

CHAPTER ONE: Shape of My Early Life in Africa

H

igh we exalt thee, realm of the free”— the first notes of Sierra Leone’s national anthem ring exuberant and hopeful, feelings that persist in my country of birth. Hope, optimism, and national pride were especially powerful in 1961, the final year “God save the queen” was sung as the national anthem, replaced by one written by a Sierra Leonean. Now, Sierra Leone’s people themselves—a collection of ancient African tribes, and idealistic freemen returning to Africa from slavery Europe and the Americas—would rule their rich land of beaches and jungle hills for themselves. Diamonds were so abundant inland that locals debated whether they replenished like plants when removed. Food, minerals, land all seemed abundant. The future radiated hope.

Even as decades passed, and corruption and mismanagement slowed the country’s growth to a slog, my family prospered. My grandfather lived in the diamond district of Kono. There, he worked for a mining company that paid him well, and sent him to London for top-

quality training and education. The company took care of its people, operating a canteen with very cheap prices and building air-conditioned housing for everyone they employed. They even paid the children's school fees, and the education in the Kono schools attracted borders from as far away as Liberia. Almost everyone my grandfather knew had a job in the mining business; it supported everyone.

Even the land itself was good to my family. My great uncle found a large diamond on land he owned, and with the small fortune he made, he bought my grandmother a beautiful home in their African town. This house was even covered in a layer of concrete, which set it apart in a neighborhood of low buildings with tin roofs and panbody walls. In an area deeply affected by poverty, my family thrived. Everyone seemed to experience some measure of financial success, and my grandparents more than others—Sierra Leone was providing well for its people.

However, by the time I was born, things had changed for the nation. Due to many factors, mining was no longer profitable work for the average Sierra Leonean, and the families of the Kono region were subsumed back into poverty.

My earliest memories are of waking in my grandmother's house, stirred not by an alarm clock, but by the shouts of hungry people outside. Each day, everyone in the tiny town woke up with one goal to accomplish by night: finding three meals—if that were even possible.

Those mornings, farmers would come to the house, machetes at their shoulders, or half-held in one hand, blades swinging by their legs. They would grin at my grandma, make obeisance, and leave their children for the day, hoping she would feed them. Others, thinking she had wealth, would ask for handouts.

Everyone was hustling each other. If someone found a wrench, they suddenly became a bike mechanic—and they would convince you your machine had some problem they could fix. If someone found something they simply could not use to earn a little money, they would try to sell it. Sometimes, I even woke to gunshots, as armed men robbed those few who had valuables—or those they thought had them.

Above all in those early childhood days, I remember the vague threat of the War—I have no childhood memory of the time before the violence over the horizon caused the adults so much anxiety. The government fought on one side, and revolutionaries on the other. People worried about being caught in the crossfire, if it came. More than that—no one was yet certain if the rebels would remain freedom fighters as promised, or if they were fighting for selfish reasons—but there were rumors about their action in the bush.

My childhood environment was filled with other sounds, too—the rustling of trees, the sound of flowing water cutting through swampy land, rain beating against tin roofs, and the never-ending sounds of

multitudes of tropical birds singing, in every direction and at every hour. Although my memory of my early childhood is often hazy, I often return to those impressions and feelings I absorbed from the jungle around me, and I believe they have shaped me unconsciously my entire life.

The country of my childhood has two seasons: the dry and the wet. During the long months of the wet season, a quiet change comes over Sierra Leone. Everything drifts to sleep: the trees, the plants, and the animals. A transition occurs over all life in this place. This is an opportunity to hibernate and recover, and a chance to regenerate, coming back stronger and wiser than the season before.

Even thousands of miles away from the place of my birth, this process has followed me through my life, as I have seen it happen time and time again. Through every difficult situation I find myself in, through all dark and challenging circumstances this life imposes upon me, I am steadfast and patient, anticipating the time of resurgence that always follows.

My early years were a cycle of sickness, starting with my birth, and I was very lucky to survive them. My mom gave birth to me at the hospital in Freetown, the best in Sierra Leone. Fatalities in childbirth were much more common there than in the West, so the risk was already high before the midwife found my feet poking out first--the birth would be a breech. My tiny brown ankles showed I was undersize and

undernourished. The staff would have to work quickly to keep my head from being trapped inside my mother's womb, killing me.

My mom is not the type to draw attention to herself, and rarely complains or mentions any difficult moment; she also rarely discusses my birth. However, she once told me it was the most excruciating and trying moment of her life. I know nothing else except that, eventually, the birth was successful. My mom, completely exhausted by the ordeal, rested on her bunk under a mint-green mosquito net in the white-tile maternity ward.

My first weeks were typical of a child born to a poor and inexperienced mother: I was completely naked because my mother could not afford to clothe me. She pressed an old friend for money she had loaned months before, and with those small funds, she purchased some basic coverings for me. She struggled to nurse. There was barely enough food for her, let alone the child she now needed to support from her own body. I was continually feverish.

My mom was determined to make the journey back from the capital as soon as we were strong enough, and return to the small town in rural Kono. There, my mom could receive the support she needed from my grandma as she finished boarding school. For the moment, however, she slept next to me on the floor of a small living room in Freetown, in a friend's house with no electricity. My mom had no money,

and would light candles only long enough to nurse me. She knew that, about two weeks after my birth, a cousin would drive back to Freetown, and she could go with him.

Around 7:00 one morning, as a light rain fell over Freetown, my mom gathered my sick body in her thin arms, and my cousin helped her to his car. Although streaked in places with crumbling bands of red dirt and orange rust, the white paint of the car gleamed. My cousin tried to protect me and my mom with his jacket, holding it with one hand while he helped us along with the other.

We departed, leaving the low buildings and bustling streets of Freetown and onto the unpaved jungle roads of central Sierra Leone. These range from wide, dusty red roads navigated by truckers, to narrow, rutted tracks, where dirty basins of rainwater pool and leaves and branches scratch at the windows. Navigating these roads requires a special kind of expertise.

My cousin craned over the wheel, trying to look past the hood and choose the best space for each tire to land so that we did not become entrapped in mud. He drove for fourteen hours, stopping only to get gasoline. Night fell, thick and totally black.

At 9:30 PM, the car broke down. My cousin, my mom, and I were several miles from the nearest town of Jaiama Sewafe, in the far

western part of our home district of Kono. Hours of driving remained. All around was the bush, teeming with noisy jungle animals and insects, totally invisible on either side of the lightless road. Trying to fix the car in the dark and rain was useless and dangerous, so my mom's cousin tried to sleep in the narrow car.

My mom felt uncertain and terrified, as heavy rain began, and big leaves stroked the car windows. My mother wrapped me tightly in her clothes to keep me warm, and barely closed her eyes that night. She continually scanned the dark windows for fear of the unseen, just beyond sight in the damp wilderness.

When the sun finally rose beyond the clouds, waking the jungle with soft, grey light, my mother's cousin headed for town. Hopefully, he could find a necessary part and convince someone to install it. For hours, my mom was alone with me in the car, trying to keep my thin body from becoming too chilled, until my cousin successfully found someone.

We finally arrived at my grandma's house in Yegenma after two perilous and uncertain days driving in the mainland bush, and my mother says she saw my grandmother weep. She was gazing at my mom and me from the door of her home, shocked by our condition, her hand at her mouth. I was now so ill my life was in danger; my mother had also dramatically lost weight.

By now, I was suffering convulsions. My fever was severe, and my fontanel—the soft areas on a baby’s skull, between the bones—were sinking. This condition is called “wongo” in the Kono language, or “deep dent fontanel” in the English dialect of Sierra Leone. It is usually a sign of severe dehydration and malnutrition. I spent less and less time alert. I almost never cried any more.

During those first few days back in Kono, my grandma and my father were essential. My father brought milk for me, and food for my mother. My grandma helped nurse me. One of my father’s brothers, Manga, told him that anytime I needed medical care, my family should just take me to the clinic, and he would take care of the costs. Meanwhile, my father contacted his friends in the regional capital of Koidu Town for help buying diapers and food. The town doctor, Doctor Mahoney, offered to treat me free of cost. I recovered and grew.

My grandma looked after me from my second month of life until I was eight-years-old, since my mother was still in school and could only return to the village on the weekends. My father was attending university in Freetown, hoping to build a better life. After their education, grandma continued to live with us. Through all these years, my grandma wrestled with my illnesses as they emerged, using traditional medicines and vigilant care to treat me. She endured many things, trying to raise me; though, through it all, she was happy to do it.

They say great love is built on great sacrifices; when I think about what my grandma went through to ensure my happiness and wellbeing, I realize how much love she truly had for me. I am alive today because of her sacrifices. When I was very young, I used to call my own mother “auntie,” like the other children I played with, and saved the name “mom” for my grandma.

So, for those first few years, I grew in my grandma’s house, playing rural African games like marbles and akra with farmers’ children. Back then in Africa, poverty was our life, and the civil war that was slowly permeating Sierra Leone made this reality even more desperate, even as I was barely aware of it until it came.