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Sonie Story 3



Sonie Achieves Her Goal!

**USAID'S CORE EDUCATION SKILLS
FOR LIBERIAN YOUTH PROJECT**

August 2011

Foreword

The following story has been developed through the support of USAID's Core Education Skills for Liberian Youth (CESLY) program. The USAID/CESLY project seeks to improve educational opportunities and outcomes for Liberian youth and young adults. USAID/CESLY increases access to education among Liberian youth through alternative basic education, enhances the overall quality of teaching, and collaborates with government and community organizations toward long-term sustainability of education for youth in Liberia. The project helps Liberian young people develop the skills and attitudes necessary to progress in the conventional academic system, transition into skills training or livelihoods, maintain healthy lifestyles and participate in their communities.

One of the key focus areas of the USAID/CESLY project is the promotion a culture of reading among youth in Liberia. When reading skills are strengthened, performance in all content areas are likely to improve.

Currently, a great scarcity of locally produced materials in schools leading to a high level of over dependency on educational materials used by learners that are externally produced and lack local orientation and context. These are therefore difficult for facilitators and learners to understand and practicalize. Or more commonly, there is little to read-- so most often, people don't read. In occasional cases, where reading is done,

learners memorize the same book and recite it over and over again. This does not develop their ability to comprehend, analyze and think critically. In response to this need, the mini-series on the life of Sonie was commissioned by the USAID/CESLY project.

The author of the following story is Saah Millimono. Saah is a youth who is physically challenged, in that he is not able to speak or to hear, but he expresses his ideas through creative writing. This clearly manifests that disability does not mean inability. He serves as an example for other Liberian youth benefit from role models who inspire them to overcome challenges. His ideas have resulted in a mini-series of chapters about the life of Sonie, a young Liberian girl who is faced with many challenges in life but takes the courage to confront and rise above each of these challenges in a positive way to transform her life and community..

The themes highlighted in this book center around themes covered in the life skills and work readiness components of the alternative basic education curriculum. Some issues include: HIV/AIDS, community service, hygiene and sanitation, preserving the natural environment, combating malaria, preventing teen pregnancy, gender equality, peaceful resolution of conflict, acquisition of work readiness skills, pursuit of education and many more topics.

This story is intended to be used in conjunction with the Alternative Basic Education Curriculum. The story can be used to support in-class work or reading outside the classroom. The story can also be used to generate project ideas and service learning activities so that what learners acquired in the classroom can be put into practice to help improve their community.

Those who use this story in the classroom may also choose to use it to practice the basic components of reading (such as phonemic awareness, decoding and word recognition, vocabulary, oral reading fluency, comprehension, analysis and critical thinking).

The register of English spoken in Liberia differs quite substantially from the register of English used in standard written documents. Learners have often found it very challenging to understand or correctly employ the phonetics, grammar and vocabulary found in documents in standard English register. The stories can be used with speakers of the Liberian variant of English to explore, differentiate and learn to employ the different spoken and written registers of English in use in Liberia. The stories are intended to provide content that will allow one to bridge that transition, so that learners know how to transition from the spoken register of English used in communities and learners' everyday lives into the written register of English used in the classroom. Without specific bridging, learners sometimes find it difficult to attain

competency in a written register of English that is unfamiliar.

The story can also be used to stimulate critical thinking, produce generative themes, and raise issues that make students want to turn the page. After reading a story, a facilitator may want to discuss with learners, “Why did the story end this way? What happened next? What led to this outcome? What would you have done if you were in the story? Could things have turned out another way?” Critical thinking around the themes in the story can be developed either in oral discussion or in written follow up.

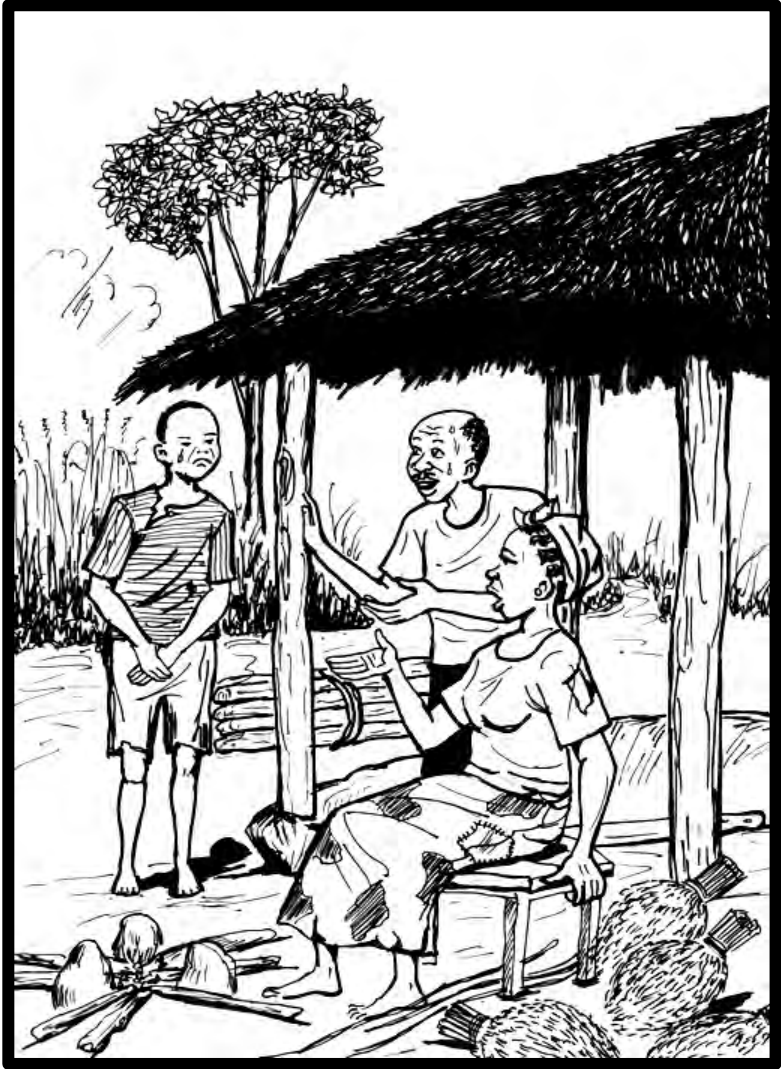
Equally important to the creation of a culture of reading is a culture of writing. Writing cannot be separated from the act of reading. Indeed, writing is what helps new readers practice and internalize new skills. In order to promote a culture of writing, learners may be encouraged to write new conclusions or following chapters to the story contained in this publication. Facilitators can also develop questions that learners respond to in writing. Learners can express their thoughts through simple sketch, drawing, song, role play or any creative way. This story should inspire teachers and educators to work with students and encourage students to create their own original stories.

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Chapter One

Along a small road that led to their farm in the forest, Sonie's parents, together with her little brother, walked one early morning. It was so early that the forest was dark. But they had all grown so used to the small farm road they could almost see it in the darkness.

At last, they came to a small anthill, went past it and into a rice farm with a small thatched hut. Sonie's mother, Korzu, went into the hut. Her husband, Mr. Mulbah, and his fifteen-year-old son, Sarkor, stood talking under the rice attic. The sun had come up now, and the sky was clear. Into the rice farm flew a few birds, twittering.

Mr. Mulbah said, "Sarkor, the birds are eating our rice too much."

"Das true, Papa," said Sarkor. "We must set trap for them birds."

Mr. Mulbah nodded his head.

Sarkor picked up a rock. He threw it at the birds. Screeching, the birds rose from the farm in a flurry of feathers. Soon they had vanished in the distance.

Korzu came out of the hut bringing the coal pots. "Go for water, Sarkor," she said, setting the coal pots on the floor.

Sarkor went into the hut and came back outside with a bucket. He ran down the road towards the creek.

Korzu sat down on a stool and began to light the fire.

"Korzu, I'm goin' to cut sticks to set trap for those birds," Mr. Mulbah said. "They eating too much rice from us."

"All right," Korzu said.

Mr. Mulbah left carrying his cutlass. In a bend in the road he turned and disappeared into the forest.

Sarkor brought the water. He set the bucket down beside Korzu. He did not look happy, and there were tears in his eyes.

"Wha happen to you, Sarkor?" Korzu asked, fanning the fire as it burst into a small flame.

Sarkor did not answer. He got up and ran behind the hut.

Not long afterwards Mr. Mulbah came back, carrying a big bundle of sticks on his shoulder. He threw the bundle to the ground and sighed heavily. He wiped his forehead with the back of his hand.

Korzu said, "Mulbah, Sarkor crying oh."

"Wha he cryin' for?" Mr. Mulbah asked.

"I don't know oh, Mulbah," Korzu said.

"Where he went?"

"He behind the hut."

Mr. Mulbah went behind the hut, Korzu following him. "Sarkor . . . Sarkor," Mr. Mulbah called.

"Sarkor, where you went?" Korzu called.

But there was no answer.

Together Sarkor's parents looked into the bush around the farm.

But they did not see Sarkor.

At last late in the evening, Sarkor came back. His mother was making fishing baskets from bamboo poles. His father had almost finished setting his traps. He stood up from digging a hole in the earth as Sarkor came towards him.

"Your ma told me you were cryin, Sarkor," he said. "Where you comin' from?"

"I was hidin' beside the creek, Papa," Sarkor said.

“Why you want to hide by the creek for?” Mr. Mulbah asked.

“I wan go to Sonie, Papa,” Sarkor said.

“You can tell us that,” Mr. Mulbah said. “But to run off is not good.”

“Sorry, Papa,” Sarkor said. “I will not do it again.”

Mr. Mulbah asked, “Why you wan go to Sonie for? You know she not workin’, she got baby, and she goin’ to school.”

“I wan go visit Sonie, Papa,” Sarkor said. “I really miss her.”

For a long time Mr. Mulbah looked at Sarkor, rubbing his beard. Sarkor held his breath, afraid that his father would say no. But then his father said, “Al right, you will go to your sister. But Monrovia is hard oh, Sarkor.”

“Thank you, Papa,” Sarkor said, and threw his arms round his father’s shoulders, laughing.

Behind them Korzu stood with a big smile on her face.



Chapter Two

The next day Korzu packed Sarkor's clothes in a small bag. They all went to the bus stop. Sarkor wore a pair of black trousers and blue shirt. His black shoes were old. One of his big toes peeped out of it. Uncle Tarnue had come with them to the bus stop, too. He was a slim, tall man. He was on his way to buy some farming tools in Monrovia.

"Tell Sonie hello yah, Tarnue," Mr. Mulbah said.

"Tell my daughter I missin' her oh, Tarnue," Korzu said.

"I will tell her," said Uncle Tarnue.

Sarkor and Uncle Tarnue paid their fares and went into a bus. In the bus sat some passengers on their way to Monrovia, too. As the bus started and drove away, Sarkor and Uncle Tarnue waved Mr. Mulbah and Korzu goodbye.

For two days Sarkor and Uncle Tarnue rode the bus from Voinjama to Monrovia. The road was bad. Now that it was rainy season, there were mud and large holes in the road.

One afternoon, just as the bus reached the small bridge, it got stuck in the mud. The passengers became angry. They began to shout and curse at the driver.

“Driver I want my money back,” a man said. “Your bus is no good.”

The driver said, “My people, I beg you. I will move the bus. Just bear patience.”

“You talkin’?” a woman said. “You just wastin’ our time on this road for nothing, you stupid man.”

The passengers got out of the bus. They had made it too heavy for the driver to push.

The driver dug his heels into the mud, pushing the bus as hard he could. The passengers stood and looked on. None of them wanted to help the driver.

“I say, this driver is lazy,” a fat woman said, and the passengers all burst out laughing.

“If he lazy that his bizness,” a man said. “He will move the bus from the mud. Nobody should help him. Next time he will not bring this pitiful thing on the road.”

Again, there was laughter.

When the laughter had died, an old man said, “My people, let’s help this driver.”

“No, we fini paying our money,” a slim woman said.

“No, let us help him,” the old man said. “A bundle of sticks is harder to break than one stick.”

“What do you mean by that, old man?” a young man asked.

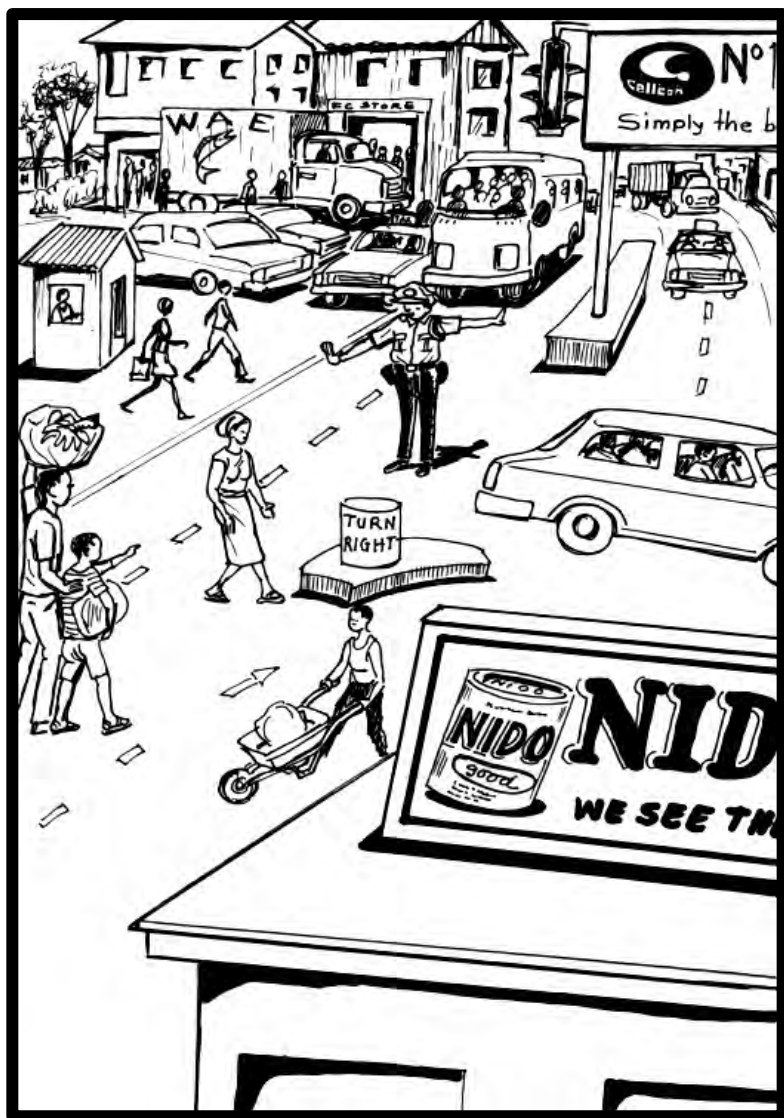
“It means that together people are stronger than one person,” the old man answered. “And since this driver can’t move the bus, if we add our strength to his own this bus will move.”

For a while, the passengers grumbled among themselves. None of them wanted to get in the mud. They did not want to help the driver either. But it was getting late. And they knew that if they waited on the driver to get the bus out of the mud, they would all sleep right there on the road.

At last all the men among the passengers, together with some of the women, joined the driver to help push. Soon the bus was out of the mud, and the passengers got in.

As the bus drove them up the road, the old man began to sing. Soon the other passengers had joined in. And this was the song they sang.

*“Two sticks betta dan one,
Togeder we are strong;
O my daughter, O my son,
Join togeder an’ be strong.
Togeder we are strong,
Togeder we are strong.”*



Chapter Three

On a Friday afternoon, the bus stopped at Red Light Market. The passengers all got down, sighing and stretching themselves. At the market were many people, selling one thing and another. Cars honked their horns. Pehn-pehns drove by. Sarkor had never been to Monrovia before. He had never seen such a big market. He looked around and around, excited.

“What is that, Uncle Tarnue?” Sarkor asked, pointing to a tall iron pole that went into the sky as far as he could see.

“Telephone pole,” Uncle Tarnue told him.

A man stood in the middle of the road, wearing a blue uniform and a cap. The man had a whistle in his mouth. He blew on the whistle and waved at the cars as they came along the road.

“Uncle Tarnue, who’s that man?” Sarkor asked, pointing to the man in the blue uniform.

Uncle Tarnue turned and saw the man. “That’s a policeman over there,” he said.

Just then a bus drove by.

“Bus stop,” Uncle Tarnue shouted.

“No stopping here,” the carboy said, and the bus drove away.

“Hello my friend,” said Uncle Tarnue, as he walked towards a man who sat selling used clothes in a wheelbarrow.

“Hello, Poppy,” the man said.

“I want to go in town, but I don't know where to find car,” Uncle Tarnue said.

The man pointed down the road. “Go down there, Poppy,” he said. “That's the bus stop down there.”

“Thank you yah,” Uncle Tarnue said.

“Ok Poppy,” the man said.

Uncle Tarnue and Sarkor walked down the road.

At the bus stop was a big crowd. People stood in the sun, waiting.

Uncle Tarnue walked towards a fat woman. “Hello,” he said.

“Hello yah Poppy,” the fat woman said.

“This the bus stop here?” Uncle Tarnue asked.

“Oh yes,” the woman answered.

“But where the bus now?” Uncle Tarnue asked.

“Car will come, Poppy,” the fat woman said. “Just wait small.”

And sure enough a bus drove by, and stopped. The crowd rushed towards the bus, shoving and pushing.

“My people take time o,” an old man cried.

“My people stop pushing!” a woman shouted.

Uncle Tarnue fought his way into the bus, pulling Sarkor behind him. They found a seat and sat down. The bus drove up the road.



Chapter Four

Sonie was cooking in front of the house when she saw a small boy and a tall man carrying a bag on his shoulder, stopped by the coal-tar road. The man held the small boy's hand tight. Every time a car drove by, the man and the little boy jumped off the road.

"They sure scared of the cars," Sonie thought, smiling, as she looked at the old man and the small boy across the road.

Suddenly she knew who the little boy and the old man were. She came running toward them.

"Sarkor," she yelled.

Then she looked first on her left and then on her right. No cars were coming. She dashed across the road.

Laughing, she threw her arms around Uncle Tarnue. And then she swept Sarkor off his feet and swung him around and around. At last she put him down, almost out of breath. Sarkor looked up into Sonie's face, smiling.

"Hello, Sonie," Uncle Tarnue said. "How you feelin'?"

"I'm all right oh," Sonie said. "But how the ol ma and the Poppy?"

“They all right,” Uncle Tarnue said. “They extend their greetings.”

“Thank God,” Sonie said. Then she turned to Sarkor. “You all right, Sarkor?” she asked.

“Yes, Sonie, I all right,” Sarkor said.

“Let’s go to my house,” Sonie said.

Sonie took the bag from Uncle Tarnue’s shoulder. She put it on her head.

“I’m scared of this road,” Uncle Tarnue said. “The way these cars pass so fast.”

Sonie laughed. “Don’t be scared, Uncle Tarnue,” she said. “I will help you cross the road.”

But Uncle Tarnue’s legs were shaking, and so were Sarkor’s. Sonie grabbed Sarkor’s hand. Uncle Tarnue held tight to her blouse. A taxi drove by, then a bus and another taxi. In the distance more cars were coming. Sonie took a deep breath and ran across the road, Sarkor and Uncle Tarnue following her as fast they could.

When they reached Sonie’s place, Sarkor and Uncle Tarnue went into the house. Sonie dished up some food. When she had finished, she took the food into the room and set it on the table. Sonie gave a spoon to the old man, and then another to her brother.

“I will eat with my hand,” Uncle Tarnue said.

“I don’t want a spoon,” Sarkor said.

Sarkor and Uncle Tarnue washed their hands and dug into the bowl of “torbor-soya” and rice.

At last when they had finished eating, Sonie cleared the table and took the dishes outside.

Then she came back and sat down on the mattress.

Uncle Tarnue cleared his throat. “Sonie, your people they told me to bring your brother,” he said.

Sonie frowned. “But why they told you this?” she asked. “They know I’m working and trying to go to school at night, and in Monrovia, it’s not easy-o.”

“Yes,” Uncle Tarnue said. “But your brother just wants to spend time with you.”

Sonie looked at Sarkor and frowned again. Sarkor bowed his head. His eyes were sad.

When she saw his sad face, she said, “All right, let Sarkor spend time here. He will go back before school opens.”

Smiling, Sarkor threw his arms around Sonie’s shoulders.

In the bag, that Uncle Tarnue had brought with him from Voinjama, were new rice, dry monkey meat, bitter ball and pepper. Sonie put them all in a big plastic pan.

Uncle Tarnue spent two days at Sonie's house. On the third day, he packed his things to go back to Voinjama.

"Tell the Poppy and the ol' Ma hello," Sonie said.

"All right, Sonie," Uncle Tarnue said, nodding his head.

Sonie and Uncle Tarnue and Sarkor went to the parking lot. Sonie gave Uncle Tarnue his bus fare back to Voinjama. She gave him money for her parents, too. The old man thanked Sonie. He got into a taxi. They waved at each other as the taxi drove Uncle Tarnue up the road.



Chapter Five

Early the next morning, there was a knock at Sonie's door.

"Who's that?" she asked, stretching herself on the mattress.

"That's Mr. Zayzay," a man's voice came from outside.

Sonie's heart began to beat, as if she were afraid. Quickly she got up from the mattress and came outside.

Mr. Zayzay was a short man with a bald head and bushy beard. He sat on a wooden bench in the hallway.

Sonie came out of her room and sat down beside Mr. Zayzay. Now her heart was beating so hard her teeth hurt.

Mr. Zayzay cleared his throat. "Sonie, you owe me three months rent," he said, "and since you came from the country I been waitin' to hear from you."

"Mr. Zayzay, it not easy oh," said Sonie, as if she wanted to cry.

Mr. Zayzay looked at her, frowning. "If you don't have the money for rent, just tell me. I will put somebody in that room. I got to eat," he said.

"Please, Mr. Zayzay, I will pay my rent," said Sonie, batting her eyes as tears ran out of them.

"What time? You know I can't wait for you," said the landlord.

"I will pay, Mr. Zayzay," said Sonie. "Please give me small time. Since I came from Voinjama things have not been easy."

"You say 'Things have not been easy', and that's what I will eat?" said Mr. Zayzay. And then he laughed, as if what Sonie had said was funny.

Sonie thought, "This man and his money bizness na easy."

Mr. Zayzay looked at Sonie. Then he looked away and rubbed his beard and thought, "These renters they always begging, like they don't know a man got to eat too. Well, I feelin' sorry for the girl. She never owed me rent before."

"Look, I will give you one month two weeks to pay your rent," he said to Sonie. "But if you can't pay after that time, just forget it."

Mr. Zayzay got up and rushed into his room, slamming the door behind him. Sonie was surprised but happy. In her happiness she began to cry.

That evening Sonie and Sarkor went to the local Susu club, her baby tied to her back. When she was leaving for Voinjama she had borrowed money from the Susu man. And she had paid him when she came back, adding his interest money also. But she was not sure whether the Susu man would lend her money again. She knew that he himself did not own the money but kept other people's money. Just like a bank. So he did not trust people who came to borrow money from him. It was hard for him to lend money to anyone. Some people did not come back to pay the money they borrowed. Some of them even ran away. That put the Susu man in trouble. Once, he had gone to jail.

The Susu man was a slim, light-skinned Fulah man. Everyone called him Musa. He sold clothes at a store down Waterside where he ran his Susu club also.

"Oh, Sonie," he said, smiling, as Sonie entered the store and sat in a chair by his counter. "I can't see you for long time oh. What happened?"

"Eh man, it's not easy oh, Musa," said Sonie, untying the baby from her back and putting him in her lap.

The Susu man yawned and stretched out his arms. He looked very tired. Then he said, "Sonie, I can't lend

money to you every time oh. You know that's people's money I'm keeping so, and anytime they can come for it."

"I know Musa," Sonie said, "but please help me again. I will pay you just like before. I owe rent and my landlord wants to throw me outside. But he gave me one month and two weeks to pay the rent. I want to borrow money from you to do bizness before I pay my landlord. Then when I pay, I will still have money to pay you. Please, Musa, I beg you."

The Susu man frowned again but nodded his head. From behind his counter he took a bundle of money and handed it over to Sonie.

"Thank you, Musa," Sonie said, taking the money and smiling.

"I will give you three months to bring my money back, with one thousand dollars interest," said the Susu man.

And then the Susu man and Sonie made a document. The document said that Sonie agreed to bring back, within two weeks' time, the money she had borrowed from the Susu man, together with his interest money. Sonie signed the paper, which meant she wrote her full name down on it. At last Sonie shook hands with the Susu man. And then she and Sarkor and her baby left.



Chapter Six

The next day, Sonie said to her brother, “Sarkor, I want you to help me sell small-small things in the market. I owe the landlord rent, and he wants to put me outside. But if we sell, we will use the profit to pay the landlord. Then we will have something to eat too, right now we don’t even have food.”

“Okay, Sonie,” Sarkor said.

Into two big trays Sonie put baby powder, Vaseline, finger nail polish, hair dye, and many other things she had bought at Waterside Market the day before. On Sarkor’s head she set one of the trays and put the other on her own head, too. Then they went out of the house to sell in the streets.

Just as Sonie and Sarkor passed Superstore and went down Clay Street, they ran into a big crowd. The crowd was shouting. Some of the people had sticks and stones. In the middle of the crowd, sitting half-naked, was a fat man. The man’s face was covered with blood. There were cuts on his head.

“We will kill you,” a man in the crowd shouted.

On top of the fat man’s head came the blow from a large stick.

“My people, I beg you,” the fat man cried, weeping. “Y’all don’t kill me.”

When Sonie heard the fat man’s voice, her hand flew up to her mouth. The tray almost fell from her head.

“You rogue,” a woman told the fat man. “When we fini with you, you will na live to tell deh story.”

“My people, yor don’t kill me,” the fat man pleaded. “We all Liberians.”

“Shut up,” someone shouted, and a large rock came down on the fat man’s head. The fat man screamed and fell flat on his back.

The crowd cheered.

“My people, don’t kill him,” a voice shouted.

The crowd parted as a girl of about sixteen years old, carrying a tray on her head, pushed her way through the crowd. She stood in the circle where the fat man lay in a pool of blood.

“Fine girl, that’s your pa?” someone asked.

“Yes, my people, that’s my Pa oh,” Sonie said, weeping.

“Your Pa, he’s a rogue,” a man said. “Today he will die.”

“My people, don’t kill my Pa,” Sonie cried. She was weeping so much the crowd began to feel sorry for her. The people stopped beating the fat man. They all looked at Sonie, surprised.

“Your Pa stole money from my store,” a tall man said. “If he doesn’t give me my money now, he will die.”

“My friend,” Sonie said, “mob violence it’s not good oh. If somebody do something, we must report them to the police. The police people will know what to do to them. But if everybody gets together and kills somebody because they do something bad, then that’s only more bad we doing to ourselves. Today that’s my Pa you’re beating so. Tomorrow it will be somebody daughter or son.”

“Shut up, small girl,” a huge man said. “The man - that’s a rogue.” The huge man grabbed Sonie and pushed her out of the crowd.

“You bring gas so we can burn this rogue,” someone shouted.

A man broke from the crowd and ran to a gas station. The crowd began to beat the fat man worse than before.

Just then a police car drove by. The crowd saw the police, and everybody scattered. But the police ran behind the people and caught some of them.

“Mob violence is against the law,” one of the police officers said. “Everybody who beat this man will go to jail.” The police officer threw a man into the back of the police pick-up.

Some of the police officers carried the fat man from the coal-tarred road into the pick-up. The fat man was covered with blood. He looked very weak. But as he sat in the passenger’s front seat of the police car, the fat man said, “Sonie, thank you for tryin’ to save my life oh. God will bless you.”

“All right Johnson,” Sonie said, weeping.

The police thanked Sonie, too. Then the police pick-up drove away to the police station.

As Sonie and Sarkor put their trays back on their heads, Sarkor asked, “Sonie, you know that man the people were beatin’?”

“Yes, I know him,” Sonie said. “That’s the man who gave me belly and left me. I shame for him, Sarkor, the way he turned into rogue. In my alternative basic education class, we learned that when there is a conflict, we should try to make peace.”

“But you said the man, that’s your Pa,” Sarkor said.

Sonie smiled. “Sarkor, I wanted those people to feel sorry for me so they can leave him.”



Chapter Seven

As Sonie and her brother walked toting their trays, people stopped them along the streets and bought from them. The sun was hot. Sometimes they rested by the coal-tar road. They bought small bags of cold water and drank.

Late in the evening, Sonie said to her brother, "Sarkor, let's go eat."

"All right, Sonie," said Sarkor, wiping sweat from his forehead.

Sonie took Sarkor to a small cook bowl shop on Gurley Street. There were many people there. They sat on wooden benches round a table, eating. The woman who served the people was tall. She was dressed in a lappa suit and head tie. She dished up the food from two large pots.

"What soup today?" Sonie asked, as she and Sarkor set their trays on the floor and sat on a bench.

"I got potato greens, palm butter, and beans," the tall woman said.

Sonie turned to Sarkor. "What soup do you want?"

"I wan beans," Sarkor said.

"Give us sixty dollars food," Sonie said to the woman.

“All right,” the woman said.

The woman dished up some rice in a large bowl. She set the bowl on the table in front of Sonie and her brother. Then she dished up bean soup in another bowl. She set it down on the table, too. Sonie and Sarkor began to eat.

A short man came into the cold bowl shop. He sat down beside Sonie.

“Give me food,” the fat man said.

“What kind of soup?” the cook bowl woman asked.

“Potato greens,” the man said.

The woman dished up greens and rice. She set it down on the table in front of the short man. The man began to eat. But as he ate, he looked at Sonie from the corner of his eye.

“Why this man just looking at me for?” Sonie thought, frowning.

The short man asked, “Fine girl, you selling the things in the tray here?”

“Yes,” Sonie said.

The man nodded his head.

When Sonie and Sarkor had finished eating, they paid the cook bowl woman. Then they set their trays back on their heads and walked out of the shop.

Just as they were about to cross the coal-tar road, the short man came up to Sonie.

“Fine girl, let me talk to you ‘mah deah’,” he said.

“I’m selling,” Sonie said. “I don’t have time for talking nonsense.”

The short man said, “Let me just talk to you small.” Then he smiled.

Sarkor looked at the short man and frowned. “What does this man want from my sister?” he thought.

“I tell you, I’m selling,” Sonie said.

“I know,” the short man said. “But I wan tell you something good. You will like it.”

“All right, what you want tell me?” Sonie asked.

“Come let’s go talk,” said the short man.

“Wait here for me, Sarkor,” Sonie said.

“All right, Sonie,” Sarkor said.

The short man and Sonie walked away from Sarkor, Sonie carrying her tray on her head. At a small distance from Sarkor they stopped.

“I don’t want the small boy to hear what I want to tell you,” the man said to Sonie.

“All right. So, what you want to tell me now?” Sonie asked.

The man smiled, and Sonie saw that his teeth were yellow and rotten. He said, “I want to give you some money so we can go to a motel.”

“What!” Sonie’s said in surprise.

“Don’t make noise,” the man said, looking around.

“What do you take me for?” Sonie said in a loud voice.

“I told you not to make noise, stupid,” the man said.

“You think I’m a prostitute?” Sonie shouted.

“Move from my face now,” the man said, and tried to walk away.

But Sonie grabbed the man by his shirt.

“Leave my shirt, before I beat you,” the man said, knocking Sonie’s hand from his shirt. Some people stopped and looked on.

A woman asked, "Fine girl, what happened."

"This man here," Sonie said. "He's insulting me. He thinks I'm a prostitute. He's saying for me to go to a motel with him."

"Ayyy my man, this small girl?" a man said, shaking his head.

The people looked at the short man with surprise.

"She's lying," the man said. "I did not tell her anything."

"So the girl is just holding your shirt on the street for nothing?" one man asked.

"She was begging me for money," the short man said.

"Oh my people! This man can lie!" Sonie exclaimed.

The man said, "Move from here, the way you small, small girls like money bizness. You say you're selling then you only looking for a man?"

"But it was you telling me to go to the motel!" Sonie shouted.

"You can lie," the man said. Hissing his teeth, he turned and walked away, then disappeared round a building.

“Leave him alone, small girl,” one woman said to Sonie. “Dis time big, big men don’t get shame face. They like chasing small, small girls.”

“But that’s bad,” another woman said. “And if they see the children selling, they want to have sex with them. That’s the same thing makes me not send my daughter to sell.”

“Me, I send my daughter to sell,” another woman said. “But I make sure my son follows her. If something happens to my daughter, my son can run and call people.”

“Yes oh, that’s the best way,” a man said. “The other day one man raped one girl who was selling. He said he wanted to buy from the girl and grabbed her in his house.”

“That’s just you selling, small girl?” another man asked.

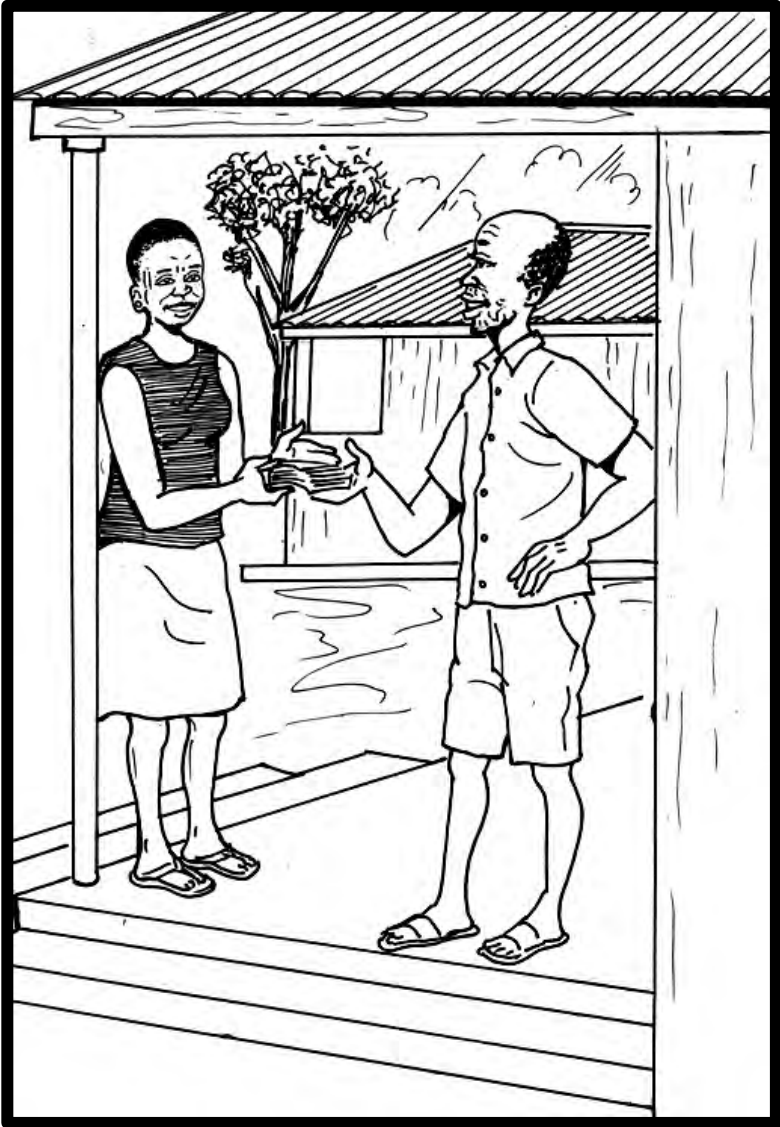
“No, me and my brother,” Sonie said, pointing to Sarkor who stood with the tray on his head.

“Good,” the man said. “Anytime you go sell, carry your brother or somebody with you. Some bad people like to have sex with child hawkers.”

Sonie nodded her head. “All right, my people, thank you. Me and my brother going now to sell,” she said.

“All right, small girl, but be careful oh,” the people said.

Sonie nodded her head again. She thought about all that she had learned about reproductive health and preventing gender violence in her life skills class at the alternative basic education school. She realized all that she had learned she could apply in her own life. Then she and Sarkor crossed the street and went away, far away from that man.



Chapter Eight

To go out into the streets and sell each day was hard. Many times Sonie and her brother went to bed almost hungry. She had to pay the three months' rent she owed the landlord. She also had to pay interest on the money she took from the Susu Man. She used what she had learned about money management in her work readiness class to figure out how much interest she would owe.

Early each morning, she and her small brother left the house to sell. Together they would come home late in the evening. If they could not buy food at the cook bowl shops, they drank farina. Sometimes they ate it with salt and palm oil. And then, in a little cash box that Sonie had hidden among her clothes in a corner, she would save some of the profit she got from her goods.

Three days before she was supposed to pay her landlord, she went to see him. Just as she knocked on his door, Mr. Zayzay came out of his room, rubbing his eyes. He had been asleep.

"Here is my rent oh, Mr. Zayzay," Sonie said, giving the landlord a bundle of money. "Thank you for the time you gave me," she added.

The landlord opened his eyes wide but said nothing.

Sonie turned and walked down the hallway. The landlord watched until she had gone out of the house.

Two months later, Sonie visited the Susu man's store.

"Musa, I came to talk to you," she said.

The Susu man frowned. 'I hope she brings my money,' he thought.

Sonie and Sarkor removed their trays from their heads and sat on a bench.

"Musa, I just paid my rent," she said to the Susu man. "I don't have the money to pay you. But I want you to please give me one more month."

The Susu man sighed. A long silence passed. Sonie held her breath, hoping the Susu man would not refuse.

At long last, the Susu man said, "Sonie, you know that's other people's money I'm saving so. I have to get their money on me every time. You hear?"

"Yes, Musa," Sonie said.

Another long silence followed, as the Susu man rubbed his beard thoughtfully.

Then he said, "You know what, Sonie?"

“No, Musa,” she said. “I will give you two more months to bring my money back, with the interest,” he said.

“Oh, Musa, thank you,” Sonie said, flying from the bench and throwing her arms round the Susu man.

“Things hard with you, Sonie,” Musa said. “I feel sorry for you.”

Weeping with joy, Sonie thanked the Susu man again and again. And then she left along with her brother, wiping with the back of her hand the tears of joy that fell across her face.



Chapter Nine

Two Months Later

Early one Saturday morning, a carpenter went to work building a booth across the road. Plak ... plak ... plak ...plak ... plak, went the hammer, as the carpenter nailed plywood to plank.

With the carpenter were Sonie and Sarkor, handing up nails and pieces of planks to the carpenter as he stood on a tall bench. Sonie had just begun to build a booth across the road. Soon she would open a cook bowl shop in the neighborhood. She had used money the Susu man had credited her, together with what she had saved to pay the costs of a copy book and materials to so that she could keep attending alternative basic education class at night and and open a business of her own during the day.

A woman walked across the coal-tar road and came up to Sonie. “Korwou and Martha making palaver oh, Sonie,” she said.

“What happened?” Sonie asked.

“Korwou say Martha tell her she got AIDS,” the woman said.

“What!”

“Yes oh. And that kind of talk, that’s helleva talk.”

“Let’s go there,” Sonie said, putting down a piece of plywood. Together she went with the woman to the rental house.

Just as they reached the house, they heard the women yelling at the top of their lungs.

“You got AIDS,” Korwou shouted.

“You lie!” Martha shouted back.

“No! It’s true,” Korwou said. “Look at the way you looking. You dry like broomstick. You see me, I fat.”

“Leave me alone,” Martha said. “You just want to lie on me so people can run away from me.”

“Yes, people will run away from you because they don’t want you to give them AIDS,” Korwu said, laughing.

Just then, Sonie, followed by the woman who had gone to call her, came into the house.

Sonie said, “Korwou, please leave Martha yah. If she got AIDS that’s nothing of your bizness.”

“You don’t know what you talking, Sonie,” Korwu said. “If you touch Martha you ‘fini’. Don’t even try to eat with her, because you will get AIDS like her.”

“Move from here, Korwou,” Sonie said. “I don’t have time for this foolish thing you talking.” She remembered what she had learned about HIV/AIDS in life skills in alternative basic education class. She knew she could not get AIDS just from touching someone or giving them a hug. Then she turned to Martha, who was weeping. “Martha, let’s go to my room,” Sonie said.

Martha nodded her head. Sonie put her arms around Martha shoulders. They both went into Sonie’s room.

Once they sat d’ own, Sonie asked, “Martha, this thing Korwou says about you, it’s true? You got AIDS.”

Martha did not answer. She bowed her head and went on weeping.

Sonie sat down beside her. She took Martha’s hand. They sat without saying anything for a long time.

Then Martha said, “Sonie, it’s true, I got AIDS.”

“How Korwou knew?” Sonie asked.

“She saw me with the medicine,” Martha said. “We sleep in the same room.”

“Oh,” Sonie gasped.

“Yes oh, Sonie,” Martha said, weeping. “I know everybody will run away from me now. They will never want to touch me because I got AIDS.”

Sonie nodded. Many people, she knew, would not even come near a person who had AIDS.

Martha began to weep.

“Martha, don’t cry,” Sonie said. “That’s a bad thing Korwu did, telling everybody you got AIDS. And the way people scared of that sickness, they will start to believe Korwu.”

Martha was weeping loudly now.

“Don’t cry, Martha. . . don’t cry,” Sonie said, putting her arms around Martha’s shoulders.

That same morning she called Korwu. Korwu came into Sonie’s room and sat down on the mattress.

“Korwu,” Sonie said, “That’s a bad thing you did to Martha mehn.”

“Martha made me vex,” Korwu said. “She too frisky.”

“Yes, but you na suppose to tell people she got AIDS,” Sonie said. “Because if people hear it, they will hate Martha. They will not even want to come near her.”

“I sorry Sonie,” Korwu said. “It’s really a bad thing I did to Martha.”

“Yes,” Sonie said. “You see, Korwu, anybody can catch AIDS, rich or poor people, old man or young woman,

old women or young boys. AIDS is like all the sickness people can get. The only thing is that it has no cure. But if somebody who never had AIDS catch it one day, you must not tease them. You must love them. Because if you tease them, they will get vex . Then they won't take their medicine and they could get worse and die. Or ending up spreading AIDS to others, instead of caring for themselves and leading a productive life.

“Hehn? But it’s true what you say, Sonie?” Korwu asked, her eyes wild.

“Yes,” Sonie said. “Think about it, Korwu. If you never had AIDS before, but catch it one day and people start teasing you about it. What you will do?”

“I will be sad,” Korwu said. “But I will be vex too.”

“And when you get vex you will try to hurt anybody who tease you. Ehneh so?” Sonie asked.

“Yes,” Korwu said.

“That’s why we must never tease people with AIDS,” Sonie said. “We must love them and care for them.”

Then Sonie called Martha. Martha came into the room.

“Korwu, tell Martha sorry,” Sonie said.

Korwu nodded. "Sorry yah, Martha," she said. "I never meant to hurt you. Sorry."

"Al right Korwu," Martha said.

The two young women embraced each other, weeping.

By late September, Sonie was ready to go back to school. Together with Sarkor, she had worked hard to save enough money. And she had not only given back the Susu man's money but had also finished building her booth. She wondered what things would have been like had Sarkor not been there to help her. And she felt ashamed that she had been angry with him when he had first come to spend time with her. Now that Sarkor would soon be going back to the country, Sonie wanted to make him happy.

One Saturday afternoon, she took him shopping down Waterside Market. The market was crowded. There were people and goods everywhere. Some of the vendors pulled at people's sleeves, calling them to buy their goods. Sonie and Sarkor went in and out of the crowd, looking for things to buy.

Sonie bought a pair of brand new shoes for Sarkor, three pairs of trousers and many shirts. Some of the clothes were used, others were brand new, but Sarkor loved them. Everywhere he followed Sonie with a big smile on his face. Sonie bought copy books and pencils for Sarkor, too. She

wanted him to go to school in the village. Together she and her parents would pay his school fees.

At last when they had finished shopping, Sonie took Sarkor to a restaurant on Carey Street. At the restaurant they ate meat soup. Sarkor washed his food down with cold water and a bottle of soft drink.

“Thank you, Sonie,” he said, as he and Sonie walked out of the restaurant and into the street.

“It’s all right, Sarkor,” Sonie said, smiling. “You’ve been helping me all this time. That’s supposed to be me to tell you thank you.”

Sarkor smiled widely.

When they got home they met Uncle Tarnue, who had just come back from Voinjama.

They hugged the old man, laughing.

“How’s the ol’ Ma and the Poppy?” Sonie asked.

“They all right oh, Sonie,” Uncle Tarnue said. “They said I should come for Sarkor.”

Sonie nodded her head. “Me and Sarkor just coming from shopping,” she said.

Uncle Tarnue nodded, smiling.

From the bag, Sarkor removed the things Sonie had bought for him. Smiling, he showed them all to Uncle Tarnue.

“Hehn! Your sister buy you plenty things oh, Sarkor,” Uncle Tarnue said. “I say, when you reach to the country you will not be easy!”

Sarkor laughed.

“Thank you for him, Sonie,” Uncle Tarnue said.

“It’s all right, Uncle Tarnue,” Sonie said. “Sarkor been helping me.”

Early the next morning, Sonie and Sarkor and Uncle Tarnue went to the parking lot. Sonie paid for her brother and uncle’s fare. And then she gave the old man money for her parents, and some money for Sarkor’s school fees, too. She waved them goodbye as the bus drove away from the parking lot.



Chapter Ten

Across the road, built like a very big box, was Sonie's booth. A sign board in front of the booth said:

Sonie's Food Center

But as much as Sonie wanted to run her own business, she knew nothing else was better than school. One evening she went to visit Aunty Deddeh.

"Oh, Sonie," Deddeh said, throwing her arms around her niece. "I've not seen you for long time!"

"Yes oh, Aunty Deddeh," Sonie said. "I been busy."

On a bench in front of the house, the women sat down.

Sonie said, "Aunty Deddeh, I want you to help me. I want to do small bizness while I go to school."

"What kind of bizness you want do?" Deddeh asked.

"I want to sell food near my house," Sonie answered. "People can buy there."

Deddeh was slient for a while. Then she asked, "You have money to make the bizness?"

“Yes, but not plenty,” Sonie said.

“Small, small,” Deddeh said. “I will bring my own money and add it to the bizness.”

“Oh, Aunty Deddeh, thank you,” Sonie exclaimed, hugging her aunt.

Sonie and Deddeh began to run their own business. Deddeh stayed at the booth serving customers while Sonie was away in school. And then when Sonie came home from school she would go to the market, buy food stuff, and help Deddeh prepare it for the next day. In this way each of them did her share of the work.

Sonie loved to study. At two o'clock each morning, she sat in her room studying. She read and did arithmetic. And she did not only read her lessons. She read story books she bought from the market.

One day, the teacher, Mrs. Davis, asked, “Who can spell the word ‘separate?’ ”

“Let me spell it, teacher,” said Flomo, a tall boy in Sonie’s class.

“Yes, Flomo, spell it,” Mrs. Davis said.

“S-E-P-E-R-A-T-E,” Flomo said.

“You try, Flomo, but you are wrong,” the teacher said.

“Let me spell it,” Sonie said, and got up.

“OK, Sonie,” said Mrs. Davis.

“S-E-P-A-R-A-T-E,” Sonie said.

“That’s correct,” said Mrs. Davis.

The whole class clapped for Sonie.

“Most people,” the teacher said, “spell the word ‘separate’ by putting an ‘e’ after the ‘p’. But Sonie got the right spelling. Well, Sonie, how come you are so good at spelling?”

“I like reading teacher,” Sonie said. “Reading helps me to know plenty words.”

“That is good, Sonie, and you must keep reading,” said the English teacher. Then she turned to the class and said, “You must all read like Sonie. Then you will all know many words and be able to write very well. Remember some people can’t write a good letter because they can’t spell. And they don’t know how to spell because they don’t love to read.”

Years Later

At the rental house was a big crowd. Among the crowd was Sonie's parents. There were Deddeh, Sarkor and Uncle Tarnue, too. The crowd sang and danced. The voices of the people rang through the neighborhood and beyond. Sonie had just graduated from the twelfth grade, and she was having a big party.

The graduation party lasted all that day. There was enough for everyone. Sonie, dressed in a white dress and high heels, hugged one person and another. She was all smiles, and looking so beautiful every man there in the crowd had his eyes on her.

At last, late in the evening, the party was over. Her arms full of gifts that she had gotten from one person or another, Sonie took pictures along with her parents. And when she came to take picture with the crowd, the people shoved and push each other, laughing and enjoying it. At last they camera clicked, and the crowd shouted with joy.

Then late at night in bed, when all the crowd had left, Sonie closed her eyes. She smiled to herself. She remembered how she had come to Monrovia. She remembered when she had enrolled in alternative basic education. She remembered how hard it was to work in the day and study at night but how she had done it. She remembered how she had enrolled in 7th grade after

alternative basic education. Then how she went on through high school.

She remembered her mistakes, like having a baby early and getting involved with the wrong kind of girls. But she also remembered her achievements, teaching others about malaria, organizing her neighborhood to clean the streets, starting her own business. Now that she had graduated from the 12th grade, she was proud of all the struggles she had overcome, proud that she had finally achieved the goal that she set so long, long ago. She closed her eyes and went to sleep with a smile on her face.