A Long Way Gone

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ISHMAEL BEAH

Beah was born in the town of Mogbwemo, in Sierra Leone in 1980, where a civil war broke out in 1991 and lasted for eleven years. Orphaned by the civil war, Beah was on the run from the rebel advance before being picked up by government soldiers. He would become a child soldier for the army, and fight for two years for the government before being chosen to be rehabilitated in Freetown, Sierra Leone's capital. There he would get the opportunity to go to the United Nations in New York City and speak on behalf of child soldiers in Sierra Leone. Although eventually returned to his extended family, when the civil war reached Freetown in 1997, Beah fled for the neighboring country of Guinea and was flown to New York with the help of a workshop facilitator he had met at the United Nations. There, Beah finished high school and attended Oberlin College, working on *A Long Way Gone* while he was a student at Oberlin. He is a member of the Human Rights Watch Children's Rights Division Advisory Committee and heads the Ishmael Beah Foundation, which benefits former child soldiers. Beah lives in New York City and has also written a novel, *Radiance of Tomorrow*.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The civil war in Sierra Leone began in 1991, as the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), under the leadership of former army corporal Foday Sankoh, began attacking villages in East Sierra Leone, and lasted until 2002. Government response was ineffectual at best. By 1997 fighting had reached the capital of Freetown, and the government was ousted, only to be reinstated a year later. Eventually the situation became so dire that the United Nations intervened, only for the RUF to go so far as to hold several hundred members of the peace-keeping mission hostage. British troops were deployed, and it is only in the wake of this action that the country found peace. The war was characterized by extreme human rights violations, including the widespread use of child soldiers on both sides.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier*
- **When Written:** 2007
- **Where Written:** New York City
- **When Published:** 2007
- **Genre:** Memoir
- **Setting:** Sierra Leone, 1990's
- **Climax:** Beah's first battle as a child soldier
- **Antagonist:** Lieutenant Jabati
- **Point of View:** First Person Autobiography

EXTRA CREDIT

Beah's Return to Sierra Leone. In 2009, Beah was accompanied by an ABC camera crew in the return to his home of Sierra Leone, which he had not been back to since fleeing for New York City in October of 1997.

Saved by a blockbuster. The song on Beah's cassette, which saves the boys twice, "O.P.P." by Naughty by Nature, reached the 6th position on the Billboard Top 100 in the United States in 1992.

PLOT SUMMARY

Ishmael Beah is a twelve year old boy living an innocent life in the eastern part of Sierra Leone in 1993. Beah's mother and father are divorced, but he occupies himself with rap music and dancing. A civil war is raging elsewhere in Sierra Leone, but the fighting has not touched Beah's life and he can't believe it ever will. When the memoir begins he is on his way from his hometown of Mogbwemo to the town of Mattru Jong, a sixteen mile trip, to participate in a talent show with his friends Junior and Talloi. But while he is there, his hometown is attacked by the rebels, and Beah's family are not among the stream of refugees that come through Mattru Jong.

After a little more than a week, Mattru Jong is attacked by the rebels, and Beah flees with Junior, Talloi, and friends from Mattru Jong, including Kaloko, Gibrilla and Khalilou, into the forest, only to return to Mattru Jong out of hunger and desperation. Their efforts are fruitless, however, and the boys wander aimlessly in the surrounding countryside, unable to cope or even talk about what they have seen, stealing food to get by. They are often mistaken for rebels and are chased, and in one case, even captured. It is only Beah's **cassette** of rap music that saves them, because when the villagers play it, they see they must be dealing with innocent boys. Eventually the boys get word of a village, Kamator, where Gibrilla's aunt lives, and they go there to help out in return for food and shelter. The village is initially vigilant about watching out for rebel attacks, but that vigilance wanes, and after a little more than four months, they too are attacked.

Beah loses track of his brother and friends in the chaos, and hides out in the forest with Kaloko, hoping for some sign that his friends have survived. When there is none, Beah decides to

get as far away from the war as possible, and leaves Kaloko behind. He promptly gets lost in the forest and wanders for a month hopelessly before coming upon a new group of boys, Alhaji, Saidu, Kanei, Jumah, Musa and Moriba. The boys head for the ocean, having heard of a town called Yele which is safe, but along the way are captured by villagers who mistake them for rebels. Beah's cassette again comes to the rescue.

The boys strike out again without much sense of purpose, but despite their sadness and their loss, are often buoyed by the kindness of people they encounter. Their friend Saidu dies mysteriously after the boys eat a crow that has fallen from the sky, but soon after Beah runs into an old acquaintance named Gasemu who tells him that Beah's family is in a nearby village. Gasemu leads them there, only to find that just as they are arriving, the village is being attacked. The boys rush in to find everyone dead and the village on fire. They are attacked by rebels who are returning to the village and flee, and as they do, Gasemu is shot and eventually dies of his wounds.

The boys are picked up by government soldiers soon afterwards and brought to Yele, where they think they have discovered some peace. But the village's large population of orphans is enlisted to fight for the army, despite the fact that some of them, like Sheku and Josiah, are so small that they can't pick up their guns. In their first battle Musa and Josiah are killed, but in the space of that battle, Beah becomes a killer. The boys are urged by their commanders to take revenge on the rebels for the deaths of their families and are given a steady supply of drugs to keep them distanced from the present. The boys make play of war, watching Rambo movies and trying to replicate the moves.

After two years as a child soldier, Beah is taken from the front to Freetown, much to his brainwashed anger. Efforts to rehabilitate him and other boy soldiers are at first met with extreme violence from the boys. UNICEF even makes the critical mistake of putting rebel boys and army boys in the same compound at first, and in the ensuing battle, several boys are killed. But by showing affection and appealing to the boys' interests, like Beah's love for rap music, the staff, like the nurse Esther, begin to help the boys cope with some of their trauma. After 7 months, Beah moves in his uncle, who lives in the capital city of Freetown, and even goes to New York City to speak at the United Nations on the behalf of child soldiers in Sierra Leone. There he meets Laura Simms, who leads a workshop to help the children tell their stories. She often sends him money when he is back home.

But Sierra Leone has not been rehabilitated, even if Beah has, and there is a violent overthrow of the government. Freetown becomes unsafe, as violent, in fact, as the front once was, and when Beah's uncle dies because he cannot get a doctor, Beah decides to flee to the nearby country of Guinea and from there to the United States, having talked to Laura Simms, who has promised that she has a place for him to stay in New York.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Ishmael Beah – The author and subject of the memoir. Beah is a writer based in New York City who at the age of twelve was orphaned by the civil war in Sierra Leone. At first just a boy on the run from the civil war, he is eventually captured by government soldiers. Although he was only a child, Beah was coerced into fighting for the government, and even came to think of himself as a willing participant. After two years of fighting and killing, he is taken from the front and, eventually, rehabilitated. Beah has since become an advocate for the rehabilitation of child soldiers.

Junior – Beah's brother, who accompanies Beah for the first part of his journey. Although Beah and Junior were once close, the terrible things they see makes it difficult for each to support, or even talk to, the other. They are eventually separated during a rebel attack on a village where they have taken refuge, and never see each other again.

Esther – The nurse responsible for Beah's rehabilitation. She is kind but persistent, and the only one to get Beah to believe her when she says "it is not your fault." She takes a special interest in Beah and is the first person he tells about the horrible things he's done and seen.

Beah's Uncle – Beah's father's brother. Despite Beah's horrifying and taboo past as a child soldier, his uncle welcomes Beah into his family after Beah has been rehabilitated, calling him son. His kindness is quite foreign to Beah, but he ultimately comes to trust and rely on him. Ultimately Beah's uncle dies when Freetown descends into civil war, and he is unable to get to a doctor despite a serious illness.

Laura Simms – A workshop leader at the United Nations for former child soldiers who coaches them on the telling their stories. When Beah comes to the UN to make a speech about child soldiers, he meets and becomes close with Simms. When, later, Beah is living in Freetown and it is attacked, she promises to take Beah in once he gets out of the country.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Lieutenant Jabati – The de facto leader of the town of Yele, Jabati is militant and coerces the boys into fighting for the government and against the rebels. Although he mentors the boys, it is in violence, cruelty and revenge. He effectively brainwashes the boys to become brutal, drugged child killers.

Beah's Mother – A tender and kind woman, she is divorced from Beah's father.

Beah's Father – Beah has a difficult relationship with his father, who has divorced his mother. Beah and his father are often not on speaking terms.

Beah's Younger Brother – Beah's younger brother looks

remarkably like him.

Beah's Grandmother – Beah's grandmother lives a day's walk from Mogbwemo, Beah's hometown.

Talloi – A boy from Mogbwemo, he is a part of Beah's first group on the run from the rebels.

Khalilou – A boy from Mattru Jong, he is a part of Beah's first group on the run from the rebels.

Gibrilla – A boy from Mattru Jong, he is a part of Beah's first group on the run from the rebels. He breaks the bad news to Beah about Mogbwemo.

Kaloko – A boy from Mattru Jong, he is a part of Beah's first group on the run from the rebels. Beah and Kaloko disagree about whether they should flee as far as possible from the war, with Kaloko arguing they are only putting themselves in more danger by fleeing.

Saidu – A part of the second group of boys Beah travels with, Saidu has a dark disposition.

Jumah – A part of the second group of boys Beah travels with, Jumah eventually becomes a child soldier, although he ends up in a different squad from Beah.

Moriba – Saidu's best friend, and a part of the second group of boys Beah travels with. Moriba eventually becomes a child soldier.

Alhaji – A part of the second group of boys Beah travels with, he has the most camaraderie with Beah once they become child soldiers. He is rehabilitated with Beah.

Kanei – A part of the second group of boys Beah travels with, Kanei becomes a child soldier, but is not chosen to be rehabilitated.

Gasemu – A man from Mogbwemo who leads Beah and his friends to the village where they are supposed to be reunited with their parents, only to find that village being attacked just as they arrive.

Corporal Gadafi – An officer in Beah's squad, Gadafi teaches the boys the basics of army life.

Sheiku – A boy even younger than Beah whom he meets in Yele, Sheiku is enlisted to fight in the army. He can barely lift his gun.

Musa A part of the second group of boys Beah travels with. Musa becomes a child soldier and is killed in battle.

Josiah – A boy even younger than Beah who he meets in Yele, Josiah is enlisted to fight in the army. He dies in the army.

Lansana – Another boy enlisted in the army in Yele, Lansana's humming keeps the already insomnia-plagued Beah up at night.

Mambu – A rebel boy Beah meets in rehabilitation, Mambu is just as violent and brainwashed as the other boys, and takes a perverse joy in his violence.

Esther – The nurse responsible for Beah's rehabilitation. She takes a special interest in Beah and is the first person he tells about the horrible things he's done and seen.

Leslie – Another member of the staff at the rehabilitation center, Leslie gets Beah on his feet once his time is up there, helping him to find his uncle.

Mr. Kamara – The director of Benin Home, the rehabilitation center. He eventually asks Beah to act as a spokesman for the center, and for the possibility of rehabilitating child soldiers.

Allie – Beah's cousin. Beah quickly becomes close to him, and Allie takes Beah out dancing after he settles with his uncle in Freetown.

Mohamed – Beah's best friend from childhood, he is left behind in Mogbwemo, but survives the two reunite in Freetown and begin attending school together.

Bah – Besides Beah, Bah is the other representative of Sierra Leone at the United Nations.

Dr. Tamba – The man who accompanies Beah and Bah to the United Nations.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

CHILDREN IN WAR

A Long Way Gone is the autobiography of a boy soldier, Ishmael Beah, who as a boy was afflicted by and then coerced to participate in the Sierra Leone Civil War as a boy soldier. Narratives of war often involve a loss of innocence, where dreams of glory are replaced by a realization of the horror of war, but a narrative of a child soldier is something else. It is the story of not only innocence lost, but innocence corrupted.

Before the war Beah is a boy with the concerns of boyhood. He is sad about his divorced parents, and gets through his days by listening to hip-hop and practicing dance moves. After his village is attacked, Beah loses his innocence, but remains a boy in the sense that his hope is that he will find his parents and the life that he had before the war, or even that his parents will get back together.

When his parents are killed by rebels, Beah is picked up by the Sierra Leone army. Rather than provide comfort and safety to the children, though, the army conscripts them, and uses their grief to turn them into ruthless killers. The lieutenant who leads Beah's squad is straightforward in his manipulation, advising Beah and the other boys to "visualize the enemy, the

rebels who killed your parents, your family, and those who are responsible for everything that has happened to you." The boys remain boys, and even in war, there is an element of child-like play. The boys compare themselves to Rambo, give themselves nicknames, and practice the moves of their favorite movie characters as they once did the dance moves of hip-hop artists. But now they are not just playing at war and killing; they are fighting a war and killing with abandon.

Once the boys are taken from the front to be rehabilitated, it becomes clear just how brainwashed they are. When the boys who fought for the government army come upon other boy who fought for the rebels, the rebel boys scream that the *army* killed *their* family. The boys fight, and several are killed, and it is apparent that the boys on both sides were brainwashed in exactly the same way. As orphaned children, the boys of the war were vulnerable and terrified, and both sides of the war used that vulnerability to twist the boys' innocence to murderous rage.

THE HORROR OF WAR

Beah's memoir is an act of witness. He relates gruesome violence so that the reader might understand what his life was like, what the war was like. The hope is also that he might draw enough attention to what happened in Sierra Leone so other atrocities might be stopped before they begin.

When the memoir begins, war is just a rumor to Beah. He doesn't believe it will ever reach him. Refugees who pass through his village won't speak of what they've seen and do not stay for long. When the violence does reach Beah, his innocence is shattered. That he is a target of violence makes no sense to Beah. The purpose of the violence does not seem to be political. Indeed, the rebels seem to have no purpose other than to be violent. They laugh and joke as they kill. The arbitrary nature of the violence makes it all the more terrifying. Beah only knows if he is caught he will not be spared.

When Beah is conscripted by the army, he comes to understand the condition of those soldiers he once feared. Killing becomes something they bond over out of necessity. As a soldier himself, he becomes attracted to the power he can have over another person's life, that is, the horror he can inflict. But as attracted as he is to the violence, he is also horrified by it. He has terrible migraines, cannot sleep, and does a fearsome amount of drugs in order to distance himself as much as he can from the present.

That Beah chooses to narrate his time as a child soldier through a series of flashbacks illustrates how people afflicted by war are forever changed by it. The trauma never leaves them. Beah's occasional narrative forays into the present reflect the permanent influence of his past as a child soldier and as a victim of war on his present. He is still haunted by nightmares and suspects he always will be.

COMPANIONSHIP, HOPE, AND THE SELF

In the face of so much horror, Beah's will to live is tested. His hope that each new set of companions will be the one he gets to keep—the ones who will not leave him or be torn from him—allows him to keep moving forward, even as the evidence mounts against that hope with each loss.

Beah is separated from his family at the beginning of the memoir, fleeing the advancing rebels with a group of boys that includes his brother. The boys' companionship often feels futile. There is no remedy for the horror the boys have seen, and their only option is to flee from it. More often than not, the boys do not speak at all. As Beah often notes, it is far more dangerous for the boys to travel together than it would be to be alone. They are often mistaken for child soldiers even though they are unarmed, and as a group they are far more conspicuous to the rebels. Yet they stick together, feeling that they could not keep on without each other's companionship.

At one point, Beah is almost reunited with his family in a new village. He allows himself to hope that not only will he be reunited with them, but that his mother and father's love for each other will have been rekindled. But just as he and the other boys are coming upon the village, he hears them being slaughtered. His hope that he might return to life as he once knew it is ruined. He goes so far as to say "I wanted to see my family, even if it meant dying with them." His hope, at that point, is to die. When Beah is subsequently picked up by the army, he hopes again, in this case, that he might at least be safe. The army promptly betrays that hope by conscripting he and other boys into the war. Once the boys begin killing, they cannot imagine, or even hope for a life beyond the war. Their squad becomes a kind of terminal family and revenge a way of embracing despair. Without companionship, without hope, Beah loses himself.

Beah is mercifully taken from the front after two years, but he is so brainwashed he views his rehabilitation as another loss. The squad had, after all, had become his only family. He reacts violently to being put into what amounts in his mind to a prison by civilians. But as he readjusts to civilian life, he begins to see the staff as his new family. It is not by telling the boys that they are blameless that the staff gain their trust, but instead by giving them the affection any child would want. Beah comes to understand he is deserving of that affection, and even moves in with his father's brother. He goes to the UN to speak on the behalf of child soldiers and makes friends who he will eventually run to when the war reaches Sierra Leone's capital, Freetown.

And when it does, Beah loses his country. His uncle dies, and he flees for the border, leaving his old life behind. But by then he has seen enough, and seen enough of the world outside of Sierra Leone, that he does not lose hope, knowing that he has

friends in the United States who he can reach out to.

GUILT AND RESPONSIBILITY

War is fertile ground for feelings of regret and guilt. Although as a manipulated child soldier, Beah can never be said to be at fault, his actions as a child soldier are often at odds with the person he imagined himself to be. Beah experiences himself firing the gun or slitting the throat—because he did fire the gun and slit the throat—and therefore cannot help but feel he is responsible for the pain he causes.

In the first half of the memoir, regret is pervasive. He feels himself guilty for, at various times, not asking his troubled brother what he was feeling, stealing food from strangers and children, and hitting friends out of anger. Despite this guilt, Beah's most essential condition is helplessness. He is always unsure of what will happen next.

When they are picked up by the army, it is the boys' sense of their own helplessness that is key to coercing them. The language of the lieutenant at the time of conscription is not that of choice. He tells the boys that they are free to flee, but that the village is surrounded, and that anyone who flees will be given no rations. The other option is to fight. Fighting gives the boys a chance to change their futures, while to flee is to accept their dismal fate. But the choice is ultimately a false one. To fight is to probably die as well, as the boys are poorly trained, ill-equipped, and well, boys. Further, the lieutenant may very well be lying. At other times, after all, the army is shown to be able to ferry people to and from the front, as in the case of the boy's rehabilitation.

As a child soldier and as a killer, Beah reclaims his agency and even his pride through revenge. Deep down, he is still very much conflicted about killing, evidenced by his migraines and constant escape through drugs. But even if he feels conflicted, he still thinks his actions are righteous. For that reason, the refrain of the staff at the rehabilitation house after the war, "it is not your fault," only provokes further violence from the boys. They feel not only condescended to, but that forgiveness is an insult: they feel they were right to avenge their families.

Beah eventually comes to find agency in his future and to understand revenge as a circuit that only leads to endless violence. He understands he cannot change his past, but that he can change the fates of those who might otherwise suffer as he did. He goes to the UN as a model of rehabilitation, and later devotes himself to a life of advocacy.

NATURE

As a boy before the war, nature is essential to Beah's understanding of the world. Its beauty seems to him not just good in itself, but a reminder of the essential goodness of the world. Beah often looks to the **moon** as a model of good behavior. As his grandmother says, "no one grumbles when the moon shines. Everyone becomes happy and appreciates the moon in their own special way." In the narrative present, the moon also is, to Beah, a reminder of the happiness of his childhood. He can look to it and be happy that something of his past lives on.

Yet as the narrative progresses nature becomes more complicated. Nature often goes silent at times of great distress, and at other times, even foreshadows great difficulty. In the lead-up to the very first attack Beah witnesses, the normal sounds of night-time are missing. Bird and crickets don't sing. Even the moon doesn't come out. Beah remarks it was as if "nature itself was afraid of what was happening."

As the boys are running or serving as soldiers in the army, nature's "goodness" ceases to be so obvious. Although at times nature provides sustenance for the boys, at other times, Beah is so afraid he thinks that nature will kill him: "even the air seemed to want to attack me and break my neck." And, indeed, nature does come for him at times: he's chased by wild hogs at one point. At another, when the boys are one the run, they come upon the Atlantic Ocean and are stunned by its brilliance, especially in contrast to the sand. The waves are awesomely large. Then they are promptly chased onto the sand by villagers who assume them to be rebels. They now find the waves to be dangerously large, and the sand hot enough to burn them. Nature's beauty proves to be deceptive, to be dangerous.

Ultimately, as Beah grows up, the simple view of nature as good is revealed as, well, simplistic. Nature is, rather, nature. It exists as itself, and does not care about the people fighting viciously within it. Beah remarks after one battle: "the rain washed the blood off the leaves as if cleaning the surface of the forest, but the dead bodies remained under the bushes." Nature is no comfort anymore. It washes its own surfaces, but does nothing for the human dead.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

BEAH'S CASSETTE

Ishmael Beah carries a rap cassette with him until he joins the government army. Although he has no tape player with him, it stays in his pocket, a reminder of his boyhood and playfulness. More than once he and his friends are mistaken for rebels, and the cassette saves him: the villagers see when they play the music that they are only dealing with innocent boys. When Beah joins the army, the cassette is burned by the soldiers, and with it goes his childhood.

THE MOON

As a boy before the war, Ishmael Beah looks to the moon as a model for good behavior. But the horror of the war brings Beah to believe that the moon is hiding to avoid seeing what is happening, and its role as a model in his life wanes. As the adult narrating the book, Beah notes that he can again look at the moon and remember what it was like to see images in the shapes of the moon, and is pleased to see some of his innocence lives on.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Farrar, Strauss and Giroux edition of *A Long Way Gone* published in 2007.

Chapter 1 Quotes

My high school friends have begun to suspect I haven't told them the full story of my life.
"Why did you leave Sierra Leone?"
"Because there is a war."
"You mean, you saw people running around with guns and shooting each other?"
"Yes, all the time."
"Cool."
I smile a little.
"You should tell us about it sometime."
"Yes, sometime."

Related Characters: Ishmael Beah (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

In the introductory pages of Chapter 1, Ishmael is an American high school student, being asked about his experienced during the wars in Sierra Leone. Ishmael's classmates, who are almost all American-born, don't really understand what Ishmael has gone through--as far as they're concerned, Ishmael's experiences in Sierra Leone are exciting and entertaining, not scarring.

The passage could be considered a "framing device" for the story, because it reminds us that Ishmael is writing about his time in Sierra Leone for his own benefit, but also to educate and enlighten his readers, most of whom live in the Western world. Ishmael wants to do away with the narrow-minded view that war is a joke or a fiction--and so he'll write about his devastating experiences in the civil war, holding nothing back. There's also something especially horrifying about the fact that Beah is only in *high school*, and yet he's already a scarred war veteran.

There were all kinds of stories told about the war that made it sound as if it was happening in a faraway and different land.

Related Characters: Ishmael Beah (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

Ishmael's classmates in the previous quote don't really understand what he's gone through in Sierra Leone. And yet at one time, Ishmael was just as removed from the war as his American classmates are in the present. As a child, Ishmael's life was relatively easy: he was far away from the war in his part Sierra Leone, and his only sources of information about the war were refugees who came to town, fleeing from the crisis. In due time, Ishmael will become a refugee, too: fleeing Sierra Leone for the safety of the United States. In short, the story we're about to hear is about how the young, innocent Ishmael we see here (for whom the war is a fiction) becomes the hardened, more experienced Ishmael who curtly mentions his time in the war to his American high school classmates.

Whenever I get the chance to observe the moon now, I still see those same images I saw when I was six, and it pleases me to know that part of my childhood is still imbedded in me.

Related Characters: Ishmael Beah (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

Before the war, Beah learns to look up at the moon when he's feeling sad. The moon, at least for Ishmael, is a sign of happiness and peace: there's something comforting about the fact that no matter how bad things are on Earth, the

moon will always be exactly the same. Years later (as he describes here), Ishmael will look at the moon with even greater fondness--after his horrible experiences in the civil wars of Sierra Leone, the moon will remind him to put his problems in perspective. Even more importantly, though, the moon reminds Ishmael that the trauma of war hasn't totally destroyed his innocence: there's still a part of him that can enjoy the simple sight of the moon rising in the night. His childhood was twisted and crushed by war, but a small part of it still remains "imbedded" in him.

Chapter 2 Quotes

❝ I was afraid to fall asleep, but staying awake also brought back painful memories.

Related Characters: Ishmael Beah (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 19

Explanation and Analysis

As we learn more about Ishmael's experiences during the war, we become more sympathetic for his behavior--behavior which his classmates in New York, with their limited experience and understanding, might just find "weird." Beah has been traumatized by his experiences during the war: he's been forced to do barbaric things. As a result, Beah is constantly frightened, even when he's alone in his room. He doesn't want to sleep, because in his dreams he relives his more horrible experiences from Sierra Leone. There is, in short, no way out for Beah--expect, perhaps, to write about his suffering, gaining a distance from his own past.

Chapter 5 Quotes

❝ We were so hungry that it hurt to drink water and we felt cramps in our guts. It was as though something were eating the insides of our stomachs. Our lips became parched and our joints weakened and ached.

Related Characters: Ishmael Beah (speaker), Talloi, Junior, Khalilou, Gibrilla, Kaloko

Related Themes:

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

As the war sweeps across the country, Beah and his companions are forced to do anything to survive. The stakes are incredibly high: they need to find food of some kind, or else they'll starve to death. Ishmael comes close to starving on several occasions. In this passage, for instance, he's so hungry that he can barely drink water--the feeling of water passing through his body makes his empty stomach hurt. The book is full of gruesome descriptions like the one in the passage--descriptions of human suffering that go far beyond anything a child should have to endure. Beah's purpose, in describing his pain so vividly, seems to be purgative: by writing about his past, he gains some control over his traumatic experiences.

❝ We decided to leave the village the next day and go somewhere safe, somewhere far away from where we were. We had no idea where we would go or even how to get to a safe place, but we were determined to find one.

Related Characters: Ishmael Beah (speaker), Talloi, Junior, Khalilou, Gibrilla, Kaloko

Related Themes:

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis

The boys have endured a great deal of danger and fear so far. Their families have been hurt, and their village has been largely destroyed, due to the war in Sierra Leone. In this passage, Beah and his peers have managed to escape from a group of dangerous rebels. While they've been hanging around the area where they were born and live, they decide that there's no point in staying there any longer.

The passage reinforces the fact that Beah's hometown is no longer a safe place. For a long time, Beah thought of the war as a faraway event, irrelevant to his own life. But now that the war has come to his own village, Beah has no choice but to keep moving--everything he had previously taken for granted has been lost.

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ Being in a group of six boys was not to our advantage... People were terrified of boys our age. Some had heard rumors about young boys being forced by rebels to kill their families and burn their villages.

Related Characters: Ishmael Beah (speaker), Talloi, Junior, Khalilou, Gibrilla, Kaloko

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 37

Explanation and Analysis

Beah and his companions are trying to find safety. They're not affiliated with any rebels--they just want to be somewhere out of danger. And yet because they're a fairly large group, villagers distrust them. The villagers have heard that the rebels train boys to shoot their own families, as well as strangers.

The passage foreshadows some of the actions that the soldiers of the civil war will force Beah and his peers to perform. For now, though, Beah regards it as bizarre that the villagers would think him capable of killing anybody--he's still just a kid, far removed from doing harm of any kind to other people. It's also worth noting that despite the risks, the boys still stay together--companionship and a sense of human connection is sometimes more important than erring on the side of safety.

❝ This was one of the consequences of civil war. People stopped trusting each other, and every stranger became an enemy. Even people who knew you became extremely careful about how they related or spoke to you.

Related Characters: Ishmael Beah (speaker), Talloi, Junior, Khalilou, Gibrilla, Kaloko

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 37

Explanation and Analysis

Beah's book is about his own personal experiences in the war in Sierra Leone. And yet at times, Beah writes about the country as a whole, and how civil war tore it apart. One longterm consequence of the war was that people stopped trusting each other: once they saw how evil other human beings could act, they stopped being so faithful to their neighbors and friends. The people of Sierra Leone were desperate--they wanted to survive, and sometimes survival meant hurting or killing other people. After the war, it's suggested, the population of the country was deeply disillusioned with itself and with humanity in general: as a result, people became less generous, less friendly, and less trusting.

Chapter 8 Quotes

❝ I felt as if somebody was after me. Often my shadow would scare me and cause me to run for miles. Everything felt awkwardly brutal. Even the air seemed to want to attack me and break my neck.

Related Characters: Ishmael Beah (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis

As the situation in Sierra Leone deteriorates, Beah's situation becomes worse as well. Here, he's walking on his own, lonely and frightened. Beah moves through the forest, afraid to stop--it's as if he's being chased, though by whom Beah doesn't know. Beah is so frightened by what he's witnessed already that he's become perpetually paranoid. Even when there's no apparent danger around him, he assumes that he *is* in danger.

The passage reverses the spirit of the early chapters in that it shows nature as a place of danger, rather than a place of peace and rest. It's as if Sierra Leone itself has become an evil place, reflecting the vast political and social changes occurring within its borders.

❝ When I was very little, my father used to say, "If you are alive, there is hope for a better day and something good to happen. If there is nothing good left in the destiny of a person, he or she will die."

Related Characters: Ishmael Beah (speaker), Beah's Father

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Beah--all alone in the wilderness--finds the courage and optimism to keep moving. He remembers when his father told him to look ahead to a "better day." Beah's father's point seems to be that life itself is a gift, and therefore worth being happy about. Beah is hungry and lonely, but he's alive, and therefore he should strive to protect himself and seek help.

The passage suggests one of the reasons that we're reading Beah's story in the first place. There's a kind of "reporting bias" involved in the book itself: Beah is an unusually strong

and optimistic person; therefore, he finds the courage to survive, and eventually manages to come to America. There are many other children in Sierra Leone who weren't as lucky as Beah. While Beah is certainly lucky, it's suggested that he also managed to survive in part because of his own innate optimism and inner strength.

❝ Our innocence had been replaced by fear and we had become monsters. There was nothing we could do about it. Sometimes we ran after people shouting that we were not what they thought, but this made them more scared.

Related Characters: Saidu, Jumah, Moriba, Alhaji, Kanei, Musa

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 55

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Beah unites with some other homeless boys wandering through the forest. Beah knows that it's a bad idea to join up with other boys, because they can easily be mistaken for rebels of some kind, and therefore the villagers won't trust them. But because Beah is so starved for company, he joins with the other boys: his need for company wins out against his need for safety.

The passage underscores how much Sierra Leone has changed in just a short while. Beah's community is in ruins, and the country as a whole seems to have become justifiably paranoid and frightened. Beah and his friends are assumed to be dangerous, and nothing Beah says can convince the traumatized villagers of Sierra Leone otherwise.

Chapter 10 Quotes

❝ One of the unsettling things about my journey, mentally, physically, and emotionally, was that I wasn't sure when or where it was going to end.

Related Characters: Ishmael Beah (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 69

Explanation and Analysis

As Beah spends more time as a homeless, parentless child, he also becomes more hopeless. He wants to believe that his suffering will come to an end soon, but he sees no evidence that it will. The passage shows Beah in the depths of his despair: he's forced to wander around the country, trying to escape the war. Beah is still a child, and he can barely understand his present, much less the future of his country. It's impressive, though, that Beah continues trying to survive, despite his crises. Beah is a rational person, and so he gets frightened. And yet Beah is also an optimistic person--and so he finds the strength to carry on.

❝ Every time people come at us with the intention of killing us, I close my eyes and wait for death. Even though I am still alive, I feel like each time I accept death, part of me dies. Very soon I will complete die and all that will be left is my empty body walking with you.

Related Characters: Saidu (speaker), Jumah, Moriba, Alhaji, Kanei, Ishmael Beah

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 70

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Saidu, one of the boys who wanders with Beah, says that he feels that he's getting steadily weaker with each impending threat he faces. Saidu explains that each time he has a brush with death a part of him dies. One might think that surviving death would strengthen Saidu, but for him precisely the opposite is true: the constant threat of danger just fills Saidu with despair. Accepting death totally means letting go of life's value, even if one keeps living.

The passage mirrors the despair that the other boys, including Beah, feel as the war in Sierra Leone continues. And yet it's important to note that it's Saudi, not Beah, who voices his despair in this chapter. Perhaps Beah is a more optimistic and hopeful child than others of his peers.

❝ Even though our journey was difficult, every once in a while we were able to do something that was normal and made us happy for a brief moment.

Related Characters: Ishmael Beah (speaker), Saidu, Jumah, Moriba, Alhaji, Kanei, Musa

Related Themes:

Page Number: 70

Explanation and Analysis

Beah notes that although his life as a wanderer is hard, there are occasional moments that help him survive--for instance, he and his peers come to a village where the villagers give them a feast. Beah's point is that happy moments, like the feast in the village, sustain him and his peers, so that when they encounter a tragic or frightening time, they still have enough energy and spirit to carry on instead of giving up.

The passage reinforces the point that optimism and happiness are key parts of survival. It's so easy to give up in the middle of a crisis like the one Beah faces, and so moments of happiness (and in his case, childlike innocence) act as vital motivators, saving Beah from total, destructive despair.

> I longed for the gentle, dark, and shiny old hands of my grandmother; my mother's tight enclosed embrace, during the times I visited her, as if hiding and protecting me from something; my father's laughter when we played soccer together and when he sometimes chased me in the evening with a bowl of cold water to get me to take a shower; my older brother's arms around me when we walked to school and when he sometimes elbowed me to stop me from saying things I would regret; and my little brother, who looked exactly like me and would sometimes tell people that his name was Ishmael when he did something wrong.

Related Characters: Ishmael Beah (speaker), Beah's Father, Beah's Mother, Beah's Grandmother, Beah's Younger Brother, Junior

Related Themes:

Page Number: 71-72

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Beah and his peers arrive at a village that treats the boys with kindness and hospitality. Beah is offered a delicious feast, and afterwards, overcome by the good experience, he remembers his relationship with his grandmother, his mother, his brothers, and his father. Happiness, it's suggested, triggers more happiness: when Beah has a happy experience at the village feast, he's reminded of the other happy moments in his life.

The passage conveys both joy and despair. Beah's memories of his family members fill him with happiness, and yet they also remind him of his present misery: he is separated not only from his family but from his entire community, and seemingly from the promise of more lasting happiness in the future.

> Under those stars and sky I used to hear stories, but now it seemed as if it was the sky that was telling us a story as its stars fell, violently colliding with each other. The moon hid behind clouds to avoid seeing what was happening.

Related Characters: Ishmael Beah (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 80

Explanation and Analysis

Here Beah describes the moon again, but in a very different context than before. While before the moon was open and inviting, a symbol of the peacefulness of nature, the moon is now hidden away. It's as if the moon can't bear to see what's happening to Sierra Leone--the spectacle of war is too terrible to watch.

There aren't many lyrical passages of this kind in the novel--yet here, Beah uses personification and metaphor to convey the full extent of the crisis in his country. Nature itself has turned its back on Sierra Leone, to the point where the moon--an old symbol of peace and romance--has abandoned Beah when he needs it more than ever.

> Sometimes night has a way of speaking to us, but we almost never listen.

Related Characters: Ishmael Beah (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 81

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout the novel, Ishmael writes descriptions of the natural world, especially the night sky. At times, the night seems to offer a relief from the carnage and horror of

Ishmael's life--it's comforting precisely because it's immune to the human changes in Ishmael's environment. Elsewhere, though, the night sky seems to respond to everything that's happened to Ishmael--it seems to give him advice and consolation, even warning him of future dangers. In short, as Ishmael says here, the night speaks to him.

Ishmael's ability to find solace in nature, one could argue, is a powerful survival mechanism. Ishmael is often incredibly lonely: without a family, and often without real friends, he's forced to turn to other places for comfort. (And yet even nature, as in the previous passage, often ignores him or seems to turn away.) Here, Ishmael suggests that his only friend is nature itself: he treats the night like a person, with whom he can at least have certain, limited interactions. Like a parent, the night offers Ishmael comfort and peace when no human being will give it to him.

Chapter 12 Quotes

❝ They have lost everything that makes them human. They do not deserve to live. That is why we must kill every single one of them. Think of it as destroying a great evil. It is the highest service you can perform for your country.

Related Characters: Lieutenant Jabati (speaker), Ishmael Beah, Jumah, Moriba, Alhaji, Kanei, Musa

Related Themes:

Page Number: 108

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, we're introduced to Lieutenant Jabati, the military man who forces Beah and his peers to fight on his side in the war in Sierra Leone. Jabati makes a long, rambling speech in which he urges the boys to support his side--and, moreover, to kill anyone who tries to run away from the danger. Jabati characterizes his position as patriotic: it's an honor to fight for one's country (Jabati claims that he and his forces are the "true" representatives of Sierra Leone), and therefore to run away from the war or oppose Jabati is to be against Sierra Leone itself.

Jabati's words are clearly false and manipulative: he's just trying to get as many loyal soldiers as possible. But because Jabati is speaking to a group of children, and because he's threatening them with death should they try to escape, he gains some followers.

It's also worth noting the clear role that dehumanization plays in Jabati's brainwashing of his soldiers. He directly says that their enemies are "no longer human," and that thus they "do not deserve to live." Jabati knows that children would have a hard time killing other people if they truly accepted them as people--but if the whole thing is unreal, and their enemies are like animals or demons, then killing becomes more justified, more like a horrifying game.

❝ Vizualize the enemy, the rebels who killed your parents, your family, and those who are responsible for everything that has happened to you.

Related Characters: Lieutenant Jabati (speaker), Ishmael Beah, Jumah, Moriba, Alhaji, Musa

Related Themes:

Page Number: 112

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Jabati again speaks to his captive children and tries to compel them to fight for him. Jabati wants the boys to be soldiers in his army: they're young, but they know how to fire guns, and therefore they can be useful to Jabati. Jabati tries to get the boys to fight on his side by manipulating them against the rebels. He suggests that it was the other side, not Jabati's own, that murdered the boys' families. Jabati could be telling the truth, or not: the point is that he wants the boys to take up arms against his opponents, without asking too many questions. Whether or not Jabati's forces killed the boys' parents, he's responsible for their misfortune: it's partly because of his military attacks that the country has fallen into civil war.

Once again note how direct Jabati is in his manipulation--he wants the boys to take part in their own brainwashing by "visualizing" their enemies as being the murderers of their families. It's as if it's inevitable that the boys will have to kill people--they just have the choice of whether or not to dehumanize and hate their enemies, or else risk going insane, crushed by guilt and responsibility.

Chapter 13 Quotes

❝ The branches of the trees looked as if they were holding hands and bowing their heads in prayer.

Related Characters: Ishmael Beah (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 119

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Beah fights alongside Lieutenant Jabati's soldiers, killing a group of so-called rebels. Beah is terrified by his own actions: he's a child, and he's never murdered anyone, or even used a gun. Beah conveys the tragedy of the moment by comparing the shape of the tree branches to a pair of hands clasped in prayer. The message is clear: Beah has not only killed other human beings; he's lost his own childhood innocence to the madness of war. Beah isn't necessarily guilty of murder--he was manipulated and coerced into fighting, after all--but he'll have to live with his actions for the rest of his life, since he was the one who pulled the trigger. Previously, nature turned against Beah or gave him comfort in times of need, but here, it does neither one: it is a force detached from humanity's atrocities, praying for Beah's soul.

Chapter 16 Quotes

❝ We fought all day in the rain. The forest was wet and the rain washed the blood off the leaves as if cleansing the surface of the forest, but the dead bodies remained under the bushes and the blood that poured out of the bodies stayed on top of the soaked soil, as if the soil had refused to absorb any more blood for that day.

Related Characters: Ishmael Beah (speaker), Alhaji, Lieutenant Jabati

Related Themes:

Page Number: 150

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Beah's memories of his time in Sierra Leone become vague and sketchy, reflecting the traumatic nature of his experiences. He recalls fighting alongside the army for many hours, even though it was raining outside. Beah was forced to fire a gun and kill supposed "rebels." At the end of the day, Beah stopped to survey the damage caused by the fighting: he saw that the ground was so soaked with blood that it bubbled up through the soil.

It's as if the natural world can't handle the violence and devastation that the soldiers of Sierra Leone have caused. In the first half of the book, nature was either antagonistic or supportive to Beah, but in the second half of the book, nature is more often than not portrayed as *rejecting* the sinful human race altogether. This tragic, lyrical passage thus encapsulates the way that nature remains detached from human violence and cruelty.

Chapter 17 Quotes

❝ At that time I didn't think I was lucky, I thought I was brave and knew how to fight. Little did I know that surviving the war that I was in, or any other kind of war, was not a matter of feeling trained or brave.

Related Characters: Ishmael Beah (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 159

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Beah--having been shot in the foot multiple times--is rushed to the hospital, where a doctor manages to take care of him, albeit very painfully. Beah survives his shooting, and foolishly thinks that he's been brave. Rather than accept the truth--he was lucky to have been shot in the foot, not the head--Beah deludes himself into believing that he was somehow responsible for his own survival; i.e., that his own toughness saved him from death.

The passage shows Beah lying to himself, showing that his time among the soldiers has distorted his perception of the world. Moreover, the passage shows Beah using self-deception as a kind of survival mechanism: instead of acknowledging his own powerlessness, Beah would prefer (quite understandably) to believe that he has some kind of control over his own life. Beah has been rescued from a life of fighting, and his rehabilitation is about to begin, yet for now he's still very much a product of his military conditioning.

❝ 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.

Related Characters: Esther (speaker), Ishmael Beah

Related Themes:

Page Number: 160

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Esther, a nurse at the rehabilitation facility where Beah has been taken, tries to comfort Beah by telling

him that his murders and other acts of violence weren't "his fault." Beah doesn't like to be told that his actions weren't his own fault--the statement just confuses him further. Beah knows perfectly well that he's responsible for the deaths of other human beings, and he hates himself for it. But he's not willing to lie to himself any further: he's not willing to accept, as Esther suggests, that his actions weren't his own. Beah was manipulated into enjoying fighting and killing--and that's why he feels so guilty, long after his days as a soldier are over. Beah will have to contend with his own sense of guilt for the rest of his life--and simplistic statements like Esther's "it's not your fault" don't make him feel any better.

Chapter 20 Quotes

❝ At the end of these long discussions our faces and eyes glittered with hope and the promise of happiness. It seemed we were transforming our suffering as we talked about ways to solve their causes and let them be known to the world.

Related Characters: Ishmael Beah (speaker), Laura Simms, Dr. Tamba, Bah

Related Themes:

Page Number: 198

Explanation and Analysis

In the final chapters of the book, Beah--rescued from his life as a child soldier in the army in Sierra Leone--is taken to be with a United Nations worker named Laura Simms. Laura is leading a workshop program designed to offer aid and comfort to the children who've been forced to fight as soldiers in Sierra Leone. Simms focuses her workshop on communication and expression; she believes that the best way to get past guilt and self-hatred is to express one's feelings clearly and openly (a thesis that lies at the center of Beah's book itself). Beah seems to respond to Laura's methods: he recognizes that he needs to talk to other people about what he went through, rather than trying to deal with his pain on his own.

❝ I joined the army to avenge the deaths of my family and to survive, but I've come to learn that if I am going to take revenge, in that process I will kill another person whose family will want revenge, then revenge and revenge and revenge will never come to an end.

Related Characters: Ishmael Beah (speaker), Laura Simms, Dr. Tamba, Bah

Related Themes:

Page Number: 199

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Beah is sent to speak before the United Nations Council about his time as a soldier in the civil war. Beah's teachers give him a prepared speech, which they encourage him to read. And yet Beah prefers to speak for himself, showing that he's learned something from Laura Simms: speaking for oneself is the only way to feel better and accept oneself. In his speech, Beah talks about how the commanders in the army tried to manipulate the child soldiers to kill other people by telling them that they'd be getting revenge for their own families' deaths. In doing so, the military set off an endless cycle of revenge: each death invited another death in vengeance.

Beah's point, taken literally, is that Sierra Leone must break out of the cycle of violence and vengeance and instead use peace and understanding to solve its problems. His point can also be taken more generally, however: all countries (i.e., those represented at the United Nations) should use communication and openness instead of nuclear weapons and guns, and all individual people should learn to forgive and work together instead of rushing into an "eye-for-an-eye" mentality.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

The memoir opens with a short prologue. Ishmael Beah is in high school in New York City in 1998. When his classmates become curious about his time in Sierra Leone, he answers as curtly as possible. He doesn't tell them anything about why he fled home except that there was a civil war. He keeps his time as a child soldier a secret.

By opening with this short passage, Beah is framing what follows as the part of his life he has been reluctant to talk about. That Beah goes on to tell us about his most private traumas shows that he believes he should bear witness and tell not only his classmates, but the world, what his life has been like.

Beah then begins his story. It is 1993, he is twelve, and is leaving his hometown, Mogbwemo, in south-east Sierra Leone, for the day. He is going with his brother Junior and friend Talloi to Mattru Jong, a town sixteen miles to the east, to dance in a talent show. His best friend Mohamed can't make it. Figuring that they will only be gone a day, they don't tell anyone where they are going. Although a violent, bloody revolution is being waged in Sierra Leone between the government and rebels, Beah and his village have yet to be touched by it. Their only knowledge of it comes from refugees who pass through their town. Usually the refugees decline to talk about their experience with war, but when they do, Beah thinks their tales seem exaggerated.

Beah's story of his childhood opens with innocence. His early life is not untroubled, but he has the freedom to pick up and go where he wants, and the time and energy for hobbies. Even though evidence of the horror of war passes through his town all the time, Beah isn't worried by it. He leaves town and trusts that no one will worry about his absence and it does not even enter his mind that war might reach his town in his absence.

The boys decide to walk the sixteen miles to Mattru Jong to save the cost of travel, playing as they make the trek. After ten miles, they stop at Beah's grandmother's house in the village of Kabati. She wonders what the boys could possibly being doing in Mattru Jong if it doesn't involve school. Her scolding is like that of Beah's father, who has often wondered if the boys even understand what their favorite rappers are saying. A couple of hours later they arrive and meet their friends Gibrilla, Kaloko and Khalilou, who live in Mattru Jong.

A sixteen mile trek is no problem for the boys with each other's company. Although their grandmother is troubled that the boys are not focused on their schooling, she does not seem concerned that they are out without supervision. Even the adults seem unaware of the possibility that war might reach them. The focus are the everyday tensions between boys and adults, between school and fun.

The next day Beah, Junior and Talloi, who are staying at their friend's, are surprised when their friends return early from school. Gibrilla, who has joined the boys in a push-up competition without giving them the news first, explains that Mogbwemo has been attacked by the rebels and that everyone has fled. They learn that Mattru Jong is next on the rebel's list.

That Gibrilla would continue to play before giving his friends what amounts to horrifying news speaks to the boys' collective innocence. None of them yet seem to grasp the gravity of what has happened. Their families may have been wounded or killed.

Beah and his friends head to the wharf, where refugees are arriving from Mogbwemo by boat, wanting to see if they can find their families or get some information about what might have happened to them. They wait anxiously for three hours, but their families do not arrive, and no one has any news of them. Beah notes how strange it was to him that that the sun could shine and the birds would sing. He cannot believe the war has reached them.

Beah and his friends are helpless in the face of what has happened. To lose their parents would shatter their world, but the boys at first do not even consider this possibility out loud. The beauty of nature, at this time, doesn't seem to match up to the horrible possibilities. Beah still thinks of nature as wholly good.

Beah then remembers with great pain the last time he saw his father. Beah was about to go to see his mother, whom Beah's father was divorced from. Sitting on his porch, Beah was approached by his father, who was just coming home from work. His father smiled at him. Beah's relationship with his father is rough, especially because his father has stopped paying for his schooling and has remarried. But before either of them can say anything, Beah's stepmother comes out, and his father disappears into the house to speak with her. Beah then leaves to go see his mother, and she asks after her ex-husband, reminding Beah that he means well. Now, Beah imagines his father running home from work and his mother running to pick up his little brother during the attack.

Despite their rocky relationship, Beah loves his father and is deeply worried for his safety, as he is for his mother's. Beah wishes, of course, that he could have talked to his mother and father, and has a sense that something terrible may have happened to them, but does not yet imagine fully that they might have been killed, which speaks to his innocence. Instead, he imagines their fear as they searched for their children and save themselves.

The boys decide to head for Mogbwemo, despite the terror that is evident on the faces of the refugees and their warnings. The boys make it as far as Kabati, Beah's grandmother's village, which has been deserted, but what they see there makes them reconsider. A car drives into town, and out of it spills a bloodied man who had tried to escape with his family. Beah is horrified to see that the man's entire family is dead in the car. More refugees come through town, some of them carrying their dead children to the hospital as if they were still alive. Others are unaware that they are even wounded. Beah dreams that night for the first time of the war, and in the dream he is shot.

In their youth, the boys have yet to understand the danger they are putting themselves in. In going to find their parents, it is hard to imagine what it is that they think they might do to help them. The man in the car is their introduction to the horror of the war, and a clear sign of just how atrocious the rebels can and will be. Beah's dream, too, shows that he is already traumatized by a war that he has only just become acquainted with.

Utterly stunned at the violence and unable to comprehend its purpose, the boys decide not to head for Mogbwemo, but instead to return to Mattru Jong. Back in Mattru Jong, the boys continue to head to the wharf for news for a week, but the stream of refugees slows to a trickle and finally stops altogether. Government troops arrive, and the boys comfort each other by agreeing that the war cannot last, spreading a rumor that the army has already gone to flush the rebels out of the mines, and listening to rap music.

Understanding the danger they had put themselves in by even going to Kabati, the boys return to a relative safety, even though they know Mattru Jong is next on the rebel's list. Although what they have seen does not bode well for their parents, the boys, with each other's help, hold out hope, even thinking that the war might stop right on their doorstep. Their youthful innocence gives them hope, and they hide behind that hope.

To distance himself from what he has seen, Beah remembers his grandmother's directive to "be like the **moon**," as the moon always makes people happy. Beah has always followed her advice, and as a boy, spends much of his time contemplating the moon and seeing images in its surface as one does with clouds. In the present in New York City, Beah is pleased to know that something of his younger self remains, since he can still look with the same the pleasure that he once did at the moon.

Nature here is shown to be a good role model, one Beah must reach to in the absence of his parents' guidance and love. As he is writing the memoir, Beah knows that despite all he has seen and done, that he can still look at the moon as he did as a little boy.

CHAPTER 2

Beah opens the second chapter as he wheelbarrows a body wrapped in a sheet through the carnage of a recently attacked town. He does not know why he is in the town, or if he is wounded, even though blood is running off of him, and he is carrying a rifle. He feels no pain. When he gets to the cemetery he begins to lose strength, but unwraps the body anyways, to find the body is himself, riddled with bullet holes. Beah awakes in the present from what turns out to have been a dream. He has fallen from his bed onto the floor.

By relating his dream without telling the reader that he is dreaming, Beah gives us a sense of just how inescapable his past is. To Beah, what he has seen and witnessed is always with him as if it were happening right then and there, especially when he is dreaming. The dream itself is horribly surreal, and a metaphor for how war destroys a person: in it, or even how a person in a war destroys himself. After all, in the dream, Beah is burying himself.

Beah gets up from the floor. He has been living in New York City for a month. He tries to think about his new life, but cannot escape his memories. He is haunted by a memory of shooting an armed group outside a coffee farm and eating the food they'd been carrying while their bodies bled out. He fears falling back asleep, but does not like being awake either, and cannot wait for the daytime, so he can return to his new life.

Although Beah is now an ocean away from the war and is safe, he is still haunted by what he has seen and done. And now for the first time the reader understands that Beah wasn't just surrounded by killing; during the war, he was a killer, too. Any time alone, even the precious time when he is sleeping, is dangerous, because it is enough time to be revisited by what he has seen and done. Hi past is not as inescapable as the dream implies, however, as his new life does offer him hope, a future, and allows him a respite from his horrible dreams and memories.

CHAPTER 3

Back in Mattru Jong, the boys continue to wait for news of their families. The rebels are in Sumbuya, a town twenty miles to the northeast of Mattru Jong. The rebels send letters carried by people they spared in Sumbuya, telling the people of Mattru Jong to welcome the rebels. The carriers have been branded by the rebels and had their fingers chopped off, with the exception of their thumb, a reference to the habit the people of Sierra Leone have of raising a thumb to each other to signify 'one love,' which is in turn a reference to Bob Marley and reggae music.

Though the message the rebels send says that they want to be welcomed, the way they've treated the messengers seem to indicate otherwise. The brutal act of leaving the thumbs of the messengers so that they inadvertently make the sign of welcome and "one love" points to a sense that the rebels will "force" their welcome; that they will make the villagers welcome them. It also points to the rebels twisted logic and brute viciousness.

Many of the people of Mattru Jong, in response, go to hide in the forest that very night. The boys are asked to stay in town to watch the property of the family with which they are staying, though. As more messengers arrive, more people go into hiding. The empty town is scary to Beah, who notices that bird and crickets won't sing and that the **moon** isn't in the sky. But the rebels don't arrive when they say they will, and after ten days, the people of Mattru Jong return to their village.

Although the rebels' tardiness ought to be expected, as it gives them no advantage to tell the truth about their arrival, in only a week the people of Mattru Jong move back in. Just as the boys don't want to deal with the fact that their parents may be dead, neither do the people of Mattru Jong want to believe they are in danger, or that they are putting their own children in danger. Nature seems to take more seriously the threat being posed to the people of Mattru Jong.

When the rebels do arrive sometime after, the people of Mattru Jong run wildly, not stopping to grab their things or even their children. The rebels dance into town, driving townspeople towards the river, while the boys run to where they think the army will be, only to find that they had abandoned their posts somehow in advance of the rebel's attack.

The people of Mattru Jong are utterly unprepared for the inevitable attack. That the soldiers have left before the rebels even come, all without telling anyone, points both to a sense that the soldiers might not be able to convince anyone to actually leave but also points at the government forces own failure as a fighting force.

Those who haven't run into the river (many of whom drown) head for the one escape route out of town, a swamp, followed by a hill and a clearing. The rebels, who want to use the civilians as human shields and the boys as soldiers, begin shooting. The boys escape, but many people, including the handicapped, are left behind, and one man close to them is hit by a rocket-propelled grenade and the surrounding foliage is showered with his remains.

So far the war has affected the boys as terrible rumors of destruction and maimed people from other villagers (who the boys may never have seen). Now they are faced directly and immediately with the horrors of war. And they are forced to make awful decisions: to even help another person would be to risk losing one's own life, and so the boys just run.

The rebels continue to chase the boys into the bush. The boys run for more than an hour, and on the backs of their adrenaline Beah notes that he didn't get tired or even sweat. Junior calls out for Beah, trying to make sure he is still nearby, and Beah can hear one of the other boys making the noises of someone who is trying not to cry.

The boys' unnatural endurance reflects the brutal intensity of their situation. Already the boys are entirely alone, without anyone to guide them or talk to them about the horror that they have seen. As the boy trying not to cry indicates, they are already trying to repress these feelings, to not react to them as a matter of safety (i.e. being quiet) and emotional survival (because they can't deal with the pain of it).

CHAPTER 4

For several days the boys continue to walk, eventually finding more survivors. Beah wants to know what his brother is thinking, but doesn't ask. He wonders where his family is, and if they are safe. He would cry, but he is too hungry. The boys sleep in abandoned villages, hoping to find something beyond the occasional fruit to eat. In the end, they feel they have no choice but to go back into Mattru Jong to get some money so they can buy food.

The boys are unable to put words to their shared horror, and are unsure of what they can do for each other. But if the horror of war is terrible, their hunger may be even worse. The boys are willing to risk their lives, as Mattru Jong is sure to be dangerous, in order to get something to eat.

The town appears to be abandoned, although there is a great deal of carnage. Beah vomits when he sees two male corpses with their limbs and genitals chopped off. The boys almost run into some rebels, but manage to avoid detection. When they get to Khalilou's house, they find it has been ransacked, and that there is no food, but that their money was still in a plastic bag at the foot of the bed.

The rebels have not bothered to clean up after themselves, and what Beah sees drives him to be physically sick. Though they are clearly in danger, and the town appears to be picked clean, the boys are hungry enough that they do not turn back. That the money is even there is a minor miracle, though it also shows, perhaps, that the rebels aren't after money: they are after terror and domination.

The boys take the money and exit the town through the swamp and head for the clearing, the only way out of town. They must crawl through the clearing, and among the dead bodies, to avoid detection, because there are rebel guards in a tower that overlooks the clearing. They cross in three groups. Nearly everyone makes it safely, until a boy trying to carry a heavy bag full of things from his house through the clearing is seen by the rebels. He refuses to leave the bag, and the boys run, leaving him behind.

The boys do what they must, crawling among the carnage in order to escape. Though nearly all of the boys seem to understand the danger they are in, the boy with the bag is unable to let go of his former life. His sentimentality almost certainly gets him killed or captured.

The boys are somewhat happy to have some money with which to buy food, and coming upon a village, they go to the market. But no one is selling food anymore, as they are saving it in case things get worse. The money is worthless. That night, the boys steal food from the villagers who are asleep.

In a state of war, money ceases to be valuable. And themselves caught in the impossible situation of war, the boys almost immediately are forced to turn to theft in order to survive. This speaks to the boy's adaptability and survival instinct.

CHAPTER 5

The boys' hunger starts to get extreme. It hurts to even drink water. They chase a five year old who has two ears of corn so that they can share it between the six of them. The mother of the boy they chased gives them each an ear of corn that night, but Beah says he felt guilty only briefly.

In the face of such starvation, the boys will do anything for food. Beah doesn't have the time or energy for guilt. The woman's action shows that she thinks that the boys shouldn't be held accountable for stealing. No one else is willing to give the refugees food, after all.

Feeling again that they have nowhere to go, as the boys do not know where they could possibly go, the boys head back to Mattru Jong. But they are captured by rebels before they even get there, outside a village. None of the rebels are older than 21. The boys are so scared that the rebels laugh, and Beah tries not to faint. All he can think about is death. Two of the rebels run ahead to the village, and the third, laughing, threatens to shoot all of them if they make any sudden movements.

It's unclear what the boy's plan is in heading for Mattru Jong, besides perhaps to find some food there, but they are desperate enough to try anything, despite what they've seen there. The rebels are portrayed throughout as laughing, almost playful. What is horrible to the boys is humorous to these rebels, which makes them all the more terrifying to the boys and speaks to the ways that these young soldiers have been completely desensitized to violence and enjoy the power it gives them.

The rebels gather the villagers and the boys in a compound as darkness descends. An old man walks into town and they capture him, too, and force him to his knees in front of the villagers, and then tell him to get up, demanding that the boys laugh at the man. One rebel asks the old man why he left Mattru Jong. The man answers that he left to find his family, and the rebel says that no, he left because he was against their cause as freedom fighters. The old man begins to cry. Beah wonders what cause the rebels could stand for.

Although the rebel claims to be fighting for freedom, his hypocrisy is apparent to Beah. The rebel is denying their freedom while also claiming to fight for freedom. The rebels enjoy torturing the old man because of his terror. At the moment these rebels seem almost like aliens to Beah. Not long from now he will be exactly like them.

The rebel asks the old man if he has any last words. The rebel then fires his gun over the old man's head. The old man thinks he's been shot and screams "My head! My brains!" while the rebels laugh at him.

That the rebels would laugh at an old man thinking he'd been shot in the head exemplifies their horrifying sense of humor. But it is again necessary to realize that these rebels were once also boys; they have been conditioned to act this way.

The rebels then announce that they will be taking recruits. The rebels look over the boys, and pick only Junior. A rebel announces that everyone else will be killed to make the new recruits strong. Beah looks to Junior; both of them are crying. A rebel laughs and tells the recruits that "the next killing is on you."

In what could be his last moments Beah looks to his brother for some sort of comfort, but finds none. The horror is so overwhelming there is nothing to say. The rebels laugh at everyone's fear. Forcing the recruits to kill will separate them from their former lives, fill them with shame and despair which, will leave them no path back but only further into becoming heartless soldiers. It is likely these rebels were forced into being soldiers in just the same way. It is a brutal cycle.

The rebels force the villagers and the boys to kneel by the river and put their hands to their heads. Then gunshots are heard from the bush, and rebels begin firing back. Everyone runs. Beah escapes, but continues to hear the cries of those who do not escape for hours afterward. The village is set on fire.

Although he's been delivered momentarily from a terrible end, Beah again finds his life in limbo, with no choice but to hope he is spared, in this case as he waits in the forest.

Beah waits in the forest for an hour, and then can hear the whispering of the other boys who escaped, including Junior. The boys begin walking toward the village they'd initially gone to after Mattru Jong was attacked. The boys only speak once they've reached the village, and there they agree to go somewhere very far from the war.

After repeatedly putting themselves in harm's way by staying so close to the front, the boys have begun to understand more fully that there is nothing in the vicinity of their home worth sticking around for.

CHAPTER 6

Beah explains that being in a large group of boys was not to their advantage. In addition to being easy to spot, the boys are often mistaken for rebel boys and are chased or even attacked by villagers hoping to repel them. Beah says that one day they were captured by villagers, and that the only thing that saved them was the rap **cassette** in his pocket. The chief of the village, intrigued by the music, asks after the boys past, finds out they are from Mattru Jong, and summons a boy from the same town, who recognizes them.

Despite the fact that the boys are refugees and have been subjected to terrible violence, that they are greeted with terror signals how boys have been made into almost demonic soldiers in this war. It is only once the appearance of the cassette suggests that these really are boys, with the concerns and cares of boys, that the villagers respond to them as boys. Of course, this also suggests that the boy soldiers are in a way no longer boys, and don't have the cares of boys.

The townspeople let the boys go, feed them, and offer to let them stay, but the boys say no, knowing that the rebels will soon reach this village, too. They walk on, and Beah notices that the sky looks dull and that the trees sway hesitantly. In the next village, Beah looks to Junior, hoping that he will speak of what is troubling him, but all he gets is a smile that quickly dissipates.

The boys seem to have learned that the war will come, whether or not the villagers understand that. Nature has lost some of its luster for Beah. With overwhelming sadness he looks to his brother for some kind of hope or companionship, but in the face of the horror of war the boys have nothing to offer each other.

Beah remembers when Junior tried to teach him how to skip a stone on a river. Coming back from the river, Beah had tripped, spilling the water he was carrying. His brother had gone back to the river for more water and asked him if he was okay. Thinking back, Beah wishes that his brother would ask him again how he was feeling, but doesn't know how to break the silence himself and in the present, Beah wishes he himself had asked Junior how he was feeling.

Beah's sense of responsibility for his brother's well-being, and his brother's for his, is compromised by the horror of what they have seen. Language is inadequate for addressing the horrors of war. Nonetheless, Beah wishes he and his brother could do something for each other.

The following morning, a large group passes through, and one of them knows Gibrilla and tells him his aunt is in a village thirty miles from them, Kamator. Although the village is in territory held by the rebels, the boys head there and, in return for food and shelter, act as sentries for the village. The boys do this for a month, but there is no sign of the rebels, and despite the boys' protests, the townspeople order the boys to farm. Farming is extremely hard on the boys. They are asked to clear extremely thick brush, and do a poor job. They are then asked to plant cassava. They do this for three months.

Beah and his friends are always whipsawing between the desire for safety and the desire for companionship and a steady supply of food. Going to Kamator puts them back in danger, but will also bring Gibrilla closer to his family, and the boys opt for the latter. Having seen the horror of war, they seem to understand that having no sentries is a terrible idea, but the people of Kamator don't listen. It seems like those who have not experienced the war can't imagine it ever actually reaching them.

CHAPTER 7

The rebels come into town suddenly, in the middle of the last prayer of the day. When they find each other later, having escaped, Kaloko tells Beah how at the mosque, everyone realized the rebels had come into town, and so they filed out while the imam continued the prayer. When the rebels came to the imam, he wouldn't tell the rebels where everyone was hiding. So the rebels tied him to a post and set him on fire.

As brave as the imam's actions are, the rebels are just as deplorable. The rebels have no respect for religion, and just as little for other's pain. Part of the horror of the Sierra Leone war—and perhaps by extension the horror of child soldiers—is that the soldiers have been raised or brainwashed to not have respect for anything. *It is as if the children's innocence has been turned inside out.*

When the rebels enter the town, Beah runs from the house he is staying at for the bush, not having time to find his brother. Eventually Beah finds Kaloko, who tells him, with great pain, about the imam. But they do not find Gibrilla, Junior, Talloi or Khalilou. Beah despairs that he will lose everyone, and remembers his father's blessing, long ago, to a new home they were moving into: "that my family will always be together."

Beah's luck appears to be getting worse. As if losing his mother, father, and younger brother wasn't enough, he now appears to have lost nearly all of his friends. The war's devastation is extensive and can reach anyone. Beah's memories of his family only serve to remind him of what he no longer has.

The boys hide for two weeks in a swamp, returning every three days to the village to see if anyone else had returned. But the village is silent, birds and crickets do not sing, and Beah is afraid of the wind. Eventually dogs come for the body of the imam.

Beah and Kaloko hope to find the people they have lost, but to no avail. Just as everyone has abandoned the village, so has nature.

Beah decides to leave, finally, as he is tired of the constant danger. Kaloko decides to stay, as he is afraid that by leaving the swamp, they're putting themselves at even more risk. Beah walks for five days, alone, without encountering anyone.

Beah feels, on some level, that it was a mistake to come back east, in striking distance of the rebels, even if it meant shelter and some hospitality. His choice to strike out leaves him completely without companions.

Beah survives on cassava, until one day he is too tired and hungry, and decides to climb a coconut tree, which he has never been able to do before. To his own surprise, he does so without difficulty. When Beah tries to go back up for more after gorging himself on the juice, he finds he now cannot do so, to his own astonishment and humor. He hasn't laughed in a long time.

Beah's laughter is just as remarkable as his sudden skill with tree climbing, and subsequent evaporation of that skill. Despite the horrible things he has seen and all he has lost, Beah can still be surprised by himself and the world around him.

After six days of walking, Beah comes in contact with a family. He tries to be friendly, but it is plain that the man can't afford to trust him. Beah asks the man's advice for how to get to an island, Bonthe, which is rumored to be safe, but the man simply tells him to head for the ocean.

In the civil war, even children, or especially children, are not to be trusted. It is sad for Beah not to be able to take pleasure in meeting a person, but there is no telling what anyone's intentions are, and Beah knows he will have to continue to be alone for the foreseeable future.

CHAPTER 8

Beah walk for two days without sleeping, feeling not only that's he's being followed, but that even the air might attack him. Mutilated bodies he encounters in abandoned villages haunt him, and he doesn't even bother to look for food. On the third day Beah climbs into a tree and rests there, and the next morning becomes determined to get out of the forest.

Even nature, which he has so often looked to for comfort, now seems threatening to Beah. He is so worried for his safety and so tired that he can't even take care of his own sustenance.

Beah, however, goes in circles. When he stops, he is haunted again by the images in his head. Beah realizes he is totally lost, and so begins to mark his surroundings so he can at least find his way back to his sleeping spot. His only companion is a snake near a river that he steers clear of.

Just as there appears to be no escaping the horrible things he has seen, there appears to be no way to get out of the forest. Nature not only appears threatening, it is threatening, in the form of the snake, and Beah knows even here, away from war, he must be careful.

Beah finds some fruit he's never seen before that birds are eating, and figures even if it is poisonous, he's hungry enough to try it. As he eats, Beah remembers a medicinal plant his grandfather gave him that improved memory retention, and to this day, Beah says he has excellent photographic memory. Beah looks around for some other medicinal plants in case the fruit makes him sick, but finds none.

Beah is desperate enough to eat food he's never even seen before in a strange forest. Beah's hope that he might find something medicinal in case he get sick is almost casual. He is too tired to be afraid, or he has seen too much.

Beah's loneliness only gives him more time with his memories. Beah is even afraid to sleep because of his dreams. Beah continues to try to find his way out of the forest, but in doing so, only gets himself deeper into the forest. He encounters a group of wild pigs. He manages to climb a tree to avoid them, but when he comes down, more appear and chase him. He finally finds a tree to climb, and the pigs give up trying to get to him as night descends.

Beah's incredible memory is at this point perhaps more a curse than a gift, and coupled with his loneliness, proves to be almost too much. He presses on more to have something to do than to find his way out. Nature, in the form of the wild pigs, is again shown to be just as dangerous as it is beautiful.

Beah gets down and continues walking in the night. He steps on a snake and then runs. His father's advice: "if you are alive, there is hope for a better day," carries him through the night. Beah spends a month in the forest before finding people.

Although Beah is alone, the memory of his father here pushes him on when even nature seems to have turned against him.

Beah encounters six boys at a junction, three of whom are from Mattru Jong: Alhaji, Musa, and Kanei. The other three are Saidu, Moriba and Jumah. The boys tell Beah that they are heading to a village called Yele to the south, where the army is supposed to be stationed. Beah feels uncomfortable initially around the boys, even terrified, as initially he mistakes them for rebels before he recognizes them.

Beah's first encounter with people in a month is fraught, and not just because Beah is paranoid. He knows that anyone could be out to get him. Even other children are dangerous, and it's almost as if Beah is scared by his reflection.

Beah knows it is unsafe to be with such a large group, but is lonely enough that he doesn't care anymore. They are regularly mistaken for rebels, and Beah says sometimes when this happened they would run after the people who had mistaken them, yelling that they weren't what the people thought, which, of course, only made them more scared. No one will give them directions.

Beah's experience with traveling as a group has taught him that no one will trust them, and that people's first reaction may be to protect themselves by killing the boys. Nor is there much the boys can do to persuade them. Their insistence that they mean no harm aren't all that different from the rebel's claims in Mattru Jong that they wanted to be welcomed, after all.

They come upon a village that everyone has abandoned, having heard seven boys are coming. Only an old man who lacks the strength to flee remains. When he sees they don't mean trouble, the old man remarks on the sad times when boys can't be welcomed into a village, and then asks the boys to cook him some yams. He seems to understand his time is coming. In return for the cooking, the man gives them directions to Yele.

The only person who comes to trust the boys in their travels is one who cannot run and seems to have accepted death. Although the boys have directions now, the way they have been treated does not bode well for their chances of being accepted elsewhere.

CHAPTER 9

As the boys are walking one day, they hear an unidentifiable roar. Terrified but curious, the boys go to find out what the noise is. It turns out to be the ocean, much to the boys' wonder and delight. The boys play in the sand on the beach, forgetting their troubles momentarily.

Nature is again wondrous and mysterious for the boys, allowing them to act as what they are, boys. The boys are not preoccupied with their past, or what they will do next, but enjoying the moment.

The boys see huts in the distance, and run to them hopefully, but are surprised to find them empty. Then villagers with machetes and fishing spears spring from behind the huts. The boys protest that they are harmless, but are tied up and taken to the village's chief.

Nature proves to be distracting, again, and in their delight, the boys fail to be as cautious as they otherwise might have been. Even this far from the war, people appear to have heard rumors of the danger of children.

The villagers rip the clothes the boys use to cover their feet and chase them onto the sand, which is hot enough to burn the boys' feet, as the temperature in the middle of the day is over 120 degrees. The boys would walk closer to the water, but the waves are dangerously large.

The villagers assume guilt, and send the boys to a cruel fate. What was beautiful and awesome to the boys is now dangerous and painful.

The boys walk in great pain till sunset, the soles of their feet bleeding. Finally, the tearful boys come upon a hut, go inside and sit down, the flesh of their feet having separated from the sole. The man whose hut it is sees the boys' suffering and brings them food and has them heat their feet over some sort of grass, which lessens the pain, and gives them some ointment. It turns out he is from the village they were just chased from.

The kindness of the man is exceptional. Few others are able to see and respond to the boys' pain, which is readily obvious, because of their own fear of the rebels. At his own risk, the man gives the boys shelter.

As the boys' feet heal, Beah notices that when they talk about their past, it is only about school and soccer, and never about their families. After four nights, the pain in his feet starts to subside. The boys stay in the hut for a week, which is only half a mile from the village they were chased out of. The man takes them to the ocean, and encourages them to soak their feet in the saltwater to help the healing. The boys are envious of the man, who is getting married soon, and seems to be very content with his life near the ocean. The man, for his part, is shocked by the boys' story and how far they have traveled.

There is too much pain in their loss to confront yet, and so the boys stick to a more emotionally shallow kind of relationship in order to keep each other going. The man's kindness to the boys makes them feel a great deal of affection for him. He is also the only person, so far, to ask the boys for their full story—to be interested in them as human beings. Nature is now a healer, and is proving ultimately, to be capricious, rather than an agent of good or bad.

One morning, after two weeks in the man's hut, an old woman comes to the hut and tells the boys that the people of the village had found out they were there, and that the boys must run. But the boys are caught. Beah tries to show the men that he means no harm by giving up and offering his hands to be tied, but the men cannot risk anything, and approach him as if he were a rebel.

But as with all the comfort and kindness the boys might get, this instance of it must end as well. Despite the fact that they have done nothing to harm the villagers and are only children, the boys are treated like villains.

Beah knows, as they are brought in front of the chief, that he is unlikely to find someone from Mattru Jong among the villagers, which was what saved him the last time he was captured. The chief tells them they will be thrown into the ocean, and has his men undress the boys. As they are doing so, Beah's rap **cassette** fall out of his pockets. The chief wants to hear it, and when he does, he is intrigued by it. Beah explains rap music to him, and how he used to dance with his brothers, and the chief asks him to show him.

This is the second time the cassette has saved Beah from a gruesome fate at the hands of villagers protecting themselves. That Beah has the cassette indicates his interest in music, which then suggests some aspect of his humanity and status as a child, which immediately softens the villagers stance toward him. The cassette therefore functions as a kind of real-world symbol of Beah's past and childhood, which as we will see later in the book are exactly the things that child soldiers seem to have had stripped from them.

Beah, for once, does not enjoy the dancing. He is thinking of being thrown into the ocean, and is not dancing with his brother, Junior. But the chief begins to relax, and starts to understand he really is just dealing with boys. He lets the boys go, and the boys laugh to avoid crying.

Beah is not sure of what the chief will think, but he does not like having to dance for him. That Beah must do this, despite his malnutrition, despite that he is unarmed, all just to show he is only a child, shows how distrustful the people of Sierra Leone have become.

CHAPTER 10

Beah looks upon the **moon** one night, noticing how it is often covered by clouds, but continues to shine all night long. Beah thinks his journey is like that of the moon, except, of course, worse. Beah then thinks about how Saidu said each time they are attacked, it feels like a part of him dies. Bea worries that he too is slowly dying.

Beah feels, on the one hand, how much fortitude and courage he has shown, when he thinks of the moon, and on the other hand, how much he has lost and his fear that he will lose more. He is always swinging from hope to despair.

On the other hand, Beah knows that there are the times that good things happen, and that they are kept afloat by these times, like the one where some men not only welcomed them to their village, but invited them to go hunting and the subsequent feast. While lying in a hammock in the village before the meal, Beah remembers laying in his grandmother's hammock, and again is swept up by his memories of his family.

The kindness of these villagers mirrors that of the man in the hut by the sea, but it also sparks heartbreaking memories of good times with his family that he fears he will never have again. The fact that there is a danger in kindness in the sense that kindness makes you feel, will be evident later in the book as well.

After the meal, there is singing and dancing. The boys stay up all night, but leave in the morning, buoyed, but only for a moment, by the generosity of the villagers, who have even given them some meat for their journey.

The boys are allowed to be boys again, and are treated with the affection one would give to strangers in a safer place, and that which children, especially orphans, deserve.

As the others boys fall asleep that night, Beah remembers how wonderful his name-giving ceremony was, how safe he felt to be welcomed into his community. In the morning, the meat is gone. The boys blame each other, only to find it was a dog who had gotten into their meat. As the boys walk on, Alhaji says angrily that he should've killed the dog and eaten it, and the other boys are surprised and worried by his aggression. But Musa agrees, saying that Malaysians eat dogs, and that his father would have been fine with him eating what he had to.

As often seems to happen, the good times bring Beah back to memories of what he lost. However, the bickering over the lost meat reflects that the boys, in the end, sometimes feel that they cannot even trust each other. That the boys consider the possibility of eating dog meat, while repulsive, reflects the desperation and the collapse of morality that the boys are experiencing.

The boys begin to tell each other of their last day in Mattru Jong. Musa ran out of his town with his mother and father, but his mother was somehow left behind, and when his father went back to get her, the rebels attacked, and Musa left. Alhaji ran to his house, to find it empty. Kanei made it across the river that many had drowned in, and had heard his mother and father had escaped. Jumah and Moriba had lost their parents. Saidu's sisters were raped, and all of the rest of his family kidnapped, while he hid in the attic.

The boys have held back talking about their families, and about their last day in Mattru Jong, and it becomes clear now why. Not just because what happened was horrible, but because there doesn't seem to be much that they can do but tell of the horrors they themselves have seen. The boys understand each other's pain, but are no more hopeful or happy for having told their stories.

Beah says that the **moon** followed them at night, but that it also hid at night behind clouds so it couldn't see the terrible things happening. One day, a crow falls out of the sky, dead, and although this seems ominous to the boys, the boys eat it. After they are done, silence overtakes the surrounding nature.

Beah imagines that even nature is afraid of the civil war in Sierra Leone, and Beah no longer looks to the moon as a model for his behavior. The boys are cautious about eating a dead animal falling from the sky, and rightfully so, but just as Beah was desperate enough to eat strange fruit, so the boys are now.

That night is too dark for Beah, ominously so, but the boys must walk on. At a bridge, they hide from some strangers, but are not found. When the strangers move on, the boys cannot find Saidu, and when they do, he is lying there unmoving. Someone says that maybe it was the bird they ate. As night turns rapidly to morning, the boy decide they will have to carry Saidu, but as they do, he awakes, telling the other boys the strangers were ghosts.

The boys' experience with the strangers at the bridge and Saidu's collapse is horribly strange. There is no simple explanation available to the boys for his collapse, given that all the boys had some of the bird. Saidu's exclamation about ghosts adds to the strangeness: even if none of it is true, the boys' paranoia and fear is obvious.

The boys come upon a village, the largest they have been in. They see familiar faces, a woman even comes and tells them that she recognizes them and has seen Junior, and that Beah's mother and father are two days' walk away. Beah is elated. That night they steal a pot of rice and cassava leaves, but Beah cannot sleep that night, feeling something is not right. Dogs begin to cry in an eerily human way, and in the morning, Saidu is silent and unmoving again. This time he has passed away.

Despite the horrible foreshadowing, things appear to be looking up for the boys, and they allow themselves to hope. But by night time, there are more omens, and by the morning, Saidu is dead. The boys do not speculate much about what killed Saidu, or worry if they themselves will get sick, as they are too overcome with sadness.

Beah cannot believe Saidu has died. He thinks at first that he has simply fainted and will get up soon. But then Saidu is buried, and Beah understands. He remembers Saidu saying how he was dying slowly. The dogs cry again that night. The boys decide to walk on, sobbing, wondering who will die next.

Beah hopes that his friend might yet be alive. Despite all he has seen, each new loss hurts as much as the last for Beah. War has cut the boys off from everything—from their families and from hope.

CHAPTER 11

When the boy stop that night, Moriba, who was Saidu's closest friend, begins to sob. Everyone else cries as well, but only for a short while. They then continue on without speaking.

Any time not spent looking for food is time potentially fatally wasted, and the boys do not feel guilty for not having honored his memory longer.

Despite their loss, the boys feel surely that in the village they are headed to they will find their families. They even allow themselves to laugh and tease each other. The next night there is an intense storm, but the boys laugh it off. Soon they are so close to the village that they can hear the sounds of town life.

Yet again, the boys find it in themselves to hope and be like boys. Even nature's capriciousness doesn't bother them. For once, it seems their hope and hardiness will pay off and they will be reunited with what they've lost.

At a banana farm, they come across a man whom Beah recognizes from Mogbwemo, Gasemu. He asks them to help carry some bananas to the village and tells Beah that his parents and brothers will be happy to see him. They stop at the top of a hill just above the village to rest before heading down, though Beah wants to sprint ahead.

After months of being denied the people he loves most dearly, Beah feels that he cannot wait another minute to get to them, although he does. There seems to be no harm in taking their time.

As they are coming down the hill, gunshots ring out, and people begin screaming. Smoke rises above the village. Gasemu tries to stop him, but Beah runs ahead to the village. The entire village is on fire, and in one house, people are being burned alive. Beah tries to let them out, but the woman and child who run who run out burn to death. Beah can hear Gasemu screaming, and runs to where he is to find that the rest of the village has been lined up and shot.

The possibility that his family was alive was all that Beah had left to live for, and that he runs to the village when there is a good chance it is swarming with rebels shows as much. The gruesome deaths he witnesses are further proof of the rebel's cruelty, and Beah must know already on some level that his family might have suffered similarly.

Beah runs around the village, trying to find his family, but the bodies are all too disfigured and burnt to make them out. Gasemu points out the hut where his family had been staying, but it is torched. Beah falls down in shock, gets back up, and runs into the still-burning house to try to find some sign of his family, but there is only ash, and Beah begins to kick at the burning structure and wail. He is dragged away from the house by the other boys.

There seems to be no limit to how horrible Beah's experience with war can be. To have been so close to being reunited with his family, only to have them burned alive just as he is coming to see them, is hellish, and Beah's reaction reflects that this particular horror goes beyond injustice into unimaginable cruelty.

Beah is enraged at Gasemu for having them stop at the top of the hill. Beah would have rather made it to the village in time to see his family and have been killed with them than not see them at all. He tries to choke Gasemu, and when he is thrown off, he grabs a pestle and hits Gasemu with it.

Not only does Beah not regard his life as worth living, he would've rather suffered the same horrifying fate as his family than not see them at all. Beah has not been violent before, either, but the loss of his family drives him to such despair that he does not care for the well-being of Gasemu

The boys pin Beah to the ground and argue over whether or not it is Gasemu's fault that they didn't get to see their families. The boys fight in the ruins of the village, but Gasemu pulls them apart sadly, saying it is no one's fault. Beah is again enraged by Gasemu's placidness and insistence that there is no blame to be assigned.

With no one else to turn their rage against over the unfairness of their lives, they turn on each other. Gasemu, even if he is right, has earned Beah's ire for not getting them to the town fast enough.

Ten rebels walk into the village, none of whom are much older than Beah. The boys hide. The rebels are high-fiving one another, and one of them is carrying a severed head. They sit down to smoke marijuana and play cards, bragging about the three villages they slaughtered. One of them remarks proudly that this village in particular was an accomplishment, as no one had escaped. After a few hours of chatting like this, one of the rebels surprises the boys by firing his gun in the air, and when one of the boys jumps in surprise, the rebels notice and come after them.

The casual way the rebels talk about the violence reflect just how used they are to inflicting pain. Their remarks leave no hope for Beah and the other boys of being reunited with their families. The rebels seem like boys in the way that they live in the moment, and yet their interests have been warped from innocent pursuits to a devotion to violence.

The boys run for hours with Gasemu's encouragement, which continues to enrage Beah. Beah says that the **moon** disappeared and made the sky cry, which saved him from the bullets. When they finally stop, Beah is disturbed to hear Gasemu crying. He is wounded badly, bleeding horribly from a wound in his side. Although in great pain, Gasemu shows them the way back to the path before passing away. Beah wonders what dying was like and feels horrible for hitting Gasemu with the pestle.

Beah is angry at Gasemu, as he seems to actually be handling his loss well. Beah is sure that night that the only thing that saves him is the night sky lacking a moon; his reference to the sky crying might be to rain, but it isn't totally clear. In the end, Beah's cruelty to Gasemu now makes him feel guilty. He knows Gasemu couldn't have known the village would be attacked, and that he only meant well.

CHAPTER 12

The boys walk for what Beah says must have been days, when they are confronted by two men with guns. The men walk them through a gauntlet of soldiers, at the end of which are four dead bodies in uniform, one with his entrails spilling out and another with his head smashed in. A soldier tells them they'll get used to it without explaining himself. The soldiers rush the boys to boats on the river while rebels begin to attack.

That the boys aren't killed immediately by the soldiers is the good news. The bad news is that these men—while they don't seem to be rebels—don't seem all that inclined to protect the boys either. The man's comment that the boys will "get used to" the blood and gore indicates that he expects the boys to see more of it. It is a bit of foreboding of what is to become.

The soldiers are from the government, and they take the boys to Yele, the town the boys had once hoped to reach. The boys feel safe at first, as the town seems free from worry and violence, despite it being an army base. There are over 30 orphan boys like Beah, who live in an unfinished cement house and help with the cooking. Beah tries to keep himself busy to ward off bad memories and migraines, but even playing soccer reminds him of his family, and so he spends time alone with the horrifying scenes, imagined and real, that play out in his head.

Despite the early danger, it seems as if the boys might finally have found safety. This might, in spite of everything, be enough for some of the boys, who return to soccer and other child-like activities without trouble. Beah, however, finds no respite from the horror, and cannot bring himself to enjoy playing.

One day the villagers become anxious as the soldiers appear to be preparing for war. Their lieutenant, Jabati, gives a speech that the boys try to eavesdrop on unsuccessfully. Jabati sees Beah watching him, and the two talk. Jabati is reading Shakespeare's "Julius Caesar" while the soldiers watch war movies. Beah is familiar with Shakespeare, and the lieutenant and Beah recite the monologue that begins "Cowards die many times before their deaths" together. In the middle of the night the soldiers go off to fight, and the boys can hear the gunfire in the distance. The **moon** shows its face in Beah's window, and no one is at play.

The boys are again at a loss as to what is happening, and no one feels the need to tell the orphans if they are in danger or not. In the Shakespeare quote over which Beah bonds with the lieutenant, Caesar expounds on the necessity of courage as he refuses to listen to his wife and goes to face the Senate (where he will be stabbed to death). With the soldiers off to fight, the boys cannot help but remember how close to them war. In war, Beah sees none of the shapes that he used to in the moon, and does not look to it as a model.

Few soldiers return the next day, and those that do hold their heads in their hands or hold their guns close. Jabati is on the radio all day, and then some reinforcements arrive, to his relief. They head off for war immediately. The war gets closer and closer to the village as the days go on, and soldiers return for ammo, or with the wounded, who die in surgery. They never bring back the dead. The lieutenant gathers the villagers in the square and announces that the village is no longer safe, and that there is in fact no safe way out. He says that any boys and men who wish to stay must fight, and anyone who leaves or does not help will receive no rations.

The boys' safety seems to be in jeopardy, and that of the soldiers is nonexistent. Jabati's choice to tell the villagers that they are surrounded without giving anyone a choice seems intentionally coercive. Clearly he means to recruit these civilians into the army by force: while not quite as violent as the rebels, the army soldiers are here revealed as not much better, either.

The next day, the villagers gather again, and before assigning the villagers their tasks, Jabati shows them the bodies of two people who decided to flee, as a way of discouraging further flight. Reminding the villagers of the horrible things the rebels have done, he pleads with them to fight for their lives. Everyone is assigned their tasks, and the boys are all outfitted with guns, which they are terrified of.

Although it is possible that the rebels killed the people, the fact that the soldiers managed to get possession of the bodies points to the opposite, as the soldiers have never before tried to bring back their dead. This would indeed indicate that the Lieutenant is coercing the boys into fighting for him and the rest of the village into working for him.

That night Beah the boys don't speak or play, and Beah cannot sleep. In the morning, they are outfitted with new clothes, and Beah's pants are burned, with his rap **cassette** still in them. Beah must shake his tent mates, Sheiku and Josiah, awake and drag them from the tent. The boys are trained by Corporal Gadafi to army crawl and use hand signals. Beah remembers playing war as a child. The boys are encouraged to imagine the banana trees they are practicing with their bayonets on as the rebels who killed their families, and Beah takes an angry pleasure in doing so.

The boys appear to be on their way to being robbed of their boyhood for good. Beah's cassette, a symbol of his childhood, is torched. The boys, who are still so young as to need help waking up, are then literally trained as soldiers. And more than trained: the officers equate the enemy with the murderers of the boy's families in order to use the boys' rage at the loss of their families to get them to embrace violence in precisely the way that the army wants. In other words, to brainwash them.

CHAPTER 13

One Sunday, Jabati tells the boys to take the day off training, and to pray to their god, because they might not get another chance. The boys play soccer and swim in the river, and then are marched off to get their weapons. The boys are given headbands and instructed to shoot anyone who isn't wearing one of the same color, and the boys begin to understand they are in for real war. One of the boys falls over, overburdened by the ammunition he is carrying.

The boys don't understand at first what they are in for, playing as if they were in for more training. That one of the boys can't even carry his ammunition establishes both how ludicrous and tragic it is that these boys have been made into soldiers. It also shows how little the soldiers actually care about them as boys: what they care about is having numbers, not whether these boys live or die.

The boys agree to stick together no matter what, and then, as they move out, are given white pills which they are told will give them energy. Sheiku and Josiah drag their guns, as they are too heavy to carry, and in fact taller than the boys. Beah says he was never so afraid as he was that day. The soldiers form an ambush near a swamp. Beah says tears run down his face even though he is not crying.

The boys promise to each other is made without knowing what lies ahead, and is ultimately therefore useless, especially in light of how unprepared they are. If the boys can't even lift their guns, they are nothing more than targets. Beah's tears show that he has not been desensitized yet: he is still a boy, even if he is forced to act as a soldier.

The army attacks the rebels, and a gunfight ensues. Beah is in shock and unable to fire his gun, until he sees Josiah and Musa die. He tries to save Josiah, one of the youngest boys, standing up in the process, putting himself in extreme danger, although Josiah is clearly beyond help. Beah then begins to shoot angrily at the rebels, imagining all the horrible things rebels have.

Beah doesn't remark on the effectiveness of the ambush, or even understand what is going on around him. He is too horrified by the loss of his friends, especially Josiah, who is so young. And yet this pain and horror pushes him into anger as his "training" takes over and he channels his rage against the rebels into violence.

The fight goes on until nighttime, and the soldiers form another ambush, killing more rebels. The trees seem to be praying, and a cricket tries to sing, but no other crickets join in. Blood replaces the water of the swamp. After the battle, Beah kicks over bodies angrily and takes weapons and ammunition. He regrets dragging Josiah to training now that he is dead. Back at the village, Beah feels empty, and when he does sleep, he dreams of trying to save Josiah, only to be held at gunpoint by a rebel. When he wakes he shoots off an entire round of his magazine. Jabati and Gadafi throw some water in his face and give him more pills.

Beah is transformed remarkably quickly from a frightened child into a killer, with no regard at all for life or death. Nature, meanwhile, seems to have been overwhelmed by the violence. That Beah feels guilty about waking Josiah and has nightmares shows that a part of him is still horrified, but the army gives him pills to push him further into hopped-up anger—to cut him off further from his past and past-self.

CHAPTER 14

When Beah is not off fighting, he takes turns guarding the village. He regularly smokes marijuana and snorts *brown brown*, a combination of cocaine and gunpowder, and takes the white pills, which give him energy. He does so much in the way of drugs he doesn't sleep for weeks. The soldiers watch war movies like *Rambo*, *Rambo II*, and *Commando* at night. The boys want to be like Rambo.

The life of a boy soldier is that of constant stimulation. To stop, or to sleep, or to talk of anything but war, would be an opportunity for guilt and trauma to creep up on the boys. The only playfulness that they retain is their adulation for movie stars, but even that is warped into a desire to actually act out the characters' moves. Again, their innocence has been corrupted. Their adulation for their idols has been used to make them killers.

The army raids rebel camps for supplies, even if it is just gasoline so they can power generators and watch more movies, and go to villages to gather more recruits. Killing becomes easy for Beah, and he no longer thinks of death. After one fight, a prisoner spits in Lieutenant Jabati's face, and Beah shoots the man. The boys cheer. Beah is proud to be a part of something, rather than on the run, and is empowered by a speech the lieutenant gives extolling the boys' virtues.

The army is shown increasingly to be not much different from the rebels. There's little in the way of rules of war, and soldiers are encouraged to be as cold-blooded as possible. Beah and the other boys take this attitude to heart, cheering the murder of a defenseless prisoner. They look up to the lieutenant's brutality.

After that particular raid, Jabati has the boys practice killing prisoners. The boys are ordered to slit the throat of a designated prisoner while Jabati times them, and Beah does so without thinking about it or feeling any compassion for the prisoner. He does so the quickest, and is promoted to Junior Lieutenant. That night, as with every night, Beah could not sleep. Lansana's humming comes to him again, and Beah drives it away by firing his gun into the night.

What the boys are practicing for is unclear, as they are already experienced fighters. More likely is that the lieutenant enjoys murder and knows that the boys do to, and by turning it into a race, he shows himself to again be manipulating what boyhood they have left. Beah's gunshots show that he cannot stand the beauty of Lansana's humming, or to be reminded of his past. The only way he can stand to be with himself is if he focuses solely on the present and does not allow any connection to who he was.

CHAPTER 15

Beah fights as a child soldier for the government for two years. He thinks of nothing but war. In January of 1996, Beah, Alhaji and Kanei go to Bauya, a day's walk away, for supplies. They look forward to seeing Jumah there, and they laugh about their guns and their skill in warfare with him when they do. There is a gathering that night. Although Gadafi has died, Jabati is still alive, and he and Beah quote Shakespeare to each other. They do drugs and talk all night, mostly about the drugs.

The book covers two years in which Beah was a child soldier in just two chapters 13 and 14. The quick treatment of this time reflects the fact that this life is brutally repetitive: just more and more killing, and drugged up movies in between. But it also captures the way that during these two years Beah is so drugged up and emotionally repressed that he is, in a sense, in a constant present. It also captures that now, as the author, these are memories that he is repressing, that he wishes he didn't have. Now, after these two years, the boys are fully used to war, having no choice after all, as it is adapt or die. But despite the desperation and the danger, the boys become almost depraved, and they are not pretending in the slightest when they talk about their joy of war. It is no longer horrible to them. This is their life. They are no different from the rebels who attacked Mattru Jong. There is also a suggestion here that Beah has, perhaps, a special connection to Jabati, through their Shakespeare connection.

The next day, when Jumah and some others leave for a raid, a truck comes into the village from UNICEF (The United Nations Children's Fund). Jabati has the boys line up, and picks boys from the line without telling them what is going on. Alhaji and Beah are chosen, and only once they have turned over their guns are they told what is going on. They are leaving the front to be put in school. Beah responds to this news by hiding his bayonet and a grenade in his pocket.

Beah does not recognize this, but it may be that the special connection he shared with Jabati may have caused Jabati to decide to send Beah to school from the war. That Jabati, in some part of him, wants to protect Beah and realizes that war is no place for children (though of course he only sends a few boys away from the front. Meanwhile, the boys, despite what they have seen and done, are still treated as if they should have no choice in what happens next to them. Beah, distrustful and violent as he is, decides even though it is his lieutenant's order that he go with the men, that he'd better keep some weapons to be safe.

Beah is angry and shoves the city soldier who tries to search him, threatening to kill him. Beah does not want to be parted from his gun, or the squad, which had become his family. The boys are brought to the truck, and Beah notes with disdain how clean the city soldiers are. He has no idea where he is being taken. Beah considers hijacking the truck. After hours on the road and many checkpoints, they come to a city. Beah cannot believe how many cars there are, but understands that they are now in Sierra Leone's capital, Freetown.

Beah is once again being stripped of that which he cares about, even if now it is with his best interests in mind. Beah consider the soldiers who are watching him to be equivalent to civilians for all the war they've seen, and his contempt for them is clear. Still no one has explained to the boys exactly what is happening, which infuriates Beah, as it is evidence that no one takes seriously how grown up the boys feel that they are.

As night approaches, Beah is amazed by how many lights there are in the city. The boys are brought to a compound by the UNICEF men. There are already other boys like them there who look just as upset as Beah to be there. One of the UNICEF men, who looks Lebanese, tells them to follow him, and excitedly shows them their beds. The boys are not excited at all.

The city inspires in the boy's a child-like fascination, but only briefly. The UNICEF man seems to think the boys will be excited to be away from war, demonstrating his own innocence and inability to understand the psychological reality of what it means to be a child soldier.

The man takes them to the kitchen, and Beah eyes the other boys suspiciously. The boys are brought rice, and Alhaji wonders where they can get some drugs. More boy are brought to the kitchen, and Alhaji asks them where they are from. One boy responds with an insult. The boys almost fight and Beah pulls out his grenade before they all realize that they fought for the army.

As far as the boys are concerned, they are still at war, and seem to even be itching for a fight, only averting bloodshed because one of them has the good sense to actually find out where the others are from. UNICEF seems to think it can just "save" the boys from the war, and that they will then revert to being normal kids. Of course the effects of being a child soldier are much deeper and more profound.

The boys talk and learn that they were similarly picked out to be taken from the war. They ask the man who brought them to the kitchen to explain why they were brought here, but he is too scared to answer. One boy, Mambu, decides they should ask some of the other boys. Those boys turn out to have been rebels, however, and two sets of boys face off, each side screaming that the other side killed their parents. The boys fight, bayonets drawn. Three city soldiers try to break up the fight, and instead two of them have their weapons taken from them. Mambu gets one of the guns, and shoots the rebel who got the other.

. That the UNICEF workers would bring the rebels and army boys into the same compound shows just how completely they don't understand the nature of the boy's conversion into soldiers. That both the army and rebel boys scream the same charge at each other shows how both *sides brainwashed child soldiers in the same way. Meanwhile, UNICEFs inability to understand what has really happened to the boy soldiers here turns deadly.*

After twenty minutes of fighting, more city soldiers come to break up the fight. Two army boys and four rebel boys have been killed. While some of the boys are rushed off in ambulances, the army boys go to the kitchen to eat and brag about their exploits. City soldiers eventually come to take them away. The boys are jubilant, cheered by the fighting. The soldiers seem to be afraid of them, and the boys think maybe they'll be returned to the front. Instead, they are taken to a rehabilitation house called Benin Home in Kissy Town, in east Freetown. All Beah can think about is his squad. He'd rather be high and watching war movies, and he is already starting to go into withdrawal from the lack of drugs.

The boys do not seem to be worried about having killed the other boys, as they are still at war, as far as they are concerned. In war, they have been taught, there are *no rules. And this is the world they've been brought up in, the only family they've had. The issue is not just that these boys were forced into becoming soldiers against their will, it is that they have been transformed into young people who only know soldiering, have been cut off by fact and shame from who they were, who can think for themselves of being nothing other than soldiers.*

CHAPTER 16

Beah says that the boys' fury at the civilians was such that the boys would respond to pleas for the boys to have medical checkups and therapy by throwing cutlery and even benches at the nurses. They even chase and beat the nurses. The only thing they will do is eat the food they're given. The boys are also so desperate for drugs that they steal pain relievers.

Whereas they once wanted nothing more than to escape war, the boys now regard it as the place where their family is, and war as the only activity they are interested in. Again the "civilians" don't understand this. They think if they just take the boy from the war they will be boys again. Instead, it will be made clear that they have to somehow return the boys to their boyhood.

The boys fight each other too, for hours, in between meals. At night, they drag their mattresses outside to sleep, and the next day someone always bring the mattresses back inside. When the mattresses aren't brought inside one day, they beat up a staff member, who they think should have brought them inside. Once the man returns from the hospital, he tells the boys that what they did is not their fault. This only makes the boys angrier. Another outburst, where the boys go around breaking windows, lands Beah in the hospital with a laceration on his hand, where he is treated tenderly despite his violence.

The man's insistence that the boys bear no responsibility for their actions shows how different these adults' attitudes are towards the boys compared to the boys' conceptions of themselves. The adults treat them like innocents who were forced into war against their will. The boys see themselves as hardened warriors. In fact, were the boys to see themselves as the adults did it would be unendurably painful, for only by being soldiers—only by seeing what they did as part of their responsibility—can they face those actions.

Beah remembers a mission while he was still in the army I which Beah and Alhaji took out a village all by themselves. Beah covered Alhaji while Alhaji practiced his Rambo moves on the guards. Alhaji is called Little Rambo from then on, and Beah Green Snake, for the way he can take out a whole village without being noticed.

The boys treat war playfully, not taking their own danger seriously, and trying to actually replicate moves from movies. The nicknames are similar evidence of a kind of perverse playfulness, a perversion of boyhood and soldiering.

Having withdrawn from the drugs over the course of their first month at Benin Home, the boys start to have horrible flashbacks. Beah sees blood whenever he turns on the faucet. The boys also start selling the school supplies the staff give them and take the money into town, where they admire how tall the buildings are and the diversity of foods available.

The boys cannot deal with what they have seen without the drugs at first. Their trips to town, and their fascination, demonstrates what intact innocence they have left, the very same which the staff is trying to resurrect.

The staff finds out about the trip and decides to make attending classes mandatory for inclusion in future trips. But the boys don't pay attention, and continue to fight each other. The teacher tells them it is not their fault, and in response the boys throw pencils at him. Beah learns to fall asleep without drugs again after a few months, but wakes up almost immediately, having imagined a gunman was cutting his throat. Beah tries to remember his childhood, but his memories of war seem to be in the way.

The boys are at least attending class at this point, and Beah's ability to fall asleep is something like a step forward, as is his desire to remember his childhood, though his repressed guilt and horror at what he has done continues to be evident as well. While he was a soldier, he had no desire to think of anything but killing.

Beah remembers that after rebels attacked and overran the base in which his squad had trained, Moriba was killed. In his memory, the surviving squad members wander for weeks trying to find a new base as the rainy season of the summer began. They are ambushed by rebels, and fight for days in the rain, pushing the attackers back and eventually capturing the rebels' village. The rain washes the blood from the foliage, but the bodies continue to bleed onto the oversaturated soil. The rebels attack again, and are again repelled. The rebels whom the soldiers capture are forced to dig their own graves. The soldiers then bury them alive. Beah's flashback ends with him outside the compound, and a staff member bringing him back inside, telling him it is not his fault.

Beah's flashback is not just a vivid memory of war, but of the horrible things he has done. Nature does not care for the fighters, and will do nothing for them. The fight is overlong, but what sticks with Beah most strongly is the cruelty with which they treated the rebels they captured. There are no causes in the civil war besides, it seems, revenge, and violence for its own sake. Although previously Beah has been enraged by the staff's comforting, now he does not respond with anger, as it is some comfort from the guilt he is feeling.

CHAPTER 17

A nurse named Esther comes to Beah one day a few months after he cut his hand, and gives him a cold Coca-Cola, telling him to come visit her any time. Beah goes to visit her, but is so distrustful he won't tell her his name without getting angry. She responds with understanding, and tells him he has a nice smile. A few days later she gives him a rap **cassette**, making him extremely happy. She gives him a medical exam as he listens to it, and finds a bullet hole in his foot. He tells her how he got the wound.

The nurse earns his trust by treating him like a boy—by directly engaging his interests as a boy—not by telling him nothing is his fault. She shows genuine interest in his interests, and in his positive qualities, rather than focusing on whatever feelings of guilt he might have. Beah warms up to her to the point of feeling he can share his past with her.

In Beah's story, his squad is drawn into a village and ambushed. Five of their men are killed almost immediately, and the rebels and Beah's squad fight back and forth with the rebels for the control of the village. Beah's squad think that they have captured the village, but are ambushed again, and Beah is shot in the foot three times. Beah is dragged by his comrades into a hut, and when he wakes the next day, he is in so much pain the doctor is afraid he will die of it. Beah is carried back to their former base, where the bullet is removed in surgery at great pain. He is told he is lucky, but Beah thinks that he is brave.

This is the first time Beah's war story hasn't ended in some sort of heroism on the part of himself or his fellow soldiers. Despite how close he comes to death, Beah's perspective does not change on war. The brave survive, and luck has nothing to do with it. It's an innocent perspective, appropriate for the brainwashed boy.

Esther is crying because of Beah's story. Esther makes a mistake, and tells Beah it is not his fault, making him angry. She tells him he can keep the Walkman, and he throws it at her. That night, Beah has flashbacks about slitting a prisoner's throat, and cannot think of his childhood.

Although Esther has earned some of Beah's trust, and he likes to be treated like a boy, he does not wish to be told that he is only a boy. Tenderness of that kind makes him fundamentally uncomfortable, as it simply cannot square with the fact that he has killed and slit throats.

Despite Esther having said it wasn't his fault, Beah continues to go to her, and one day he is taken into the city for a check-up. Beah goes to the hospital, and afterwards a field-worker, Leslie, buys Beah a Bob Marley **cassette**. Beah memorizes the lyrics so he can sing them to Esther, and Leslie teaches Beah about Rastafarianism, but Beah is still reluctant to talk anymore about his past.

As it turns out, all it takes to earn Beah's trust is to connect with his interest in music. Confronting his problems, however, is another matter, but to have him even enjoying himself is a feat altogether, and a way for him to get away from his nightmares. There is a sense here that a new cassette represents the beginning of Beah's re-engagement with his childhood, himself, and his past.

Beah has a new, horrible dream, in which he is surrounded in his house by men stabbing and killing each other. When the men disappear Beah stands outside of the house in front of his family; he is covered in blood, but they don't see it. It begins to rain, and his family runs inside, leaving him to be cleaned of the blood. When he is, he tries to go into the house, but it is gone. It is the first time he has dreamed of his family since the war began.

In the dream, even once he is washed of the horror, he will still not have his family. It is heartbreaking that even if Beah gets past his trauma to his childhood, he will have memories only of what he has lost. Nature here is at first a savior, but it's coming to wash him heralds the disappearance of his family. Beah can only continue on if he leaves his family—and all that guilt and trauma associated with their death, and then the "revenge" he took on rebels for their deaths as a boy soldier—behind.

Beah goes to Esther to talk about his dream, and she gets him to talk about his time in war, too. She tells him it is not his fault, but Beah actually begins to believe her now, even if he still can't completely trust her. She takes him to the wharf one day and they look at the moon together as Beah once did as a child. Beah sees a woman cradling a baby in her arms.

Beah is slowly beginning to let his guard down, coming to desire the affection and tenderness, and even the chance to talk about what has happened to him. That he sees in the moon shapes as he used to is a sign of his boyhood returning.

CHAPTER 18

Beah tells Esther one day after five months at the center that he has no family left, and that he thinks he has nothing to be alive for. She says she can be his family. Her laugh reminds him of a girl he used to know in school, and Esther often catches him staring at him.

Esther proves to be able to bring Beah out of even the most depressive funks with her good humor. That Beah has a crush on her—and that this crush is connected to memories of his past—is a good sign, as it suggest both that he is reconnecting to that past and seeing a future for himself.

Visitors from the European Commission come to see Benin Home, and during their visit Beah reads a monologue from Julius Caesar and performs a hip hop play. Mr. Kamara, the director of Benin Home, asks Beah to be the spokesperson for the home in case there is an opportunity to speak out against the use of children as soldiers and in favor of the possibility of child soldiers being rehabilitated. Two weeks later, Beah begins to give presentations about the horror of forcing children to soldiers and the need and possibility for rehabilitating those children, pointing to himself as an example of this possibility.

Beah has come already to be a model of the possibilities for rehabilitation, having regained his interest in the things he loved as a boy, even being able to articulate the difference rehabilitation has made in his life. The once enthusiastic soldier now knows he was brainwashed, and identifies as someone who is proof that the brainwashing can be overcome.

Beah learns from Leslie, a staff member at Benin House, that boys at the home can only stay for seven months, after which they have to find a foster home. Beah tells him that he has heard his uncle lives in Freetown, and Leslie promises to do his best to find him. On a Saturday, Leslie brings his uncle to meet Beah. Beah is reticent at first, telling the man he doesn't even know him. However, his uncle comes every Saturday to visit, and Beah comes to look forward to the visits. Beah is happy, but cautious around his happiness. He and his uncle bond over memories of Beah's father, though the memories still make Beah sad.

Beah, remarkably, is reunited with family. Although Beah is cautious around the possibility of having a new family, as he has had his hopes dashed so many times before, his uncle is ultimately his best chance at a new life. Beah is even able to enjoy talking about his past with his uncle, even if the pleasant conversation ultimately leads to sadness.

Beah is brought to meet his uncle's family. He is greeted as a son by his uncle's wife, and as a brother by his children. Beah will grow close to his cousin, Allie. Beah is happy, but doesn't show it.

Beah is beginning to feel a part of his family, but is still cautious around the idea of happiness. The last time he was returned to his family, it was only to hear them being murdered.

CHAPTER 19

Two weeks later, Beah is to begin living with his uncle. He says goodbye to his friends and Esther. He will never see any of them again, except for Esther, who he will see once more. Beah is astonished by Esther's fortitude and her capacity to care for trauma-stricken children, and comments in the book that he loved her, even though he never told her.

Beah's split with war is a complete one. Just as his childhood was taken from him, here so is his past as a soldier. Beah has a chance to begin again and be a part of a family, even if his memories never leave him.

Beah moves in with his uncle's family, staying in Allie's room. He's given a welcome home feast, with chicken, a rare occasion. He misses Benin Home, but already feels himself adjusting to being around such a happy family. Allie takes him out dancing at a pub, where Beah dances with a girl who approaches him without him having to do anything. The dancing triggers a memory of attacking a town during a school dance.

Beah feels again how difficult it is to have people he cares about pass out of his life, but to be welcomed so openly, and to feel himself fit in so easily is almost uncomfortable for Beah. To have been at war less than a year ago and to now be dancing is something of a shock, and Beah has not fully escaped his past yet.

Beah dates the girl briefly, after seeing her at the pub again, but feels he cannot yet be intimate, as sharing his past is a too much for him.

Beah feels he cannot yet share his past with everyone, that he cannot yet face the shame or horror of it.

Not long after, Leslie comes to see Beah and tells him that he has an opportunity to interview for the chance to go to New York and speak on behalf of child soldiers at the United Nations. At the interview, Beah finds himself among city boys who dress better and understand modern conveniences, such as elevators. However, he is, as far as he can tell, the only boy there to be interviewed who isn't from the city and actually has been at war. He comments on this fact during the interview and is chosen to go to the UN. His uncle, half jokingly, doesn't believe it will actually happen, yet despite the complicated process for getting his passport and visa, they do eventually come through.

Despite the horrible things Beah has seen and done, and the fact that he is unwilling usually to talk to other people about what he has seen, he goes to the interview, understanding it might be his responsibility to advocate for an end to the war.

CHAPTER 20

Beah travels to New York with Bah, the other boy chosen to speak to the UN, and Dr. Tamba, the man who has sponsored the trip. Beah is worried New York will be like the war front in Sierra Leone, with people shooting each other, because of all the rap music he is listening to. Instead, it is just terribly cold. Beah doesn't even have a coat. The city shocks him with its modernity. The next morning, he and Bah meet children from around the world, and learn about each other's lives.

Beah shows his innocence again, this time to great comedic effect in his sense of the violence of New York and belief in the images of pop culture. That said, before he experienced war he could not imagine it. Now that he has scene it he can imagine it, and has trouble not *imagining it. Beah has traveled to New York to participate in a conference about and including children—often those who have faced hardship—across the world. It is an effort to build bonds.*

Beah also meets Laura Simms, a woman who works at the United Nations. She promises the children that in her workshops she can teach them how to tell their stories more effectively. She takes particular interest in Beah and Bah, and even gives them each a coat of hers. On the last day of the conference, Beah has the opportunity to address the UN Council about his experiences. A speech had been written for him back in Freetown, but he decides instead to speak from his own heart and mind. He speaks of his experiences, rejects his past as a child soldier, and remarks on the circular nature of revenge, and how as long as orphans continue to be convinced to avenge the deaths of their families, war will go on.

The workshops are designed as a way for the children to learn how to tell their stories, to share those stories with the world. They allow the children to become witnesses and advocates, to both force the world to face the ordeals it makes children endure and to attempt to change those conditions. Through his close relationship to Laura Simms's Beah becomes able to clearly face his past, to process it for himself and others. Beah's understanding of his own brainwashing shows how much he has distanced himself from it.

Laura Simms accompanies Beah, Bah, and Dr. Tamba back to the airport. The mood in the car is somber, as Beah and Bah are sad to leave behind the friends they have made. Laura Simms gives Beah her address and phone number, in order to stay in touch, before he boards the plan heading back to Sierra Leone. In a few days Beah will turn sixteen.

The detail that Beah is still fifteen—the age at which most Americans, for instance, are sophomores in high school—when he leaves the conference drives home just how young he was when he was a soldier.

CHAPTER 21

Back in Sierra Leone, Beah's childhood friend, Mohamed, who had also ended up at Benin House, has also now moved in to live with Beah's uncle. The boys are excited as they are about to start going to school, but at the school the other students are wary of them, knowing that they were child soldiers.

Beah and Mohamed return to a "normal" life as students. Though the other students' reaction to them makes clear that having been child soldiers will always stay with them, will always carry some kind of social stigma. It also shows how little the other students understand or can imagine the war.

On the morning of May 25, 1997, Beah hears gunshots in Freetown. The government is ousted in a coup by a group of army officers. The new government releases prisoners (many of them captured rebels) from the central prison, and gives them guns as they exit. There is massive looting, and many released prisoners seek vengeance on the lawyers and judges who put them in prison. A man named Johnny Paul Koroma comes on the radio, announcing himself as the new president of Sierra Leone, having overthrown the democratically elected Yejan Kabbah. The army and the rebels have joined forces, and now institute martial law. Total chaos grips the country.

In an almost unimaginable shift, just as it seems Beah is in the clear, Sierra Leone goes to pieces entirely. It turns out that despite the years of war, the rebels and army came to understand that their purposes weren't so different after all, which is fitting, given the apparent barbarism both sides display in Beah's narrative. The war wasn't ever really a war of ideal so much as it was a war for power: and by joining forces those two sides get the power they want.

The new government, called Sobels, shuts down schools and even blows up bank vaults to get money. Beah says there is nothing to do but sit around, as it is too dangerous to leave their house. To get food for their family, Beah and Mohamed sneak to a black market.

Although Beah has survived far worse, he knows better than to risk his life going out and about unless he absolutely has to. Food happens to be one of those necessities. In a way, Beah and Mohamed's time as child soldiers better prepares them to face this sort of situation.

As they are leaving the market, armed men from the government arrive to shut it down. The men fire warning shots, and then shoot a woman who fails to put down the food she is carrying as they ordered her to. Beah and Mohamed try to sneak away, but get stuck in a crowd of people protesting against this new government. The armed men begin firing on the crowd with bullets and tear gas. The boys run for a gutter as a helicopter fires on protesters with its machine gun. Beah and Mohamed run and hide in a gutter for six hours. When the sun sets, they head back to the house, to find Beah's uncle in tears. He hugs them and tells them never to go back into the city, but they respond that they will have to when the family again runs out of supplies.

Predictably, Beah finds himself again in harm's way. It's only by their wits and understanding of just how violent the Sobels can be that the boys avert disaster. Just as the villages of Beah's youth could not imagine the war ever hitting them, here the entire city seems blindsided by the sudden arrival of the war. Beah's uncle wants to protect these new children of his from the war, but in war the novel shows again how little parents can do to protect their children.

Over the next five months, gunmen proceed with the same kind of arbitrary violence that was the mark of the civil war, and the civilians adjust, knowing that they have to go out to get food. A family who lives a few doors down are dragged from they home by armed government, shot, and left in the street.

While Beah is adept at this kind of life, he takes no pleasure in it. His new life has been ripped from him.

Beah's uncle gets sick, but there is no way to get him to a doctor in the violence of the city, and no doctors willing to come, and he dies. Understanding there is little left for him in Sierra Leone, Beah manages to call Laura Simms to ask her if he can move to New York. She says yes. But to get to her he will first have to get out of Sierra Leone and reach Conakry, a city in the neighboring country of Guinea.

Just as his new life is in ruins, so too is his new family. Beah decides there is nothing more for him in Sierra Leone, that it is not only safest for him to move away, but that he no longer wants to live in the country. Beah has made connections that allow him this possibility. He knows many others haven't.

A week after his uncle passes away, on October 31, 1997, Beah leaves Freetown, telling only Mohamed about his plan. Beah leaves before dawn and sneaks past checkpoints to an old bus station. Beah and a number of other refugees take a dangerous series of buses, and are stopped repeatedly by officials and others who demand exorbitant bribes to let them pass. But Beah makes it to Guinea, and takes a bus to Conakry, where there are even more bribes and over fifteen checkpoints. People who can't pay are kicked off the bus. Although Beah can't pay the final fare to Conakry, he sneaks on the bus.

The exploitation of refugees is disgusting, but familiar enough to Beah, who uses his usual quick thinking to make it out of a difficult situation. His anticipation of freedom, however, is relatively joyless, as he has lost so much, and had to sacrifice so much. Beah has given up on his country as a home: there is no safety or comfort in it anymore.

In Conakry, Beah isn't sure what to do next. He has no one to stay with, so he heads to the Sierra Leone embassy where he knows he can at least stay at night. Everyone there is sleeping on the floor, and Beah watches a mother telling a story to her children, and is reminded of a story he was once told by his grandfather. The story is about a hunter who goes to kill a monkey, but the monkey presents him with a dilemma. If he shoots the monkey, his mother will die, if he doesn't, his father will die. Beah's answer, even when he was seven, was that he would shoot the monkey, so no hunter would ever be in the same predicament.

There is no system in place for refugees to escape, and so Beah has to suffer the indignity of sleeping on the cramped floor. The story Beah recalls is something of an allegory for the dilemma of whether or not to intervene in a civil war as bloody and feudal as the one in Sierra Leone. Beah proposes it's better to intervene and risk further death than allow the possibility of the cycle of violence continuing. A Long Way Gone is ultimately an act of witness, in which Beah uses his own story to make human, and therefore more monstrous, what was happening in Sierra Leone. And in being so it is a demand for action from the world to intervene, both in Sierra Leone and elsewhere.

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