



A CHILD'S STORY

AFFECTED BY WAR IN SIERRA LEONE


Foday worked cheerfully beside his mother in their garden. His sister, Kadiatu, only five years old worked beside them too, pulling weeds. The hot sun beat down on their backs as they bent over to pull weeds, cultivate seedlings and check for bugs and diseases that would destroy their plants. Foday, at 10, bore a heavy share of the responsibility for the work, but not for much longer. He would soon pass through his initiation rites into manhood and would no longer work with his mother in the garden. He wondered what she would do though when he was gone. Kadiatu was not able to help much. If only..... Well, no sense in thinking about that. His brother, Alhaji would have been 8 this year, if he had lived. He had become sick, quite suddenly, with a fever. The road to the hospital was closed at the time. Rebels had been attacking vehicles and burning them up, so there were no vehicles traveling the road any more. The hospital hadn't been able to get any medicines in a long time anyway, so maybe they couldn't have helped even if they could have gotten there by foot. But, 25 miles is a long way to walk, especially carrying a sick boy. Alhaji had died after only 2 days. Foday missed him, and he knew his mother did too.


They stopped working long enough to get a drink of water from the plastic jug nearby. It used to hold motor oil, but it had been carefully washed and now held their drinking water. The water was warm, but they were very thirsty, so they didn't mind. As they rested briefly, they looked over the garden. Foday read his mother's mind. He knew they needed a good crop this year. Food had

been so scarce since the war had come to their area. Trucks weren't traveling into their area anymore, bringing in the supplies that they needed. Nor could they get the things that they grew and made out to the markets. Rebels were all over in their area. Every day brought news of another village burned or another person they knew kidnapped or killed. So far, they had been lucky. Their village had not been attacked. But that didn't make everything all right.

Foday saw a shadow cross his mother's face and knew she was worried about Father. He had left their village 3 months ago trying to find a relative in a safe place where he could take his family. He had not come back. They all knew what must have happened. Rebels must have captured him, but no one spoke of it. Perhaps if they didn't say it, it would not really be true.

They went back to work in the garden. The smell of smoke tingled their nostrils. "Someone must be starting up a cooking fire," Foday thought. But when he looked up, he froze. He yelled to his mother, "Mama, look at the village!" Smoke billowed from the tops of the huts at the far end of the village. No sooner had they seen the smoke than they heard the screams of terrified villagers. Most of the men were either out in the farms or out hunting. Many of the women and children were working in their gardens near the village, as were Foday and his mother, while the older men and women and the small children stayed in the village to cook, do the household work and watch the village.





People began running out of the village, passing near the garden where Foday and his mother and sister were standing. "Run!!" they screamed. "It's them!!" There was no need to ask which "them" they meant. Everyone knew. The rebels had finally attacked. Foday's mother grabbed Kadiatu's hand and began to run into the forest surrounding the village. Foday followed, stopping only long enough to grab the container of water and his cutlass. As they crashed through the underbrush, they heard noise behind them and knew without looking that the rebels were following the villagers into the bush. They kept running until they could run no more. Hearing machine gun fire behind them gave them a little more energy and they kept going. Finally, Foday's mother collapsed out of exhaustion. She had not been well lately. She had been giving up her own food to her children when food was so scarce.

"Keep running, Foday! Take your sister and run! Don't stop or look back, no matter what happens! Go quickly!"

"No, mother, I can't leave you here for them to find. Keep running! Please try! I'll help you!"

"No, my son. I cannot. Let them find me if they must. Perhaps they will leave me be. But you they will not. You are young and strong. They will take you and force you to join their forces. It will be worse than death. Go, now, quickly!"


Foday quickly helped his weakened mother to an area somewhat sheltered, hoping that she would be hidden from view if the rebels came near her. Then he grabbed Kadiatu and ran. As they ran, they continued to hear machine gun fire behind them. The rebels were just spraying the bush with bullets, in case anyone was hiding there. Foday knew this area well. He had spent much time here

walking the path to the stream to catch fish and pretending to hunt with his friends. Maybe he could reach the tree....

He turned and ran toward his favorite tree, a huge mango tree that towered high above many of the other trees. When he reached it, he boosted Kadiatu quickly onto the lower branches and whispered frantically for her to climb. Kadi hadn't climbed many trees, and she wasn't very good at it, but he knew they would never outrun the rebels. He continued to boost her up from branch to branch, higher and higher. When they had gotten as high as they could, he situated her in the crook of a branch where she could sit without falling. Then he sat on a branch nearby. Tears ran down her cheeks as she sat, but she didn't make a sound. This was not the first time they had had to run, and she knew that silence was important. Foday looked at her and silently motioned for her to be quiet and not to move. His eyes strained to see what was happening around him. He heard branches breaking and leaves crumbling. Then, a band of rebels, maybe 7 or 8 of them passed under the tree where he sat. He glanced at Kadi. Her eyes were huge and she looked ready to scream. He reached out to touch her arm and laid two fingers gently on her lips. She looked at him with wide eyes.

When the rebels had passed, they breathed a little easier, but it was not over yet, and Foday knew it. They wouldn't keep going. They would look for a while and then they would go back and loot the village, taking anything of any value and taking prisoners of those who did not or could not run.

After about an hour, when their muscles were starting to ache terribly from sitting in one place in the tree, they heard people coming back. The first people Foday saw were a couple of his friends. Manso and Alfred, two boys who lived near him, and



their older sister, Mariama. Foday almost gasped when he saw them, but held his tongue just in time. They were being pushed along by the same band of rebels who had gone by earlier.

When they had passed, Foday waited for another hour. He heard nothing more in the bush, so he helped Kadi climb down from the tree. They cautiously retraced their steps to where they had left their mother. Foday bent over her where she lay under the bush. He saw blood on her clothes. She didn't move. Kadiatu shook her mother, calling to her, "Mama, get up. They are gone. Let's go home. Please, Mama, please get up!"

But she wouldn't get up.

She couldn't get up.

She was dead.

Foday took Kadi's hand and pulled her away from their mother's body. She cried and reached for her Mama. Foday pulled her along with him as he headed back to the village. He couldn't speak, not right now. He would explain to Kadi later.

When they reached the village, he couldn't believe his eyes. The whole village was gone. In its place, there were only smoldering piles of ash, where each of the huts had been. Everything they owned was gone. Mother was gone. Foday sat down. He didn't know what to do next.


He saw some other people from his village wandering around also, dazed by the events of the past few hours. Uncertain of where to go or what to do. He saw his uncle who had been out in the farm and saw the smoke and came back to see what had happened. His family was missing and he walked around crying, not knowing where to look for them. Foday told him about his mother, his uncle's sister. His uncle cried


harder, and finally Foday felt tears on his own face.

For a few days, everyone stayed near the village; hoping missing relatives would come back. They slept in the bush, on the bare ground, afraid of another attack at night. The bugs were terrible and wild animals made noises at night. There was no food to eat, as it had all been burned or stolen. They dug up roots in the bush to eat and located some fresh fruit on the trees around the village that hadn't been burnt.

Finally, some of the people decided to head for Freetown. There were camps there where people could stay when their homes had been destroyed. Foday and Kadiatu joined their uncle and headed for the camps. Perhaps they would find Father, Foday thought as they walked. His uncle hoped to find some of his family too. Red Cross workers at the camps tried to locate missing relatives for people. Though they lived 130 miles from Freetown, the capital city, they only had to walk 30 miles. From there they could get a ride with the United Nations trucks that relocated displaced people. "Displaced people." That's what they had become. People that didn't have a place in the world to live.

At the camp, Foday and Kadiatu were put in a "booth" with their uncle. The booth was actually a piece of tarp over some sticks. Thousands of people wandered about the camp. Some were stopping everyone they recognized and asking if they had seen a missing relative. Others just sat, not knowing what to do or why they were there, or what would happen next. No one had any money. Most of the people had escaped with only the clothes on their back. Foday had his cutlass, which he sold for a little money so they could buy food. Aid workers came around and gave out food rations, but it wasn't enough to live on.





One day, as he and Kadiatu were working on finding some food, a social worker stopped by their booth. He asked about Foday and Kadi's parents. Foday told him that rebels had killed his mother and that his father was missing. The social worker asked him if he had been to school. Schools in Foday's area had closed three years earlier, when the fighting in the area had gotten too bad to continue to have school. Foday told him that he had almost finished first grade, but that was all. Kadiatu, of course, had never gone to school. The social worker told him that they had a school for displaced children and wondered if they would like to attend. Foday wasn't sure. It had been so long since he had been in school, he didn't remember anything. As Foday hesitated, the social worker mentioned that they served a hot meal every day at the school. Foday instantly agreed and asked when and where they should go. The social worker took their names and told them to report to the local church tomorrow morning.

As the social worker turned to go, Foday had a frightening thought. "Sir!" he called after the social worker. The social worker turned around. "Sir, I can't go to school. I don't have any uniforms and neither does my sister." The social worker smiled at him. "Don't worry, son. No one else at this school has one either. But we hope to get some for you soon." And he left.

Foday couldn't believe it. A chance to go to school in the middle of all this sorrow? And a good hot meal every day. He felt so relieved for Kadi. She was so sad after losing their Mama and tired after all of the walking to get to the camp. He knew she would enjoy going to school.

The next morning dawned bright and clear and Foday and Kadiatu were up early to get ready. They washed themselves clean and brushed as much dirt as possible off of their

worn out clothes. Foday had thought to ask one of the women in a nearby booth if she would braid Kadi's hair the night before, so she looked pretty good, he thought. They went together. Foday found the class where Kadi would be sitting and then looked around for his own place. He was so nervous. It had been so long. He should be in 4th grade by now, but he didn't even know how to read or do simple math. Where should he go? One of the teachers saw him looking around and asked him what he needed. Foday explained his problem and the teacher helped him find his class. It was a class for big kids that were just starting in school. Foday was surprised to see how many kids there were in his situation.

As class began, the teachers opened in prayer. Foday had never heard someone pray like that before. The man sounded like he knew God personally and felt like God cared about him. Foday glanced over at Kadiatu. Her eyes were closed for the prayer, and for the first time since the attack, she looked almost peaceful. He was glad they had been found by the social worker. Now if they could just find Father, he knew everything would be all right. As he listened while the teacher began to tell the children about Jesus and how much He loves children, Foday thought that maybe things were already starting to be all right.

