I remember him well. He was a quiet child, with the impish charm of a boy not yet nine. The fine layer of street dust that covered his body couldn’t disguise his good looks or the bright intelligence in his eyes. He moved through the shell-cratered streets, along bombed-out buildings and around United Nations peacekeeping trucks like he owned them, in some small way. This was, after all, his home—a small Angolan town I am calling “Muleque.” Like anyone living in a dangerous place, one filled with predators and unseen pitfalls, he maintained a ceaseless vigilance, even in play. Somehow, he radiated a charisma that made him seem fashionable in a tattered pair of shorts with more holes than material, and a ragged T-shirt that might once have said “Coca-Cola,” a hand-me-down from humanitarian aid workers. I remember thinking, in that curious juxtaposition of remote warzone and twenty-first-century techno-culture, that he looked like he could have graced an MTV music video. On a deeper level, the boy had a gentleness about him. But he was a street fighter too. He had to be a fighter, gentle or otherwise, he explained, to survive. I call him “Okidi” here, a name that means “truth” in a local language.

It was the dawn of the twenty-first century, and, though no one knew it at the time, the final years of the war in Angola. Okidi had lost everything several years back in a blinding moment during a long offensive that tore his town and his family apart. His parents had been killed, his home destroyed, and his life irrevocably changed by the fighting in which he and his loved ones had no stake beyond survival.

He was four years old then.

Okidi had created a new family, a group of war orphans like himself.
Families of this kind are never in short supply. War, starvation and deprivation, illnesses and lack of health care, coupled with the vagaries of violence, produce a steady stream of homeless children. He and his group lived by their wits, and they were all brilliant children.

The others just didn’t make it.

The day I met Okidi, I was sitting on a wall in his hometown, watching him and his friends trying to sell old coins to a band of UN “Blue Helmets,” the common name for the UN peacekeepers. Their interactions were intricate. The children knew they had to negotiate the fine line between hungry child and trustworthy vendor. The Blue Helmets struggled with their attraction to the unusual coins and their fear — so common to adults — of “feral children” and what they mistrust as the scam of innocence. I began to appreciate the children’s sophistication in trying to understand human nature and the nature of business in a world where these are cast as adult pursuits. In trying to understand war and the will to survive, it was the children, not the peacekeepers, who caught my eye.

The children were playing “grown-up work,” as children do all over the world. The peacekeepers were well kept by the UN. Beer and food delicacies were flown in from their home country to keep them happy; they had access to good pharmaceuticals, which are worth their weight in gold in these war-torn places; they had gasoline, arms, clothing, and foreign currency. To Okidi, these Blue Helmets were diamond mines on the hoof. The children knew that handouts didn’t come easily from grown-ups. Food, medicine, currency, freedom from hunger and fear were bought or bribed or traded or bartered. They were uncertain whether their unusual coins would make them rich, but they knew that if these coins brought in even a tiny fraction of what was available to the Blue Helmets, they would serve the children well. At their age, “rich” meant a full stomach and a safe place to sleep.

As adults, these orphans would learn how to play the game fully. Instead of trading old coins for food, in the years to come they might negotiate international currencies for arms deals, bumper crops for medicines and industrial equipment, diamonds for power. They had already learned a key point: wealth springs from sources you least expect.

They had learned what journalist Maggie O’Kane witnessed in Sarajevo in the early 1990s: peace is a contentious reality. The peacekeepers who risk their lives for others, who leave home and hearth to stand in the middle of a firefight they have no mandate to control, who represent some of the best values in the world’s collective community — these peacekeepers also run “hot” markets at times. The international composition of the UN provides for a truly international marketplace in the most remote of locales.
The UN soldiers are making themselves and the Sarajevo mafia rich. The locals are the middlemen for a trade in cigarettes, alcohol, food, prostitution and heroin, worth millions of pounds. (O’Kane 1993: 1)

Having concluded their business with the Blue Helmets, Okidi and the other children came over to me, and the boy simply held out his hand to show me his treasure: old coins of the fallen colonial regime. He wasn’t trying to sell me the coins. He had noticed my interest in his dealings with the soldiers and was now sharing his story. He had a look only children can fully achieve: deadly serious and yet delighted. His was a hungry band, but they had discovered valuable assets by which they could better survive.

“Beautiful,” I said to the boy.

He nodded seriously in agreement.

The children all gathered around me, talking all at once: Yes, they are beautiful; look how they shine in the sun. These are very valuable, you know. And they are ours, they were clear to point out—they had not stolen them from anyone.

“Where do they come from?” I asked.

Come, we’ll show you.

The boy took my hand and led me through town. In his world, discoveries and treasures are shared in camaraderie and not spoken of in abstract words.

We walked to the center of Muleque, an eerie place that was at once a ghost town and a provincial hub of commerce and politics. The battles that took Okidi’s family had bombed every building in the downtown into ruins. Shell and mortar blasts and countless bullets left gaping holes in whatever walls were remaining. Roofs had been blown off, and upper floors collapsed onto lower ones. Everything of value had long since been looted, and the rain dripping through open ceilings watered weeds growing on rubble-strewn floors.

A handful of enterprising government officials had found a few habitable rooms in the less-destroyed buildings and had set up rickety wooden desks from which to attempt to work in a town whose entire infrastructure had been destroyed and land-mined. Their job was daunting: energy and water systems, roadways and communication lines, agricultural and resource sites all lay in ruins. With trade severely compromised by war, many didn’t even have pencils and paper. The men and women didn’t look up as the children walked over to the demolished Central Bank and pulled me through a mortar hole in the wall and into the building.

Once inside, the children wound a complicated path around craters and mountains of debris. I belatedly hoped that they were winding around unexploded ordnance and land mines. Well-trodden paths
smoothed by months and perhaps years of little feet seemed to indicate that the children knew what they were doing.

Suddenly they stopped in a back room and dropped to their haunches to dig in the dirt. About a foot down, they grasped a handful of coins. I had never seen coins like these: they must have been colonial currency discontinued at the national independence over twenty-five years before. I couldn’t estimate their value, but those coins were indeed buried treasure. During the bombing raids, bags of money—either forgotten in the dusty vaults and the mists of political change or hoarded with an eye to a profitable future—had probably been hit by shells, which then broke through the floor and carried the coins into the earth below.

The children pulled me down and taught me how to dig for the coins. I marveled at the difference between childhood and the onset of “maturity”: few adults would invite a virtual stranger to share their only source of wealth. The children pressed handfuls of their valuable currency onto me. I returned the coins, saying that they were the fruits of their labor and their chance to eat the next day. But I kept one, a tangible reminder of a day that digs deep into the utility of humanity.

Then a change came over the group. They sat back and grew serious. The animated talk and laughter gave way to a more considered silence. One of the girls went to the corner and picked up a bucket filled with grain and set it on her head. She returned to take my hand and say good-bye. The boy withdrew a packet of Marlboros three-quarters full, as if he were taking something important but somewhat dangerous from a safe.

“What is it?” I asked.

“We have to go to work now.

“What do you do?”

The girl is hauling grain to sell; I sell these cigarettes in the market areas. Some, they look for work helping in the fields, carrying things in the markets, helping people however they can. Others look for “opportunities”—you know, grabbing a handful of rice from a bag that falls and breaks open, finding something left and forgotten, a good merchant who hands them something at the end of the day.

The boy and I began walking down the road toward the marketplace. The playfulness he had exhibited while digging for coins was replaced with wariness as he watched the movements of the people about him. One teenage male, with all the hallmarks of a bully, shouted aggressively at him as he passed by. The boy mumbled to me, in a tone both fearful and defiant:

“Are you scared of this man? What does he do?”
Scared? We have to be. He’s bigger. He can beat me up, take whatever I have, what money I’ve made, my cigarettes.

“How do you make it?”

We little ones have to be smart. Smarter. We are careful. We help each other.

“Are all the older ones like this?”

No. Just the worst. This is what war has brought us.

We both pondered his statement in silence, walking easily beside each other now. I asked him where he got his cigarettes. He made a gesture: Wait, you’ll see. A little farther down the road, he pointed out a store:

This is where I get my cigarettes.

“Do you have to buy them?”

*He shook his head no:*

The man gives me a packet, and when I have sold all the cigarettes, I return to give him his share of the money, and get more.

The ethics of economics; the morals of survival. It seemed a harsh clash of realities. On the one hand a businessperson makes money from a desperate orphan living on the streets. On the other, the boy was able to survive; without this man and his “investment,” the child might not make it at all.

And in all this, a child selling foreign cigarettes on bomb-cratered roads far from the world’s economic centers links into global extra-legal economies that reap trillions of dollars annually.

We paused to look at the shop before parting ways. It belonged to a businessman I’ll call “Kadonga”—a word in Portuguese-speaking Africa meaning goods that move outside the law. In a town largely bereft of energy sources, communication and trade systems, or vehicles and industry — a town where the minister of health admitted that more than 60 percent of the population lived on the brink of starvation — Kadonga’s shop offered gleaming new television sets, VCRs, and other luxury items that peeked out from darkened back rooms in a building as bomb ravaged and bullet pocked as the rest. An expensive Mercedes truck was parked out front. In a remote location ravaged by war and bereft of basic survival goods, cosmopolitan dreams from the world’s urban centers called out to shoeless, shirtless passersby.

But some people had the means to buy these luxury items. These people didn’t deal in kwanza, the local currency (which isn’t traded on the international market). They had access to
– the country’s valuable resources that converted to hard currency;
– the international markets with glittering cosmopolitan dreams;
– the trade routes that would bring these goods across war-troubled lands; and
– the means to ensure that officials worldwide would turn a blind eye to less-than-legal transfers.

A vast network stretched from this town out through the country’s gem and mineral mines and along its precious timber and valuable agricultural resources, through troops and civilians, profiteers and thieves, and then across international borders to link into large exchange systems that operate both legally and illegally, running all the way to far-flung criminal organizations, multinational corporations, and superpower urban commodity centers.

A good part of this complex global network becomes visible in the journey of a pack of cigarettes from their source, through an intricate set of international exchanges and negotiations, and into the hands of a poor war orphan on the frontlines of a conflict from which he will see little profit. Some 50 percent of all cigarettes in the world are smuggled. Whether these travel legally or illicitly, they do not travel alone.

The cigarettes may make the journey alongside dangerously illegal products, unregistered arms, and illegal drugs, or they may travel with the merely illicit — pirated technology, for example. Popular media would have it that drugs travel a “drug route,” arms an “arms route,” and computers a more cosmopolitan “high-tech corridor.” In fact, shipping routes are markets, and thus they are matters of opportunity. The number of markets and routes to these marketplaces is not unlimited. Once routes are operating with confidence, all manner of goods can pass along them. A shipping container can “contain” arms, cigarettes, and the latest pirated DVDs, along with a host of other commodities ranging from the seriously illegal to the merely mundane. In fact, such transits work more smoothly than they would if all routes were separate: arms buyers find an easy market for cigarettes, videos, and information technology (or Mach 3 razors, 4 × 4 all-terrain vehicles, or pornography).

But most likely, the cigarettes will travel at least part of their journey with unregistered (and therefore illegal) commodities that are overlooked because of their very normality: food, clothing, books, industrial parts, software, toiletries, car parts, electronics. They might cross a border in the shirt pocket of a person who walks this route daily to find minimum-wage labor in more promising markets, or perhaps tucked in to the
luggage of a person flying between continents to seal a multi-billion-dollar deal.

The tendrils of cigarette smoke enter the most basic aspects of our daily lives, making cigarettes profitable and inescapable across all borders of legality. They can find their way to a bombed-out shop on the frontlines of a devastating war, and into the hands of a hungry street child seeking enough money to buy a piece of bread at the end of the day.

My interest in the powerful expanses of global il/legal economies— the intersections of the legal and the illegal— didn’t begin with cigarettes. I met Okidi, the young war orphan, when I was charting “robber barons”: those who trade for immense profits, most visible in international exchanges of resources (gold, diamonds, timber, humans, etc.) for arms. Military supplies are so expensive that few countries’ tax bases can provide sufficient funds to purchase them. National currencies in warzones are generally shunned by financial markets: they tend to be weak and unpredictable monies that few urban industrial centers accept. Natural resources become the “hard currencies” of choice to raise the capital to run wars and countries. Given the pressures of international laws, sanctions, and national industry regulations, much of this commerce crosses the line of the law in the journey from source to profit.

In charting this trade, I realized that a veritable smorgasbord of goods travels these circuits: people have to eat, set up industries, and obtain computers, energy, entertainment systems, and life-saving pharmaceuticals. Immense profiteering exists in this trade, as well as that surrounding war supplies. The illegal is also sustained by a human desire for beauty. One can see this in bombed-out frontline markets. In these places, desperate people congregate to seek or sell pitifully small amounts of food or a handful of smuggled life-saving medicines, often carried over landmined fields and under gunfire. Amidst these critical necessities, there is often something of beauty for sale: a delicate piece of cloth smuggled in from a neighboring country, an incongruous piece of art, or maybe a pair of counterfeit Nike shoes or the recording of a beloved musician, carried across the trenches of hell and outside the law, only, it would seem, to remind us of our spark of humanity.

And cigarettes. The fire that flares from the match lighting a smuggled Marlboro clearly illuminates the entire global flow of il/legal commodities and the power regimes behind them.