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THE GUNBOAT

The morning reveille of distant drums sounded once more, and again the heart-sinking realization of where we were was accompanied by the dawn's light. A man in grey vest and suit trousers had slept beside us all night. As he sat up I realized he was the man with the squint, who had comforted us with words the first night and brought food and a more threatening presence the next. He seemed to have a natural authority with the younger ones and they referred to him as 'Pastor'. He leaned over, slapping the youth who was rolled up in the blue tarpaulin. As he awoke with a start, throwing the blue plastic from his face, the other two members of the gang laughed.

'Ah, So'ja,' they exclaimed as they sat rolling the first joint of the morning.

Every member of the gang seemed to have a pseudonym, preserving their anonymity and therefore their security. This recalcitrant youth seemed anything but a soldier, but he clearly relished his code name 'So'ja'.

'Ah, Pastor, no vex me now.' He crawled out of his plastic cocoon and drew on the joint offered him from the sullen man who had interrogated us the previous day. He sat,

leaning on his shotgun, his yellow football shorts filthy and stained. He wore them below the waist, homage to ‘sagging’ and hip-hop stars he would never meet.

The Pastor sat, his left leg outstretched before him, rubbing his ankle and foot. The foot was swollen and wrapped to no effect in a piece of cloth. He pulled his right knee up, cantilevering his weight against it.

‘We bless God,’ he announced.

I lay, my eyes half shut, surprised at what I had heard. Shirley and Alanna turned to look. The three other men had sat down before him and he, slowly and deliberately, began to sing:

Good morning Jesus, good morning Lord,
I know you come from heaven above.
The Holy Spirit He’s on the throne,
Good morning Jesus, good morning Lord
Alleluia ...
Good morning, Jesus good morning Lord,
I know you come from heaven above ...

The youths seemed to know the chorus and mumbled along, the chorus fading after the second time. It seemed quite incongruous and disturbing. We knew this chorus well and sang it at morning devotions at the mission station most days. It was always accompanied by laughter, loudness and wild gesticulating. After two or three different choruses the Pastor invoked the mercies of God to protect the gang, and, in particular, the leader – or ‘General’ as he was known – that his enemies should be vanquished, his wife and children blessed, and that all the plans that are meant to bring him harm would come to nothing under the protection of God.

It was puzzling. The singing, the words and the prayers echoed so closely what was expressed in our little mission, and yet the context and intent seemed the very antithesis of all that we understood to be godly.

The Pastor seemed genuine in all he said, seemingly blind to any sense of hypocrisy or irony. Indeed, it was almost tacitly expected that as Christians we would somehow join in with these morning devotions.

As the Grace was said and the little gathering broke up, we sat up beneath the mosquito net and held hands. It was as if the language and expression of our faith had been hijacked and misused. In some sense the language of our prayers seemed sullied, our petitions mocked. As one of the gang was to point out at a later time, 'Satan knows the Bible better than most Christians.'

We sat on our mattress under the mosquito net, exposed on the small open bamboo platform as the sun nudged above the tree line, its glare now beginning to reflect on the floodwaters just inches below us. It was a beautiful sight, and at another time and place people would pay good money for this extreme jungle experience. The beauty, extent and the remoteness of the jungle, paradoxically, created our prison walls. It was all so open, the jungle vistas surrounded us, the platform having no walls, and yet at the same time the sheer density of vegetation was so claustrophobic, creating an impenetrable barrier.

We gave thanks for sleep and waking without sickness. Ian was still heavy on our minds and hearts and we came before God with a simple desire for resolution and release. I rewound the previous day again and again, so bizarre, so brutal, so devastating.

I asked for the tarpaulin to be hung up at the foot of our mattress to give a small one metre barrier from eyes when Shirley or Alanna needed to attend to bodily functions, squatting inches over the floodwaters at the edge of the mattress. The men acquiesced reluctantly. The division gave some semblance of design to the platform, a very sketchy sense of 'us and them' if they were sitting or lying down. To be scrutinized all day, in such close proximity, especially for

Alanna, was intimidatory and exhausting, and the banter of the previous day was still frightening, given rape was a tool of dominance and predation in the Delta, and its threat lay ever present in the voracious, lust-filled eyes of the younger men.

The biggest man leant over and spoke for the first time since he had pushed us at gunpoint from the mission station.

'You need to call your people, get the money..' His English was pidgin, rough and loud.

Again, we explained the lack of a phone.

'You get one!', he said with exasperation.

There was nothing to say, we couldn't begin to proffer a solution to this dilemma. His lips were wet with saliva, and he pouted and spat.

The speedboat was heard in the distance, its arrival heralded by the growling of the outboard engine. As it nosed through the reeds into the clearing, we saw the slight man known as the General sitting cross-legged, nursing his AK-47 in his lap. Beside him sat one of his elders, a senior member of the gang, monosyllabic unless intoxicated, again brandishing an automatic machine gun and a doped expression, his eyelids heavy. Twelve bottles of drinking water were heaved onto the platform, a loaf of bread, more ground nuts and, bizarrely, twenty-four toilet rolls. The General nimbly alighted, his sagging jeans black and oily rolled up to the knees, his feet bare. He squatted, leaning on his rifle, and, with animation, began a heated conversation in which it was clear he was talking about Port Harcourt and mobile phones. The conversation was short, and within minutes he had left again, the wake of the accelerating outboard cleansing the water around the platform of detritus and faeces.

A small slight man in his late twenties with shaven head, rolled up black viscose trousers and a tight red elasticated top that seemed to be a woman's blouse, sat silently, watching the exchange.

He positioned himself against an upright of the shack, right against the edge of the platform. He was careful in his speech and did not seem to share in the profligate drinking and drug taking. Unexpectedly he had offered to wash our clothes.

'Why would you do this?' I asked. 'Let me have some soap and I will do it.'

'No,' he smiled, 'it's my job, it's why I am here.' With no change in clothes there seemed little point or opportunity to take advantage of his offer. His manner was gentle in contrast to the others.

'What were they talking about?' I asked quietly.

'They are trying to find a phone which cannot be traced. It is not easy.'

Certainly not, I thought, Port Harcourt was four hours away and untraceable mobile phones are certainly not a high street item and would be both rare and expensive. The big man whom we spoke to earlier was incensed, loud and angry, his speech rapid and explosive. It was clear he was exasperated by the delay but also that the younger man had spoken to us.

He waved his arms in our direction.

'You no friends, you no talk, call your people, get the money, go back to your people, go back to your country, leave Nigeria for us.' He looked out across the waters and berated the younger two beside him.

And so it was for the rest of the day. Waiting, discussing, smoking, drinking, withdrawing and sleeping. The sun rose to its zenith, and the heat and humidity sapped everyone of strength and conversation. We could not stand; they had nowhere to go either.

Mid-afternoon the General returned, this time in an ancient dugout canoe, So'ja paddling at the stern and occasionally stopping to bail the water from the leaking craft. It was another splash from the improvised bailer, a