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Day of Decision

'Oseh! Oseh!'

'Yes, Auntie!'

'Have you finished sweeping that backyard, and outside kitchen yet?'

'No, Ma.'

'Hurry up, boy. You've still got to get some water in before your housework is finished.'

'Yes, Ma.'

'And don't forget to wash behind your ears when you wash yourself. Come on, hurry up so that you won't be late for school.'

'I'll be ready soon, Auntie.'

Abioseh picked up the white enamel bucket from the back steps of the house and set off briskly for the public tap halfway down the street. There was a large grey patch on the side of the bucket where a piece of enamel had chipped off when he dropped it a few days ago. He had to be careful not to drop it again as he knew that when the enamel chipped

off, the exposed metal underneath rusted very easily, and soon the bucket would spring a leak. If that happened, he would certainly be punished.

'Morning, Oseh . . . Hello, Oseh!' greeted two of his friends at the communal tap. They always met, and would have a joke, or two while they got their water. It was time spent at the water tap which made a lot of boys late for school. However Oseh was proud of his record of punctuality at school, and he didn't want to waste any time this morning. He was lucky and did not have to wait long each time at the tap, so it wasn't long before he had ferried several bucketfuls back to fill the small water tank by the back door. Then it was time for him to take his bath. It was a warm morning, typical of the dry season, so he used cold water. This was just as well because although his two cousins, Mabel and Rodney, would have had no difficulty in getting some hot water from their mother for their bath, he always seemed to sense a certain reluctance by his Aunt to allow him to have any. Even when he was given hot water it was only enough to make his bath just tepid.

His Aunt's voice sounded through the open dining room window on the ground floor of the house.

'Abioseh, it's half past seven. Hurry up, or you'll be late for school.'

He was almost ready. It seemed already a long time since he had woken that morning. He had done the household chores he had come to know so well since he arrived from Bonthe to live with his Aunt's family in Freetown three years before. He was usually up, and out of bed before Mabel, or Rodney, and by the time they appeared he would have got the wood stove going for the tea kettle. Sometimes, he would even have finished sweeping the rooms on the lower floor of the house, and have polished the floors. This morning he had been up first as usual, but now

as he stood in the bathroom throwing cups of cold water on his head, and shoulders to wash the soap lather off his wet shiny brown body, Rodney and Mabel were already having their breakfast.

The two boys were quite close to each other in age, but at fourteen Abioseh looked upon Mabel, who was eight, as only a little girl. However he had to show more respect towards Rodney who was already sixteen and ahead of him at school.

The bucket was empty now, and all the soap on his body had been washed off, and swilled out through the small hole in the wall into the gutter outside. Abioseh reached out for his bath towel, which hung on the nail on the door, in deep thought. It wasn't the fact that it was Monday morning again that made him feel depressed as he put on his white shirt, and khaki shorts, the school uniform at the Prince of Wales School. School was the part of his life which he enjoyed most. The worry on his mind was much bigger, and far more significant.

Ever since Saturday when his Aunt had shouted at him when he returned from the Kissy Road market having to tell her he had lost sixty cents of her change. After his Uncle had given him six strokes of the cane for his carelessness, he had felt he had had enough. He could no longer go on living under such strict conditions, and he was convinced that the only sensible answer was to run away from it all. Not that he was unhappy all the time. He liked attending school, and was most grateful for the opportunity to go to one of the best secondary schools in Freetown. Yet at the same time he felt a sense of injustice growing, for he seemed to be treated more and more as a servant, and less as a member of the family.

All Sunday he had thought about the idea of running away from home. He decided there was no other way out. He was so sure that it

was the right thing to do that he had actually made some provision towards it. As usual he had been to church on Sunday morning, and had attended Sunday school in the afternoon as well. At both services he had managed to keep the coins he had been given by his Aunt instead of paying them into the collection plate. That, plus the five cents that his Aunt gave him to take to school to buy fruit during the midday school break, would be a start. Of course he would have been even better placed if he had been prepared to steal money from his Aunt or Uncle, who often left their small change lying about the house. But, whatever he felt about them, this was something he would never even contemplate. He couldn't possibly steal anything that did not belong to him. That was bad!

His Aunt was just coming out of the pantry as he rushed in through the back door.

'Oh there you are,' she said. 'You'll find your bread with a cup of coffee in the kitchen. Time is running out on you, it's a quarter to eight.'

'Thanks, Auntie,' replied Abioseh, but as he turned to go into the kitchen Rodney called from the dining room next door.

'Is that you, Oseh?'

'Yes.'

'Could you clear the table, please, and wipe it.'

'I'm just coming.'

How he hated his cousin's attitude that all work had to be done by him while Rodney went about like a king! This was the last straw. He must go today!

There was not enough time for him to sit down to breakfast, so he stood at the kitchen table munching his bread, and drinking his coffee

in large gulps. Then suddenly it was as if fate was on his side. His Aunt came into the kitchen with her purse in her hand.

‘I want you to get me some cassava, and minnows from the Krootown Road market on your way home from school. Here’s one leone. Make sure you bring my change back this time,’ she said.

‘Yes, Auntie,’ Abioseh accepted the green note, and slid it into his pocket.

It was all he could do to hide his excitement at this unexpected addition to his funds. This was enough for his immediate needs, and he did not feel that he was stealing it. The money had been given to him. It was just that he was not going to visit the market, for he was not going to come home from school. ‘This is surely not stealing,’ he thought, though he felt uneasy about it.

Abioseh got his books together. ‘I’m off to school, Auntie.’

‘Make haste,’ she called, relieved to see that he wasn’t going to be late for school. Rodney, and Mabel had left some minutes earlier.

As he joined the other school children hurrying along Waterloo Street, Abioseh could see his friend Tejan waiting for him by the street tap. Tejan was a Muslim so Abioseh saw very little of him at weekends, especially not on Sundays when Abioseh, and his cousins spent their time going either to church or to Sunday school.

‘Morning, Oseh.’

‘Hello, Tejan!’

They hurried along the street turning left at Westmoreland Street towards Sanders Street. The sidewalk was crowded at this time of the morning with people going to work, and also women going off to the markets in the eastern end of the city. There were a large number of

children amongst the bustling crowds, some ambling along aimlessly in the warm morning sun. There were others on their way to school with a sense of urgency, and purpose about them. Several times Abioseh and Tejan had to split up as they threaded their way through all these people. There was a special policeman on duty at the three way junction of Sanders Street, Krootown Road, and Brook Street trying to control the flow of cars, taxis, and buses.



‘Shall we catch the bus?’ asked Tejan as they neared the stop.

‘Not today,’ said Abioseh. Every cent mattered to him today.

So they hurried along Krootown Road past the market which Abioseh knew he wouldn’t be visiting that afternoon. They were soon walking across the Kingtom Bridge bearing right onto Hennessy Street which led to the Prince of Wales School.

They arrived at the main gates with only minutes to spare before the duty Prefect closed the gate to declare latecomers, and there was not time to go to their classroom at the back of the main building before morning assembly.

‘Come on, Tejan, let’s leave our books on the window by the main notice board and go straight to morning assembly,’ suggested Abioseh.

Tejan was more cautious, ‘You know the prefects don’t like us doing that.’

‘Maybe they don’t but they like it even less when we arrive in the main hall late for assembly.’

Tejan agreed so they went straight to assembly.

The morning periods dragged on slowly for Abioseh, and as he listened to the old naval bell being rung every hour to mark the end of a class period, he thought the lunch break would never arrive. He could not help day dreaming during the last period, a geography lesson. They were learning about Canada and Abioseh wished that he could escape to such a far country right away from Freetown, and from Sierra Leone.

After what seemed like ages the final morning bell went. ‘Come on, Oseh,’ called Tejan, ‘let’s get something to eat quickly, and then we can spend the rest of break swimming. The tide is fairly high but it’s on its way Out.’

‘I don’t want anything to eat yet,’ replied Abioseh.

‘I’ll go down to the pool ahead of you.’

The school ‘pool’ was in fact the River Rokel. There was a disused jetty which projected into the mouth of the river which formed the city’s natural harbour. From the jetty one could watch the ships come in and out of the harbour. The boys dived from this jetty and looked upon the surrounding water as their school pool. Abioseh did not have to wait long for Tejan and others were already swimming.

‘Look, Tejan, there’s a cargo ship heading up river towards the deep water quay,’ Oseh called.

Tejan looked across the harbour at the ship, which left a gleaming white wake as she moved upstream. ‘It belongs to the Palm Line,’ he observed. ‘How I wish I could go on board one of those one day, and travel to many different lands.’

‘So do I, Tejan!’

‘Come on! It’s time to get back to class.’

Abioseh was pleased because they had Woodwork for their two afternoon periods. A practical lesson was what he needed to help pass the time more quickly. The period was uneventful until the very end when suddenly the quietness outside was shattered by a loud bang. It seemed to come from the direction of the school pool and the master quickly spoke to the class before they broke up in pandemonium.

‘Nothing to worry about, boys. Carry on with your work. That bang was caused by a small explosion of dynamite,’ he explained.

Abioseh was puzzled by this explanation. ‘Excuse me, sir,’ he said, ‘how could that have been dynamite when there is no stone quarry in the whole of Kingdom peninsula. Isn’t that what the road contractors use to break large rocks?’