

# How the Rebels Took Port Harcourt

by Matthew Derby

I do not remember when or how I ended up traveling on all fours. I was wandering through the Delta in tattered fatigues, far from my battalion, which had been torn apart by mortar fire outside Warri. I had no more water in my canteen and only a half-eaten meal bar (fruit medley flavor) in my shirt pocket. My son, an electronic surrogate for the one who died in its mother's womb, was shattered in pieces inside a blue gym bag strapped to my back. I had been awake for close to seventy hours. I suffered visions of colossal snakes descending upon me from the dense canopy, absorbing my head down their throats like a hand into a black leather glove. I am certain I was bitten by a fat violet spider, whose venom worked on me like a bottle full of the malaria medication I had not taken for days. I saw dead rebels in rotting black flak jackets rise up from the swampy bogs, their flesh flaking loose from their skulls. They shadowed me in the dappled half-light, slinking effortlessly through the peat. These visions gave way to a period of darkness in my mind, and after that I was crawling on a dirt road—nothing more, really, than two soft tracks worried into

the trashed, primal wilderness. I crept along the roadside for as long as I could before collapsing in a grassy ditch.

When I came to, the sun was different. Higher, with a greenish halo. I heard a churning, like wood in a chipper; a beaten blue taxi was coming straight at me. I was convinced it was part of the rebel faction that shredded my comrades. I rolled into the road and waited for the taxi to run me down. Instead it stopped, and the driver—a spindly man with a white scouring pad for a beard—emerged, hefted me by the underarms, and tossed me into the back seat. On the radio, a young tough groused in staccato pidgin.

I sat up and leaned against the window. We sped through a lush nowhereescape. Gnarled trees sprouted amid stiff yellow grasses. I stretched my legs across the seat and rolled up the pant legs. My calves were gouged and dented.

“Where we headed?” I asked.

“Away from Port Harcourt.”

I had, in the past twenty-four hours, seen two good friends roasted alive by a jury-rigged flame thrower. A third got flipped in the air by a roadside bomb that sheared away half his face. I was not anxious for more. The rebels could take the whole country for all I cared. I wanted only to get back to cool, cavernous America where my son could be reassembled.

“What is your story?” the driver said, gesturing at my outfit. “You military man?”

“Oh, this,” I said. “It’s not—I’m not with the army.” I had decided I didn’t care if he was a rebel. I didn’t care if he killed me the way they’d wasted my friends, but my hands still shook. “I’m a contractor. For Shelton.”

“Oil man.”

“I actually couldn’t give one what Shelton makes. I’m pulling

down sixty an hour with O.T. Or I was.”

“You are from America, though.”

I nodded. I was in Nigeria on a security contract. It was cheaper and easier for the oil companies to hire American paramilitary outfits for security detail on their facilities than to get people in-country. No one wanted to be a target for the rebels or to betray their nation, whereas we were hungry to take on all comers. At least until the rebels came in the night and routed us without hardly breaking a sweat. I told the driver none of this.

We continued in silence for a long stretch, moving slowly through a rained-out gully choked with reeds. In the distance, a flare sent stippled gray plumes into the air.

“I thought America would have fixed this by now,” the driver said.

“Excuse me?”

“This, what is happening here. The rebels and the government. The insurgency. I thought of Americans coming here to end the fighting.”

“I don’t know one thing about what’s happening,” I said, hoping that would suffice. I could guess why America wasn’t coming to Nigeria’s aid (mainly that it was a shit country), but I was not inclined to engage the man. I just wanted to gain purchase on a tract of land with usable buildings and roads. A place that looked like it might have an internet connection. Or at least Skittles.

“Where are we headed, anyway, if not Port Harcourt?”

“I am going to my brother’s. He has a farm. I am going to stay with him. You can stay with us if you like.”

I watched his eyes through the rearview mirror. They never left the road. A rebel’s eyes would have drifted. His lids were puffed, as if brimming with tears, although his face remained calm.

The gully gave way to a dusty land pebbled with low-growing trees and brush the likes of which I'd never seen before. I unzipped the gym bag containing Jerome and held him in my lap. A speaker had come loose and a rat's nest of wires hung from the casing. I gently pushed them back into his frame and tried to tighten the fabric. He was a peanut-shaped thing, approximately the size of a loaf of bread, "designed to forestall grief in mothers who have miscarried." That was the description in the brochure. The doctors gave him to us just hours after the miscarriage, within the bonding window. We sat in the recovery room and looked at the thing sitting there in its bassinet. Then it made

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a tiny whirring sound, a sad digital sigh, and I went and picked it up and the whirring stopped. I held it for a

while, and then Mandy asked for it. She took it in her arms and grimaced but held tightly. Before long it was no longer an "it" but Jerome, and we took him home with us.

Soon afterward, things heated up in the Delta and I was called into duty. Not six weeks later I got a big Jerome-shaped box in the mail along with a scented letter from Mandy explaining that she couldn't take care of him while attending nursing school and maintaining her spot in the leaderboards on Dance Dance Execution, which was in the high teens, which meant that she was competing with actual Koreans. I saw this as a real sign, that the boy was being sent down a vast river by his mother, just like Moses down the Nile, if Moses's mother was a wicked, selfish philanderer. It was the one real sign I have ever gotten, and I have contracted in most of the holy lands. I resolved to give Jerome my all, but one night the rebels made it through the concrete barriers

and torched us with Molotovs. I was only half awake when a guy came at me with a two-by-four wrapped in concertina wire and smashed me in the lower back, where I kept Jerome. Because of my ineptitude and torpor, he was just a heap of parts in a bag.

“Son,” I whispered. I looked up to see whether the driver was looking back, but his watery eyes remained focused on the road. “Son, I just want to know—are you still in there? Is there an escape hatch where you can leap in case of a rocket attack or something? Did your builders build that?”

His pieces sat silently in my lap, his speaker cone trembling.

The radio cut out in a sharp blister of static. The dashboard lights went brown. “I wish this wasn’t happening,” the driver said. He pointed to the gas needle, which had dipped below the “empty” hash mark, and pulled over to the side of the road.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“We need to wait here. Someone will come by.”

“They’ll just give us gas?”

“Most likely we will have to take it from them.” He reached under the passenger seat to retrieve an AK-47.

“Whoa,” I said, ducking involuntarily. “Where do you get a thing like that?” It was in beautiful shape, its rosewood butt polished like the skin of a Christmas chestnut.

“The Russians were not stingy when it came to spreading the word of communism,” he said. “Anyone with a cause, they provided the weapons.”

“All due respect, your people are communists?”

“No. But during the civil war they gave guns to anyone who might have a reason to overthrow the government.”

“That’s slick,” I said, shaking my head. “All that stuff you hear about conspiracies, secret documents, things getting shipped here and there. Very slick.”

“Not very slick,” the driver said. He ran an oily hand towel over the barrel. “The Soviets are gone. They went the way of the dinosaurs. The Americans, that is what is slick. You see an opportunity to bring hamburgers and soft drinks to a country, you do it in the open, shaking hands with everybody. Whenever you open a new restaurant chain, a local band plays and the children are given small toys in vacuum-sealed bags.”

“You’re talking about Arby’s, now.”

“The Soviets failed because they misunderstood how the world works. The Americans understand. That is how you will spread your arms so wide. When you shake hands, your hands shake the world.”

“Is this,” I said, then stopped to clear a gob of something in my throat. The air was sharp and crisp, the way it always is right before someone dies. “Are you going to shoot me, or—”

The driver abruptly reached down to release the catch for the trunk and got out of the cab. The chassis bounced as he rummaged through the trunk. I heard heavy objects moving, then a zipper, followed by a muted rustling. He shut the trunk and approached the passenger side window, handing me a brick of dried meat wrapped in cellophane, and a handgun.

“That’s more like it,” I said.

He pointed the AK barrel at Jerome. “What is that?”

“That’s my son,” I said, unable to disguise the bitter defiance that accompanied the response.

He shrugged. “You will get in the driver’s seat. Do you understand? You will sit there and wait for someone to come by. I will be up in the trees.”

“Up in the trees?”

“Yes,” he said, irritated. He indicated the line of gently canted palms. “Up there, in those trees, with the rifle. I will watch from

there. You will wave down the passing vehicle. You will beg them for gas. If they give it to you, you thank them and give them the meat.”

“What if they don’t?”

“Most people, when they hear there is a man in the trees with a gun, will give you the gas.”

“What if they don’t?”

“That is why you have the gun.”

“You want me to hold them up?”

“Very few people would put up a struggle at that point.”

“I don’t even get to eat the meat?”

“If you don’t have *dash*, they will be very upset. It’s better to give them the meat.”

He walked slowly toward the trees, the brush engulfing him by degrees until it swallowed him altogether. I reluctantly got out of the car and walked around to the driver’s side.

“Man,” I said to Jerome. “I wish you could see this, son. Your father has gotten himself into one hell of a situation. And here I always thought I would die at home, in a recliner, fading out to the voice of a well-groomed game show announcer.”

The afternoon crawled. I spent most of my time fighting off all manner of wispy, needle-nosed bugs. Eventually, in the distance, the sound of a motor heaved through the brush. I put Jerome on the floor of the passenger side and lay the meat out in the bucket seat so that whoever was coming would have a clear view. The vehicle was a burgundy station wagon with the back windows obscured by sheets of corrugated steel. I counted three men. As they came closer, I saw the signature black kerchiefs over their mouths and noses. They pulled up alongside the cab.

“Soldier-man. You are broken down?” the driver asked, the kerchief puffing out from his face like a tiny lung.

“I just need gas. You have gas?”

“No,” the driver said in a low voice. “I don’t have gas. Do you have gas?” He looked at one of the passengers, who was working at something I could not see.

“Maybe you don’t understand,” I said. “I’m not trying to do anything here. Just get some gas—gasoline. Enough to get to the next station. Maybe some . . .”

I let the phrase trail off into the hazy distance between us. The driver regarded me with furious restraint. His eyeballs were a capillary relief map, practically furry with raised, reddened blood vessels.

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“We can get you gas,” he said. “But we need some things.”

I patted the loaf in the passenger seat. “You want this.”

The driver, without glancing at the loaf, said, “We would like you to exit the cab.”

I had a loaded handgun tucked into my belt. I had years of military training, I had seen people die. I had killed the people I saw die. There was a lady in the United States whose unscrupulous body knew mine. These were the things I thought then, clearly ordered and prioritized.

“Okay. I’ll get out. I should tell you, though, that there is a guy in the trees with a gun.”

The driver scanned the canopy. One of the passengers shouldered an automatic rifle and aimed at me. I dived for the floor.

A bouquet of glass shards bloomed in the cab’s airspace. Outside, the men shouted as the cab driver returned fire. Tires peeled and the station wagon fishtailed into the cab, which sent me

ass over end into the passenger seat. I heard the pop of a tire rupturing, the tin clatter of a hubcap spinning off into the brush. There followed a round of spastic shouting, and then a short burst of rifle fire, and then there was just the sound of the station wagon idling and a weird insect buzzing in the trees.

“It’s okay,” the cab driver shouted from high up. “They’re gone.”

I righted myself, shaking glass shards from my clothes. The station wagon was angled into a ditch, and a burled cloud streamed from the hood. An inverted body dangled from the passenger side window, the arm chewed up and gristly.

The cab door was broken, so I climbed out through the open window. My calves pulsed, my whole lower half a complex lace-work of gashes.

The driver scurried down the tree trunk. “Quickly,” he shouted, “the siphon, the siphon.” He pointed at the trunk of the cab.

“No way,” I shouted back. “That wagon’s about to blow.”

“The siphon,” he repeated with greater intensity, as if to drown out my response.

“Man, I am not getting the siphon. That’s outrageous.”

He emerged from the brush. “You are an American pussy,” he said, pushing past me to get to the trunk. I could have come up with some sound arguments against the claim, but this was, I knew, not the time for it.

He rushed over to the station wagon with a length of plastic tubing and a five-gallon metal tank and set to work. He swiftly unscrewed the gas cap and threaded the pipe into the hole. In one motion he sucked the gas up through the tube, drew the tube from his lips, capped it with a thumb, and forced it down the narrow throat of the gas can. Black smoke poured from the hood, but the cab driver rocked back on his heels, hands thrust in his

pockets, as though he were waiting for an ice cream sundae.

When the tank was full, he withdrew the siphon and joggled over to the cab where he began the process in reverse. While the tank was filling, he glanced inside the cab.

“This shouldn’t have happened,” he said, gesturing at the shattered windshield. “Who will pick this up, this mess you’ve made?”

I set my jaw and returned to the cab. I picked out more broken glass and tossed it into the high grass. “Diamonds of Sierra Leone,” I muttered. The driver did not respond, only tightened the gas cap, closed the hatch, and started up the cab.

“Get in,” he said. “We go to my brother’s now.”



We drove through a dull, shiftless landscape until the sky turned a heinous orange. We had no working headlights, so we slowed to a crawl as darkness approached. The road was caked in litter. The wheels of the cab crushed each soda can, plastic chips wrapper, and desiccated meal with protracted relish. I leaned forward, my elbows resting on the dash, and stared through the gaping hole where the windshield had been.

“You mentioned a civil war?” I asked. I had not slept a real sleep in days. I felt like I was speaking through a tank of heavy water. Each word floated up in a private orb, rising independently of its peers.

“Biafra,” he said.

Before they shipped us over, our employer, Evergreen Security Solutions, put us through a rather thorough training course. I remembered a PowerPoint presentation on Biafra. Rebels in that war had made their own tanks from sheet metal and old cars. Badass.

“You were part of that?” I asked.

“No. I was a teacher back then.”

“No shit.”

“Many years ago, things were better here. I had a wife and two boys. We had very stable government. Each year, it seemed that things were getting better. We were on the elevator to the first world. And then the oil companies came. A long time, the country went sideways. Biafra was an attempt to stand straight again, but it failed. We failed. And so things continued to slip. Now this.”

The driver made a brushing motion with his hand. He was not up for an extended conversation about his ruined past. I leaned against the headrest and watched the cool gray procession of forest unfolding before us.

“That bag,” the driver said, tilting his head toward my lap.

“My son?”

He raised his hands over the steering wheel to emphasize his lack of comprehension.

“Well,” I said, sucking my teeth, “he started out as just a tool. My Mandy, she had a miscarriage. And the doctors gave her Jerome—my son—as a way to get over it or live through it or what have you. And I just, I have to get him back to the U.S. and get him put together again.”

I assumed he regarded me as a supreme jackass, a living incarnation of all he’d secretly assumed about the rolling American nightmare. A grown man playing soldier, carrying around a trussed-up radio and calling it a boy. I suppose he had a point. But something happens to a person when a small and needy object is placed in his arms. Something slips away from you, a taut and slithery thing that might be reason, and once it’s gone, you have only the foaming, bared teeth of parenthood, a wild, insensate desire to wall up your private airspace and gun down all foes.

The driver smacked his lips.

“You thirsty?” I asked.

“I have lost children,” he said. His nostrils quivered. “There is no bringing them back.”

“I think I have some water here,” I said. “Or maybe it’s bourbon.” I started to search my bag.

“I was not home when they were killed. I was at the school. They came into the school first and told us to get down. While we were on the floor, they were burning the houses. And my wife and my children were in the houses, burning, while I lay on the floor. And I remember that my face was pressed to the floor and it was concrete and I thought about how cool it was, and I think it was in that moment when I thanked the floor for being nice and cool, that is the very same moment that my wife and my children left the earth.” The man’s eyes were glazed and his speech slurred.

“I wanted so much to go back, to try the window, to try to run for the door, to fight the soldiers, to run back to the house and warn my family, but in my mind I could never make it back in time.”

My hands trembled. “I think that I don’t actually have bourbon,” I said. “I may have just been hoping for it.”

He looked at me, puzzled.

“I offered you bourbon,” I said. “Nevermind. I don’t have it. I don’t have anything in this bag, nothing.”



I was at the base conducting a session on the M60 when the call came through. Mandy sounded rough, like she had inhaled paint fumes or something. She told me the baby was having problems. She was calling from an ambulance. It was hard for her to talk, she said, because they’d put an oxygen mask over her face. I told her

to just keep the phone by her ear. I told her not to think about the baby. She asked how, and I said I would talk to her about when we met. I told her everything I remembered. I was on a detail in Honduras and she was working as a missionary. I described the ruins we discovered on our walks, those mighty caved-in pyramids in the middle of the jungle, no velvet ropes around them or anything. I told her about the time we climbed the ancient stairwell that wound around the side of the mountain, and when we got to the top the trees fell away and we were above a cloud of mist. I told her about the expat bar in the middle of town, the Thursday night karaoke with DJ Big Bill, how we sang a duet of “Magic Man” by Heart even though it was not a duet. I told her about the plantains, the salted, fried plantains, nothing like them anywhere ever in the entirety of the universe.

I got in the Escalade and drove. When I got to the hospital they told me the ambulance had arrived with the baby dead already. Mandy said they made her go through labor anyway. She said they set the lights low, and that it hurt worse than anything, because there was not a single fabric of hope to pull her through the pain. I told her I was not prepared to hear the rest. She got upset, because she had no choice in the matter so why should I, and she shouted more details while I begged her to stop. She said that they had cleaned the dead baby and taken a picture of him, and that the picture would be kept on file at the hospital, always.



The dark was really starting to penetrate the landscape, its black cloak unraveling over the horizon. I stuck my head out the window to get a better look at the sky. The clouds were thick and variegated. White streaks plowed through at spastic intervals, like falling stars in reverse. Closer to the horizon, I saw a point where

the clouds met the ground. Something was burning.

“Those clouds are not clouds.”

“I know,” the driver said. “That is Port Harcourt.”

“I thought we were heading away from Port Harcourt.”

“We need more gas. We are almost out again. We will skirt the city’s edge.”

The plan was sketchy, but I had seen the man conduct a tree-top assassination. I reached for the AK. “I don’t think this has many rounds left,” I said, thumbing the magazine.

“Look in the glove box.”

I turned the clasp and the whole door came away in my hand. A half-dozen full magazines tumbled to the floor. “You are not a

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man of chance,” I said, stuffing two in my hip pockets.

We drove along the single weatherworn dirt road, never getting

closer to the source of the smoke. We passed houses, darkened windows. The back of my neck went cold, and I felt a certain action in my bowels, a new level of engagement. We slowed our pace. I laid the weapon crosswise on my lap and hugged the bag containing Jerome between my feet. We were night men, prowling silently through the graveyard of houses and shabby storefronts festooned with banners of the new republic. A single boy wandered in a field.

“Where is everybody?” I asked.

The driver shrugged.

We began to see better. The landscape came up in sharp relief, everything clean and well defined in shades of gray-blue. This was true darkness we were cutting through, almost by intuition or

some oddball faith. As we edged closer to the death zone, our ears rang with the surging chemical ductwork that accompanied the end-time. I felt like I could split a man's teeth from five hundred yards with a single shot, blindfolded.

We entered a space that was more clearly urban. Houses gave way to complexes, the stores became markets and other places of business. Some of these, we could see, had smashed windows. Whether this was evidence of the current aggression, we couldn't know.

"Damn, how far do we have to go?" I asked in a dry-mouthed whisper.

"To the connector. Just a few miles," he said, wheezing, the first hint that he was not entirely confident about his plan.

"We don't have to," I said.

"Can't go back, can't stop," he said. I turned to look at where we'd been—a dark blue field framed by sky, bands of deep purple fading at the horizon line, periodically ruptured by luminous tracer fire.

We turned onto a paved road and a new quiet blossomed over us in a meditative dome.

"Do you think I'm crazy for carrying around this bag?" I asked.

The driver glanced between my feet.

"Does it make you lose respect for me?"

"I don't know much about respect," he said, wiping the sweat from his forehead. "There are just actions. There is nothing else."

"But here I am, traipsing around your country with this bag of parts that I call 'Son.'"

The driver's eyes narrowed. "What you carry, and what you call it, has no bearing for me." As he spoke, the driver sucked in his cheeks and lunged forward, slamming his foot on the brakes.

I hurtled into the glove box and smashed my face on the dash.

“Jesus.” My teeth were bleeding.

“This is bad,” the driver said. In front of us, blocking a good portion of the road, was an overturned personnel carrier, wrecked parts strewn everywhere.

He took the AK, slipped out, and crouched by the door. The world was dead quiet.

“Can’t we just go around?”

“This is a trap,” he whispered, waving to silence me. “An old trick.”

The driver pivoted on the balls of his feet, his whole body a well-orchestrated mechanism for stealth. I could barely see him as he maneuvered toward the front of the upended vehicle and ducked around the other side.

Night sounds howled in my ears as I tried to locate the driver’s footfalls. Some kind of beast with long, sawing lungs keened in the trees. I stared hard at the outline of the vehicle, which trembled and flagged in the near-total darkness.

I wanted to call out to the driver, but I did not know his name. I realized I knew nothing about where I was or how I might get somewhere else. I knew not how to reassemble my son from the bag of parts at my feet. None of the facts and figures I had stored up in my head over the years were applicable or transferable to this place. Like a campsite after a Boy Scout jamboree, Nigeria would be cleaner when I left than when I arrived.

A crispy insect spazzed in the crook of my neck. Twigs snapped. I took the handgun from the small of my back, where it had made a deep and intricate impression. I cocked it in my lap with a long, deliberate stroke. ■ ■ ■