and unlikely circumstances, we would finally have our chance to reach America!

CHAPTER 3: Journey to America

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or the children of Sierra Leone and much of Africa, the United States, and the rest of the Western world, seem almost like mirages— an abstract utopia seen only through media, and the stories of chance visitors from the West. Many Africans dream of escaping the stagnation or chaos that often plagues countries on this continent, thought--like dreams--visions of moving to America are mostly false, and based on myths.

I was no exception. I had always dreamed of leaving Sierra Leone for the opportunities and prosperity of the West, but I accepted it would never happen.

Like many of the kids I grew up with in Africa, my perception of America was defined by a sort of MTV-consciousness. When I thought of the American way of life—particularly for African Americans—I thought of rappers and celebrities living luxuriously: flashy jewelry,

expensive cars, gold grills, and handfuls of bundled banknotes.

Obviously, these were images of success and wealth. However, it wasn't even the wild opulence that attracted me to these images; instead, it was the certainty with which the people on the screen lived their lives. They were not anxious about anything—let alone war and want. They seemed like they believed they could do anything, and nothing could touch them.

While my understanding of America was vague and misled, my desire to leave everything behind and go there was compelling. Then, as I turned twelve or thirteen, I began to see my father preparing. He was going to try to make a way for us to move, perhaps even to America.

My father's education and hard work through these years of conflict and disorder created a life of relative comfort for my family once the war had finally boiled over; we were no longer starving. However, my father knew that he wanted more for us; more than a war-torn Sierra Leone could provide. For years, he applied to program after program that promised work and life abroad—but, one by one, they all fell through.

Finally, a few years after the final ceasefire, he was discouraged and dejected; but he retained one more hope. Several years before, his coworker had won the Diversity Lottery and gained passage to the

United States. My father felt that something within him told him: this is the only way out.

Established in 1990, the Diversity Immigrant Visa program is intended to welcome people from populations who scarcely immigrate to the US. From an applicant pool of approximately 20 million, only 50,000 Permanent Resident Cards (green cards) are awarded. Recipients are selected by random lottery; the only stipulation is that applicants must have a high school diploma, or two-years of occupational experience. Once selected, applicants only need to pass the basic immigration requirements, and just like that, they and their family are allowed to live and work in the U.S. The prospect of winning was thrilling, but the odds were stacked against us. My father applied, almost reluctantly, waited until he was very close to the cutoff date in 2003; he had very little hope in our slim chances. Months passed. He received no news, and was ready to give up on the idea.

One day, a stranger visited him in his office, excited, his shirt soaked in dark sweat.

“I have good news! So good, you must buy me lunch for delivering it!” the man said, laughing. He was waving a manila envelope.

Suffice to say, the messenger ate very well that day—my father’s name had been drawn for the Diversity Lottery! Awestruck, he sunk into

his chair, grateful to God for answering his prayers. But why had it taken so long? my father wondered as the two men ate lunch.

Apparently, the envelope fell behind a metal cabinet, where it sat for months. Then, this man was cleaning the office, sliding furniture back and forth, when he found the envelope. Leaving his cleaning halfway finished, he figured out where my father worked, and ran out into the hot Freetown streets to deliver the envelope.

Inside was a slip with some instructions. Now, my father needed only to redeem his invitation letter, and go through an interview process at a U.S. embassy.

Now the process began to get very complicated--so much, that my father began to doubt whether finding the envelope after all this time was the luckiest thing that had ever happened to him, or the cruelest twist of fate possible.

The first obstacle was the expiration date: my father had exactly one week to get to the U.S. Embassy. And not just him; the acceptance letter meant that any of his immediate family members could also get visas, but anyone who did not get to an embassy for an interview within just those seven days would be ineligible. Then, of course, there was the problem of getting there.

During the Civil War, the U.S. Embassy was relocated to Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire. To travel to Abidjan meant that my father would have to purchase airfare for the entire family, plus numerous days in a hotel

room. The interviews themselves each cost 300\$, or about 1,200,000 Leones per person—imagine how stressful the process must have been as my father supported a five-person family!

My father had to empty nearly his entire savings to cover this process, knowing it was worth it to create a new life for us. Still, the money was not nearly enough. My father asked many family members, cobbling funds from every corner of his network. He bought the tickets--and the last of his financial resources were expended. However, he booked the flights and the hotel on short notice. We would barely beat the deadline, just for the opportunity to be interviewed, and to have a chance--still hoping we would be accepted.

After ten-days of nerve-wracking medical evaluations, interviews, and waiting endlessly in Côte d'Ivoire, we were awarded our visas in late April 2004. To my sisters and I, the possibility of living in America began to feel tangible. Now we had momentum, we thought!

One more deadline remained: to get our green cards in the United States, we had six months. The United States Government offered the visa, but nothing more; All of the logistics were left up to my dad, who didn't even have the money to fly one person, let alone all of us. The deadline approached, day after day.

My dad adjusted the plan. Now, he would try to borrow the money to fly himself to the United States. Once there, he would get a job on an American wages, save some money, and start a chain: first, he

would bring over my mother. Then the two of them would work to bring us. Of course, he had only six months to do this; he put in his one month's notice at work, and committed to the plan.

When my father could not even find the funds to buy a plane ticket, and four weeks remained before all of our visas expired, he accepted a job. He planned to remain in Sierra Leone as an accountant for an American who was trying to build an international African business: Kib Pearson.

Kib Pearson was an intelligent businessman, and he was also interested to learn more about my dad. Gradually, Kib began to understand our predicament, and generously offered to help.

“You have a golden ticket,” he said, “but you can't use it,” and he generously offered to help:

“Come work for me in the United States. I could use an accountant there; please come be our business manager, and I will buy flights for you and your family,” Kib said. My dad couldn't believe Kib's generosity; he took the job immediately. I remember his excitement as he told us: he felt as if some force were pushing him forward, to keep taking the steps to get to America, no matter how risky--things would work out.

This offer was extremely generous, and a little risky. Kib knew my dad, but not well. He did need to hire some help--but hiring someone already in the United States would be much simpler and cheaper.

Ultimately he genuinely wanted to help us, and didn't want our opportunity to immigrate to be wasted. The dream remained alive.

Before speaking with Kib, my dad planned to move us to an area where we would have distant family for support, but now we would follow the job.

"Besides," Kib told my dad, "San Clemente will be a great area for your family, and for your kids." He was certain that we would have better opportunities if we could grow up in a wealthy area:

"Many doctors or engineers go to America; people with high degrees, and lots of skill that count in their own countries. But not in America," he said. "They go, and they sweep floors for the rest of their working lives. And they do it for their kids; they do it so their kids grow up with opportunities. They would have plenty of opportunities in San Clemente."

My dad nodded; this was exactly why he was leading us to America. "I'll do it," he said.

One day, Kib also took our measurements, using a thin white piece of measuring tape. He would ensure we received more clothes when we got there, he said--he would send his wife our measurements. Then, he bought the tickets on our behalf, and sealed the deal. It was real: the dream was coming to life.

Now fourteen years old, I felt that the final two months of waiting in the blazing Freetown sun felt like eternity. I could imagine

myself in new, American clothes. My dad told us Kib said there were beaches. Other than that, I had almost no idea what to expect of our new life over the horizon. The liminal period dragged on and on, and my parents gradually sold the last of our things. We were finally ready to move.

Leaving the place we had spent our entire lives would certainly be painful. But, after all we had fought through to survive the war—and after all we had sacrificed to make our emigration to the United States possible—the only thing that stood between us and our liberation was a stretch of ocean water. Everything felt so certain to me—we were finally leaving!

Leading up to the last day, we encountered another critical problem: we had no choice but to spend a night-long layover in The United Kingdom, and could not get visas. We wanted to stay the night in Heathrow airport, but it closes. We had no choice but to go through customs. UK immigration control was concerned we would try to enter the country illegally during our layover. Kib was indignant: “Why would you try to emigrate illegally to the UK when you already have a visa to get into the US?” We had only a few days left, and my father seemed to spend nearly all his time trying to get us all UK visas. “It’ll work out because it has to,” he said, but he didn’t seem convinced.

And, in addition to the trouble with the visas, we had to make it to the airport—and, as I've said before, nothing is certain in Sierra Leone.

Sierra Leone had a single international airport: Lungi International. It is separated from the capital of Freetown by nearly 8 km of ocean. Smaller, more expensive transportation methods are sometimes available, but the vast majority of those hoping to travel between Freetown and Lungi must ride the single ferry that crosses the inlet. There is no other quick way to cross than to pack yourself into the mass of people, and trundle your way across the water in what looks essentially like a massive bathtub.

On June 28th, 2004, my family and I got up at dawn. The sun rose orange on the other side of the bay from Freetown, and the water between us in the town, and the airport in Lungi, glistened. Our plane was not even scheduled to depart until 11:00 pm that night, but the sheer excitement of the coming journey woke us up with the sun. Besides—we had family to see before we left, and still no visas for our layover. The day would be busy.

Our goodbyes were long and difficult, and the saddest for me was separating from my grandma; my earliest memories were of her; she gave me my first understanding of love. That day, she wore her traditional dress, its beautiful red and yellow tie-die pattern swaying as she walked. In the years after the war, she had aged, and her wrists were

thin. She held my face in her hands, pressed our foreheads together--and spoke a few words. She held my hands for a long time, squeezing between soft hands with thin skin.

Then, it was time to go to the dock. father had sold everything: our home, and all of our larger belongings. Everything we had, we would carry on our backs, or in our arms. My father's pockets were empty, and the plane tickets were not refundable. He would not be able to replace what Kib bought; the only way was forward. This was a major gamble. If, for some reason, the flight did not work out, we would not even have a hotel room to return to. Our ferry would depart at 6:00 PM—and we were determined be on board no matter the obstacles.

With every step, everything behind us in Sierra Leone seemed to disappear forever, as if it vanished the second we took the next step, and the next. Departing my home country still felt like a dream, like each step I took was unreal--and We made our way down the gently sloping streets, until we were in sight of the large ferry. A crowd gathered at the boat, people and cars ambling their way onboard. Meanwhile, the crowd was growing.

Kib was there, waiting for my father, both of them dressed in suit jackets to go finish negotiating the visas. Kib had a small car waiting; my father told us to get on board the ferry. The process of loading everyone would take over an hour: "I'll be back before the boat leaves," my father said, and he and jogged away in their leather business shoes.

We were shoved onto the vessel, a big, white, tub-shaped boat streaked with yellow and brown. Its rusty hull was filled beyond maximum capacity: countless, standing bodies of people mixed with scattered cars and trucks. Nothing moves too quickly in Sierra Leone--we would have to wait for a while in the open air--but we anxiously watched for every sign the crew was ready to leave.

My mother became more and more anxious. Where was our father? What if the ferry left without him, and without our visas? The disaster seemed too big to contemplate. I think I had to remember to breathe. Workers were beginning to unmoor the ferry, shouting to each other. I climbed up the side of the boat to watch for him, and there he was, his jacket open and flapping like a cape, and an extra shirt button undone. He was holding our bundled visas like a football player running for the goal line.

He had the visas; Kib helped secure them. As he elbowed his way through the crowd of passengers to join my family, the boat shuddered, engines churning to life. He stumbled a little when the deck trembled, and he was completely breathless--but he was successful. What could stop us?

The sun was on the other side of us now. It shone through the city's haze so that it looked almost fuzzy, but its reflection in the water was bright and stinging. Passengers were chattering all around us, bumping into strangers without much care. The sea wind stirred, and the

wind coming back over the docked boat felt full and wet. It was a little after six o'clock: the ferry was about to leave late, but nothing to worry too much about. I wanted to shout as the engines started to life, and the barge prepared to trundle out into the waves.

My eager emotion, however, was shattered by a new announcement: the engineers discovered the anchor was lodged immovably. The ferry would not even be able to leave the dock. Over the crackling intercom, the captain assured everyone that the crew would find a way to get the boat moving again. From our place in the ferry, we could see the crew running from place to place, but they seemed to be growing more panicked. Someone went to a nearby steel factory to get its owner to sever the chain and free the boat. The sun continued to go down so that it was at the horizon, and we shielded our eyes with our hands.

By eight o'clock, the bay sat in darkness, and still help had not arrived. Eleven o'clock felt far too close. People were beginning to leave the ferry, and walk back into town to find hotels. Others were sitting on the docks, crying or trying to make the best of things. Others were returning with food, holding out hope that the boat would get moving again. Our excitement was completely overshadowed now. We were silent, looking anxiously from the crew, to the time, to the rising crescent moon, to the other shore with its flickering lights, and, somewhere in the dark—a plane with empty seats with our numbers.

My dad jumped into the scramble on the dock, where food sellers had come to try to make a little money from the situation, and people were haggling. He disappeared into the chaos, trying to find another way across. Now I was anxious the boat might start, and leave him on the shore. He returned, suddenly. "Come, come, come," he said, beckoning and barely waiting before hurrying back through the crowd. My mother got my two sisters and me on our feet, and we stepped back onto land to follow him.

He had commissioned the owner of a motorboat to take us across, a small man who leapt ahead of us into the wooden hull, and scrambled to move old blankets and cartons so that we had space to sit. The vessel was shaped like a wooden trough, and had green stripes. The finish was worn away in places so that the wood looked almost white in the light of the light bulbs that swung over the dock. It had a single engine in the back that took three or four hard tries before it finally coughed to life. We could not care less, however; we would have taken a raft if it had gotten us to the other side. The owner pushed the little boat away from the dock with a kick, and we were moving again, closer and closer to our goal. "I'll have you there in less than forty-five minutes," the boatman said.

Now, we bounced over the edged waves toward the opposite shore. This was at least faster than the crawling pace the ferry would have taken. My mother held my sisters' hands in the front, near the pilot.

About midway in our journey, the engine suddenly sputtered, and its loud, clunky roar was silent. Our own wake splashed past us in one swell, and then ceased. Now we were drifting. We each sat up straight, looking from eye to eye, and the only sound was the waves under us, licking at the edges of the boat.

The boatmen tinkered with the engine, his fingers quick. He was completely silent; I think he did not want to acknowledge what had happened for fear that the news would cause us alarm. However, the silence said enough; we were stranded. Our fear and dejection was inexpressible, and we were each close to sobbing. We bobbed in the black water, isolated from the lights ahead and behind. A few boats passed, going in either direction, their speed making us yearn to be moving again, but the last blow to our spirits was seeing the ferry we had abandoned—now moving steadily towards the far shore. It churned by so slowly that its passage took several minutes; we shouted, over and over again, but the ferry was just far enough that the crew could not hear our cries for help.

We had nothing left but to pray to God for safe passage. And, if we were not destined to reach America, we begged him to at least allow us to return to Freetown with our lives. We would learn from this terrible experience, nurse our wounds, and somehow start again. However—all ears were out of our reach, and our sore throats grew hoarse from begging the boats to come.

We knew no help was coming. I began to imagine things happening to the boat: a leak, a hole. Anything of that sort would have been the end for us. We knew how isolated we were, and how helpless. Whenever a larger wave hit us, and rocked the boat, my sisters and I would startle and cling to any part of the boat we could. After everything we survived—sickness, the rebels, the bombs dropped on our neighborhood during the siege, the jungle—we only wanted not to die in an old speedboat by the airport.

Then—the engine suddenly sputtered back to life. We held our breath as the boat lurched forward and gained the first bit of momentum; we were on our way toward the Lungi shoreline once more. Over and over, the boatman apologized, embarrassed and probably afraid, himself. We knew the problem was out of his control, and we felt blessed to be moving again; we could not be angry. We were soon stepping onto the docks that, minutes before, had seemed impossible to reach.

Now, we had to travel forty-five miles from the ferry terminal to the airport. Our plane was scheduled to depart in thirty minutes—clearly, we were not going to make it on time. However, we had come so far—it seemed unthinkable to stop now. We were determined to see this journey through to the very end, even if the airplane left without us. We crammed into a 1970's model taxi, the only one at the dock, with two other passengers. My dad sat up front.

The driver was young and didn't seem very experienced: he drove wildly, recklessly, sending the car to the outside of each turn. Our bodies mashed against each other, pushed by the rapid turns, and the aluminum panels and doors clanked groaned like a soda can being crushed. We sprinted along for twenty miles or so, sometimes only three tires on the ground as we crossed broken asphalt in ridges.

Then, the cab was thrown to its left side, and it slumped off the road. We saw something small drift and bounce away from the cab's front and disappear: it was the front left tire. The driver lost control completely and began to swerve; insanely, he seemed to be trying to continue driving! My father pushed him out of the way and took control of the vehicle, decisively bringing it to a halt. No one was hurt, thankfully.

Eleven o'clock had come and gone, and we were close to giving up hope that we could get on the plane. The lights of Lungi were hazily visible in the distance. We started to walk, shuffling our stiff legs toward the airport, when we were intercepted by a couple of commercial motorcycle drivers, their round lamps bouncing in the rough road. We climbed aboard, our arms still full of our things, and our knees gripping the bikes.

We screeched to a halt at the gate; my father quickly paid the drivers. He stopped counting out the change and just passed the best he

could do. We began to scramble. We could see the plane ahead of us, which made us relieved—but we were also close enough that our effort would make a difference. We sprinted through the doors and greeted the weary-eyed attendants at the desk. We were so late that they had to restart the conveyors to get us checked in—we later found they heard the ferry was delayed, and held the plane for any passengers who might have been on board.

Airport employees hustled us on board with the few others, also impeded by the anchor problem. The cabin of the plane was dimly lit, and below half-capacity: row after row of blue chairs under the yellow light. Climbing on a mostly-empty plane had an ominous feel, but finally we could spread out our limbs and rest. We did not sit long before the engines ignited again, and with them I regained my shattered sense of joy and excitement.

The plane lifted off—there was a certain melancholy in seeing the lights of the city fade, the city where I had spent so much of my first fourteen years. I watched them fade into obscurity until my neck was sore on one side from craning to look past my sister and out over the eastern shores of the Atlantic. I knew we had made the right decision, and how fortunate we were to have even the ability to make that choice.

The rhythmic roar of the jet engines, and the hum of the plane's climate control replaced all the noise and confusion of the day. I continually thought of New York City, where we would land—the abstract metropolis, idealized in film reel images of taxis and skyscrapers, style and wealth. My sisters and I barely slept, thinking about what we might see there.

My parents, meanwhile, were still recovering from the trials of the day. My mom cried through the night, and my father's attempts to sleep were interrupted by nightmares that met him whenever he managed to doze off. I was fatigued, both in body and mind—but I couldn't suppress the nervous excitement that bubbled in my stomach, keeping my mind awake and my eyes glued to the frosty window where silver night clouds seemed to race by, concealing the dark unknown beyond them.

CHAPTER 4: A New Way of Life

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hese initial days in America were a blur of excitement, joy, surprise, and confusion. During the 18-hour flight, I wanted badly to press my entire face to the window, not to miss a thing, even as the clouds that passed by repeated themselves. I wanted only to climb out of the plane and step foot in the country made familiar to me from watching American films and listening to American music.

When the captain's voice came over the PA system, saying that we were approaching our final destination, I could not restrain myself. Leaning over my sister's lap, I must have looked like a skinny swimmer, my arm gripping a seat and pulling me toward the window. My sister moved her head so I could look with her. I could see that city below, the endless array of grey structures surrounded by water. The buildings dwarfed little white triangles that I knew must be the wake of ships. Our own elevation and the immense height of the buildings suddenly became

real to me. I am sure I held my breath; I had never seen a city so enormous and unending. The city stretched off into the distance, beyond the skyline, and disappeared. Bright light reflected off of steel and glass, thousands of feet away, and gleamed through the cloudy glass window.

A flight attendant sharply ordered me to sit back in my own chair, but even with my seat belt on, I remained hunched across my little sister, wide-eyed. While my body bore the weighty fatigue of the endless flight and trials of leaving Freetown, my mind burned in a surreal woken state, not willing to miss a moment of this new experience.

The plane landed, and I don't know that any disembarking has ever felt slower. Then, finally, I stepped onto American soil for the first time. I remember most the feelings that dominated my experience as I passed through lines of travelers, along the glass walls of airport, to what felt like desk after desk of officials. I felt nervous, whether I would find my place in America, and knowing that I would stand out as an immigrant. I do remember waiting amongst my family's luggage, waiting for my parents as they performed the mysterious rituals of entering the country, or to board the next plane—sitting on dirty, multicolored airport carpet, ostensibly watching over our luggage as I looked around, taking in the sights of trucks and planes on the tarmac, and diverse people moving in the terminal.

Although I was exhausted, and perhaps my memory is unclear, I do not think I rested. For five hours, my siblings and I gazed around us at

every passing person, eyes wide and unblinking, as if we could perhaps absorb a little more of America itself by widening them. We heard bits of new, strange languages; saw people clothed in ways we had never seen before. I probably thought I would never forget a second of it. Yet I remember—more clearly than any specific image or experience—a hyper alertness. It was like so much excitement and anxiety rolled together. I was aware of everything in crystal detail: our luggage, the movement of people around me, every stranger in sight. Thinking of it now, I see myself perched among our dusty luggage, in the long, air-conditioned terminal, looking around with an irrepressible grin, staring at every stranger--although, inside, I also felt a little like an animal that has ventured into an unfamiliar, possibly dangerous habitat.

We boarded another plane, and departed New York for Los Angeles International Airport, towards Orange County, Kib Pearson, a new job for my father—a new life. The flight was a blur—overwhelmed, I must have rested. When we stepped off the plane, the air was warm and humid, and I thought of Africa again. The area around the airport was much greener than the area surrounding JFK International.

How can I possibly describe what it felt like to be there? I looked out the window, caught sight of palm trees, and felt a rush of excitement from my chest to my throat that I can only describe as the feeling of going home. I glimpsed images of my friend's faces, my childhood home, my first school. But then another detail would snap me out of the

moment: some sight or sound or smell that was not of Sierra Leone. It was like the moment in a good dream when you begin to catch on that the world you are in is not quite right, and you are not where you thought you were. Whatever you are receiving or experiencing is about to be lost and was never real. And so, after that split second my mind was in Africa, I would realize I was really in a strange and new airport, in a new country. I had eaten, but I felt hungry. I was in the land I had dreamed of, but yet only felt as if I were losing something.

Leaving the airport gave me a chance to be again caught up in the excitement of being in America. Truly in America! We went to a car; we were moving now, and if those lonely feelings were not gone, they were at least outrun. We would go to San Clemente, to our expectations. We were going to our America. Lily Pearson came to pick us up in a van; she was a welcoming face, and the first person in America to feel familiar. We'd heard so much about her from her husband Kib, and her warmth toward us was a comfort after our exhausting travel. I climbed into the backseat, proud of the clean white quarter panels as if the van were my own, and Lily my personal chauffeur. I settled my small body into the bench seat as if I were a king.

Within moments we were on the freeway. I had never gone so fast before. Reaching 70 miles per hour in the bulky van felt a bit like the first plunge on a steep roller coaster. My body must have been stiff and startled in the backseat, but I plastered my face to the window, not to

miss a thing. The world blazed by, and I felt trying to focus on any one thing was like trying to read printed words on a page as it blows by in the wind. As fast as we were going, motorcycles zipped past us, tilting to weave between cars, flying faster than I could remember seeing anything before, inches away from the glass windows. The experience repeated several times before I realized my body was flinching away from the window each time.

Now I know how safe I was, but then, I relished in the same thrill I had felt before when my family raced across the open water in a single engine speed boat. Everything seemed as if it were on the brink of destruction, and I was the only one braced for it! Nothing could be so exciting. I was stunned, taken by the excitement of the New World. I let it overwhelm me—I embraced it with every part. When we flew past cars, or someone changed lanes next to us, I leaned against the window. It felt thin against my open palms, a paper screen to protect against other cars' crushing weight.

Outside, everything looked enormous, clean, and new. I looked at huge vehicles with two, four, six empty seats, vehicles carrying only one or two people! There were thousands. I had never seen so many types of cars, or such big cars, or such new cars. They cruised across the freeway, one-ton machines gliding on massive ribbons of concrete. Other freeway branches arched overhead, their gargantuan shapes snaking across each other, higher in the air and I would scarcely have felt more awe standing

under the vaulted arches of an ancient cathedral. It was almost impossible to believe that they could be so still in the air, heavy and yet suspended.

My first time seeing them, their edges looked smooth, as if each ramp and bridge were cut from a single block of granite. I had never seen such smooth roads. They seemed perfectly clean, wide, and endless! I thought Los Angeles must be the cleanest city in the world. I know now these highways were the 405 and I-5, twelve-lane southbound freeways which I now know from veteran experience are not so clean or wonderful as I perceived them then.

A breathless ride later, we pulled off the freeway in San Clemente, and parked in front of an orange and green 7/11. Inside, my siblings and I lined up by the Slurpee machine, and watched carefully as a stranger filled their cup. I wanted to get it right on my first try. I overfilled mine, of course, and the thick icy juice rolled down its plastic dome. I licked it up, an overwhelmingly cold and sugary experience that I tried to make last as long as possible. The sensation of the almost foamy ice on my tongue remains with me—obviously, Slurpees have never tasted as good as that first orange-red tiger's blood ice I tasted, my first opportunity to join the table and commune as an American. I lived here now! —and this would be my city. Too quickly, there was nothing left in the straw but air that made a loud sucking sound as I scratched and probed the bottom of the paper cup with the spoon end.

Back in the van, we cruised through city streets with lights and crosswalks. These intersections were governed by lights, unlike those in Sierra Leone, where police officers signaled cars to stop or move by waving their ridged cactus-arms, or stiff puffs on their silver traffic whistles. The quiet order of the streets amazed me. Cars rolled lazily to a stop and then actually waited. There was none of the frenetic energy of the two-lane dirt roads and simple streets that were all I knew back in Sierra Leone—no horns, no motorcycles creeping into the intersection, waiting for the white-gloved hand of the police to drop, and signal the beginning of the race.

Perhaps more than any other detail I saw, the grass made me feel as if I were now living in one of the Hollywood movies I had seen as a small child. There was so much grass everywhere, trimmed all to the same height, and all the same uniform color of shamrock green. The flat green ground around the parking lots of strip malls looked as curated as palace grounds. But the people on the sidewalks were not what I expected. Instead of the starched, high-waisted jeans and stylish city hats I had seen in *Poetic Justice*, everyone seemed to wear board shorts and sandals. These people didn't seem to know they were American! —this city was the land of layered blond hair and sunglasses, not the baseball jackets and pressed, collared shirts I had anticipated.

As I write, in 2018, the county is 73% white, and I think this percentage must have been higher when I arrived. This definitely broke

with the image of New York I had come to believe represented America. Still, I imagined myself as if I were now on one of those Hollywood screens, a character experiencing America for the first time, and, more than that, experiencing it as if it were my new home. That image in my mind, the picture of me, the small African boy staring out of the car windows into the South Californian landscape—that felt more real than all the sights and sounds clamoring for my attention.

We arrived at our first apartment, a small place on the first floor that we accessed by a walkway with white-painted, wrought iron railings. We knew Lily prepared the rooms for us; she helped us move our little pieces of luggage from the van up to the door, grinning with excitement.

Before I tell you what the apartment was like, I have to tell you that we did not expect anything; bare floors and walls, perhaps mattresses on the floors. Because Kib took our measurements, we knew Lily prepared some clothes for us. While we were still in Africa, amazed and grateful that we would receive these gifts in our new home. More than that, we reached America itself through miraculous generosity; that was more than enough.

Lily opened the door. We went inside, and were immediately stunned. The whole place was already furnished: couches, a beautiful wooden coffee table, mats, a dining set--even the walls were decorated. We stepped inside cautiously and respectfully, hearts racing with

excitement, like ordinary people walking through a king's palace. Could all of this really be ours? My mother stepped into the kitchen, the largest she had ever had the chance to use, and admired everything from pots to silverware, and the blue curtains put up over the windows. Lily beamed with pride and joy. Our bedrooms, too, were fully furnished. The whole thing could have been a TV episode.

When we were still in Africa, and Kib sent our measurements to Lily, he told her we would be coming with nothing. What he didn't know was that Lily had compassionately taken action. She gathered the humble, ordinary people at her church, and told them: Kib is bringing a new secretary, an immigrant whose family has nothing. What could we do for them?

Together, Lily and the other families at church gathered resources. Some had much, some had less, but they went to work. Some cleaned; some stocked the fridge; some donated items; others picked out clothes and furniture. They picked out rooms for us, and thought of decorations. What would two young girls like in their room? Or a young teenage boy? Then, they even gathered enough extra money to pay our first six months of rent. My parents did their best not to weep in front of Lily.

We didn't own the place, and everything in it was a gift--yet we also felt like settlers, as if we were claiming our first corner of America for ourselves. My parents looked at the apartment with pride, as if they

knew this place, generously given to us, would lead to bigger successes, against even higher odds than we had already faced. If I can speak for others—I think we all felt that ambition. If America were not already our land, someday it would be.

Culture Shock

I embraced school, and the community of students, as if it were my whole purpose. I was certain that I would not only quickly become American, but that no mistake or awkward moment could prevent me from perfect success. I leaned into the experience of school with everything I had, boldly introducing myself to anyone and everyone. I know I must have felt some moments of rejection, but my absolute determination and the friendliness of my peers made me feel invincible. My determination and quickness to make a joke certainly helped me to make the transition quickly.

On my first day of school, Kib and Lily's son Quinn went with me to school. He was an invaluable guide that day, and during the first few weeks; if I needed to find a classroom, or an office, he helped me to find it--then helped me understand the system. He gave me many pointers on etiquette--I was able to avoid or make up for several awkward situations, thanks to his help. He was liked by some of the teachers, too, and introduced me to them.

Another boy in particular quickly became my most immediate friend, my guide to American school, and my ambassador to the community on the high school campus. Gator was a senior, and one of Kib Pearson's nephews. Although he was a few years older than me, we took to one another quickly. He would pick me up from our apartment in the mornings. I would wait for him at the window, peeling apart the blinds with eager fingers, and glide down the white railing as soon as his jeep appeared. He would joke with me and tell me anything he thought I needed to know about in America. He looked out for me, and before I had known him long, I knew I always had at least one person to depend on.

Gator was a successful state wrestler, and he was very popular. He was big, strong, and a little imposing: one of the tallest boys at school. At the same time, he had an easy grin that always started on the left side and spread its way across his entire face. He was like a warm bear, quick to put his arm around an acquaintance. He was equally eager both to be liked, and to show other people he liked them. There was nothing pretentious or elite about his attitude, ever. He also had a fierceness in him, maybe something he'd honed as a wrestler, that emerged when he felt protective of someone he was loyal to or when there was some kind of injustice. I immediately knew not to be intimidated by him. From some of the first days at school, I knew I could joke with him, and being around him felt safe and familiar.

Gator knew everyone and was always introducing me to people. I met many of my friends because Gator told stories about me or talked about his funny friend from Sierra Leone. In this way, I quickly felt that everyone at the school knew me, and that I knew almost everyone. I am profoundly grateful for his friendship. My process of learning and mastering English was rapidly accelerated by our hours of practice and conversation, and Gator's charismatic introductions set positive tones in my relationships at school. If not for him, I know I would have succeeded in that new social environment, but with much more effort and time.

Gator also introduced me to skateboarding, and I got my first board: a used deck, with a graphic decal on the bottom that had been ground away until it looked like a huge barcode, and faded yellow wheels. I loved that board, and practiced for hours on it by myself, trying to master the tricks I had seen Gator and the other students perform. I ignored the bruises and scrapes as if they were nothing, I was so determined to learn.

Meanwhile, I set out to become the most American I possibly could. I quickly picked up Southern California slang: "cool, weird, bro," etc. I was unafraid of my accent, which then was much thicker and more obvious. Each time someone made a reference, or a joke I found inaccessible, I laughed. I suppose you could say that I was determined to "fake it until I made it," but, thanks to Gator, or the willingness with

which people extended friendship to me, I felt as if I were truly connecting with my peers each time, despite the occasional misunderstanding or communication failure that inevitably happened. I began to master and use the language and references I picked up. The challenge that school presented motivated me, and I was with my American friends from the time Gator picked me up in the mornings, through school, and my friends' soccer practices, until my parents arrived to drive me home in the evenings.

Gary Brown was one of my teachers that first year, another “ambassador” for me during this intense time, who helped me to build trust in the faculty. He is still teaching in that school in Orange County. I would enter his classroom at the beginning of a period when I was headed to another class and take a cup of coffee from his pot (which he had invited me to do). Each time, he would laugh, and I remember him often pointing to me and saying, “This is Fas—you ought to meet this guy.” He was the kind of teacher who addressed his students by their first names, having them perfectly memorized by the end of the first week of school. When he spoke your name, he would say it as if it was familiar to him, as if he'd known you his entire life--even if that name was the only thing he knew about you so far, and you'd only taken his class for a week. The tone of his voice implied history with people—actually, the entire, energetic and familiar way he related to us stirred

me. I quickly learned to love his classes, and his passion for history became my own so deeply that I believed it was always inside of me.

Before long, our friendship did have its own history. I joked with Mr. Brown frequently, in class and out, yet he always knew how committed and eager I was to learn from him (especially about the history of my new country). Sometimes, he would divert from the lesson to tell stories about the students he found funny or had friendships with. Having my name on his roll was like being a part of his community of students who were also engaged in the class and eager to learn.

When I went to my first prom, I had few clothes, and certainly nothing that fit the occasion. But Rich Brown loaned me his zoot suit—“It won’t just fit you; it’ll fit *you*,” he said. I remember him winking at me, holding out the perfectly folded clothes in chaotic yellow and black patterns, gesturing as if presenting it on a platter. On the wall of his classroom, he placed a photo of me wearing that zoot suit, with my fingers forming a peace sign, and a sly grin on my face that captures my usual persona at that time. Seeing it for the first time felt like being inducted into a special group—a hall of fame of sorts.

My family, especially my parents, did not have such an easy time integrating. My father, like me, was shocked by the size of the roads and cars and airports. He was unwilling to drive on the freeways at first, since in Sierra Leone, there were no roads wider than two lanes. The many road signs everywhere were actually a hindrance. My father was

now overwhelmed with information he could not understand, and Spanish and English names that were unfamiliar and difficult to remember. On top of everything else, despite being an expert accountant, he now had to learn to use computers to perform even basic functions for his new job.

While I was young and could mimic what I had seen in movies or seen my peers doing in order to fit in, they had to break out of decades-old patterns. I recently spoke to my father to try to understand what it was like for him and my mother to come to The United States as adults. The cultural differences, large and small, were more challenging to my parents than for me or my sisters.

For example, in Sierra Leone, where food is not as plentiful as in California, it is a compliment to tell someone they are fat. You can imagine my father's embarrassment and confusion when he graciously told a female co-worker she was "looking fat," and she turned red and stalked away! On top of cultural misunderstandings like this, American culture tends to value being on time. In Sierra Leone, this is not anywhere near as important or practical, and meetings begin when they begin. My parents had to learn to live by rigid time constraints, which caused them plenty of stress and quite a few moments of misunderstanding.

Although my parents had already overcome so much to arrive in America, they were still not quite insiders. And, while they spent many

hours on the phone each week, conversing with our many family members in Africa, they quickly found that their new challenges also distanced them from their community in our old country. My father even received a phone call from a well-intentioned relative, asking pointedly how he could afford such a mansion in the United States, when work was yet so difficult. My father was confused, until he realized my relative taken the \$1,500 a month my parents were paying to rent our tiny apartment and converted it into Sierra Leonean currency: nearly one million! Therefore, he thought my father was renting a massive house. Meanwhile, my parents were also trying to learn English, wearing unfamiliar clothes, and navigating whole new systems just in order to buy food, pay rent, and get us through school. I remember how exhausted they seemed those first few months.

I think it was easier for me, as a child, to let go of relationships in Sierra Leone and invest all my time into American relationships and culture. While my parents relished talking to old friends and relatives, endlessly asking after different people and places they had left behind and soaking up the native tongue they loved so dearly, I am sorry to say I did not. They would hand me the phone from time to time, and I would reluctantly listen to the voices of uncles and aunties asking me about school, and what I hoped to do in America. Very quickly, I could not remember many of the faces that went with those voices. Time passed, and for me, the phone calls themselves became a part of my American

experience more than they were a taste of an old life. Finally, I stopped talking on the phone so much with people in Sierra Leone.

I am uncertain whether my family could have thrived in this new, alien land without the Pearsons, and others who followed in the things that the Pearsons did for us. Before we even went to school or jobs, the Pearson's church stocked the apartment for us so that my family had some extra clothes, and even bicycles. Lily Pearson, who had picked us up at the airport in Los Angeles, provided my father with an old desktop computer. He used this same computer to learn at a breakneck speed how to use Microsoft software at his new job. My room at the apartment was even furnished with an old X-box and a miniature pool table. I also vividly remember a portrait of Zorro on my wall, black mask and sword ready.

Our family had been religious back in Sierra Leone, and my parents were very eager to find a church where we could thank God for everything he had done for us. Our moments of danger in the taxi and on the boat were fresh in our minds, especially for my parents. Additionally, many people in Sierra Leone told stories about how coming to America could be very difficult for children, and every once in a while, they heard reports of young men joining gangs or wasting their lives with drugs. My parents wanted to find a strong community, a community that valued family relationships and strong ethics.

Our first day in our apartment, when Lily Pearson picked us up at the airport, and gave us everything her church and community had given us, My mom looked at the coffee table and found a copy of the Book of Mormon sitting on it. Its gold letters shimmered, bright against a blue leather background. My mom picked it up. It fit well in her hands.

“Is there a Bible?” she asked politely.

“Oh, yes--there are a couple of them somewhere,” said Lily, “But try reading this, too!” My mother leafed through a few pages.

“And would you like to come to church with me?” Lily asked. My mom looked up at my father and said yes. Within a week, Lily picked up up in the same van she brought to the airport.

The day we visited the church ward was the first time I had worn a tie since we were in Sierra Leone. Lily brought us in the van, and, as we walked through the parking lot, I noticed some of the other people walking in. The men were uniformly wearing white shirts; a sharp contrast to our colored button-ups and my father’s blue suit! Some of them made their way to us before we even reached the door, and introduced themselves, welcoming us warmly. Many of them already knew who we were; I realized more and more how many people must have helped us, simply because we were the friends of their friends, or because we had need, or because it was the right thing to do. Our feeling of gratitude swelled.

Before church, there were a few minutes of friendly conversation. Many people welcomed us as if we were friends, but there were a few reminders that we were still immigrants. One well-intentioned man asked my father if it would take a while for us to get used to wearing suits—perhaps he assumed that we did not have any nice clothes in Africa! I wondered what that man would have thought if my father showed him our family photo album, and photos of us wearing the variety of clothes we had worn in our hold home.

But no awkward misstep could diminish the feeling of welcome; from Africa until then, we had traveled as my family and my family alone. We had no friends or companions on our journey, no community to support us, except those whom we left behind. But now, we were embraced by strangers. We were aware that we stood out, though all treated us exactly as if there were no difference between them and us. The way they interacted with us was the same way they interacted with each other. And so, although their manners and language seemed formal and perhaps a restrained to me, we also knew that we were accepted wholeheartedly.

It was the first Sunday of the month. The practice in the Mormon Church is to “bear testimony” on these days—to share accounts of what people feel God is doing. Many people took turns standing behind the pulpit, and sharing what they were grateful for. My dad stirred a few times, but he was still chewing his thoughts, as if he knew what he

wanted to say and was still deciding how. Then, he stood and gave a testimony of what had happened to us, and how we escaped the war to come to America. He told how God had spared our lives and given us mercy to make it all the way. The room was intently focused on him, with congregants touching their hands to their faces, leaning closer in the smooth, wood pews to hear the story. I too, felt compelled to stand up, and, in my then-broken English, share our testimony—of taxis, boats, airplanes, and how God had saved us more than once. Some people thanked us afterward for sharing, and told us that our stories had deeply encouraged them.

We continued to attend; none of us were reluctant to do so. As weeks passed, we began to develop relationships with other families, and my parents gained especially important friendships. They needed a community around them. Their new friends also began to give in unexpected ways: some of the women went shopping with my mom to spend time with her and pick out clothes. The missionaries took us to get our social security cards. One of our new friends named Cassidy Williams helped us get food stamps for our period of transition, and to register for Medicaid. Another gave my father driving lessons to cope with the new, overwhelming roads.

As a family, we were baptized into the Mormon faith in the Newport Beach Temple, in late 2004. So, when my little sister Eileen was born, my dad stood as a member of the church and blessed her to

have a roof over her head, shelter and food. This prayer contained a powerful simplicity. I remember clearly the faces of everyone in the room, their heads nodding, eyes intent. It was as if the people were hearing something they knew but had forgotten. We were surrounded by prosperity, and there were some who had forgotten that there were still people who consider receiving their needs alone to be a blessing. There was a sense of humility in almost every member and a desire to do more and thank the Lord for their blessings.

Our family was vulnerable with the congregation in nearly every way—before we even knew their names, they knew our deepest needs. They heard the challenges we would face, and anticipated some of them even before we did. We came to them exhausted and with no way to pay any of them back. I may have wondered then why they would do all this and receive nothing. But moments like my father's blessing remind me that the vulnerable themselves offer deep gifts, and that people who seem to have no needs can sometimes find their deepest needs met when they did not know they even existed.

Meanwhile, my family became more independent, but not everything was easy. The job my dad had followed to Newport Beach dried up, and the project Key Pearson was developing did not succeed. My father searched for a new job, and took some time to develop his computer skills. The resources he had meticulously saved for transition and emergency began to run dry, and our brother in the church, Gary

Hadley, stepped in and again found us support for the period of time we were without a major source of income. We understood this as an effort on the part of our friends--our new family--organizing privately, out of love for us, to ensure that we succeeded. Before long, my parents were able to provide for us, and to give to others in the church that had needs in turn. It was important to them to feel that they, too, were part of the work that needed to be done. I would later gain this same desire.

Months became years, and I developed greater confidence. Gator, Rich Brown, the Pearsons and others invested in me. Gator graduated, and in many ways, I stepped into the role that he had once had. He had known everyone; now, everyone knew me. I also tried to listen to everyone, and hear their problems and the things that excited or troubled them. As I grew I became aware of other young people who looked up to me in much the same way as I had Gator. I defined for myself what success would mean, pursued it, and began to find it.

Through all of this, I remember those times in childhood—depending on those around me for nearly everything, from clothes, to opportunities to practice English, to the very roof over our heads. Even in the places I was most confident—at school, and with Gator—I know I was vulnerable, and completely dependent on those around me for acceptance. I remain deeply grateful for each of these friends who touched my family and myself during this time, and made it possible for us to grow and build our life in the United States.

Orange County, as a culture and an environment, would have an immense impact on the development of myself as a person, and on my mindset. These factors would shape my experience of America as a very young man.. I felt a strong need to define what were the most important aspects of our new home in shaping who I was then, and the trajectory of my life into the present. Many things will follow in the later chapters of my account, things I think are best explained with a foundation. In these first few, formative years, how did I, a young Sierra Leonean, become an American?—how did I, Fas, the young immigrant, transform myself in response to the slice of America that my family settled in? Who was I afterward?

My family and I had no other Africans around us. Therefore, we would have no support from others sharing our exact experience. There was no Sierra Leonean church for us to join. All of our neighbors spoke to us in English. We did not understand this as a suffocating experience—although it was, perhaps a little overwhelming at first!—in fact, it was an opportunity. I, especially, was determined to be an American. There was nothing for me to do but become one! I could not hang out with other immigrants; I had Gator, and my other friends at school. There was, therefore, no advantage to isolating myself from my new community in any way. I lacked familiar things, and I experienced some loneliness in that, but I felt joined to my new country much more

quickly as a result. I am sure that my mastery of the language and culture was greatly accelerated.

I must stress that my intent is not to diminish any other person's experience, but rather to define my own.. I am sure my mindset would have benefited in different ways had my family settled in another place—immigrant neighborhoods, for example, or a community of Sierra Leonean descendants. My purpose is to describe my own history, and to express gratitude for the experiences I had--both the blessings, and the challenges and trials.

The important thing at this time is that I mined many advantages from my experience in Orange County, and received many others I was not conscious of at the time. In fact, I can see now that some of the negative baggage I carried in my thinking was stricken off in these first years, and I credit my environment in many ways.

Orange County is home to many entrepreneurs, and huge amounts of wealth. My friends' parents were self-starters, driven, and resourceful. Many built fortunes on their ideas--in fact, being wealthy did not make a person exceptional in that environment. I began to see success and profit as normal. Prosperity, impact—to my young mind, these were not unattainable, abstract ideas; nor, in this case, were they the result simply of getting lucky . Instead, these things were very real and very possible—I could see them in front of me! Again, my intent is not to elevate this environment above others, but it is also impossible to

diminish the ways in which Orange County formed my perspective. Coming from my country in Africa, which receives aid from the United States, and where opportunities are nowhere near as plentiful, I can clearly see the more conservative, cautious ways of thinking I very naturally held before. Whatever the case, I count growing up environment of Orange County as an inestimable privilege.

Through my experience, I developed what I will call a “Hellenistic mindset;” I began to share much of the thinking that others in the West have adopted from the time the Greeks recorded their ideas, and earlier. I became westernized as these ideas, which were new for me, replaced my earlier thinking.

In Sierra Leone, for example, it is common for a woman to cook and clean up after her husband. A man is not allowed to enter the kitchen, as this is the carefully guarded domain of his wife. Of course, it is assumed that both boys and girls will be married as adults, and not remain single. In Orange County, there were fewer expectations about a person’s life path. This is not to say that Orange County was free of assumptions or roles, but that these were defined more loosely. Or, perhaps it is better to say that a person is expected to behave as an individual. Each person is expected chart their own course, and decide what is best by evaluating what is important to them, and not necessarily their community, or according to their traditions. Two people, based on their priorities, may negotiate their own roles in relationships, at least to

a much larger degree than is expected in my childhood country. I mention this example as a concrete representation of the ways in which the different mindsets express themselves in different ways—my goal for now is not to establish or compare the value of each.

I began to develop my new American identity, which I correlated with this western mode of thought. I began to express myself more openly, and with less restraint. I began to use phrases like “I’m sorry,” or “I love you,” more often—my language reflected my environment. I was certainly becoming assimilated.

As I mastered English, I also became fascinated with the myths of the Greeks, and semi-historical figures of the ancient past. I read stories like those about Bacchus Aurelius and Spartacus. I developed interpretations: to always get up after defeat, to always look for another way to establish victory, not to accept anything less than success, and other such ideas.

Of course, I do not miss the irony of the different ideas I have discussed in this chapter—that I, and my family, completely depended on other people, without whom I would be nothing—and that I then gained this Hellenistic mindset, which contains such seemingly-opposed values. In the coming years, this new mindset would equip me with huge advantages in navigating my new life, and would also be troubled and tested. Eventually, I would be faced with the need to integrate both my African and American pasts.

