

Ishmael Beah

Ishmael Beah was born in Sierra Leone. He is the "New York Times" bestselling author of "A Long Way Gone, Memoirs of a Boy Soldier". His work has appeared in the "New York Times Magazine", "Vespertine Press", "LIT" and "Parabola" magazines. He is a UNICEF advocate for Children Affected by War and a member of the Human Rights Watch Children's Advisory Committee. He is a graduate of Oberlin College, Ohio with a B.A in Political Science.

FLYING WITH ONE WING

By Ishmael Beah

It was the first time she had seen her father weep. His body trembled as he walked onto a piece of land that was now consumed by grass. A tall cement pillar still stood on the far end of the land, bearing residues of smoke, rain, dust, and scars from sharp metals that had left visible holes of dark moments. He looked back at his daughter and managed to conjure a smile. He kicked in the grass to reveal some part of the remaining foundation.

"This is where I use to sit, this was my classroom." He placed his fingers on the ground.

"This was my school. I can still hear our voices reciting the alphabet, greeting our teacher, 'good morning Mr. Kanagbole!' and running outside during break, screaming our desired positions for the football match that we played everyday." He continued and sat on the ground. His daughter sat next to him. She was accompanying her father back to his home where he had always said the core of his heart still lived. They sat quietly and listened to the wind that sailed

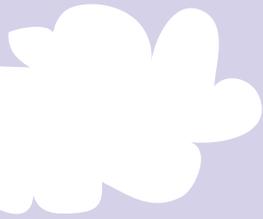


through the leaves of the nearby mango trees. Her father had never spoken much about his home. However, he had now started speaking in a voice that belonged to the past.

“My heart is not familiar with the joy of celebrating birthdays. It is however deeply intimate with the happiness of walking to school and learning to read. The discovery of language intrigued my childhood years. The ability to read and learn new things infused my childhood with possibilities and added more magic to my environment and activities. After I started school, the leaves on the side of the road to school were no longer just medicine; I also knew how they absorbed sunlight and water. These moments of learning were some of the happiest in my early childhood and they continued with exceptional vigor and meaning that followed every discovery of my own mind. This journey to discover my own mind allowed me to find the very necessity of my humanity and with that came an awakening to live my life for others, not just for myself. The seed of this awareness was planted in me right here, on this land.”

He closed his eyes raised his head sideways so that the sunrays rested on his face and then continued.

“The biggest celebration in my house was at the end of the school term when my brother and I brought home our report cards. My father’s words still remain deep inside my ears. ‘Birthdays are just reminders that you will become your parents. But celebrating education is guaranteeing your existence forever, is evoking the spirit of possibilities, is



finding the strength of your spirit to easily swim against any tide.' His face became tense, the veins filling with blood when he said such things. 'One day you will understand, my child.' He would rest the palm of his hand on my right cheek. I have come to understand"

He turned his face away from the sun, his eyes still closed. He sighed heavily that his body heaved before settling again on the ground.

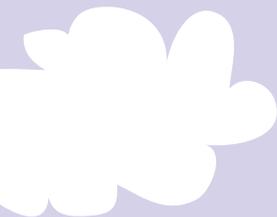
"I remember learning how to spell my name right here where we are now sitting. I had a slate in my hand and a chalk. The teacher came by and sat on the ground next to me. We didn't have benches then. He wrote my name at the top of my slate. I.B.R.A.H.I.M, I repeated after him. 'Continue reciting the letters and copy them on your slate as many times as possible,' he said and walked to the next pupil and soon enough, the chatter rose higher in the classroom, each boy and girl reading out loudly the letters of their names. On that day, I waited anxiously for the school bell, a long iron that hung in the branches of the mango tree, to be rung. As soon as one of the older boys rang the bell to signal the end of the school day, I ran home reciting the letters to each contact that my feet made with the ground. My mother was home waiting with a cup of water. I was ecstatic and told her every detail of what had happened in school. I had a piece of chalk in my pocket so I wrote down my name on the door of the bedroom my older brother and I shared. Although the letters, in retrospect, seemed crooked, I could see the joy on my mother's face when she cupped my little face in her

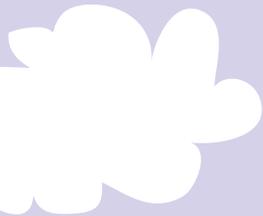


hands and lowered herself to meet my tiny eyes. There were tears of joy in her eyes. Not long after that, I was writing the names of every member of my family on various doors in the house. My father encouraged this by buying me more chalk. Soon enough the entire house was covered with not only names but every other sentence that I had learned in class. My father knew this would get out of hand so he bought me a notebook along with a pencil and asked me to copy everything I had written on the walls and doors of the house. The scent of that first new book is still lodged in my memory and I would never forget those moments with my father reading the sentences and names I had inscribed on the wall to me as I re-wrote them in my notebook. I knew then that something about my life had changed forever. I could feel it in the elation of my spirit and that of my father as we went around the house cleaning the walls.”

A bird flapped its wings to quickly fly past where they sat. He wiped the clusters of sweat that had emerged on his forehead. She was still, only her watery eyelids shook. He placed his right hand under his chin to hold his head upright.

“Years later when I was in class six in primary school and knew how to read and write, I became the young boy in this small town who knew the secrets of almost everyone. I wrote and read letters for the older people from their children who had moved away. I learned about the fears, hopes and dreams of many people. This role also provided me with some money that I used to buy books that I read while walking home after school.





Once, on my way back from school, I was reading a book about a boy who had gone to the city on his summer vacation. I was so enthralled with the book that I forgot to keep my eyes on the road. I walked off the tiny bridge that had no bars on either side and fell into that river and my book was soaked and useless. I never saw my father laugh as hard as he did on that day when I arrived home in my soaked uniform. He advised me though to sit and read instead of walking.

We didn't have any electricity so I read by the lamp at night and sometimes near the fire especially when the evening air was colder. There were a few times when it seemed even the fire from the lamp or the fireplace was envious of my reading and licked the side of my books with its flames. My father said that the fire was testing my awareness. It wanted to see if I had gained anything from all of that reading."

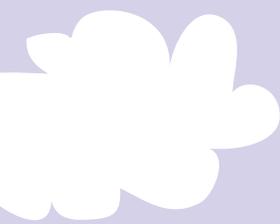
He opened his eyes and looked at his daughter. She clasped her hands in his beckoning him to continue when he was ready. He smiled a bit before his face tensed and went to recounting.

"Things changed though when the sounds of nature were replaced with those of guns, of wailing, of chaos. This is why we are sitting in this ruin of what used to be my school. During the time of that madness, I forgot to dream of a future as there were no longer schools to go to. But the memories of those early schooldays stayed with me and will never depart.

They are the times I remember fondly before everything changed. They are the times that were reborn when the guns ceased emitting their terrifying and destructive noises.”

Ulaimatu put her arms around her father. He had become quiet perhaps thinking of what to say next or perhaps exhausted from remembering. This is the most her father had said about his past and she now realized why he never bought her presents for her birthdays but only when she did well in school. They sat quietly for a while until the air was filled with sounds of bells that signaled lunchtime. A horde of boys and girls in their uniforms emerged from a nearby building, chattering like birds and making their way to various parts around the school building to sit and have lunch. Simultaneously, another horde of boys and girls the same age came running to the school compound with trays of food and water to sell. Ulaimatu’s father’s body trembled again.

“The future is only half bright, or in my father’s words, this country is a bird flying with one wing. It cannot soar for long.” He said as he looked on toward the school grounds.



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