



One Sure Thing

Another pause on the endless refugee road which runs from poverty to poverty. Yet it was hardly a pause. The waiting had already stretched into hours and hours could easily slip into days. Mother and son - Dodou she called him - stood in the roadside river of hungry people exposed to relentless rays of the African sun. Dodou's tiny hand firmly clasped his mothers. His arm ached, but he would not let go. There was no point in them scanning the constantly lengthening queue for tell-tale signs of the supply lorry. Every cloud of dust on the road seemed to end in dashed hopes. People stood for long periods. The lorry could come suddenly and you had to be sure you were on your feet or you could be too far down the line when the rice and beans ran out again.

Perhaps that was why little Dodou clung so tight to his mother. He could soon lose her in the frantic rush. There was never any certainty the lorry would stop at the head of the queue. When the time came she would wrestle his hand from hers and place him crying on their bundle of possessions, leaving him, while she ran to fight her way through with her bowl and can. Dodou would sit, howling, some secret dread warning him she would not return, his infant mind still scarred with memories of his father disappearing into a nightmare of noise and fire and fear.

They had queued for water earlier, but the child was thirsty and their one plastic bottle was already half empty. Dodou suddenly buried his head in his mother's tattered yellow dress, frightened by a casual gun-shot. A group of soldiers passed along the line, shuffling one another in high spirits, singing bawdy songs, swinging their firearms above their heads and then pointing them menacingly at the crowd. There was no doubt where they would be when the rations arrived. Dodou's one eye, wide with fear, sneaked a look from its hiding place, across the soiled ground where a goat grazed on nothing. The little hand gripped tighter.

Two older children came from the crowd, dragging a charcoal stick in the sand. They stopped to say 'hello'. Dodou barely responded. His face fixed in a traumatised stare, oblivious of the crawling flies; a dried rice grain at the corner of his mouth. His mother's only remaining child, Dodou had received all her care and most of her own food. Unlike many children his age, his face was full and round. Perhaps one day a smile would flood across it to turn the anxious adult stare into a ball of childish fun again.

The sun was already low in the sky when shouting grew out of the general hubbub to indicate the arrival of the truck. An immediate stampede ensued with people crowding, falling, running, crying as soldiers butted and cursed them into some sort of order. Dodou sat on their bundle, tears falling and drying on his cheeks. He still held out his hand to where his mother's had been wrenched from him. He was reaching out for the one sure thing in his life... I prayed that that certainty would be his for just as long as he needed it.