
BLUE SKIES, BIRDSONG

LEYLA LOUED-KHENISSI

Do you know about the 1997 coup d'état in Sierra Leone? You might have heard about it if you saw that 2006 Leo DiCaprio movie *Blood Diamond*,¹ which did a surprisingly good job with the subject matter, given the Hollywood factor. But this coup d'état happened before social media, so it didn't garner much press. It also happened in Africa, where events don't often make it past the horizon of global interest. As luck would have it, I happened to be in Freetown, Sierra Leone's capital, when the coup erupted. The memory of it dims, an outlier in the puzzle of my person: mother, American, Tunisian, neuroscientist, . . . war survivor? I'm writing this down to inform you—but also me—that it really happened, to make a record of events, to provide a sample of lived civil unrest.

I was eighteen in 1997 and visiting my family in Freetown, home from my first year in college. I'd been to Freetown the summer before, and my dad had been stationed there for a couple of years already. A "resident representative" of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), a sister organization to the UN focusing on economic development, he spent his first year alone in Sierra Leone due to the country's security problem—namely, a brutal civil war. The rebels fighting the war, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), were famous for their signature arbitrary limb mutilation as they ravaged the country, village to village.² But by 1996, whoever was in charge of UN family repatriation decided that, with the war ebbing and a civilian government in place, the country was once again safe for the spouses and children of its personnel. And so, my mom and two younger sisters joined my dad in

Freetown, in a lovely house on a hill, in a neighborhood called Wilberforce, a name imbued with power, weighted with history.³

That year, I begged my dad to help me find an internship, not wanting to spend my summer in tropical listlessness. (No internet back then.) My father was leery of nepotism, so it was the first and last time he hooked me up with something, a volunteer internship with Action Against Hunger (AAH). On my first day, I met with the people working there, mostly French, young and dour. I got the general vibe that I was unwanted. At lunch that first day at AAH, someone showed up who made everyone else stand up a little straighter, a Belgian man from the EU commission who strode into AAH like he owned the place. The staff seemed in awe of him. At the table, he took over the conversation, doling out insider information on rebel activity in the country, and the others deferred to him like he wasn't the dime-a-dozen European Who Understands Africa he was. Why is he worth a mention? Because a few weeks later, under the shelling, he would unveil himself as a dyed-in-the-wool dirtbag. During those few weeks at AAH, a kind Spanish nurse took me under his wing as we drove around the Freetown Peninsula to check on displaced persons camps. Like me, he seemed to breathe freer out in the field than at headquarters.

The civil war in Sierra Leone had begun in 1991 and, by 1997, was thought to have ended. In brief, the country was mismanaged following its independence from the British in 1968.⁴ In 1991, Sierra Leone was one of the poorest countries in the world. Its people suffered, its youth had no future, and, as you can imagine, the next logical thing happened: the RUF came into being, fighting the established government in a brutal internecine conflict. In Sierra Leone, the war "ended" when South African mercenaries stepped in, imposing a form of peace. These mercenaries, improbably called Executive Outcomes, had to earn a living after apartheid ended and racist secret police were dismantled. Why and how did South African mercenaries end up in Sierra Leone? It was the second largest producer of raw diamonds in the world. There were fights and threats of fights over the diamond pie, so the Sierra Leonean government opted to hire "well-trained" security to bring peace and protect the diamond mines.⁵ And peace came, for a while, and a civilian government with it. But then the mercenaries were thrown out, the optics being what they were (bad). The RUF were not neutralized though:

echoes of their brutality in the bush made their way to the capital, though we were reassured that they were banished from the Freetown Peninsula. Still, one could find many strange players in Sierra Leone in 1997, Indiana Jones-types, adventurers probably lured by the diamond mines. So there were a lot of armed factions at the time in the country, including the civilian government; the RUF in the bush; the South African mercenaries who still hung around, incredibly large and pink men; the Kamajors, local village militias formed to push back on the RUF; and the Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG), a peace-keeping force made up of mostly Nigerian soldiers.⁶ If this collection of armed interests wasn't volatile enough, next-door Liberia was also implicated in the RUF via the country's one-time president and now-convicted war criminal, Charles Taylor, who provided arms to the rebels in exchange for diamonds. Altogether, a large ensemble cast of people and interests.

My family lived in a compound, a large house surrounded by high walls. Our backyard was a vast, steep slope. The view from the back of the house was the breathtaking expanse of beach and Atlantic Ocean. As in other IMF residences, ours was not a home but a functional house. The sheets and dishes were familiar, elegant but neutral, as they were in the previous residence we'd lived in, thousands of miles away.

There were many details about our life in Freetown that we chuckled at, mainly centered on security measures we didn't fully appreciate at first. The compound was walled, spiked with broken glass, and topped with barbed wire. The main doors of the house were impossibly thick wood. We were tasked with securing those doors with a large metal bar every night. If you went upstairs to our living quarters, you'd be greeted first by a metal gate, followed by a bulletproof door, which led to a hallway. Off that hallway, our bedrooms, and another bulletproof door that led to a double room, where my parents slept and where we hung out. This was our safe room, where we were meant to hide in case of trouble. We laughed too at the weekly drill on the radio, when UN security did a roll call of personnel and my dad had to come on and state his code name. We marveled that a security expert came to inspect the house for vulnerabilities. A security expert! It was a bit spy-novel for us, but the report that came back was downright surreal, if presciently accurate: the roof of our fortress was made of tin, easy to breach. The solution would be an electric grid laid on the roof to shock

any intruders. Finally, at night, a UN patrol would come around a couple of times to make sure we were safe. We had no weapons of course. It was forbidden for IMF and World Bank personnel to possess firearms, not that we would have known what to do with them anyway.

I arrived in the capital at the end of April 1997, my older brother a month later. My family had found their groove in Freetown, made some friends, found a bakery, that sort of thing. My father organized a family outing the first weekend we were all together, out to a beautiful place on the beach at a river's confluence. The river wasn't too wide, but wading into its mouth, you could feel that pull of the ocean, of the Big, Big, Bigger than you. After a morning at the beach, we went to a restaurant nearby for lunch, where I noted the presence of French soldiers, more non-sequitur characters playing on the Sierra Leonean stage. Later that day, we went to one of Freetown's hotels, the Mammy Yoko, where we had access to the pool. On the terrace, my parents ran into friends and acquaintances, picking up news. Being Arabic speakers, they had befriended a number of Lebanese Sierra Leonians, more immigrants than expats, some having settled there a century before. There was the usual coterie of diplomats and UN personnel. But scattered amongst them were more curious men with opaque reasons for being in the country, with vague professional affiliations such as "business" rather than an acronym. Some were tough, some pretended to be so, and all were cagey in their answers, lured to the country by the crucible of diamond trade churning in just barely controlled chaos. At some point, the hotel manager, an affable American man who would later be accused of arms dealing, came to greet my dad. That Saturday, May 24th, was a peaceful day in a beautiful place, full of birdsong and blue skies, a day where we all actually enjoyed one another. It might have been one of the last times my family did so.

The next morning, a Sunday, my brother woke me up, uncharacteristically agitated, telling me to hurry and join the safe room. I heard booming in the distance as I threw on some cut-offs and made my way barefoot to our family room. Something was happening downtown, trouble, but neither my family nor I were particularly bothered. Between the compound's security measures, the UN patrol and, frankly, our years in Washington D.C., we couldn't muster much panic over gunfire a few miles away. I made myself a cup of coffee, and settled in to hang out for a while. How exactly did we while

away those first few hours of May 25th, 1997? I don't remember. There was a TV with a satellite dish, a Nintendo console and lots of books. We chatted quietly about what little we knew of the situation: that there was a coup, that the military was revolting, that there was shelling downtown.

Towards midday, the peace in the compound broke. We heard the sound of tires screeching and voices shouting in Krio, the local language, sounds that didn't travel very far to reach us. Armed intruders breached our compound. A lame doorman guarded our gate, but his principal job was to open and shut the heavy metal doors for cars; he couldn't put up much of a resistance. There were no windows on the front of the house through which to peek and assess the situation, only the corridor's wall studded with small square light wells, a feature that would ultimately keep us safe. We believed the giant wooden front door with its ridiculous metal bar would hold. It didn't. It held a few moments before we heard triumphant cries, much closer this time, inside the house. Suddenly, we were worried. My dad made his way to the radio, one of our security lifelines. I reminded him what to say in case of emergency; having been so bored at one point, I read the radio instructions from end to end. My father radioed in as we heard excited voices downstairs, along with other noises, smashing and crashing of furniture. The radio eventually crackled into life, a UN security officer on the other end. *We're being attacked too, said the voice, turn off your radio.*

The disbelief. We had full faith in the UN patrol, and in the system in place. We heard the looters downstairs trying and failing to get past the first bulletproof door. We didn't know if they were soldiers, civilians, or a mix of the two. The first group didn't stay long, maybe ten or twenty minutes, before piling back into their vehicles and leaving. Our respite was short lived. A few other groups, maybe another two, three repeated the process, each time the same sequence of sounds, tires screeching, Krio shouts, smashing and crashing downstairs in the living room, breath held, terror, an eventual departure, exhale. We were scared now, but not panicked yet. Only, at some point during those early attacks, my dad looked out the large window of our safe room, this time not out to the glorious view of the ocean, but down closer, to a helicopter landing at the military base below. He gasped, holding his hand to his face. He could see, from our aerie, President Kabbah being put onto a red helicopter. The president was being kicked out of the country, which meant the coup had succeeded. My dad grasped the gravity of the

situation when the rest of us didn't. What I did understand, based on the crack in his demeanor, was that we were fucked.

We didn't have a plan, but I was convinced that America would swoop in and save us. I was eighteen, pathologically optimistic and fearless. The first looters contented themselves with the downstairs, but the armored door on the landing did nothing but signal further riches upstairs. One group of looters insisted on keys to our car, a brand new Toyota Landcruiser that our driver couldn't have been more proud of. (The car was neither his nor ours, but the IMF's.) My father tossed the keys through one of those little square light wells that studded the hallway wall, afraid that our guard would otherwise be harmed. Another group breached the cage on the landing and the first "bulletproof" door. During that attack, we heard the looters in the hallway, just on the other side of the wall. The hallway was filled with boxes we had yet to unpack, mostly books, which the intruders loudly complained about as they tossed them out of their boxes.

And then it got worse. One attacker figured out the compound's security flaw. The electrifying grid had been laid across the roof, as the security expert recommended, but it was still missing its power source, a battery. It was perhaps the fifth group of looters that cut through the roof. In our safe room, we looked up in horror at the sound of looters working above us, whittling at the last barrier between safety and harm, until the ceiling gave. A large black military boot came crashing through, pulling a soldier down with it. Here, we finally screamed. So did the soldier. But only briefly, before brandishing his rifle and demanding *Whe di money?*, what was to be the mantra of our ordeal. We had already taken out the cash and jewelry we had on hand and laid them out. A moment later, his buddy came down the same hole in the ceiling, saw his friend pocketing cash and promptly started arguing with him. It escalated into a fight, and they tussled into my parents' bedroom, crashing into a mirror.

Here, my memory gets fuzzy. There were just so many attacks. A couple of other groups came through the hole in the ceiling, with some trying to shoot the second, still-standing bulletproof door, jamming the lock and leaving us stuck in the safe room. But then a large armed group came in, led by what appeared to be a Big Fish. This group also included an armed child. The big group led by Big Fish brought a different tenor than the others had, simply by dint of having a leader. It was this group who instigated my only

instance of hysterical shouting, Big Fish ordered one of his guys to shoot down the stuck bulletproof door from the inside of our family room. Off the machine gun went, as all six of us cowered together in the adjacent corner of the room. The sound was deafening, and as spent shell cases bounced off the door, one hit me in the shoulder. Its heat made me think I was shot, and I began screaming for them to stop. My dad in turn pleaded with them to stop for my sake. He also sensed Big Fish's aura of authority, and as his—soldiers? friends?—picked through our family room, they started chatting.

The man, genial enough, presented himself as some kind of officer, most recently released from Pademba prison. Part of the coup involved releasing all the prisoners from the main correctional facility in Freetown.⁷ Big Fish insisted that it was political prisoners, like him, who were released. Since he exuded gravitas, my dad tried reasoning with him, but it was made clear that we were the enemy. The blue flag flying on our compound made it so. My dad argued that the IMF had supported the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP), the post-revolutionary civilian government, but Big Fish retorted that the SLPP government was made of *teeves*.

As this reasonable conversation went on, the AK-wielding child rifled through my kid sisters' things, taking the Nintendo, some games and a backpack. One sister, who, I stress, until now had complied with our entreaties to be calm and quiet, broke form, indignant at the theft of her homework. And then the heartbreaking defense from the child: *I'm a schoolboy too!* Meanwhile, a looter who was especially aggressive rummaged through our deep freezer, brandishing a clump of pink ice cream out of its container. *What's this?* he seethed, suspicious. *Ice cream*, said my brother, *it's good*. But there was no pleasing the looter as he shouted, *NO! It is poison! You taste it!* and thrust the clump at my brother's face. While the other guys looted politely, the angry gunman kept hissing things about us, at us, until my dad tried negotiating again. *We are African too*, he entreated, but Angry Gunman whipped around and countered, *Yes, you are Africans from Nova Scotia!*

We are African too. We were. We are. In fact, our country of origin, the ancient Roman province of *Ifriqiya*, gave the continent its name. But ours is the in-between place of the so-called "brown" person, neither black nor white. Our white card is sometimes approved, other times declined. Historically? We were colonized, but we were also slavers. So Angry

Gunman's retort was not wrong in spirit. At first glance, we had nothing to do with Sierra Leone's troubles and could align ourselves with either Sierra Leonians and fellow Africans' woes or the IMF's noble mission. But deep down, even then in my starry-eyed, self-centered teenage haze, I understood our complicity, living under a flag that failed in its promise, propping up and benefitting from a system where some (we) had so much and others had so little. Consciousness of that injustice is embedded in our flesh, and guilt along with it.

The looters kept coming and going, each bursting in with the same demand, *Whe di money?*, annoyed with my dad's weary response, that there was no more, before picking through the leftovers of our safe room and then going back up through the ridiculous hole in the ceiling. Darkness fell. The electricity of course was down and something had happened to our generators. With each group, with each tire screech that heralded a fresh attack, we braced ourselves, wondering if this would be the group that shot, raped, killed us. To be fair, the attackers were not uniformly cruel or even angry. Most were just there to loot. The schoolboy with the AK came back through the hole late in the day, alone, politely insisting he had dropped a video game. My dad obliged him, and helped him look through the detritus of our family room for the lost game, unsuccessfully. Another group shot out our water tanks, flooding the safe room. Still another group drove by, didn't come in but sprayed the outside wall of the hallway with automatic gunfire like in the movies. We talked quietly to each other between attacks, discussing what to do, if we could escape. Big Fish had offered my dad safe passage. But we had no cars, even if we could figure out how to clamber up the hole in the ceiling and leave the safe room, which increasingly felt like a tomb.

By early evening, I gave up on my expectation of seeing American forces come and instead focused on sleeping between attacks. We were abandoned; there was simply nothing else to do. I took my sisters into my parents' room with me, feet squelching in the wet carpet, and climbed into their bed. I woke up sometime later to the barrel of an AK in my face, screamed (for the third and final time), and was swiftly told to shut up by the soldier at my side. I hurriedly explained that there were little ones with me, so little, as the soldier pulled back the duvet to reveal the two small dark heads huddled beside me. He stroked their hair and alternated cooing *Aw, little babies* and

turning to tell me to shut up. The scariest attack involved an obvious civilian, in shorts, a faded red polo, flip-flops, alone, with a pistol, who, unlike all the others, would not easily accept that there was no more money and repeatedly threatened to kill us at gunpoint. And it was luck or grace that he ultimately gave up on his threat, making do with our remaining scattered possessions.

By morning, we had been attacked sixteen times. I remember counting them, but I couldn't differentiate all of them now, twenty-five years later. In the morning, Big Fish came back to our compound with some of his crew and offered to escort us out and to the U.S. compound. How the U.S. compound became our fallback was unclear, but it was evidently now part of our security plan. I remember my dad hesitating; he is an economist and intellectual, untrained for war and conflict, much less weird dilemmas involving his wife, kids, and violent coup d'états in far-flung countries. I remember willing him to say yes to Big Fish. I knew he was worried that someone would simply throw a grenade through the large window overlooking the ocean. He worried, too, about an empty safe that his predecessor had left but that no one could open. But he declined Big Fish's offer in the end.

I despaired, but it wasn't long before we heard a familiar voice on the other side of our jammed-up bulletproof door, which may or may not have saved our lives. It was Mr. Ibrahim, my father's driver. My dad is a complex person, but he had a tendency of being noble towards his staff, generous and respectful, insisting on paying them well and treating them with dignity; this was especially true for his drivers. Mr. Ibrahim came through the hellscape that was Freetown on May 26th, 1997 to check on us and make sure we were okay. Mr. Ibrahim yanked us out of our helplessness, calling the guard in to help break us out. Together, they took a metal bar (maybe the metal bar that secured the front door?) and bashed the wall frame of the door repeatedly, taking turns striking the concrete. Sparks flew as it gave way until finally, finally, we could unjam the door. I remember my parents, including my buttoned-up mom, falling into Mr. Ibrahim's arms with relief. Our guard was mercifully unscathed. My father even joked that the looters hadn't taken the guard's watch, one he had gifted him, even though they took his, an exact replica.

We quickly turned to the remnants of our family room, looking for things to salvage. Bags and suitcases had for the most part been taken but

stuff remained strewn around, as all the loot had to go through the stupid hole in the ceiling, dragged up by people climbing through it. But my parents found, impossibly, a large tote bag with an impressionist print, Monet perhaps? One of those tote bags you find at a museum store. They also, incredibly, retrieved their passports, along with my sisters', and a credit card. My brother and I rushed to our respective rooms looking to see what we could retrieve. I hoped to find a gold charm bracelet, an heirloom from my grandmother, her first gift from my grandfather, which I cherished, being one of twenty-three grandkids. It was gone, as was absolutely everything in that room, including my bed, passport, and dirty laundry.

An immediate problem to our escape was that I had no shoes. Luckily (sort of), in the ruins of the family room, we found a pair belonging to my mom: gold lamé flats, replete with an obnoxious crest on the toe, a size too small for me. I folded down the back, and put them on as best I could. Everyone else had footwear. As we walked out of the house with the Monet tote bag, my dad spotted our next-door neighbor having coffee shirtless on his terrace. I didn't know until then, but our next-door neighbor was none other than EU commission Dirtbag, he of the AAH lunch visit. My dad asked him if he was attacked, and he shook his head. Then my poor father, the man who hates asking for anything, even for his kids, did something I never saw him do. He tentatively asked Dirtbag for a favor. A car. Dirtbag said no. *But you have two*, said my dad. *Still no*, said Dirtbag. *Please, for the little kids*, said my dad, pointing to my sisters. But Dirtbag was gonna dirtbag.

Resigned to an uncertain walk ahead, we trudged up the steep hill that was our driveway, out onto the road, and down the mountain in single file, with Mr. Ibrahim leading the way. As we rounded a corner on the road, we could see Freetown below, its highest building, which housed the Central Bank where my father worked, on fire, billowing smoke. As we walked down the mountain, we crossed paths with armed folks, soldiers and others, but I kept my head down, afraid of attracting attention and more trouble. I don't remember being tired, or hungry or thirsty, but the shoes were painful. They cut calluses into my feet, leaving scars that didn't heal for years. After some time walking, maybe an hour or so, we got to the US compound, a collection of buildings where US personnel lived. We were not US personnel, and we had no news of how other people had fared. But we got on the intercom, explained what happened, and, mercy of mercies, the gate opened.

And we were welcomed. A nice man greeted us and opened up the home of a couple away on vacation. We were to stay there until we could figure out our next move. The nice man gave me a pair of shoes, white sneakers, several sizes too large. We all slept in the same room, the apartment's master bedroom.

That first night, I slept on the floor between the double bed and a wall so I didn't have to take cover when I heard the now familiar sound of an AK-47 bullet storm aimed at the compound. The relief of the day gave way to dread, a sick fear that we would never get away from the violence. But then, my day-old fantasy of Team America saving us came to life. There were a couple of Marines posted on the roof—where they came from, I'm not sure. The AK-47's thunderous, maniacal taunts were met with the M16's cooler, quieter, high-pitched response. Amazingly, the looters promptly booked it. Over the next couple of days, the apartment we sheltered in became a refuge for other foreign families. A lady with two little kids; two other little kids, unaccompanied; a British lady with a 4-month-old baby. All had ties to America, some more tenuous than others. The people at the compound welcomed them anyway, humane treatment that we later learned wasn't always the rule in other foreign missions. Those days in that apartment were spent in relative safety and unfathomable uncertainty. My father was trying to get us out somehow. I think the kids were watching TV—the couple had an impressive video library, a whole wall of the living room. My mother and I scavenged through our unknown hosts' pantry, trying to put together meals for the children. We couldn't eat ourselves, even though we hadn't eaten in days.

After a couple of nights in the American compound, my dad brought the news I was dying to hear: We would be evacuated the next day to Guinea, on a United Nations' cargo ship. The next morning, I woke up to another beautiful day in Sierra Leone, blue skies, and birdsong. A car came around to take us to the port. It would be our first excursion out since we'd fled our own compound. I looked out the window of the car during the ride, suspecting I wouldn't see Freetown again. As I did, I saw the most ubiquitous, prosaic scene, one you will find the world over: kids playing soccer in the street. Blithely kicking around a ball, rich or poor, war or peace. The tableau of little kids playing and birds singing brutally clashed with my grief and fear. This backdrop of irrepressible joy and life mocked my newfound understanding of violence and insecurity.

When we arrived at the port, we found several other UN and affiliated personnel milling around the terminal, waiting to embark. We saw right away that the coup had landed on some harder than others. Each family was told to bring no more than one suitcase, which wasn't a problem for ours and our Monet tote bag. It was obvious others had lived through similar nightmares, as they had nothing, or a small bag with them. But other families were luckier and came laden down with luggage. I remember staring at a family sitting across from us at the terminal, struggling to stuff their tennis rackets in their suitcases. Their kids were teenagers like me, so there was a game-recognizing-game moment, except that I'd been wearing the same ratty t-shirt and cutoffs for days. My parents ran into people they knew, exchanging news with them, who had been attacked, looted, raped. The slew of attacks we experienced earned us a cabin on the boat, which I was grateful for. I couldn't bear to look at the kids with the tennis rackets, swimming in an irrational sea of shame that I had been attacked and they had not. It was one of those times where I couldn't look ahead into the future, which is weird for a teenager.

The ship we boarded was no frills, but by the time we arrived in Guinea, our lives started to find a glimmer of familiarity. Someone in a suit was there to greet our bedraggled family at the water's edge as we stepped off the gangplank in the middle of the night. We were whisked away in a nice car to a nice hotel in the capital, Conakry. The next few days were a weird combination of family vacation and post-war refugee recovery. We went through the embassies, replacing lost documents. We went to the market to buy underwear and the best family uniform: matching one-size, white t-shirts for all of us, girl, boy, ages eight to forty-seven. I don't know what my father was going through, but armed with a proper credit card, he shifted into tourist-dad mode, talking up the poolside menu, urging us to order steak *and* shrimp. But the absurdity didn't end there.

Someone, probably well-meaning, decided we needed therapy. Crisis, trauma therapy. It might have been mandatory. My parents were old-world in that they were dubious of psychotherapy, but they were rule-followers too, so off we went. The session started with group therapy, which was even worse. We had nothing to say. We were still so shell-shocked but my parents put on their Polite Guest masks and did their best to comply with the therapist's guidance, responding to a stranger probing into a difficult, undigested

story as best they could: truthfully, superficially, and with a positivity that, in fact, would actually serve us. After the group session, the therapist took our family aside, as we had been uniquely affected by the coup. She was kind, young, and nervous. My parents felt sorry for her, and they tried to soothe her, feed her answers she wanted to hear. I laughed inside as my parents struggled with yet another experience utterly beyond their comfort zone. Even if they had stuff to share with this lady, I knew they would rather run back to Freetown-at-war than reveal anything in front of their kids. In short, it was a cringe-fest mumble-shuffle exercise in emotional torture. I have to believe that UN crisis counselors are better now; sadly, there's plenty of opportunity to practice. But now that I think of it, I'm not sure many staff families suffer violence abroad as we did. Maybe our experience hit the therapist too close for her comfort.

We spent about a week in Guinea before we had enough documents to leave the country. We had first class tickets to fly back home to Washington D.C. via Paris. I don't remember the first flight, but I do remember Charles-de-Gaulle airport, all of us wearing the same white t-shirts, my dad leading the way, charging through the airport like he always did on our family holidays. Airports are great places to witness the weird, but every step of the way in that airport, our ragtag crew was noticed, and we had to brandish our tickets to prove that, yes, we were first-class, t-shirts notwithstanding.

In D.C., we settled into a furnished apartment, and I realized that I'd come back just in time for my real prom. I had graduated a year ahead of my classmates and was pushed to go to college early so as not to do my last year of high school by distance in Sierra Leone. I reached out to my friends, eager to share my experience, but no one was interested. A few seemed to envy it, which I could understand; I had more of a claim to Baudelaire's *Spleen* now, more of an excuse to chainsmoke cigarettes. At the same time, our ordeal only lasted a couple of weeks, trauma-lite. My dad's employer took good care of us, too. It might as well have been a close, exciting adventure vacation. Disaster tourism, they call it now. We almost died but we survived, so, everything was ok. We came out unharmed, at least physically, so it was unclear that what happened was even a big deal.

There were little things that lingered and faded over time, like a new-found dislike of fireworks. Once, that summer of 1997, I marched up to a

salesperson at a bookstore, and, in despair, demanded to know why they had a “Military History” section, since it basically promoted the glory and glamor of war, which was a lie. There was also an increased risk-taking bordering on nihilism, which was tied to a different understanding of the world, one that could bottom out at any time. And then there was, and is, survivor’s guilt, the knowledge that we suffered little compared to others. That guilt played no small part in my relative silence about the event until now. By and by, the old-school rigidity of my parents helped stem the trauma. Where some therapists insist on talking things out and through, my parents framed the experience as a lucky one, one where we had no right to feel anything but gratitude, where our privileged lives were juxtaposed to those left behind, stuck in the nightmare of war. Our family’s way was a form of *cognitive reappraisal*, and it mostly worked.

Another, more general factor that contributed to my resilience was the quality of the perpetrator-victim relationship. While the power balance was in our attackers’ favor for a brief moment, it was ours on the whole. It was impossible to resent or even feel threatened by the perpetrators in hindsight, given their position on the world stage. What were they in the end but starving soldiers? The rapes, the murders were unforgiveable. But the looting? Operation Pay Yourself had its logic. Other hurts I’ve borne in the years that followed were mundane, unworthy of an essay, yet they scarred me simply because they came from people more powerful than I, perpetrators who would not answer for their actions.

Still, the coup brought a fuzzier pain, an irritation, a longing at the edge of my consciousness, the inevitable consequence of an expanded worldview and being cut adrift from those around me. Working to pinpoint the precise wound the coup left has been a years-long journey—walking in circles in the inner forest, running a mental finger along the grooves of other pains, known, well-labeled—only to find two decades later that this event left me alienation, a most prosaic gift. Alienation is a weird pain. No medicine, no therapy. The burden of its resolution lies in the carrier alone. But in poking at the coup’s legacy, I find I’m glad of it, thankful for the bruise. It links me to different people, a far-off land, another’s pain. Pain is a currency, a kind of stupid money, one I’m happy to bear as a down payment on my guilt, a collateral for the privilege I’ve been gifted in an unjust, unequal world.

NOTES

¹The film is set against the backdrop of the Sierra Leonean civil war, depicting the diamond trade's contribution to the country's armed conflict.

²Dick Durham, "Diamond trade fuels bloody wars," CNN, January 18, 2001, <https://web.archive.org/web/20070116193213/http://cnnstudentnews.cnn.com/2001/WORLD/africa/01/18/diamonds.overview/index.html>.

³William Wilberforce was a British politician who fought for the abolition of slavery and created the Free Colony of Sierra Leone towards the end of the eighteenth century as a homeland for Black settlers from different parts of the British Empire.

⁴Marianne Ducasse-Rogier, "The Sierra Leonean Conflict: Causes and Characteristics," *Resolving Intractable Conflicts in Africa: A Case Study of Sierra Leone* (Clingendael Institute, 2004).

⁵Emmanuel Safa Abdulai, "War, Business as Usual: The Global Scramble for Sierra Leone's Natural Resources" *Freedom of Information: Law and Good Governance* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021): 151-175. https://doi-org.proxy.lib.umich.edu/10.1007/978-3-030-83658-0_6.

⁶A. B. Zack-Williams, "Kamajors, 'Sobel' & the Militariat: Civil Society & the Return of the Military in Sierra Leonean Politics," *Review of African Political Economy* 24, no. 73 (September 1997): 373–80. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4006415>.

⁷Early in the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, President Zelenskiy similarly released prisoners and armed them, which will probably go down as a bad idea. See Constant Méheut, "Zelensky Signs Law Allowing Convicts to Fight for Ukraine" *New York Times*, May 17, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/05/17/world/europe/ukraine-convicts-zelensky.html>.