Running. Running. Feet down steps. Quickly, quickly. One, two, three. Memuna, Sheka and me.

We ran down the back stairway of our house in Kissy, skirted the edge of the crevasse and went inside through the door into the kitchen of the family below. The front room was crowded, everyone from both families: Mum, Morlai, Santigi, Musu, Esther, Sullay and all the people who lived there. There were upwards of fifteen of us. We sat quietly and listened to the sounds of the ISU soldiers as they arrived at our house: shouts, slamming tail gates, boot soles hitting the dust, the dull clank of heavy metal, ammunition belts rattling like chains, and the dog Apollo barking impotently, on and on, as the men raced in every direction until they had us surrounded. No one spoke, nobody breathed. We sat around on the chairs in the middle of the room, staring at the floors and the walls and the windows, like people on a bus, avoiding each other’s gaze and the temptation to utter a sound.

Upstairs now. I could hear them there. Muffled thuds and footsteps on our floors. Voices and words. What were they saying? Someone in command. Where were they now? In our sitting room. Along the passage. Quiet. Strange sounds, shuffling. Hovering feet maybe. The pistol-sharp crack as the lock on a door gave way to a shoulder or a boot. Not my room then – I had left our door unlocked in the scramble. The scrape of furniture along the stone floor. I turned my ear upwards to the sounds. Doors slammed. The thud of our books and belongings as they fell to the floor. Papers fluttering. The distinctive tinkle of a mirror breaking. Seven years’ bad luck. The sounds merged and unfolded, repeated in waves over and over, all except the barking dog, who was silent now.

I looked at the faces around me: glistening foreheads, darting eyes, a head cocked, eyes watching the ceiling as though they might penetrate the layers of plaster and polystyrene tiles. There were not enough chairs for us all. Santigi stood with his back to the wall, feet apart, shirtless in
shorts. He had been doing the washing when the soldiers came. Musu pressed her nails into her palm, again and again; her chest heaved with the effort to control her breathing. Chief Sumano's wife, the owner of the house, got up and moved quietly about the room. Preparing herself. In case they knocked on the door.

Time passed. Slowly we crept to the window. A whisper marred the silence. Someone moved the curtain aside and we looked out. Two trucks were parked at the front of the building, alongside a white CID Volkswagen. A man stood with his back to us. He wore a red beret and had a rifle slung over his shoulder. Another figure, identically dressed, was away to the right. The stone-breaker and his family were outside their panbody: hands over their heads, eyes on the dirt in front of them. By the door was an untidy pile of their pathetic horde of belongings: enamel bowls, aluminium pots, a gas canister, a few limp clothes. A third soldier ducked out through the opening and passed them by. He did not so much as glance at them, and the stone-breaker and his wife did not look up at him. We hovered behind the glass, in the discreet silence of the room. God, please let them not come over here. Someone touched my shoulder, edged me back from the window sill. It was open, but we dared not risk closing it.

A movement over to the left. I turned my head. Someone on the stall at the side of the house. Coming down. On the landing now. Three pairs of legs. Two in khaki, one in brown slacks. A pair of familiar shoes. Brown suede shoes. I held my breath. One step, two – they were almost in view. I pushed my face up to the window. The whisper floated on the stillness of the room: 'It's Daddy.' I turned to Memuna and Sheka. My scream tore through the silence: 'Daddy!'

A hand over my mouth. Pushed it away. I struggled against the other hand on my shoulder, the same someone pressing me hard against them. Across my chest, holding me. Slip down and slide. Onto the floor, I crawled away past their knees. Towards the door. Hands reaching, too slow. Nobody fast enough for me: Sheka, Memuna, we three. He was going, walking in the direction of the trucks. We reached the door. 'Daddy!'

My father stopped in his tracks and slowly turned. Time hovered like a dragonfly above the water. None of us moved. 'Let them go,' I heard somebody in the room behind me say. 'Let them go.' Who was it, a man or a woman? I remember the words, but not the voice. Let them go. Somebody who saw that it was impossible to hold us. Or perhaps there was some other reason, known to them but not to me. Perhaps it was Morlai. Years later he looked me in the eye, smiled at me and said: 'Remember how you ran? How you ran?' I felt the hands begin to relax their grip, one by one, releasing me.

Somewhere in those infinite seconds, as I shook off the last of my restraints, I saw my father turn to his guard. I saw the man shake his head. I was out of the door. I was running away down the length of the house. I called again. He must see me. Memuna and Sheka ran at my side. The guard hesitated, then he took the key and released the handcuffs. My father turned round and stretched out both his arms to receive us.

I cannot remember what we said to each other. I cannot remember him being led away again. I remember nothing really, except having my arms around his waist, only the railings of the veranda separating us. I ran so fast I felt as though I would run through them. Instead I hit them hard, almost bruising my ribs. I didn’t care at all. He held us all close, the four of us together. He spoke some words, reassured us, promised he would see us soon. I remember that. I believed him utterly. Perhaps that was why I let him go? I don’t know. But somehow he was gone, taken away from us.

The next I recall I was upstairs in my room waiting behind the closed door while the soldiers went on searching our house. Memuna sat on her bed and I sat on mine, as we had been ordered to do. I had my feet on the floor and my hands in my lap. We were facing each other.

'Aren’t you scared?' she asked.

'Yes,' said I.

'Don’t be frightened. Come on.' She stood up and put her arm around me. 'Let’s look out of the window and see if we can find the little brown dog you saw this morning.' We colluded, the older and younger sister: we both wanted a reason to look out of the window again.

There was no brown dog to be seen. Instead I could hear Apollo barking at a soldier, one of those still surrounding the house. The dog was being persistent, inching forward, jumping back at the slightest movement. The soldier swatted at him like a fly. The dog backed off and came at him again with bared teeth. A few moments later the soldier had had enough; he stepped forward and kicked Apollo in the ribs. His companions laughed.
at that. The soldier took his rifle off his shoulder and mockingly took aim. Others paused to watch the fun. They were loading the truck, herding the people in: the family from downstairs, the stone-breaker. I saw them climb up one after the other, in front of a soldier who pointed his gun at them. They stood together in the back like cattle, while another soldier fastened the tail gates.

Memuna was pointing away in the distance, keeping up our pretence that we were really looking for a stray dog. I looked over in the same direction. Neither of us saw the soldier approaching until he appeared below our window. He shouted at us and gestured with his arm to come down. We ducked away from the glass, ran back and sat on our beds the way we had been before, the way we were supposed to be doing. I prayed the soldier would go away. But he didn’t. I could hear him yelling at the open window. I ran across and sat with Memuna. Now, I really was afraid. I didn’t want to be arrested and taken away to prison.

We waited. The soldier was still shouting. His voice was harsh with anger and authority. *Bo you there! Commot.* Memuna and I looked at each other: ‘We’ll have to go down.’ She said it first. We walked to the door and opened it. Morlai was in the hallway. We babbled at him in our fear.

Morlai walked to the window and looked out. The soldier shouted to him to send us down. ‘Please, they’re only children,’ Morlai called back. Yes, I thought. That’s what I am. I am just a child.

The soldier took Morlai instead, ordering him to come down and get into the back of the truck.

‘It’ll be all right,’ said Morlai as he went. ‘I’m coming back later.’

I nodded, grateful, allowing myself to fall backwards into the synthetic comfort of his lie. My brain was empty of everything, even guilt, washed with relief that it wasn’t me they were taking away.

After Morlai had gone, and the soldiers too, I went in search of the others. I couldn’t find Mum. Sullay was wandering around the house. Tears leaked from his eyes and down his face. He didn’t wipe them away. His nose was streaming too. Why doesn’t he care? I thought. Sullay opened his mouth and uttered a cry, a huge frightening noise, as deep as a cavern. I stared at him. I had never seen a man cry before, I had never seen anyone cry like that.

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