

CAUGHT IN THE MIDDLE OF A CROSSFIRE

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The automatic gunfire erupted in the bustling main street of Bamenda. A chorus of screams pierced the hot October air as people scuttled for cover. Shoppers ran in all directions. Street-side stalls were upended and goods crashed to the ground. Cars hooted madly while hysterical people scattered all over, crossing the street at dangerous points, looking for a safe spot to hide. A car veered off-lane as the driver got hit. An oncoming taxi collided with the victim's car head-on and stopped. Women with babies strapped to their backs screamed and panicked. Some of them unstrapped their babies as they crouched to safety.

Whilst the automatic rifles continued to cough and mow people indiscriminately, Meryline Sirri instinctively threw herself down. Her newly plaited hair with rebellious teenage blond cornrows scraped off the red dust as she rolled under Mr. Anyangwa's red, beat-up Toyota SUV for cover.

Mr. Anyangwa parked his Toyota at the same spot every morning, opposite a hardware store. There were no parking meters on the unmarked streets, so the truck parked there all day long. He'd reverse into the spot, lock the truck and then unlock the door to his photographic shop-cum-studio. Anyangwa & Sons

had been in the hands of the same family for 50 years. For five decades it had been a feature on the recently renamed City Chemist Street.

From where she was hiding, Merryline watched in juvenile horror as bullets, flying over Mr. Anyangwa's Toyota, shattered the huge shop windows. Shards of glass rained down on the dusty sidewalk besides her. Inside the shop, the photo frames, film canisters and cameras on display were ripped apart by the bullets. The bits flew up in the air and came scattering down to litter the polished floor. Mr. Anyangwa lay slumped over his counter. Blood, which from Merryline's viewing point looked like carelessly thrown paint from an upstart portrait artist's canvas, ran in lazy streaks down the side of his chest. Amid the horror, Merryline stifled her sobs. Tears ran down her caramel-coloured oval face. She was scared of making noise and alerting the shooters. From her hiding place, she saw casualties of the noon massacre who littered the unlined street and sidewalks. The unidentified gunmen walked around jumping over the fallen townspeople, and taking valuable items. There was no time, even purpose, to check for wounded people's pulses. Those with a breath still laboriously twitching their riddled bodies were ceremoniously finished off without as much as a flicker of conscience.

From the west side of City Chemist Street, adjoining Sonac Street, a batch of unidentified gunmen in uniform, herded a group of captured young people towards the square. Merryline Sirri had never been so scared in her life. A warm, wet rivulet of pee down her thigh attested to the horror. All of her 20 years, she watched as the innocence of life expired before her eyes. She never knew, and certainly no one knew that a short trip to buy rice and some beans would end up as a witness to senseless killings. It felt as if the incident was staged, and it appeared like a movie but it was

real. Now Merryline began to comprehend why all the men were required to help the government army ward off separatist fighters. Her father Manjong had been one of those given the presidential order. The family was worried the day he was picked up. Without formal military training, he and others were forced to carry out national duty for which they were not skilled. Manjong was wounded in the spine. He lay home helpless and bedridden and could not cater to the tiny family plot anymore. The government had no policy in place to compensate fallen and wounded men. Even if it had such a policy, there was simply no money. Merryline's mother Malah, God bless her, tried all she could to keep the family together. However, under these difficult circumstances she could not afford to feed Merryline and her six other siblings. Only three of Malah's children attended school. Merryline was fortunate to be one of the three. The schools in Oldtown functioned intermittently. For much of the year, children were on the move, displaced by unpredictable fighting and sporadic attacks. Hunger and tent-hopping were constantly on children's minds. Those lucky enough to escape malaria, as Merryline did, could get a few months of schooling in the year.

As Merryline laid still, unmoving under the truck, she thought about her family. Her mother, together with her brothers and sisters, were preparing the plot for the planting season. Were they safe? Did they know where she was? Had the unidentified uniform men got to her house? She stopped breathing and listened intently. The sound characterising the attackers was subsiding. The gunmen appeared to be retreating. Merryline could hear orders being shouted. Heavy feet hardened by months of jungle training, stomped past Mr. Anyangwa's car. Merryline cringed and noiselessly shrunk away towards the centre under the car. After a while, which could've been hours, all traces of the gunmen's southern accent faded away.

Still Merryline laid still, afraid to move a muscle. The sun was dipping down the western sky. Shadows filled empty spaces where the sun danced in heat waves before the gunmen struck. Merryline continued to hide a while longer. She could hear no ambulance sirens, no gunmen barking orders.

There was no one that came to rescue the victims. The town was overrun by gunmen, who were in control. Eventually Merryline flexed and cautiously rolled out from Mr. Anyangwa's Toyota SUV. When she came clear in the hot afternoon sun, she sat and waited, listening for approaching sound. She feared that someone would see her and begin shooting. There was no one, not a soul in sight. Then she stood up and turned to look around at the damage. The buildings were pock-marked by gunfire. On the upper floors of the buildings, tattered curtains stirred in the breeze. A block away, a building was engulfed in flames. Countless bodies lay scattered on pavements and in the street. Each body was accompanied by a puddle of congealing blood.

Looking at all these, Merryline became sick to the stomach. She silently vomited outside Mr. Anyangwa's Photographic shop. Standing upright, she wiped her mouth and legs where the spittle had run down.

Then looking up and down the street, she began walking, slowly and undecided at first, then hurriedly in the direction of her home. She had lost the money Malah had given her for groceries. Now she'd go home without the food parcels. In the thick silence of a decimated town, Merryline walked on. A well-fed dog came running past her, licking blood from its mouth. The canine sent fresh cold quivers down her spine. Whether it was its master's blood or the remains of a sumptuous lunch, Merryline had no energy to ponder. After scaring her, the dog scuttled away in no particular

direction, sniffing endlessly. Merryline walked rapidly, her small feet noiselessly skirting one body after another. She passed a block with its opened, ruined shops. She arrived at an intersection, and stopped briefly to check for people. There was no one around, so she walked on and crossed the intersection.

She wished she could find someone or see someone to talk to, to ask for help. Questions she couldn't answer raced through her mind. The thought of being alone with so many dead bodies rattled her. Block after block, intersection after intersection, Merryline encountered no one. In a matter of hours, Bamenda had turned into a ghost town. Everything had happened in violent haste. Those who could, just upped and ran for the hills. Merchandise sold by small traders laid scattered in all directions. Street-side stalls selling food were abandoned with simmering pots that were now charred. The smell of burnt food, coupled with the sight of blood spilt, nauseated her and she vomited again. But she moved on to the next intersection. Then Merryline Sirri turned a corner and froze. Her small hands involuntarily flew up and covered her face as though she freed her vision.

Right ahead of her a platoon of gunmen, machine guns trained at her tiny body, stood menacing. Their cold eyes, burning with the desire to destruct, ravaged her small body. There must've been 50 of them. Merryline's legs trembled violently. It was the first time she saw the gunmen face to face. And the sight was ugly. The helmets that the gunmen wore on their heads made killing and destruction a fashion statement. A thickly built soldier, who appeared to be their commander, yanked a cigarette from his thick-lipped mouth. He stepped forward, casually shaking his head. Probably not more than 30, he appeared to relish this moment of surprise. He handed his machine gun to a toothless, bare-chested soldier. The soldier

grinned mirthlessly. Then the leader drew his pistol and stepped towards Merryline. Merryline wished so bad she could turn and run away. She stood trembling and crying. Her legs could not carry her, and she reeled as if she would fall, then found the strength to stand upright. She wished her father could miraculously appear, slay the attackers and lift her to safety. But with Manjong crippled and helpless, the fantasy rapidly fizzled away to reality. She bent double, clutching her belly. The soldier laughed at this sick entertainment.

“Look what we have here!” the leader stuck the cigarette back where it belonged. The cigarette looked like a prop he was born with. Then his swollen lips curled back in a hideous smile, exposing his brown teeth. In a flash, the grin disappeared. Merryline could feel her bones rattle beneath the skin. She searched for words, longing to say something. Her mouth, dry, was wired shut by terror. She wanted to ask to be rescued, to beg to be taken to her family, to be given water – but all that came out was an inaudible hiss. The soldiers laughed at her attempt to open her mouth and speak. One shouted sarcastically: “*Un soldat mute, commandant! Un bonus!*” A mute soldier. What a bonus. Merryline started as a single gunshot rang out around the block. The leader sprang into action.

“Take her in, boys!” he ordered. “Bring her to base to join the others. There, along with other child captives, the process of brainwashing them into believing the supposedly good cause of the soldiers began. She was to be trained and turned into a fighter whose conscience, innocence and compassion would be pried out of her delicate brain. There in the jungle Merryline was instructed, and programmed to turn against her own folk, her kin, and unleash attacks of terror all in the effort to help win its war against the separatist of the north and south west region. A chilling warning that it was not ideal to be a girl child.

Nearly a year ago when the massacre in Bamenda at high noon took place, Merryline was at the wrong place. It was the wrong time to be in town. Her disappearance caused Malah's heart palpitations. Manjong, who had rapidly lost the ability to comprehend dialogue, laid wide-eyed, with no way of knowing that his daughter was the next village attacker. As for Malah, it was a safe bet to believe that she would never see Merryline again. Alive.