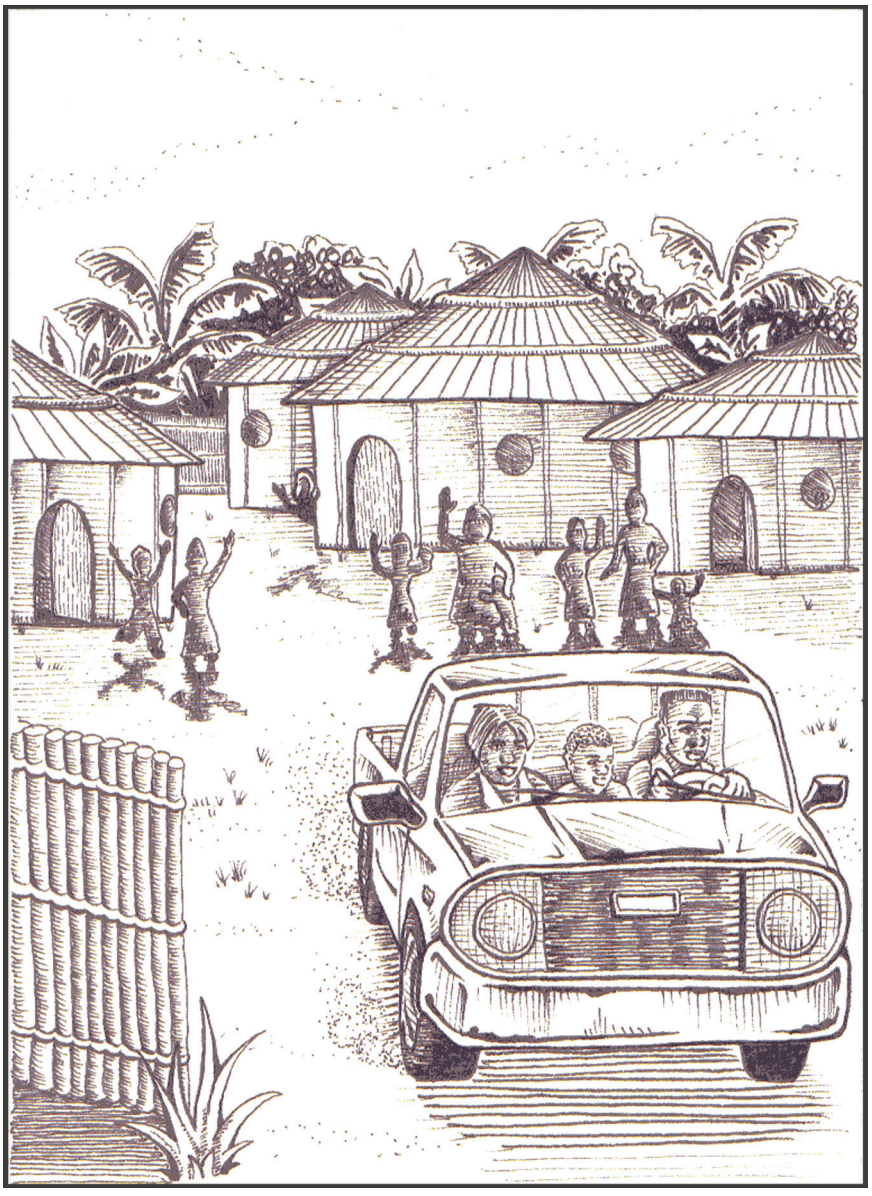

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JERRY GOES TO SCHOOL

Jerry Gompa hurried over his breakfast of *geigba* served with left over *wolor*-seed soup. He sat, molding the *geigba* into small round balls, dipping it into the soup and swallowing. All around he could feel the piercing cold *harmattan* wind that blew at this time of year over the Nimba Mountains, about 40 miles away, from across the Sahara Desert. It moaned its own chilling farewell.

Later, as he put away the bowls from which he and his mother had eaten, he thought about the journey ahead. For the first time Jerry was going away from home to attend a boarding school, the African Interior Mission High School.

"Jerry." His mother's voice came from the backyard, where she had gone to wipe away the tears in her eyes. Earlier, she had tried to control her tears. But each time she remembered her first child was about to leave and become a pupil of total strangers, she wept.

"Hurry up and get ready," she cried. "You do not have to wash the dishes this morning. Just leave them in the kitchen and your sister will wash them after we are gone. Remember also that your father wants to talk to you as soon as you are dressed for the journey."

For the past two months, ever since he received the news that he had passed the entrance examination for the African Interior Mission High School, Jerry had felt excitement and anxiety. Fantasies of what he would do with his new independence kept creeping into his head. But now that his departure was only hours away, he felt the desire to cling to that warm and close family atmosphere he had come to appreciate so dearly in his sixteen years of life.

Theirs was a closely-knit family. His father was a polygamist and kept two other wives besides his mother. But a visitor to the Gompa's family compound could not

tell that Jerry and his half brothers and sisters had different mothers. This was quite an achievement. Most of the homes in Nimbata where there was more than one wife were scenes of chaos and confusion, as rival wives and mothers competed for the attention of their husband and children. But the Gompas had remained close and their household relatively quiet because of the stern discipline Jerry's father had instilled in his wives and children, sometimes barely distinguishing the ones from the others in his method of punishment.

As Jerry left the kitchen and headed for the outdoor bathhouse a few yards from the main house, he bumped into Kau, his beautiful younger half sister and the eldest of his father's second wife's children.

"How?" she asked jokingly. "Just because you are going away today, you can't tell me 'morning' again? I know when you go and come back you will behave like you never saw me in your life, eh?" She concluded with a half smile.

"You are talking as if I am going overseas or something. The mission is a little over 100 miles away. Except that the road is bad and rugged, it is really not that far," Jerry said. He was already tired of explaining this to her and other members of the family who had constantly reminded him during the last few months about his new status as the first child to leave home for school.

"One hundred miles!" Kau exclaimed, as if this distance was the other side of the world. "I wish I were you, Jerry. I know you will meet lots of new friends. And, who knows, you might even get a chance to visit the capital city!"

"Sh-sh-sh… don't talk so loud, especially about the city. If papa hears you even suggesting that, you might spoil my chances of leaving here today for school. You know how he feels about big cities. I would not like for him to even dream of me doing something like that," Jerry said.

"I was just joking, brother."

"I know you were joking, but this is not the first time you have mentioned it. I am afraid that you might let your tongue slip in the presence of mama and papa, and that will be the end of my trip before it even starts."

"But look, Jerry," Kau said, gripping him by the arm and leading him out of earshot, "once you leave here you will be on your own, free from the watchful eyes of the Old Pops." She used the nickname they had coined for their father as a mark of respect and fear. "You will be able to do anything you please. Oh, how I envy you."

Though Kau was about three years his junior, she always seemed wiser and more mature than other 13-year-olds. Jerry and Kau had practically grown up together even though she lived in a separate house in the compound with her mother and two younger brothers.

Mr. Gompa had inherited the premises from his father, a chief for one of the clans in Nimbata before it grew into the community it is today. As head of the family, he occupied the main house, situated in the middle of the compound, along with Jerry's mother, his head wife, and her children.

The third and youngest of his wives lived alone in a small house, because in the 10 years she had been married, she had not yet born the children that traditionally would give her the status to move into a much larger house now vacant in the compound. This fourth house remained unoccupied, except when they had a guest important enough to be given private quarters.

This house could have been used to accommodate a fourth wife, but this had ceased to be a threat to the other wives because Mr. Gompa had repeatedly said he had no such intention. Besides, the missionaries with whom he worked at the Christian Hospital up the road would find such a move hard to accept. When he agreed to become a member of the church some eight years ago, it was understood that he could keep his three wives, because the Christian doctrine frowned on divorce, but he was not to marry any new ones.

It was toward this deserted house that Kau led her half brother on the morning of his departure. Here, at least, they could spend a few moments alone together and make plans for how she was to break the news of his leaving to her many female friends. These friends frequented the compound to see Jerry under the pretext that they were there to visit her.

"No, Kau," Jerry protested, as they got closer to the house. "I do not think it is a good idea for us to go in there today. I have to go and take a bath and get dressed before the Old Pops calls me. I want everything to be perfect this morning. I do not want him quarreling with me for any reason."

His sister understood his resistance and did not insist on carrying out her plan.

"OK, go and get ready, brother. I will see you later before y'all leave. I also have something for you that I will give you when you come over to the house to tell my mother goodbye," she said, reluctantly dropping his arm.

In his excitement, Jerry barely took what could be considered a good bath. The thought of soon being out of the direct supervision of his parents thrilled him as much as the hot bathwater that served as the only remedy to the cruel harmattan wind, which had intensified as the morning progressed.

Back in his room, he greased his dry skin with coconut oil that was part of the cosmetic kit he was taking with him. He smiled as Kau's idea about visiting the capital city came back to him.

"That little devil," he thought, almost aloud. "How could she read my mind so well? Sometimes I wonder if what they say about her is true."

Jerry was thinking of the common family joke that Kau was a little witch in disguise. She was born a triplet, but the other two infants died moments after birth. Somehow it was accepted that she had acquired the mental and physical powers of the other two children.

She was considered an exceptional child. For many years, older people who believed in her ability to interpret their dreams flocked to the Gompa's compound every morning, just before dawn, to tell her their experiences of the night. The old man had long since stopped this traffic. He could only think of his daughter as a child, and this attention from people, some as old as himself, made him feel uncomfortable. He vowed on more than one occasion to send Kau and her mother away if he saw people coming and consulting his daughter to have their dreams interpreted. This decision was much to the young girl's relief. What her "clients" did not realize was that the exercise caused great stress for someone of her age and drained her emotionally.

Jerry finished dressing just in time to answer his father's call.

"Good morning, papa," Jerry said with a half bow—the traditional way people, younger or of lower social status, were expected to greet a superior.

"Morning, Saye," Mr. Gompa answered, using Jerry's middle and indigenous name, given him because he was the first child in the family. It was a name Jerry was not too fond of, because it constantly reminded him of his role as future head of the family.

"Go and call your mother," the old man said, without changing the expressionless look on his face. "I want her to be here when I talk to you because, if things were done properly around here, I wouldn't have to talk. She should have given you all the proper advice by now."

Jerry went off to call his mother for what he knew was a full dose of last minute parental counseling. He dreaded what he was about to face.

It was the repetitious nature of the whole process that bothered him.

From the day it had become clear that he was going to leave home for school, everybody constantly bombarded him with the "dos and don'ts" of campus life. Even those who had never had the opportunity of living

in such an environment offered advice. He thought it was unfair for his father to suggest that his mother had not done her fair share of advising. Every move he made during the previous weeks was judged according to whether or not it was proper behavior to display on campus. She, of all persons, had advised him to the point of harassment, but he did not mind. He loved his mother. She was a beneficiary of the bounty of his fantasies.

He found his mother in her room, putting the final touches on her makeup.

"Papa says I should call you," he said.

"Wait for me outside my door. I will come when I am done dressing," his mother said, using the tribal language. She also spoke and understood Pidgin English, a dialect of English common to most people in the country.

Jerry knew this delay was dangerous, because his father was not to be kept waiting, even by his head wife. Jerry did not want anything to upset the beginning of such an important day in his life.

He waited outside the door, expecting at any moment to hear his father's deep voice asking why they had not yet appeared before him.

Nothing happened.

Jerry was getting very nervous just before his mother appeared. She was dressed elegantly, as she dressed for church on Sundays or to attend important programs in the community.

"Where is your father?" she asked.

"He is in his room," Jerry said.

His mother led the way through the family sitting room, turned left down the hallway that led to his father's room, and in less than a minute, they were both before Old Man Gompa. Only the three of them were in the room. Jerry was glad that today his father had not decided to round up all his other brothers and sisters to listen to the sermon he expected. It was not uncommon for his father to use the mistake or success of one child to lecture before the rest and their mothers about the facts of life.

"Bring a chair for your mother," his father said as they entered the room. He did not look up.

"That is OK, I will sit right here on the bed," his mother said, enjoying a privilege she knew would not be denied by her husband because of the joy they shared today.

There was nowhere else to sit, so Jerry assumed he was expected to stand through the whole ordeal. He was right.

"I called the both of you in here," his father said, pausing to clear from his throat something that was not there in the first place, "because Saye is leaving us today to attend boarding school. You are his mother and I think it is important for you to hear what I have to say."

"Thank you for calling us," his mother said, "I, myself, have been talking to Saye *small-small*, from the time the mission wrote to say he passed the test." His mother only called him Saye when in the presence of his father, or when she had to reprimand him for some wrongdoing.

"Saye," his father said, addressing Jerry directly. "You are no longer a baby. Last school year, you finished the ninth grade, which is the highest class our local junior high school offers. Today, you will be going to the African Interior Mission, where you will start off in the tenth grade. Hopefully, you would remain there until you finish high school. Assuming, of course," his father added with emphasis, "that you go there, behave yourself and study your lesson.

"I picked this particular school because it has a good reputation for educating people who have excelled in society. You will meet people from all sections of the country. Some will be there to get a serious education, while others will be there to distract conscientious students from their lesson. You will have to be very careful how you associate with people and whom you choose for your friends. As a matter of fact, I would suggest that you keep to yourself as much as possible."

"Well, I think he should have friends, but I will go along with what you said about picking them carefully,"

his mother interrupted. "Also, you should advise Jerry," she continued, using the name she always called him around the house, "about this girlfriend business, because I hear the school is for both boys and girls."

At the mention of this sensitive topic, Jerry's heart sank. He had hoped his father would not get down to telling him what his attitude should be toward the girls in his age group he had daydreamed about meeting since he learned he would be attending a coeducational boarding school.

"If he wants to go there and put his mind on that, that is his business. The first report I receive about anything related to that would mean that he is a fully grown man now," Old Man Gompa said with a stern voice. "I would just withdraw him from the school and send him to the farm, where he can marry as many wives as he pleases. That will be the end of all this school business."

Jerry wondered why his mother had brought up this topic, when there was nothing to suggest he was a womanizer. It caught him completely off guard. He was only just of the age when boys began to think in any serious way about girls and the distractions they offer.

After repeating some of the earlier lines and adding a few more off-the-cuff remarks, Old Man Gompa began to wind down his going-away lecture. Deep down he knew that his son was not a bad student. Jerry's grades over the years had proven that. This was part of the reason why Old Man Gompa decided to invest more money in Jerry's education. However, as far as Mr. Gompa was concerned, it would be a sign of parental weakness to allow his son to go away to school without scolding him.

"Well," his father said finally, "do you have anything to say, or any questions to ask?"

Jerry was not prepared for this part of the session, but he knew he had to say something.

"I do not have much to say, Papa," he started, speaking off the top of his head, "except that I am very grateful to you for deciding to send me on the mission. I

will do my best to study my lesson, and I can guarantee you that I will not let you and the family down. Also, I shall write you all as often as I can, to let you know how things are coming on with me."

"Have you packed all your things?" his mother asked.

"Yes, mama."

"Well, if there is nothing else to be discussed, I suggest that we get your valises together and begin our journey," Mr. Gompa said.

"The first part of the road is paved, so we shouldn't have any problems there. But the other half is unpaved, and this being the dry season, the dust will be very thick. This presents problems for travelers. In the rainy season, it is even worse, because the erosion of the soil causes many potholes and ditches in the road. Vehicles get stuck in the mud for days at a time." Mr. Gompa's tone changed to indicate he had said all he had to say and was prepared to leave at any moment.

Jerry's father had asked the missionary with whom he worked to lend him his secondhand jeep for the day in order to allow them to travel conveniently to their destination. Mr. Gompa could not afford a vehicle of his own, even though he supplemented the meager income he received as an x-ray technician at a hospital run by the Church of Christ by selling rice he grew each year.

His job at the hospital and the white lab coat he wore to work made many of his kinsmen think he was a medical doctor. Many of the unlettered members of his family believed every male who worked in a hospital and wore the type of uniform Mr. Gompa did, was a doctor. And, of course, every female similarly attired was a nurse. It was difficult for him to make clear to them the difference between the job he performed and the duties of a doctor. There was just no term in the Mano language to explain what an x-ray technician did. The best one could do was to say that he took pictures of broken bones with a special device. Mr. Gompa had stopped correcting them. Not that he was embarrassed by his status, to the

contrary, he regarded his achievement in life with a great deal of satisfaction. He had stopped because it took too much of his time, and so long as he did not impersonate a doctor, he had no reason to feel uncomfortable about other people's mistakes.

Soon after he left the presence of his parents, Jerry went to Ma Kalee's house to say goodbye to his stepmother and her children. He preferred to think of Ma Kalee as "his other mother," rather than his stepmother. His relationship with Ma Kalee was as good as his relationship with his own mother. He ate frequently at Ma Kalee's house and played freely with her children. The apprehensions that sometimes existed about this type of free association between members of the extended family did not exist among the Gompas.

"I came to tell you goodbye, Ma Kalee," Jerry said when he reached her. She was in the kitchen frying doughnuts, as she did every day, for Kau to take to the market and sell.

Ma Kalee rose, smiling, and gave him a warm hug. Then she held him by the shoulders, looked him straight in the eyes and said, "Jerry, God be with you, ya. You must put your mind to your book business and don't let nothing fool you. Tha' all I have to tell you, my son."

"Ma Kalee, you know me better than that. I have really been praying for this opportunity, and now that it has come, I am going to do just as you say," Jerry answered.

"Kau," Ma Kalee called for her daughter, who was busy wrapping the gift she intended to surprise her brother with. "Yes mama," Kau answered from her room.

"Bring the bag of *country bread* I asked you to beat for your brother."

Kau put the final knot on the gift, threw it into a brown paper bag, and hurried to the spot where she had put the *country bread*. She appeared minutes later and flashed a smile that displayed a set of even white teeth against her very dark gums. "Here you are, Jerry," she said, handing

him the small sack of *country bread*— newly harvested rice pounded in a wooden mortar into very fine particles, with a little sugar added. Country bread could be eaten dry or soaked in some water. It made good breakfast for people engaged in hard physical work, such as farming.

"I will think of you every time I eat some of this *country bread*," Jerry said.

"Now," Kau said, handing him the brown bag, "I have a special gift for you. Promise me that you will not open it until you arrive where you are going."

"Well, if it is what you want, I will not open it until I get on campus."

Jerry hugged the both of them and headed for the door. If he had remained in their presence much longer, it would have been difficult for him to hold back tears before he left the compound.

Jerry went next to knock at the door of his father's third wife. But after a while, it became clear that she was not at home.

"Where could she have gone so early in the morning?" he wondered. Then it hit him. He knew she was probably up to her ridiculous ways again. She had a habit of disappearing whenever there was an event that involved children. The thought of it made him sad, because he did not expect this from her when it came to him. He of all persons had tried his best to be close to her. He often performed manual tasks for her, as a son would do. He wanted to see her before leaving as a mark of respect.

There was not enough time for him to go over to the neighbors'. The sound of the jeep told him that his father was warming up the engine for their departure.

Jerry put the suitcases into the back of the jeep— a Land Rover designed like a small pickup truck. The other children gathered around as he hopped into the front seat and sandwiched himself between his father, behind the steering wheel, and his mother, sitting next to the front passenger door.

They were soon off, to the cheers of the children and a few nosey bystanders who came to see whether it was indeed true that Jerry was going away to school.

His father pulled into the first gas station to fill up the tank and check the oil and water levels.

"We seem to be all set," his father announced, after paying the gas station attendant.

They did not talk much during the first part of the trip, except for occasional remarks by his father, who identified each rubber plantation they passed by the name of its owner. Mr. Gompa knew all the rubber farmers in this part of the country, because most of them had purchased or were given their land during his late father's tenure as clan chief. This was many years ago, when a rubber boom hit the country because of the demand on the world market. Mr. Gompa was just a boy at the time, so he was not involved in the details of the land sales. But because his father, the late Chief Dolo Gompa, was very fond of him and always kept him around, he was there when land deals were made. In those days, farmland was sold at 50 cents an acre. Labor was also cheap. One could find able-bodied men willing to earn an honest living by working on the land. These days, it was difficult to get good farmland near the main highway. If one did find land, it cost more than most people could afford.

It was also more difficult to find labor, as fewer and fewer young men were willing to work for the two dollars a day most rubber farmers offered their tappers.

"That farm over there," Mr. Gompa said, pointing to a house on the left side of the road, that looked as if it had once been beautiful, "used to be the farm of the late district commissioner. He had over 2,000 acres planted in rubber and an additional 150 cultivated in coffee and cocoa. But since he died a few years ago, his sons have allowed the farm to decline."

"What happened to his sons?" Mrs. Gompa asked.

"You know, these days, most young men do not want to work hard. They simply want to live off their parents'

sweat. This is precisely what happened to the commissioner's sons. They are busy consuming the money their father left in the bank and drawing on the real estate he accumulated in the city, so they do not have time to pay attention to the farm."

Jerry was not too interested in topics such as an abandoned farm, or spoiled children who did not carry on the good works of their father. He knew all this talk was intended as additional, indirect advice for him. He was more concerned with what was ahead of him— a new school and new friends.

"You passed by some good palm wine on sale at the side of the road," Mrs. Gompa told her husband after a long silence.

"Wait until we turn off to the Lofa County side of the road," he said. "The palm wine in that part of the country is much better that what we make around here. The palm wine tappers in our area have a tendency to add too much water to the wine; they reduce the potency considerably. In Lofa, they only add a little water and leave the natural flavor virtually intact."

"Are you sure about what you are saying?" his wife asked. She knew her husband was not much of a liquor connoisseur, and so was a bit surprised he knew what part of the country made the best palm wine.

"Oh yes, I am sure. I do not drink the stuff that much, but you remember when I was with the mobile medical team last year? We had to travel all over the country, and I was able to determine that the palm wine in Lofa is the best."

"If you say so," his wife said.

After a few more miles of driving, they crossed the St. John River bridge that divided Nimba County from Bong County.

"Why is the water so red-looking, papa?" Jerry asked addressing his father directly for the first time since they left home.

"Hum, my son, that red water you see there is a result of some of the development our country is experiencing," Mr. Gompa said, with sarcasm. "The iron ore mined from Mount Nimba is washed for export and the waste matter is deposited into this river. As a result, almost all the fishes have died off. People who once looked upon the river as a source of water for drinking and bathing can no longer use it, because they run the risk of contracting stomach or skin diseases if they do."

"But the government makes a lot of money from the iron ore," his wife said, repeating a comment she had heard from women she spent time with.

"It is true that our country used to realize a lot of revenue from iron ore, but this situation has changed recently. However, the fact remains that the iron ore processing is what is responsible for the river looking so dirty as it does." Mr. Gompa decided to end the conversation here. He assumed his half-literate wife and his young son were not capable of understanding the complex economic and political issues connected with the exploitation of natural resources, so he was not prepared to waste his breath explaining.

He was wrong. His son had picked up quite a bit of knowledge from talking to friends and listening to local gossip about how expatriates were exploiting iron ore, not paying a fair market price for the products they received. Even so, Jerry was not used to discussing this type of topic with his old man, so he accepted his father's shallow explanation without question.

"I brought some fried chicken for us to chew on," Mrs. Gompa said. She reached into a plastic container placed securely on the floor between her ankles.

"I will eat mine later on," Mr. Gompa said. "I cannot eat and drive at the same time."

"Jerry, you want some?"

"Yes mama."

She handed him a leg, which he accepted and began to eat immediately. Like most foods his mother prepared,

it was delicious. The chicken was not too greasy, and his mother had prepared it with just the right amount of hot pepper and seasoning.

When they arrived in Gbarnga City, it was still not quite 10 a.m.

"We are doing fine on time," Mr. Gompa said. "I wish that today was not a Sunday. We would stop and visit a few old friends who live here." He said this only in passing. It was obvious he would not have stopped, even if it were any other day of the week. Mr. Gompa was somewhat of a loner. Very few people visited him at home, and he almost never visited anyone. He kept to himself and spent a lot of time overseeing the activities of his three wives and eight children. His son, Jerry, had copied this part of his father's personality.

"What is that building there on the right?" Jerry asked his father, pointing to a two-story structure with many vehicles parked in front.

"That is the administrative building. The official office of the local superintendent, who is the administrative head of the county and personal representative of the president in this part of the country," Mr. Gompa said.

"I see," Jerry said.

"I think I should get more gasoline here, because I am not sure if I will find gas in the area where we are headed."

Jerry wondered why his father always talked about his new school as if it was completely isolated. He hoped this was not the case. Unfortunately for him, he just had to wait and see. He took the entrance examination at a center in Nimbata, so he never had the opportunity to get a firsthand impression of the school.

Nimbata was considered part of the hinterland, even though it had grown into a large rural town surrounded by several villages. Jerry had never seen any community larger than Nimbata. He was fairly naive about life and some of its pleasures.

They stopped at an Agip gas station at the junction of the main highway and the rough and unpaved road that was to take then to Jerry's school.

"We have about 60 miles of dusty road to travel on and then we will be there," Mr. Gompa told his passengers, to prepare them for the worst part of the journey.

Mrs. Gompa reached into her handbag for a scarf and tied her hair.

The dust on the road was not too noticeable, except when oncoming vehicles passed, or when Mr. Gompa got too close to vehicles in front of them. But when a large gas tanker overtook them, Mr. Gompa had to pull over to the side of the road as the truck's rear tires spun gravel with near-shattering force at the windshield of the Land Rover.

"Damn it!" Mr. Gompa said, using profanity he rarely spoke in the presence of his wife and son.

"That truck came very close to us," Mrs. Gompa said.

"Hum!" Jerry said, almost in unison with his parents.

"I do not understand why they have to run so fast on a road like this," Mr. Gompa said, after he had caught his breath.

"And the road is so narrow," Mrs. Gompa said. The frown on her face showed she considered the matter very serious and was not sure if she wanted to continue the journey.

"We just have to be careful," her husband said. He was gradually regaining his composure. "This is how these commercial drivers behave on the road. Everybody all over the country is complaining about drivers' education, but still the situation gets worse. Something really needs to be done to improve the standards of those who use the highways."

"And this road…," Mrs. Gompa started to say.

Her husband interrupted her. "Fixing the road costs money, and you remember how many years it took before our side of the road was paved."

Mr. Gompa was not much of a politician. Neither did he care much for the barroom *yak-yak* some of his work mates indulged in as they sat in the evenings around and drank on credit at a popular Lebanese merchant's store in Nimbata. He sensed that the comment by his wife, if allowed to be finished, would lead to this same type of talk about what the government should or should not do, so he squashed it.

"Why does he think he knows it all?" Jerry thought, looking at the speedometer and seeing that his father had slowed down to 35 miles per hour.

"The next time you see a vehicle approaching, Jerry, I want you to hold the windshield like this," Mr. Gompa said, placing the tips of the fingers of his left hand against the windshield and applying a slight pressure outward.

Jerry tried the technique and his father nodded approval, adding, "That keeps the windshield from cracking should it get hit by a rock particle."

Nobody doubted this, as Mr. Gompa's authority regarding anything related to his family was never questioned.

Shortly after they passed Belefanai Town, Jerry could hear what sounded like water rolling in the distance. He knew that they were not traveling in the direction of the coast, so this seemed a bit peculiar to him.

"What is that noise?" he finally gathered enough courage to ask.

"You will soon see," his father said with the twinkle in his eyes that usually appeared when he was in total control of a situation.

After a few miles, they reached a long steel bridge. "This is the St. Paul River. It divides Bong Country on this side from Lofa County," Mr. Gompa said.

Jerry and his mother took a long look at the river below as it dashed against rocks and flowed by majestically.

"But this river is not polluted like the St. John's River we saw when we crossed from Nimba County into Bong County," Jerry said.

"This is true. It is because there is no iron ore or other minerals washed into this river. There are, of course, the diamonds."

"Diamonds?" Jerry and his mother asked together.

"Yes, diamonds. This river you see here contains some of the world's, or maybe West Africa's, largest and most precious deposits of diamonds."

"Why is it then that we don't see people all around the river trying to collect some diamonds?" Mrs. Gompa asked her husband, doubt in her voice.

Mr. Gompa gave a chuckle.

"It is not that easy, my dear. Those who know how to get at the diamonds do so."

Jerry knew this was information he had to check out before accepting his father's opinion. He wondered how his father, who did little or no traveling, all of a sudden knew which rivers held the nation's fortune and which ones carried its garbage.

"You just passed by some palm wine again," Mrs. Gompa said. She pointed at a group of men assembled at the side of the road who drank the local brew out of dry squash gourds cut to the shape and size of glasses.

"I am OK. I felt like drinking some at first, but I think I will forget it now. I want to be completely sober when I talk to the principal when we arrive. I do not want her smelling alcohol on my breath and thinking I am simply a drunken and irresponsible parent who is just looking for somewhere to dump his son."

"Nobody in his right mind looking at you would think like that," his wife said. "You, who hardly ever drink."

Jerry was sitting wondering whether he had actually heard his father say the principal is a she. He hoped his father would repeat himself, but he could not think of anything to say to bring up the subject again. He was tempted to ask his father directly, but was afraid his father

would accuse him of not paying attention. He decided to remain quiet.

"We will soon be reaching the school," Mr. Gompa announced as they passed through a small town that looked like it had between 2,000 and 3,000 inhabitants. "This town here is actually where the school is situated."

After about one and a half miles, Jerry looked to the left and saw a community that, for one thing, kept the grass on the lawn very well cut. The buildings in the cluster looked like they were freshly painted and were intended to stay that way, in spite of the unpaved, dusty highway located close by. A carefully angled sign read: **AFRICAN INTERIOR MISSION HIGH SCHOOL. Est. 28th March AD 1953.**

His father slowed down, signaled left and made an easy turn into the campus's main gate. A speed bump at the entrance caused his father to go even slower. Another sign, not as elaborate as the first, but more fancifully designed, greeted them. This read: **Knowledge, Peace and Goodness for all who enter here; WELCOME!**

Except for a few pupils walking in various directions, all seemed quiet. A Volkswagen Beetle driven by a white missionary crept past. Jerry's father kept driving down the only road on the campus. He seemed to know exactly where he was going.

Meanwhile, Jerry and his mother looked around them, trying to get a glimpse of the place they had heard so much about over the past few months.

Mr. Gompa turned right into a small parking lot where there were two other vehicles. One was an old Mercedes Benz pickup, which looked like it was used to perform work far above its horsepower capacity. The other was a Renault bus which, from the words stenciled on its side, was obviously used for transporting students.

"Well, here we are. I think we better lock the valises up in the front part of the Jeep and go in to find out if the principal is here."

Just before getting out, Mr. Gompa said to Jerry, "Oh, I meant to give you these in the room when we were talking this morning, but I forgot." Mr. Gompa put his hand in his pocket and handed his son two $5 bills. "Even though you have all the provisions and cosmetics you need, I figured you should have a little money with you just in case of emergency."

"Or if some of your things get finished," his mother added.

"Yes," Mr. Gompa said. "Thank your mother, too."

"Oh, thank you, too, mama," Jerry stammered, confused as to why his father made him thank his mother. He knew it was his father who paid all their bills and who gave him the money a few minutes ago. He did not understand why his father, who usually wanted to take credit for everything, was suddenly bestowing the role of equal on his mother. He thought that perhaps his leaving home was bringing them closer together. He did not completely understand this, but he liked it.

A young man passed by who looked as if he knew what was going on, so Mr. Gompa asked him for directions to the principal's office.

"Just go straight and turn right, you will see the sign on the door," the man said in an accent that indicated that he was from one of the French-speaking African countries."

"Thank you very much," Mr. Gompa said, as he led them in the direction the man had suggested. "I think he must be the French teacher," he said, as soon as the man was out of hearing range.

After taking a few steps down the walkway, they turned right. A small sign on a door before them read: **PRINCIPAL's OFFICE. Please enter next door.** An arrow pointed toward the only other door in sight. After a light knock, which did not receive any response, Mr. Gompa turned the handle and walked into the room, followed by his wife and son.

A young man wearing wire-rimmed eyeglasses sat at a small wooden desk. He looked up at them and then rose to his feet. He seemed to realize these were parents bringing their son to the campus and tried to exhibit his best manners.

"We knocked," Mr. Gompa said, almost apologetically, "but no one answered, so we took the liberty of coming in…"

"That is all right," the man said. By now, he had come within arm's length of Jerry and his parents. Only a wooden counter with a swinging half door separated them. "I was busy looking at our list of incoming students and I got a bit carried away, so I did not hear your knock. Sorry. Well," he continued without much of a pause, "my name is Mr. Sonpon. I am the registrar."

"Nice to meet you," Jerry's father said, extending his hand to meet Mr. Sonpon's left hand in an awkward handshake. Mr. Sonpon had a withered right hand. Mr. Gompa accepted the registrar's left hand with a smile.

"My name is Queeglay J. Gompa," he said. "This is my wife and my son," he added, ushering Jerry and his mother to meet Mr. Sonpon.

Jerry and his mother exchanged greetings with the registrar.

"My son is supposed to be attending school here this year in the 10th grade, and we have brought him on campus today," Mr. Gompa said.

"Very good. Students started arriving yesterday, and we expect all of them to have arrived by tomorrow. That is, those who will be returning this year," Mr. Sonpon said. "As you may know, we expect a serious drop in enrollment this year because of the stringent economic conditions in the country.

"Anyway, please sit down," he said, realizing that he had said more than was necessary in the first few moments with new parents. "The principal will soon be here to check your son in. She just went up to her house to have some lunch and is due back any time now."

Just then they heard footsteps coming down the corridor. It was clear that whoever was approaching wore spike heels, the kind that made a lot of noise and squeaked when they came in contact with the concrete floor. All heads turned toward the entrance of the office. The door flew open. A woman about six feet tall, with a slight hump on her back that appeared to be put-on, walked into the room. She took one sweeping glance at all the four people who awaited her arrival.

Her eyeglasses rested a little lower on her nose than was normal and were held firmly on her face by a sliver chain. The chain hooked onto the tips of the two handles of her glasses and locked in somewhere at the back of her neck. This made her appear to be looking over the lenses of her glasses instead of through them. Jerry wondered why she bothered to wear glasses in the first place.

Mr. Sonpon broke the silence.

"Good afternoon Mrs. Gedebeku. I am pleased to introduce Mr. and Mrs. Gompa. Their son…," he stopped, realizing he had neglected to ask Jerry his name, " …he is going to be with us in the 10th grade and they have brought him on campus."

The principal greeted Jerry's parents and then came over to Jerry.

"Hello, what is your name?"

"Jerry Gompa."

She gave a little nervous twist to her pointed nose that suggested she did not remember the name as one she had seen on the register.

"Welcome. Please come into my office," she said, opening a door with a key from the largest bunch of keys Jerry had ever seen. He wondered how she could possibly keep track of which key fitted which lock.

The principal's office was slightly more comfortable than the room they had left. It was very clean. Two flags stood behind a wooden desk: The flag of the republic and the flag of the church that ran the school. The walls were

bare, except for a picture of a shepherd boy with a flock of sheep and another picture over the door that looked very old, but important. It was a photo of about 50 boys and girls dressed in their school uniforms. A caption at the bottom said they were the pioneering students who enrolled at AIM the year it was founded. An air conditioner mounted into the wall looked as if it had not been used for years. A standing electric fan confirmed this was the case. Mrs. Gedebeku opened a window and the curtains to let in fresh air and sunlight into the room.

"We do not have our generator on as yet. My husband will turn it on this evening for the first time since we closed school last December," she said.

Jerry would learn later that Mr. Gedebeku was the maintenance "engineer" for the school and worked under the supervision of his wife, a tough administrator.

"How did you make it through the vacation period without lights?" Mr. Gompa asked.

"We turned the generator off to save fuel. All the students were gone home so it did not make much of a difference," the principal snapped back. She sat authoritatively behind her desk. "Well, let us get down to business," she said after a few minutes. She pulled out a stack of papers that contained a roll of names. "What grade did you say you are registered for?"

"10th," Jerry and his father said together.

"And you say the name is Gompa?" she asked, as she went down a list with a pencil she had picked up from her desk almost as soon as she sat down. "Oh, yes, I have it here, *Gompa, Jeremiah Saye, I."*

"Yes," Jerry said, lifting up his eyes to meet Mrs. Gedebeku's stare.

"We have you down for 10-A."

Jerry felt his heart skip a beat. He knew this classification meant he had not only passed the entrance examination, but had passed with a good grade.

"Let me see," the principal continued as she looked into another record book, "yes, I thought I remembered, your tuition has also been paid in full."

"Yes," Mr. Gompa said, "I sent it to you last month, by way of your mission office in Nimbata."

"That means that we must have a receipt for you somewhere here. Anyway, you can get it on the way out. However, I am sorry we did not get to tell you, the $384.00 covers only the first semester fees. There is an additional $5.00 for yearbook fees, which we added at our last Board of Trustees meeting," Mrs. Gedebeku said.

Mr. Gompa paid the additional charge, and Mrs. Gedebeku pressed a bell that summoned the same gentleman they had earlier asked for directions to the office.

"This is Mr. Jalloh, our business manager," she said. "We saw him earlier," Mr. Gompa said, trying to forget that earlier he assumed the man was a French teacher just because of his accent.

"Mr. Gompa should have a receipt here for his son's tuition. Also, please make out another one for $5.00 to cover the yearbook fees," Mrs. Gedebeku told Mr. Jalloh.

"Yes madame," Mr. Jalloh said in a respectful tone most uncommon among young people these days, or so Mr. Gompa thought.

When the business manager left to get the receipts, Mrs. Gedebeku looked at her three guests and started talking again.

"Here at the African Interior Mission High School (AIM High), our aim…," she stopped and forced a burp to ensure they had appreciated her carefully rehearsed pun, " …our aim is to train young boys and girls to be productive and progressive citizens, and tomorrow's leaders. This we do by focusing our school's curriculum on the development of sound academic knowledge, superb spiritual discipline, and strong physical education skills."

Jerry remembered reading these exact words in the prospectus the school had sent him along with the result

of his entrance examination. He wondered why she took so much time to explain the obvious. Both of his parents seemed impressed by Mrs. Gedebeku's monologue, which lasted a good twenty minutes as she went on and on about the achievements of the school and why she thought every wise parent should send his or her child there. She paused only for an occasional question from Mr. Gompa. Jerry remained quiet throughout the ordeal. He really felt sorry for Mrs. Gedebeku if she had to go through this performance with every parent who brought a child in for admission.

Mr. Jalloh brought in the two receipts, handed them to Mr. Gompa and then whispered a few words to his boss. She seemed totally unmoved by something he thought was urgent. She mumbled some quick instructions back and dismissed him.

"Where is his suitcase?" Mrs. Gedebeku asked, after the business manager left the office.

"They are outside in the jeep," Mr. Gompa answered.

"Well, you must bring them in here for checking. We want to make sure that each student has all the requirements so there is no problem."

Jerry and his father left the office and came back a few minutes later with both of the suitcases. Mrs. Gedebeku gave a frown when she saw the two large suitcases but remained silent until they were opened. She began by scolding Mr. and Mrs. Gompa for bringing too many clothes and other unnecessary items.

"The list of requirements said only two dress shirts for Sunday worship service and I see you have about six in here," she said, tossing the other four brand-new shirts among the things which she had decided were to be taken back by his parents.

The principal continued this sorting out process until Jerry was down to barely a suitcase full of clothes.

"The rest of these things," Mrs. Gedebeku said when she was through, "have to be taken back and kept at home. You see, Mr. Gompa, it is important that we stick

to the rules here, otherwise some students have the tendency to develop a superiority complex over their colleagues about how many suits they have. So we have to check every student thoroughly."

Mr. Gompa nodded his head in approval.

"What about pocket money?" the principal asked. "He is allowed only $5.00 at a time. All other money must be turned over to the office for safekeeping."

For a moment Jerry thought his parents would betray the fact that he had twice that amount of money with him, but Mr, Gompa had decided that enough had been taken away from his son in one day. He diverted the principal from the pocket money issue by asking whether it was possible for her to keep the rest of Jerry's things at her house, just in case he needed them during the semester.

"No," Mrs. Gedebeku answered as if she was accustomed to parents making such a request.

When the checking was over, the four of them walked to a building which Mrs. Gedebeku said was the boys' dormitory and Jerry's home for the next few months, or perhaps years.

"I am sorry the dean of boys is not here. He should be doing this orientation, but I had to send him on an errand. He should be back sometime this afternoon," the principal said, as they entered a room about 20 feet by 12 feet.

The room had two bunk beds, enough to accommodate four students. There were also an equal number of metal lockers. "I think these are for you to hang your clothes in," Mr. Gompa said, opening one of the lockers.

"You are lucky to be the first student from this room to arrive. This way, you have preference to take any of the beds and you may select any locker of your choice," Mrs. Gedebeku said to Jerry.

At first Jerry was certain he wanted one of the top bunks for the excitement of sleeping so high up in the air. He had shared a regular double bed back home with

another of his younger brothers. His father advised him to take one of the lower bunks, as it was more easily accessible.

"Well, we must be going now," Mr. Gompa said, after they had helped Jerry get somewhat settled in his room. "You may unpack the rest of your things later."

They walked toward the jeep in the parking lot. They said their good byes, and almost as slowly as they had come, Mr. and Mrs. Gompa drove off the campus and headed for home.

After they had left, Jerry strolled back to his room, sat on his bed, and for the first time in his life felt very alone. The pecking of some birds on a fallen tree just outside the room window and the sound of distant but loud male voices were the only signs of life.

As he sat there, feeling empty and wondering what his first act should be, he suddenly remembered Kau's gift.

Jerry rushed to the section of his metal locker where he had placed it earlier and tore open the carefully wrapped package. It felt like a book, but he was not sure it was, because it also felt like a small box.

"Perhaps it is a box of sweets!" he thought.

Before much longer the contents of the package became obvious: A hardback copy of the King James Version of the Holy Bible.

The inscription in it read, *From Kau, Ma Kalee, and all of us, with love.*