

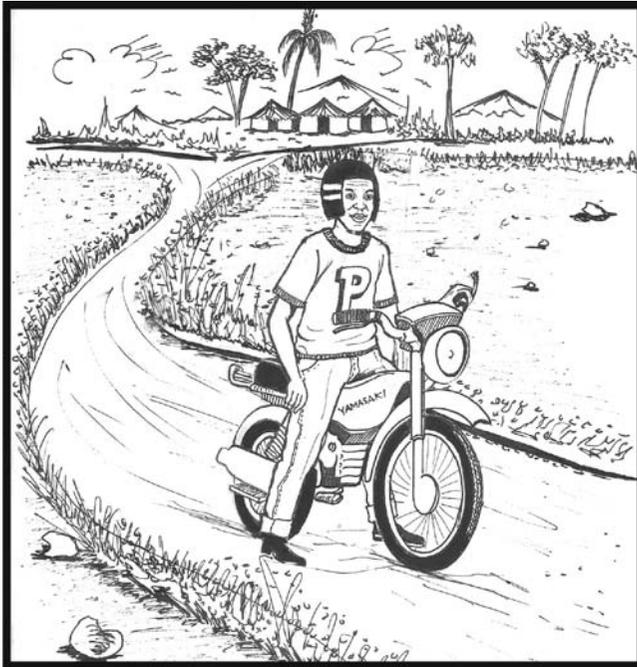




**USAID**  
FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE



# *The Adventures of Pehn Pehn Ben*



## *The Life and Times of a Young Liberian Motorcycle Rider*

**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.

The author of this story is Watchen Johnson Babalola. Watchen has written about a young Liberian motorcycle rider. In

Liberia, motorcycle riders are often stigmatized as reckless, irresponsible youth. Many motorcycle riders are presumed to be ex-combatants. However the story of Penh Penh Ben provides an example of a young male motorcycle rider can be a peacemaker, a good citizen, a critical thinker and an example to his peers. This story is provided as an accompaniment to the Sonie Story series so that both young Liberian males as well as females may get to know the life of a youth who faces the same challenges they do, a youth who can serve as a role model.

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: corruption, honesty, integrity, peacemaking, safe driving, nepotism, leadership, working hard to earn a living and other issues that confront youth in day to day modern Liberia.

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).

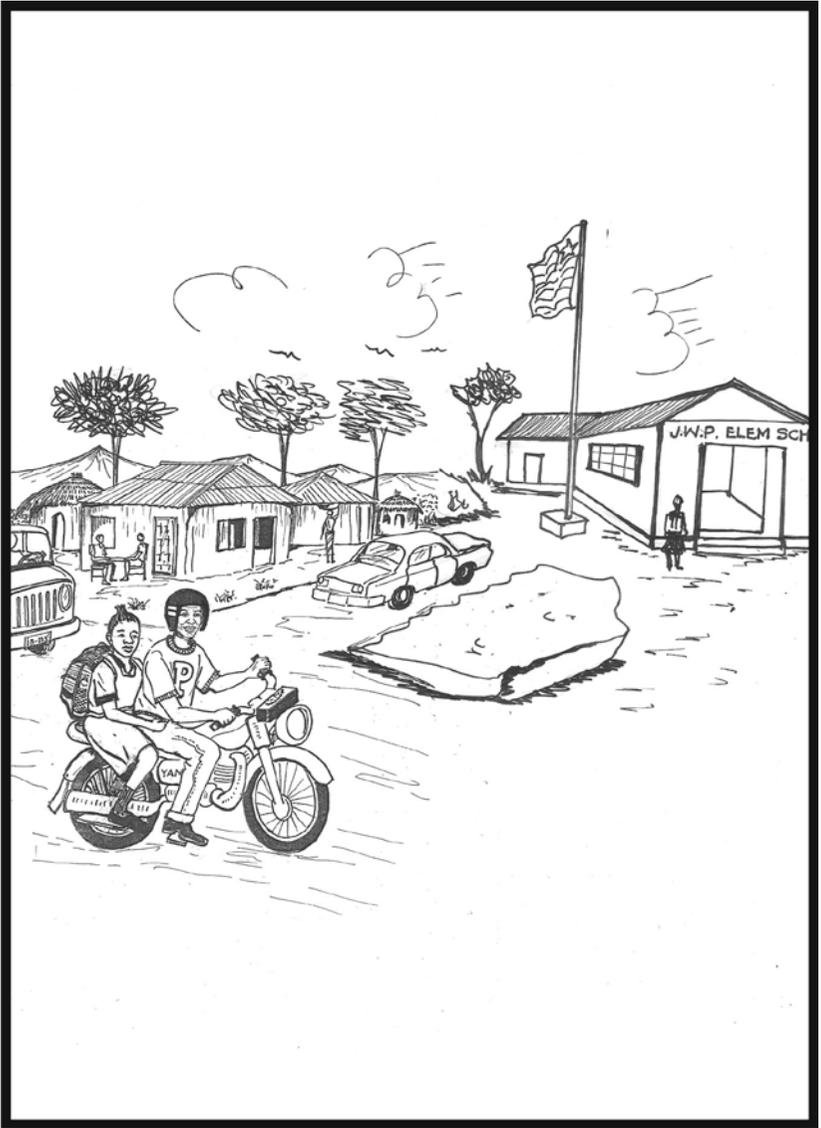
The story can also be used to stimulate critical thinking, produce generative themes, and raise issues that make students want to turn the page. After reading a story, a facilitator may

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.

While the text was written by Watchen Babalola, the illustrations were completed by Saye Dahn and Francis Coleman, Liberian illustrators.

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# PEHN-PEHN BEN

*By Watchen Johnson Babalola*

Hello.

My name is Ben.

I am a young Liberian.

I am a student at the University of Liberia, or asL.U as people say. This is my first year. I plan to become a medical doctor one day.

My life has not been easy. I grew up the hard way. My parents died before I was five years old. I was brought up by a poor grandmother. She did not have money but she always gave me good advice.

“Always work hard. Make sure you go to school. Be honest. Do not commit crimes. Respect people whether big or small, man or woman. Be a good citizen,” she said.

I left my village because of the Liberian civil war. I came to Monrovia. It was hard for me at first, but I remembered my grandmother’s advice.

I was a houseboy for three years. I went to night school from the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 9<sup>th</sup> grade and saved some of my houseboy pay every month. When I reached the tenth grade I bought a “pehn-pehn”, a Liberian motorcycle with all my money. That is how I became a pehn-pehn driver.

I ride boys and girls on my pehn-pehn. I take them to school.

I ride older people too. I take them to work.

That is how I paid my school fees up to the twelfth grade. That is how I pay my school fees at L.U. It is very hard work, but I have learned that it pays to work hard. It is better to work and do something than to sit, do nothing and beg.

All my passengers like the way I ride. I ride carefully. I know the traffic rules. I observe the traffic rules. I make sure my passengers wear a helmet. I do not ride above the speed limit. I do not ride between cars.

And most of all, I do not drink alcohol before riding my pehn pehn.

My passengers do not get hurt when they ride with me.

I do not abuse or fight with my passengers.

I treat them with respect.

The boys and girls call me Pehn-Pehn Ben. Some of the older people call me Pehn-Pehn Ben too.

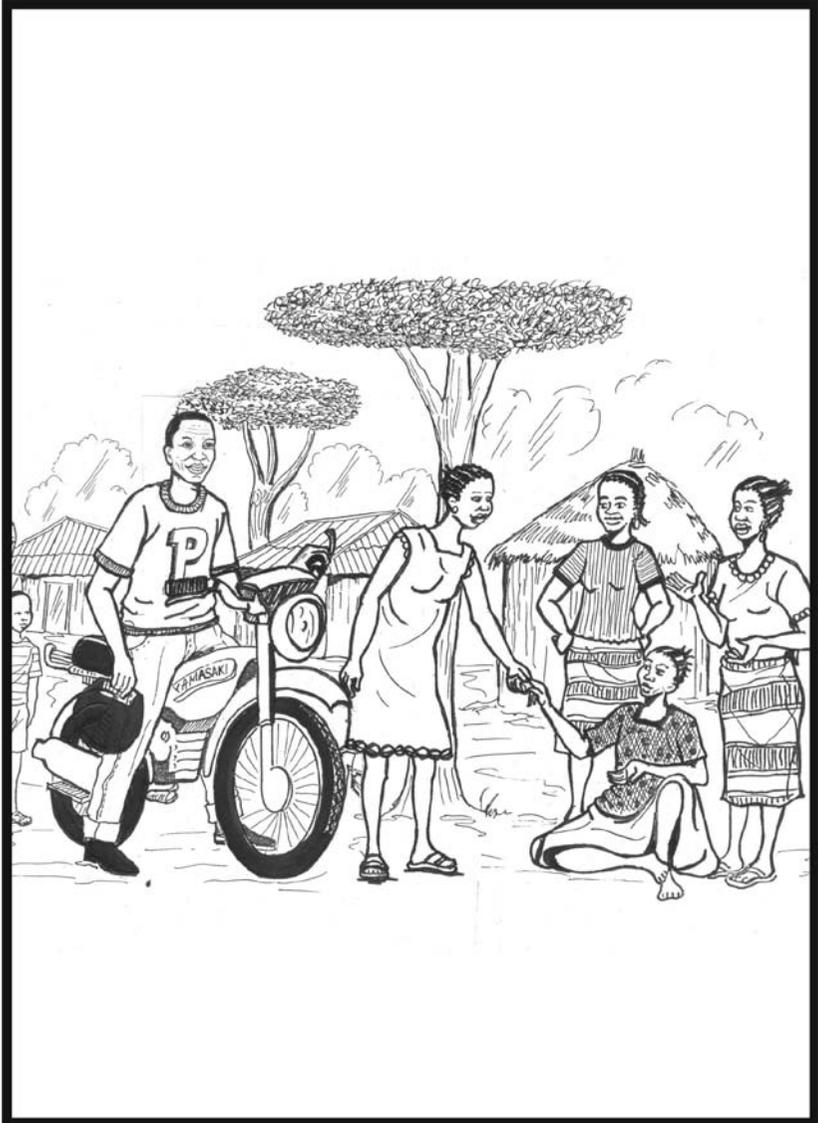
“Hello Pehn-Pehn Ben,” they tell me each day. “Please take us to town; to work; to school.”

And I do.

I take them to where they want to go.

**END**





# PEACE MAKER

*By Watchen Johnson Babalola*

“Look here, what were you telling your friends about me?” Korto shouted at her friend Helen.

She slapped and pushed Helen. Helen did not expect the attack; she fell to the ground and landed on her back.

Korto walked away from a group of girls. She stood with her hands folded across her chest and a frown on her face.

Pehn-Pehn Ben was passing by. He had just dropped off a passenger and was making his way back to the main road. He saw Korto push Helen and heard her angry words.

“Hello,” said Pehn-Pehn Ben. “Don’t spoil your fine face with that frown. Why did you push your friend like that?” He asked.

Korto looked at him without answering. She was so angry with Helen. She knew that if she tried to answer this pehn-pehn driver she would begin to cry.

“What is your name?” asked Pehn-Pehn Ben.

“Please mind your business, pehn pehn boy and leave us alone!” Korto responded angrily.

“Well, I saw what happened just now,” said Pehn-Pehn Ben. “Such action can put you into a lot of problems. I know the girl you are angry with is your friend. Tell me what happened.”

“She used to be my friend, but she is not my friend anymore!” said Korto. “And you better go and pick up your passengers and stop poking into other people’s business.”

“What did your friend do that that deserved such treatment?”

“She gossips a lot. She has nothing to do but to take my name around the community. She is telling people that I always borrow her clothes to go out.” Tears filled Korto’s eyes as she explained and she choked on her words.

Pehn Pehn Ben gave Korto a handkerchief. Korto held it and wiped only the corner of one eye. The other eye filled with tears. Ben felt sorry for her.

“Nobody has everything,” Pehn Pehn Ben said. “We all share and borrow from one another. That is how life goes.”

“Go and tell her that,” Korto said pointing in the direction of Helen.

“There are many good ways to deal with anger, fine girl,” said Pehn-Pehn Ben, “but being violent and fighting is not the way. You need to cool down and even say sorry to your friend that you have pushed.”

“Sorry!?! I am planning how to beat her up more,” said Korto.

“You are not saying sorry to her for being angry,” said Pehn-Pehn Ben. “Being angry is OK and everyone feels angry with someone else now and then, but we need to control our anger and don’t let it control us.”

“You cannot push and scream at people who make you angry. Can you imagine the amount of trouble and noise we would have if all of us begin to scream and push people every time we got angry?”

Korto imagined everyone pushing one another. It was not a nice picture.

“But what do you want me to do? Hug her and tell her ‘thank you’?” Korto asked, with a sideways look.

“You could tell her that she made you feel bad. Tell her that you did not expect that from her. You do not have to abuse her. You could let her know how you feel without fighting her,” answered Pehn-Pehn Ben.

Korto turned and looked at Helen and the other girls. She saw that Helen had fallen and hurt herself when she pushed her. She began to feel bad. She turned back to Pehn-Pehn Ben and said, “I did not mean all the things I said. Helen is my good friend, but she made me feel too bad. Now I am feeling bad for pushing her.”

“You should say that to your friend, not me,” he said. “Even if you didn't mean to do or say something wrong, you still need to say sorry. In fact, we are supposed to apologize when we do something wrong even if what happened was an accident.”

“Suppose I go to say sorry and she refuses to accept my apology?” asked Korto.

“Sometimes saying ‘I'm sorry’ fixes everything right away. Other times, it might take a while for someone to accept it after you say sorry. What is important is to do the right thing and clear your conscience and be friends again,” Pehn Pehn Ben said.

Korto stood thinking. Pehn-Pehn Ben could see that she was unhappy. He could not tell whether it was because she had

pushed her friend or because he was telling her to apologize. He took out his banana and salty ground-peas and began to eat.

“Should I go tell her now?” Korto asked suddenly.

“This is a good time, fine girl,” answered Pehn-Pehn Ben.

Korto walked back toward the group of girls.

Pehn-Pehn Ben watched from a distance. He could not hear what they were saying. After a period of time, he saw the girls shake hands and embrace each other. The other girls were happy and smiling.

As Pehn Pehn was about to leave, the girls called him and asked for his name. “My name is Ben,” he said. “But more people call me ‘Pehn Pehn Ben.’”

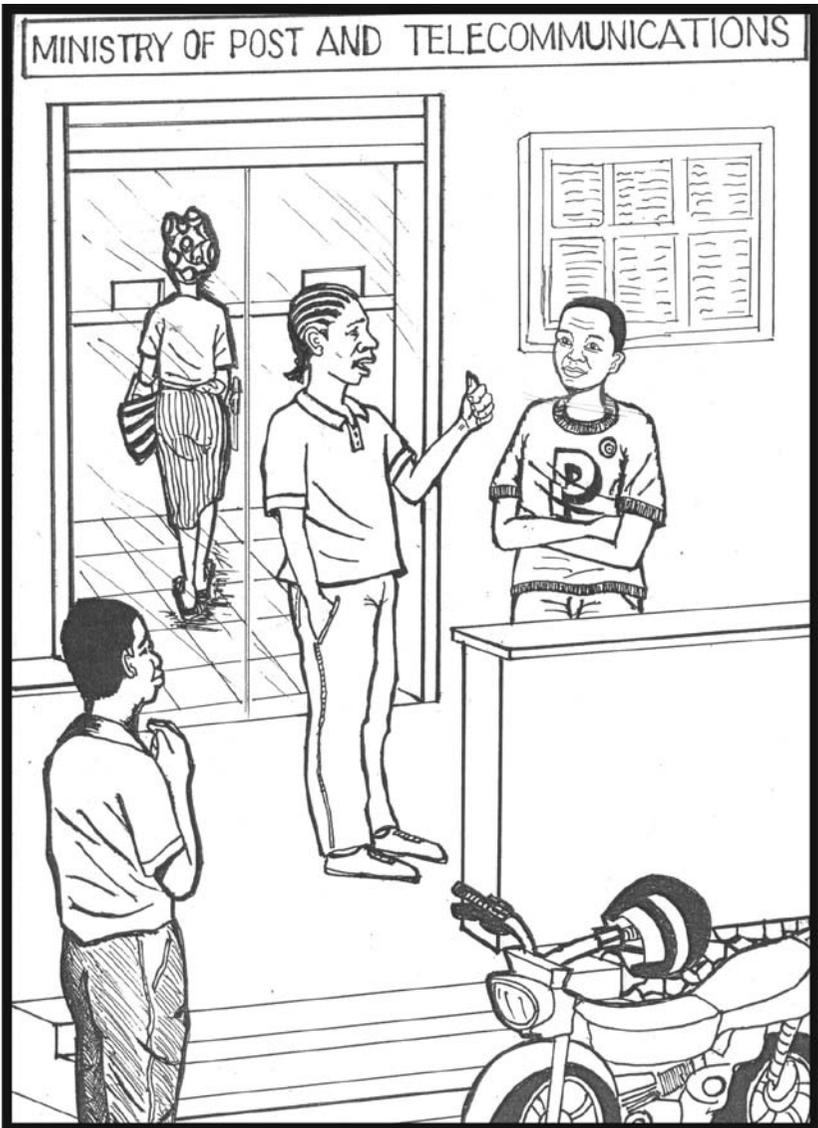
The girls laughed and said, “We are surprised to see a Pehn Pehn Boy making peace. Usually they cause a lot of trouble and confusion. We will call you Pehn Pehn Ben, the Peacemaker.”

“Not all Pehn Pehn riders are bad. Like the five fingers of a hand, everyone is different .” Ben shared his peanuts and banana with them. They ate together joking and laughing.

Pehn Pehn Ben started his motorbike and rode away.

**END**





# EMPTY PRIDE

*By Watchen Johnson Babalola*

The sun was up as Pehn-Pehn Ben walked into the post office. He had come to send a box of dried fish to his cousin in Norway.

There was always group of people at the front veranda of the post office these days. They were looking at the latest American Diversity Visa (DV) list of applicants whose names had come up.

Pehn-Pehn Ben smiled and wondered to himself, 'Why are Liberians fighting everything to go to America? Everybody believes that there is gold and diamonds in America and everything is free there. But that is not true; life is also hard there. You can make a good living anywhere you find yourself as long as you work hard. If all of us go to America who will remain to rebuild Liberia? Oh, Liberians!' He said. "Anyway, I wish all of you good luck!"

He remembered the days when he played the DV too. But he had lost interest when he was not successful after trying two times. He had since given up and decided to stay in Liberia and work hard.

"Ben! Ben!" he heard someone call as he pushed the glass door open to enter. He stepped back and looked around. "There must be a fire somewhere!" he thought.

"Ben! Ben!" he heard again and looked toward the sound. A young man was walking toward him, waving both

hands. He was dressed in jeans and t-shirt. He had his hair in nice corn-rows and had a small earring in both ears.

“My man, Ben, how is life?” he asked. He called Ben’s name as if he was saying ‘Burn’.

He shook Ben’s hand. Pehn-Pehn Ben returned the greeting looked at the man with the fake American accent; adding ‘r’ to almost every word he spoke. His face looked like someone he knew.

“Ben, Ben, don’t know me again?” the young man asked. “It’s me, from our days at the junior high school. We sat on the same bench in class. I used to be called Trokon or T man.”

“T-man! Is this you?” Ben asked. “I could not recognize you with your hair plaited and the earrings.”

“What to do? But I am not carrying that Bassa name again. It sounds too country and primitive. My name is Demosthenes or people can call me Demos.” Trokon said.

“But that is the name given to you by your parents. Why should you change it? It has a meaning. You call yourself Demosthenes. Do you know what it means?”

“Oh forget it,” Trokon said. “I am taking this name because it sounds nice and civilized.”

Pehn Pehn Ben shook his head and said, “I will still call you Trokon, my friend.” They both laughed.

“So, what are you doing here?” Pehn Pehn Ben asked Trokon.

“I should be travelling soon,” Trokon replied.

“Congratulations!” said Ben. “So is your name on the list up there?” He pointed to the list on the wall. There was a huge crowd stepping over each other trying to find their name of the list.

“No. It is not there this year, but I expect it to be there next when I play.”

“How long have you been playing?” Pehn Pehn Ben asked.

“I’ve been playing the DV for six years now,” Trokon said.

“But what are you doing while you are waiting to win?” asked Ben.

“Nothing. My man, Ben, this place is not straight. I am tired with this place. There are no jobs. I just need to get out. When I get to America, I will work hard. I will bring back the latest car. I will take you around in my car. There will be computer and video in the car. I will teach you how to drive it.”

Pehn Pehn Ben burst out laughing and some of the crowd turned and looked at him.

“Why are you laughing?” Trokon looked surprised.

“You have not even won the DV and travel and you are talking about teaching me to drive your car. So, what about school? Where did you go when we left junior high school?”

“Nowhere. My man, none of the schools in this country is good. I’ll go back to school when I get to America. I will get my Ph.D. degree from Harvard University.”

“But you need to complete high school before thinking about Ph.D. from Harvard.”

“Just forget it. When I get to the States everything will be ok.”

Pehn Pehn Ben said, “My man, Trokon, six years is a long time to be waiting, oh,” Pehn-Pehn Ben advised his friend.

“Everything is cool. My plans are set!” Trokon told Ben.

“Okay then,” said Ben. “That’s my pehn-pehn over there. I work for myself.”

“Riding Pehn-pehn? You are joking! A decent boy like you riding pehn pehn and risking your life? What if our friends from school see you? You won’t be ashamed?”

“Ashamed of what? I am paying my school fees at L.U. I built a small dirt brick house from this pehn-pehn.” Ben was annoyed.

“What? You mean you are in the university and even have your own house?” Trokon looked surprised and could not believe his ears.

“I am serious,” Pehn Pehn Ben said.

“What? I need to stop wasting my time with this DV business and start doing something good.”

“I am not saying that the DV is bad,” Pehn Pehn Ben said. “All I am saying is you need to do something while you are playing. It is not a good thing to just sit as a young man waiting for DV results to go to America before improving your life. Remember, time waits for no man.”

Pehn Pehn pointed to a small strand of gray in Trokon’s mustache. “We are getting old everyday.”

As Pehn Pehn was about to leave, Trokon whispered in his ear and said, "Please help your man with LD\$ 20.00 to pay his way home. It is rough my man."

Pehn Pehn Ben was surprised. Trokon looked well dressed. Why should he beg for money? I have no money Pehn Pehn said. "What I have here is the amount I need to send this parcel to my cousin in Norway."

Trokon sat on Pehn Pehn Ben's motorbike and attempted to ride it. He did not know that Ben had locked the bike. He lost his balance and almost fell over.

"No, no," Ben said. "You need to learn how to ride first. I am not saying you should ride a motorbike like me, but you can find something else to do that will give you money."

Trokon left the motorbike and as he left he said, "Ok Ben, it was nice to see you, I will call you when I get to America."

Pehn Pehn Ben shook his head in wonder as he watched his friend walk away. He felt sorry for his class mate who would rather beg than work. He got on his pehn-pehn and rode away, leaving Trokon behind, hungry and broke with only his empty pride.

**END**



# FIRST THINGS FIRST

*By Watchen Johnson Babalola*

Nyemah and his friends, Korto and Helen, sat in a shop. Korto and Helen drank soft drink but Nyemah was too sad to drink. The result of their ninth grade West African Examination Council (WAEC) exams was out and he had failed. Helen had failed too but she did not care.

“Don’t feel bad, Nyemah,” Korto said. “They will soon be giving the exams again. If you study hard you will pass next time.”

“Why are you crying like a small girl?” Helen asked Nyemah. “This is Liberia. We will find our way around this problem.”

“Helen, you know what you are depending on. As for me, my parents are poor and do not have money to help me. I do not know how I will attend school next year. I was on a football scholarship. I will be dropped because I have failed.” Nyemah bowed his head as tears rolled down his face.

Pehn-Pehn Ben saw the three friends. He parked his bike and walked into the shop.

“Hello,” he greeted them with a wave. He knew Nyemah from the time he was a small boy. Korto and Helen were new to the community. He remembered Helen and Korto. Korto was the girl who had slapped and pushed Helen some time ago. He had met the two girls one afternoon while riding his pehn-pehn. They were angry with one another and he had to play the role of a peace keeper. They had since then become his friends as well.

The three of them had attended the community junior high school.

“Hello, Pehn-Pehn Ben,” Nyema answered.

“Hello, Mr. Peacemaker,” Korto and Helen responded.

“Why are you crying, Nyemah? Did your friend or relative die?” Ben asked.

Nyemah shook his head without answering.

“What is wrong with Nyemah?” he asked Korto. Korto explained to Pehn-Pehn Ben.

“But I cannot believe that,” Pehn-Pehn Ben said as he took a seat from one of the other tables and sat with them. “Nyemah, you have always been at the top of your lessons. What happened?”

“It is the social club that he joined last year, Pehn-Pehn Ben,” Korto told him when Nyemah still did not answer. “Every weekend there is a party. He hardly has time to study.”

“The man is ready to cry again oh,” Helen joked. “He is behaving like a woman. A man is not supposed to cry.”

“No,” Ben said. “Crying is not a bad thing. It helps to express your emotions or feelings and makes you feel better. Both man and woman can cry. No one should feel ashamed to cry.”

“Helen, this is not the time to joke,” Pehn-Pehn Ben said. “What I am hearing does not sound like the Nyemah that I know,” he said.

“It is the truth, Pehn-Pehn Ben,” Korto said. “I told Nyemah to pay more attention to his lessons since this was the

year for his WAEC, but he did not listen. Then he met one girl from the other school when we went for a football game. That made it worse. He could no longer pay attention to his lessons.”

“Is this true, Nyemah?” asked Pehn-Pehn Ben.

“I cannot blame the parties and football, Pehn-Pehn Ben,” Nyemah finally spoke. “There are others on the team and in the social club who passed the exams. I blame myself.” He wiped a teardrop that rolled down his face.

“Why do you blame yourself?”

“I had enough time to study but I used it to do other things that I felt were more important.”

Helen started to laugh at Nyemah.

“Helen, shouldn’t you be sad about your own problem? Didn’t you fail too?” asked Pehn-Pehn Ben.

“Pehn-Pehn Ben, those people just want ‘cold water’. Give them some money and they will promote you. That is what I have been telling Nyemah, but he won’t believe me. I will be in the tenth grade next year, you will see. This is Liberia,” she said with a laugh.

“Helen, that is a bad way you want to live. That is called bribery and corruption. You will spoil your own future,” Pehn-Pehn Ben told the young lady. “You may ‘pass’, but you will have nothing in your head. Then you won’t have anything to show when someone wants to see what you know. This is how corruption starts. When people take what belongs to everybody and take it for themselves. Corruption can spoil a nation. It can stop development and bring about suffering, conflict and war.

“You have to study well while you are a student. You have to put first things first. Your education comes first. Once you are educated you can find a job and take care of yourself and your family. You will help to build your community and your country. You will be respected by people.”

“That is true Pehn-Pehn Ben,” said Nyemah. “I want to give up hope. I wasted the year for nothing. But I can’t give up hope. I just have to make the commitment that I will repeat that grade again! I will cut my football time down. Instead of going to the video club to watch football games, I will study. Maybe I will join a study class.”

“That sounds like a good plan to me. It is not magic or giving your teachers ‘cold water’ that will make you learn,” Pehn-Pehn Ben said.

“The two of you need to learn to manage your time well. You cannot put all your attention on having fun, forget to study, forget to rest and then expect to pass well on any exams.”

“I am happy you passed by the shop, Pehn-Pehn Ben,” Nyemah said. “Your advice is good. I will listen to you and try to change my behavior. I feel a little better already.”

“Me too,” said Helen with a smile. “Thank you Pehn-Pehn Ben.”

“It is no problem,” Pehn-Pehn Ben answered. “Now take care of yourselves. I hope you will do better in the next exam.”

“We promise to study hard and pass next time, Pehn-Pehn Ben,” the two students said. “We promise to put first things first.”

**END**





# NO LIGHT

*By Watchen Johnson Babalola*

“Ben, come and hear my trouble,” Ma Sarah said as Ben drove slowly into the yard. “This girl is pregnant!” Ma Sarah pointed to her niece, Wehmah.

“She has been vomiting and getting sick these few days. I have spent all the money I make from selling doughnuts to take her to the hospital. I thought it was malaria or typhoid. She has not gotten better.

“Today, I took her to the hospital again. The doctors have checked her and they said ...she is pregnant!” Ma Sarah burst into tears.

“I am so frustrated and do not know what to do. She has wasted all the money I have spent on her education. Oh, this girl has killed me. I brought her from the village and promised her parents that I would take care of her and send her to school. Now, see what she has done to me? What will I tell her parents?” Ma Sarah held her head with her two hands, stamping her feet on the ground in pain and grief.

Pehn Pehn Ben called the girl, Wehmah, and asked her, “Don’t be afraid, tell me the truth who did this to you?”

Wehmah bowed her head down with her finger in her mouth. “Open your mouth and talk you foolish girl before I break your head,” Ma Sarah shouted at her.

“Take it easy and don’t shout at her, if you do that she may run from the house or try to abort the pregnancy out of fear.”

The next evening, Pehn-Pehn Ben left the traffic a little earlier than usual. He had promised Ma Sarah to take Wehmah to see the family of the boy who got her pregnant . He had a little food to eat then went to pick up Wehmah on his pehn-pehn.

“Who is the baby pa?” Ben asked, trying to hide a yawn.

“Ask the young miss,” Ma Sarah said.

“Wehmah, do you have a boyfriend?” Ben asked the girl.

“Yes, Uncle,” Wehmah answered.

“Where does he live?”

“Not too far, Uncle. I know the place.”

“Good. Then tomorrow evening you will take me there, okay?”

“Okay, Uncle.”

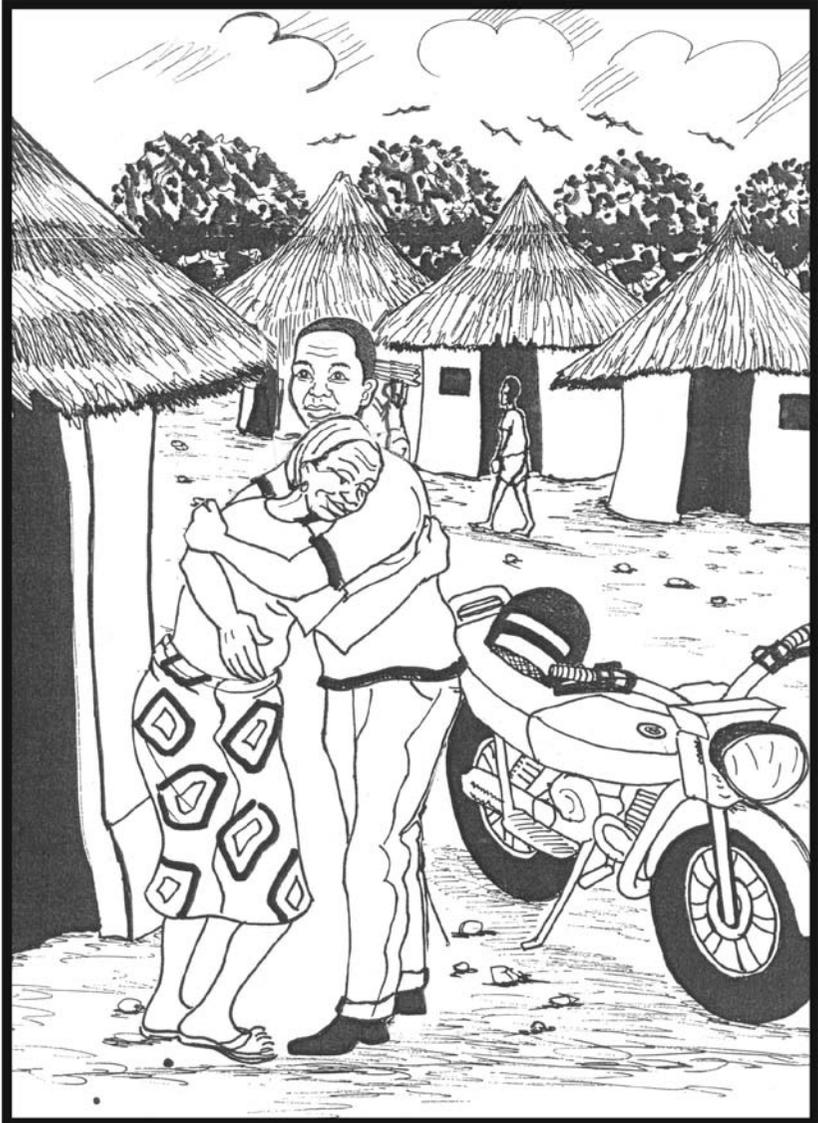
“Yes oh, Ben. Help me here before I sleep in jail because right now I just feel like choking her,” Ma Sarah said.

“Take it easy, I will go and see the boy’s family tomorrow,” Ben promised as he yawned loudly and began to walk to his house.

“Good night Ben. You are a good friend. I will see you tomorrow,” said Ma Sarah with a wave of her hand.

**END**





# REUNION

*By Watchen Johnson Babalola*

Pehn-Pehn Ben honked his bike horn as he drove into his home village. It had been six years since he had been home. The road had been closed since the war and was opened only two days ago.

He honked his horn as he passed the home of old man, Barjue. Pehn-Pehn Ben smiled when he remembered those days back then when he and his friends had run from old man Barjue and his dogs after stealing some of his cassava, corn and chickens. The boys would meet late at night, build a fire, cook and eat. 'We were very bad boys,' he said to himself and shook his head. 'But look at me now, a completely changed person. If I can change and become a responsible person, others can do the same.'

He waved to the people he saw standing before the one-room school building. The distance between the school and the house took close to twenty minutes on a pehn-pehn. As a boy going to school, this was the distance he had walked every morning to school, in the sun and rain up to the sixth grade. He went bare footed because he was afraid that his slippers would get spoiled when he wore them. His friends made fun of him and called him 'the bare footed warrior'.

He would go home crying. But his grandmother would tell him, "Wipe your tears my son, not all fingers are equal. We do not have today, but if you study your lessons, work hard and respect people you will live a better life tomorrow than those who are laughing at you today."

Grandmother was right. Trokon, his friend he met at the post office, was a reminder of how hard work pays ...and how idleness does not.

Later he arrived at the house where he was raised by his widowed grandmother.

Ben's childhood was full of love and laughter. His grandmother was beautiful and energetic. The last time he saw her, she was running back to their house after putting him on the last pick-up that was leaving the village for Monrovia. The sound of gun fire could be heard and she wanted him far away from danger.

"Let's go together grandmother," Ben cried. "I don't want to leave you behind."

"I will follow you soon my son" she told him. "Go in front. Go!" She told him.

He had not seen her since that day. Nobody had seen his grandmother but he knew in his heart that she was alive. He had done the best with his life while he waited to see her again.

So now, six years later, here he was.

He honked his horn again as he climbed off. He could not recognize the house. All houses in the village looked alike. Nobody knew him in the village. All the people he knew were either dead or left the village. His friends had all left as well.

Later, he saw the plum tree. This was where they played football after school. He knocked at the door. There was no answer. Ben's heart begin to beat faster, he was afraid. "I hope grandmother in still alive."

The door opened slowly and an old lady that he did not recognize opened the door. Then he recognized her.

“Nay-Goe?”

“Who is that?” she asked

“Your son, Ben. I am home,” Ben told her as his heart beat hard. Tears formed behind his eyelids. While he was in Monrovia turning into a ‘book man’ his grandmother was growing weak and old. He rushed into her open arms.

“Ben? Is it really you? Now I can die in peace!” She cried and they held one another for a long time as tears of joy and pain ran freely down their faces.

Nay-Goe fixed fufu and soup for her grandson. Ben helped make the fire and cook the fufu, while she prepared the soup. After eating the food and having a hot bath, Ben and his grandmother sat to talk.

Ben told her all that had happened to him since they were last together. He told her how he had worked as a houseboy and was now a pehn-pehn owner. He had attended school, just as she had always advised. He told her his plans for the future.

“I am happy for you my son,” she told him as tears rolled down her cheeks. “Your ma will not feel bad about me in her grave.”

“How about you, Nay-Goe? What has been happening to you?” he asked his grandmother softly.

“My son, after you left here that day, soldiers came here and drove us away. They took all our things. We stayed in the bush for months. When we were able to come back, we met nothing. Thank God the house was not burned down. Other

people's houses got burned. So we all came back and started from scratch.

I started to make the farm again but it was not easy. My eyes were getting blind. One day, I stepped on one big snake that was lying on the road. By now somebody should be showing you my grave.

So the village council decided to help me. They said they would give me a husband to farm, go fishing, cut wood and all those kinds of things. But I must give my land to the person. My son, I was getting blind. I couldn't hear from you. I didn't know if you were even alive. So I married the one they gave me - Glee-gee."

"Glee-gee!" shouted Ben. "The village drunk? That is your husband? That man who used to get drunk and sleep in the swamp? The town people said that is the help that they could give you?"

"I know, my son. I myself am not satisfied. But that time I was confused. I didn't know what to do. So I agreed to it."

"Nay-Goe, that is not the way they can help someone. You give a hungry person a bowl of rice with sand inside, is that help? Where is Glee-gee?"

"He is at his 3<sup>rd</sup> woman's house."

"Where did lazy Glee-gee get money from to support three wives?"

"He is selling my land. The land is supposed to be for you." She began to weep bitterly. "He is using the land to dowry his wives. When I tell him to stop selling the land . . ."

“What!?” asked Ben. “What does he do when you tell him to stop selling the land? Because I will jail him if I hear that he ever beat you!”

“Humph! Just leave that one, my son. Now, his new wife, one small girl is telling me that she should not see my foot on the farm because I will carry witch there. My own farm!” Nay-Goe cried.

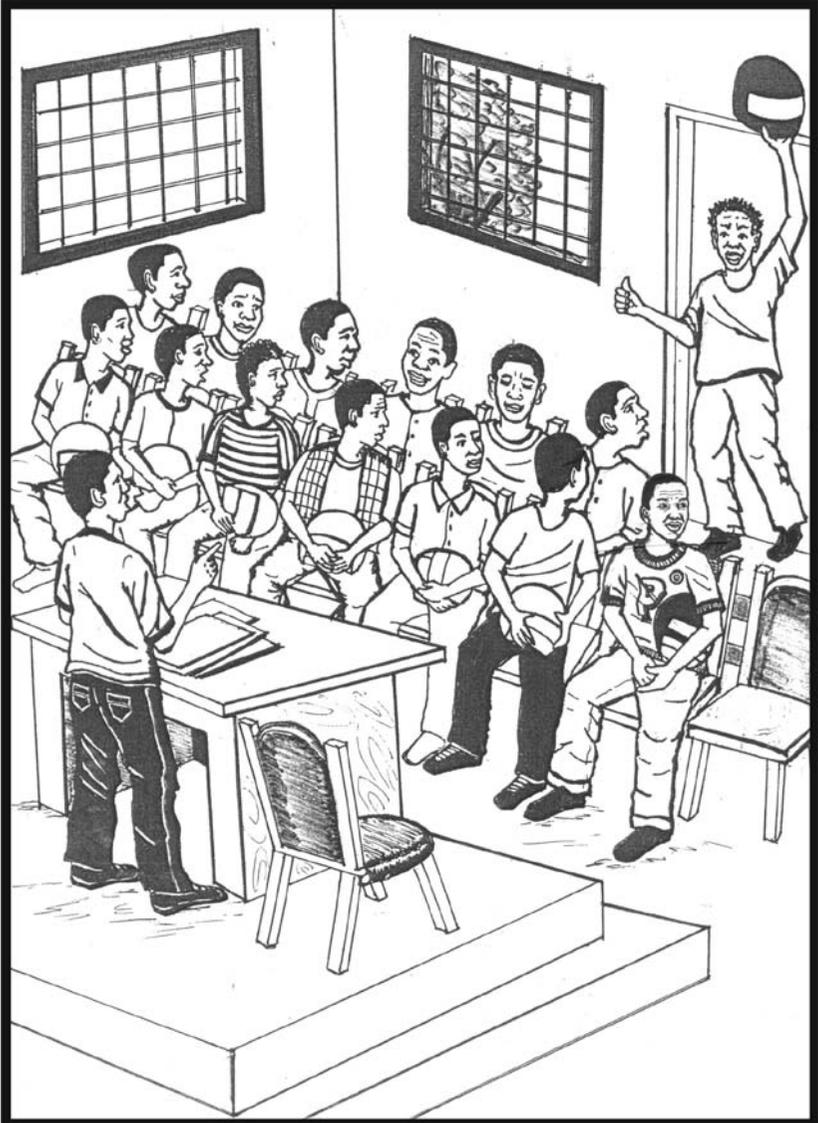
“Don’t cry, Nay-Goe. We will solve this problem. I am here now.” Ben held his grandmother until her tears stopped.

They stayed up for most of the night talking, planning and packing. The next morning, before any of the other villagers woke up, Ben tied a bundle for his grandmother on his bike, locked up her house and drove her, to the parking station. He put her in the first car going to Monrovia. He rode on his pehn-pehn behind it all the way to town.

He took her to a good hospital. Then he took her home and gave her his bed and slept on the floor.

When she became well and could move around, Pehn-Pehn Ben went back to the village to deal with the village council and straighten out the situation with his grandmother’s land.

**END**



# CHOICES

*By Watchen Johnson Babalola*

It was the meeting day of the leaders of the pehn-pehn association and Pehn-Pehn Ben was waiting for his best friend Sam to pick him up. Sam was also a pehn-pehn rider. They always attended the meeting together. While waiting, Pehn-Pehn Ben remembered the very first day that he had attended the meeting, four years ago.

It had been a Friday evening and all the leaders among the pehn-pehn owners and riders were having their big meeting. The room was filled. There was only an empty chair near Ben. Suddenly, the door of the meeting room opened with a lot of noise.

Ben saw a dark skinned young man step into the room. But the man did not sit down in the open chair next to Pehn-Pehn Ben. He picked the chair up and carried it to the other side of the room where his friends were sitting. And he did not do this quietly.

He sat down, but he started to talk with all the people around him. He disturbed the meeting.

Pehn-Pehn Ben was angry. He thought that the chairman would tell the noisy man to stop but he did not.

Pehn-Pehn Ben complained to Sumo, the man who sat next to him.

“The Chairman is afraid of that guy,” Sumo told Pehn-Pehn Ben. “It is better to just leave him alone.”

“How can the chairman be afraid of him? And how did he become a leader if he is afraid of his members?” Pehn-Pehn Ben asked.

“He is not bad oh. He is free handed. Many people like his business. He is just loud and doesn’t know how to talk in a gathering.”

After the meeting, while Ben was talking with some of the other men, Sumo and the noisy guy came up to him.

“Ben,” Sumo said, “Please meet my friend.”

“You can call me Crack Head or Suicide Bomber,” the young man called told Pehn-Pehn Ben. He shook Pehn-Pehn Ben’s hand.

Ben was surprised, ‘How can a man call himself such a name and feel proud. Something must be wrong with this man,’ he thought. Ben shook his hand.

“My name is Ben,” he said. “Why do you call yourself Crack Head or Suicide Bomber?”

“Don’t mind the people. It is because I am always involved in accidents. They say I ride like a crack head and a suicide bomber.

“Do you like that?” Ben asked in disgust.

“It is just for fun,” the young man answered. “I just like to be lively and popular.”

“Do you think that accidents are funny? Is it right to gain popularity by doing bad things?” Ben asked.

“No, but accident is accident. I do not plan it. I like to talk with my passengers. Sometimes the lecture gets so sweet that I

forget to pay attention to the traffic. Then before you know it, an accident happens.”

“That is not true,” Ben replied. “You can prevent accidents and save precious lives if you ride carefully and observe the safety rules.

“You guys are spoiling the name of pehn pehn riders. Everybody thinks all Pehn Pehn riders behave like you.”

“Yeah,” said another rider standing nearby. “There are sores and scars all over his body. He even broke his arm and leg twice.”

“All this is happening to him because he drinks before riding his bike,” another lady said.

Crack Head stood there smiling.

“Is it true what these people are saying?” Pehn-Pehn Ben asked..

“Yes,” he said.

“But why do you drink and drive?” asked Pehn-Pehn Ben.

“I get cold easily when I am riding and the breeze is blowing me,” he said. “The liquor keeps me warm and active. As soon as I started having accidents, I became popular with the young people. That is how I got my name.”

The men who were still standing around burst into loud laughter.

After the meeting, Suicide Bomber led the group to a liquor shop.

“No,” Ben said. “Alcohol is not good for your job and your health. You will damage yourselves if you continue like this. You

need to save the money you earn. You will not continue to ride motorbike forever. One day you will get old and you will not have the strength to ride. With the money you save, you can use it to start a small business to take care of you and your family. You are still young and have a future ahead of you. Prepare yourself now and live a better life tomorrow.”

The crowd that gathered around Ben was silent and pressed forward to listen. They were surprised to hear a pehn rider speaking good English and talking sense.

“I am in the university and have built a house.”

“How did you do that?” the young men asked.

“I save my money and use it wisely. I do not spoil and misuse it. If you do the same you could be like me and even better.”

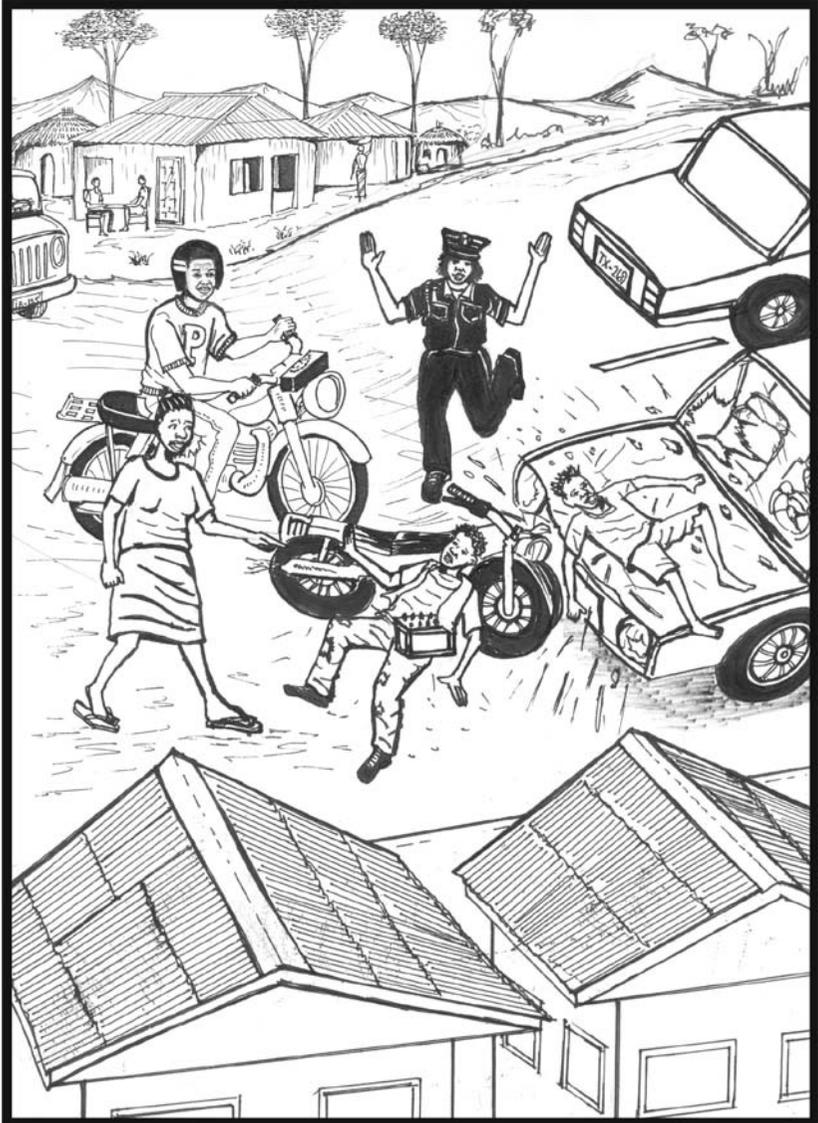
Everyone looked at Ben and nodded. Suicide Bomber looked around and saw that everybody respected Ben. Nobody thought he was cool anymore.

Suicide Bomber, shook his head and said, “Ok, as of today’s date, no one calls me Crack Head or Suicide Bomber. My name is Victor. We will make a straight rule that says: “No pehn rider should drink alcohol before riding.”

Everybody clapped for Ben and Victor. Ben left and went home.

**END**





# DESPERATE TIMES

*By Watchen Johnson Babalola*

Elizabeth climbed the hill with her market bag on her head. She was almost back at her place of work. She had been a housekeeper and cook with the same family since Massa, the youngest, was only a crawling child. Massa was now 19 years old and in her 2<sup>nd</sup> year of college. The children were like her nieces and nephews. She smiled as she thought of the children.

She shifted the bag a little to the back and held it with her left hand. The bag was heavy; full of palm-nuts, fish and plantain.

She was almost there. She could see the house now. She saw her boss man's car outside the fence. He must have forgotten something and come back for it. Sweat rolled down her forehead and into her eyes. She brought the corner of her lappa up to wipe her face.

Then she spotted them.

Two men were standing beside her boss man's car. One man sat on a pehn-pehn with the engine still on. The other man was doing something under the open hood of the car. Mechanics? Was something wrong with the car? Why were the mechanics working on the car with pehn-pehn helmets on? She started to walk faster. Something was wrong. Then she saw the second man pull out the car battery. She watched as he pushed it under his jacket.

"Rogue! Rogue! Rogue!" she shouted at the top of her voice. She started to run toward the men. The bag was slowing her down. The man with the battery looked up quickly. He

jumped on the waiting pehn-pehn and yelled, "Go!, Go!" and the pehn-pehn pulled away.

When she saw the 2<sup>nd</sup> man jump on the bike behind the driver she dropped the bag and ran faster with her hands stretched out to grab one of them.

She missed him, tripped and fell over. She got up and shouted, "Rogue! Rogue! Rogue!" she shouted, over and over. "Boss man! , the rogues are stealing your battery!" Her voice sounded very loud in the quiet street.

Just then another bike came riding by.

"Stop!" shouted Elizabeth.

"Where are you going?" asked the driver.

Elizabeth jumped on the pehn-pehn.

"Follow that pehn-pehn!" she shouted. "Those people are rogues! I saw them stealing my boss man's car battery!" Elizabeth answered.

The driver pulled off with Elizabeth. Her heart beat fast as she sat behind the driver. She did not like to ride pehn-pehns. So many people had died or gotten hurt from them. But she had no chance as she was determined to stop the rogues.

"Take time, pehn pehn boy," she said.

"Don't be afraid," the rider said to her as he increased the speed with his eyes on the pehn-pehn that was carrying the rogues.

"I am too old for this thing," Elizabeth thought to herself. She kept her eyes shut as her headtie flew off her head.

The driver increased his speed a little bit more. "Don't be afraid," he said again to the woman behind him. "We will catch those thieves."

The pehn-pehn seemed to be flying now. Elizabeth began to cry. She was so afraid.

"Stop!" she shouted.

"What?" the driver asked without slowing down.

"I said stop your pehn-pehn!" she shouted again.

"Don't be scared old ma, we will soon catch them. My pehn-pehn is safe," the driver said.

"Stop your pehn-pehn, my friend!"

Just then, they saw the pehn-pehn carrying the rogues brush against a car. The two men flew into the air and landed on the hood of the car. They fell over and rolled on the coal tar.

They tried to get up to run but could not. The man with the battery tried to remove it from under his jacket as the traffic stopped. Elizabeth jumped off the pehn-pehn and ran to them.

"Rogue! Rogue! Rogue!" she shouted and grabbed the man by his shirt. "This man is a rogue! This battery belongs to my boss man! He just stole it! I saw him with my two eyes!"

Two police women came on the scene. Elizabeth explained her story.

"Officer, this man chartered me," explained the rider. "I didn't know that he was planning to steal. I got scared when the woman started to yell that is why I ran away. Here is your rogue there," he said pointing to the man with the battery. "Not me."

“My people, please feel sorry for me. I’m not a rogue,” said the man with the battery under his jacket. “Conditions made me do it. My wife is dying in the hospital. She is suffering. She is in pain. The hospital say they will not touch the woman until I pay LD2,500. I do not have a cent. I can’t just let my woman die like that.”

He bent down and held the officer’s feet. He was crying.

“Take the battery, officer, and feel sorry for your brother. I’m not a rogue.”

“Leave my foot! Get up! Rogue!” shouted the policewoman.

“I’m not a rogue!” the man cried. “Conditions made me do it.”

“So you will steal? Commit a crime to solve your problem?” asked the policeman. “Let’s go. We are taking you to the station.”

“Aye God, my wife will die.” the man cried as his hands were cuffed.

Elizabeth began to feel sorry for the man.

“Officer, can’t you leave him now?” she asked. “I got the battery now.”

“No auntie. The law has to take its course. Please go along with the officer and ask your boss man to come to the station. I will be waiting there. The two of you will have to make statements.

He climbed on the pehn-pehn that the rogues had used and rode away with them.

Elizabeth and the other police got on the pehn-pehn and went back to her place of work. She carried the battery with her.

Back at the house, they met her boss standing near his car. The hood of the car was still open. There was a small crowd around him. People asked him questions that he could not answer. "I don't know," he said over and over. He looked very confused.

He and some people in the crowd shouted with joy when Elizabeth rode up with the police. She explained all that had happened.

"Elizabeth, you are my hero," said the boss.

"No, bossman, this pehn-pehn driver is the real hero," she told her boss. "Even when I told him to forget the whole thing and bring me back here, he kept chasing the rogues."

"Thank you my friend," the boss man said to the pehn-pehn driver. "Thank you very much; for bringing my battery back but most of all for helping Ma Elizabeth. She is like family to us. Thank you plenty."

"You are welcome," answered the pehn-pehn driver.

"Sorry, my son. I didn't even ask for your name," Elizabeth said with a smile.

"My name is Ben, but I am popularly known as Pehn Pehn Ben," the man answered, as he waved good-bye to go.

The bossman, Mr. Harris, said, "Please take this LD\$500.00 for your kind help."

"No," Ben said. "I did not do it for money. I did it because I think we should help one another especially in times of trouble."

As Ben was leaving, his pehn pehn could not start. His gas had finished because of the distance he travelled chasing the thieves. Mr. Harris opened the trunk of his car and gave Ben a gallon of gas.

“Thank you sir,” Ben said.

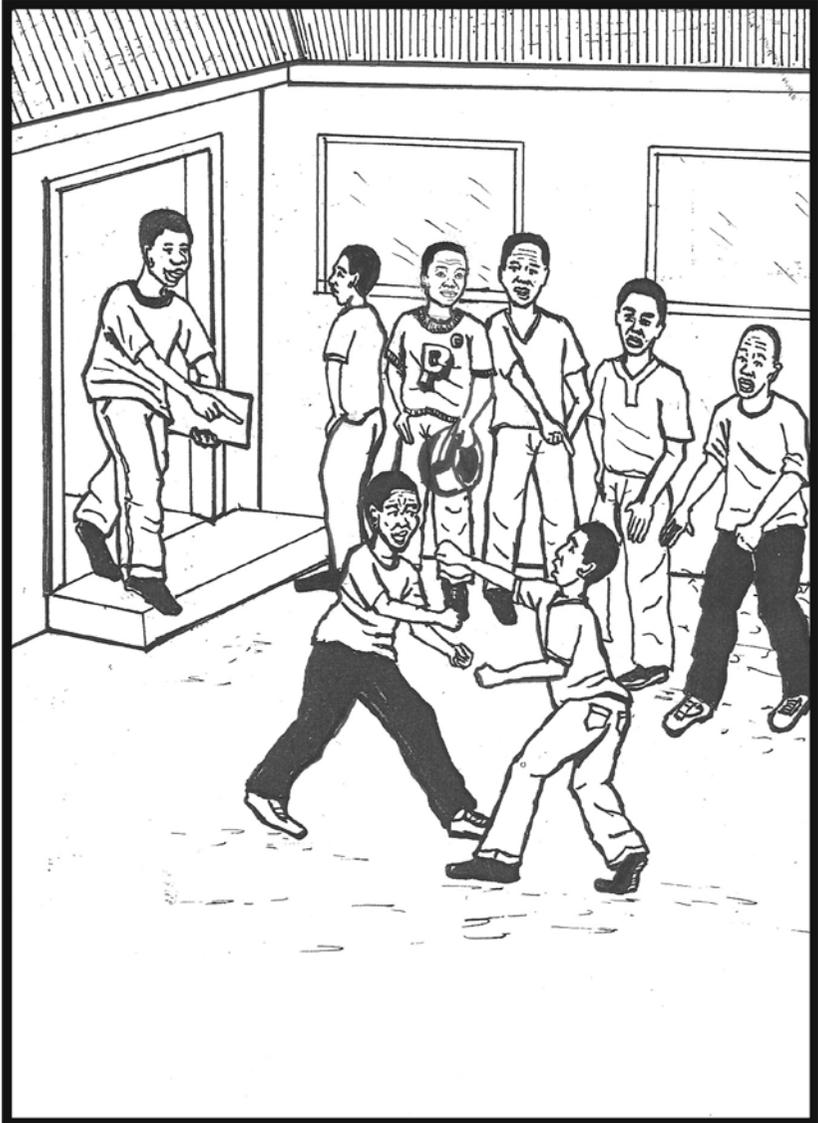
“I should be thanking you,” Mr. Harris said.

Ben got on his pehn pehn and left.

As he drove away, Mr. Harris said, “That is a very special and kind young man. I have not seen a pehn pehn rider behave like that before. I wish all young people would act like him.”

**END**





# WHO KNOWS YOU?

*By Watchen Johnson Babalola*

Ben read the job announcement on the school's bulletin board. His last exams were over and he had two months of vacation.

"I think I'll give this a try", he said to his friend Sam, as he pointed to the announcement.

"Did you read it well?" asked Sam. "It says right here that the person will have to travel as far as here for the job," Sam pointed to the name of the city. "That's very far to go for a job that you may not get.

I wish you luck, but remember, most people employ their relatives and friends and leave out the competent and qualified people," Sam warned Ben.

"I will get the job. I am a good pehn-pehn rider," Ben said.

"What if your pehn-pehn breaks down? And how will you pay for the gas?"

"No problem," answered Ben with a smile. "I will handle everything. Why are you so afraid? I am not a small boy. Have you forgotten? I am the one who chased and caught two rogues recently. My name was in the newspapers."

"Okay, local hero, I have not forgotten. It is just that I was very careless with my life some years ago. It is your friendship which has helped me. I just want to be a good friend to you and give you advice," Sam said.

“I know,” said Pehn-Pehn Ben as the two men walked away still talking about the announcement.

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Two weeks later, Ben sat by his broken down pehn-pehn near the main road in the middle of nowhere. He had been sitting there for hours and not a single car had passed.

‘What brought me here,’ he wondered. ‘I should have listened to Sam.’ The trip had been bad.

After making his final decision to try for the job, Ben had travelled to the town on his pehn-pehn.

He reached the town on the night before the interview. The next morning, he woke very early, washed up and rushed to the school for the interview. Almost one hundred young men were there.

They all listened to the rules.

1. No fighting
2. No trying to cut the line
3. No drugs or drinking liquor
4. 15 riders needed

Then the interviews began. They were invited one by one into the classroom.

Ben was #47.

The applicants were left to stand outside in the sun waiting for their turn. As the hours passed, they started to get

tired and hungry. So Ben was not too surprised when a fight broke out between two of them.

“I will show you pepper!” one of the fighters shouted over and over as he punched the other man.

The head interviewer and another man ran out of the building and broke up the fight. The two fighters were taken into one of the classrooms and sent out of the compound after a few minutes.

Ben’s name came up on the short list of twenty-five applicants at the end of the day. The rest of the men were sent away.

“You all can try again when another contract comes up,” the announcer told them.

After they had left, the announcer spoke with the small group.

“You are twenty five on this list,” he said. “We are looking for only fifteen riders. We will come back here by 7 o’clock tomorrow morning for the driving test I wish you all the best of luck.”

“These people have started again. Eeehhh- Liberia!” said one of the applicants as they walked through the gate. His name was Kolubah.

“What do you mean?” asked Ben.

“Didn’t you see Joseph’s name on the list?”

“Who is Joseph?” asked Ben.

“The huge man who beat up the other man this morning.”

“No, that cannot be true,” said Ben. “The people said that they would not select anyone who fights.

“Ha-ha-ha,” laughed Kolubah. “You are a stranger in this town. You will see for yourself.”

To his surprise, Ben watched the man called Joseph stroll into the school yard the next morning. He had a smile on his face.

“What are you doing here?” a young man named Zinnah called out to Joseph. “You broke the rule yesterday by fighting.”

“That is not your business,” Joseph said in a loud voice and walked towards the man to fight.

The other applicants held on to Joseph. “No, don’t fight,” they begged.

“Leave the man,” said Zinnah as he stood his ground. “I will beat him this morning if he tries me here.”

“Hey! Hey! Hey!” , shouted the head interviewer as he rushed outside. “What is happening here?”

“It’s this man here,” Joseph pointed to Zinnah. “He wants to fight me.”

“We said no fighting!” the interviewer shouted at Zinnah. “Sorry, but you have to leave. Joseph, you go sit by yourself over there until it is your turn.” The interviewer pointed to a chair on the porch.

“But I did not fight!” Zinnah said.

“I said out!” the Head Interviewer shouted, pointing to the gate.

Nobody begged for Zinnah.

“No, sir,” Ben said to the Interviewer. “Zinnah is not at fault. Joseph is the one who should go home.”

“Shut up young man!” the man shouted at Ben.

“You can take your job, but this is unfair,” Ben calmly responded.

What hurt Ben most was that some of his friends mocked him and called him names. Others called him Mr. Human Rights while others called him Justice Minister.

“We don’t want to lose our chance to work,” Ben was told when he asked why they were afraid to talk. “If we talk, we will not be employed,” they said.

“But if we all shut our mouths anytime something wrong happens and do not stand up for the truth, this country will move nowhere and injustice and corruption will continue. I love Liberia. I want Liberia to be a peaceful country where people respect each other and the law.”

Later that evening Kolubah came and saw how upset Ben was. “But I told you yesterday. So now you have seen it for yourself.”

“Joseph is the head interviewer’s son. But that is not all. Do you see the man over there?” he pointed to a man who looked like he was drunk. “His name is Dobliah. He wasn’t here yesterday. He is always drunk. But he will get the job. He is the Superintendent’s nephew. They deported him from America. And that one,” he pointed to another quiet young man that Ben had spent some time talking with on the previous day. “His name

Chelley. He will get the job. He is the brother of the girlfriend of one of the big men in town here.”

“You mean that we travelled this long distance for nothing?” asked Ben.

“Just pray that you will be among the remaining 12 people,” Kolubah answered with a laugh as he walked away.

Two hours after the driving test, the final list of fifteen persons was placed on the school wall. They were to begin work the next day.

Ben’s name was number 6. Joseph, who fought, was #2 and Doblah’s name was #8.

Chelley’s name was #13 and Ben did not have a problem with that. But Joseph and Doblah?

Then to make things worse, that night Ben got sick with malaria. It was Kolubah, one of the applicants that was rejected, who took him to the hospital and visited him for the five days he spent in the hospital. After that, Kolubah took Ben to his own home and cared for him for 2 more days.

Kolubah told Ben that his contract spot had been given to the son of another interviewer.

Ben couldn’t wait to get out of that town.

During his trip back home, the pehn-pehn broke down far away from town. He did not see a single car pass by. He sat there as the sun went down and prayed for help.

Ben decided to push the motorbike as he waited for help. The bike was very heavy and he was sweating.

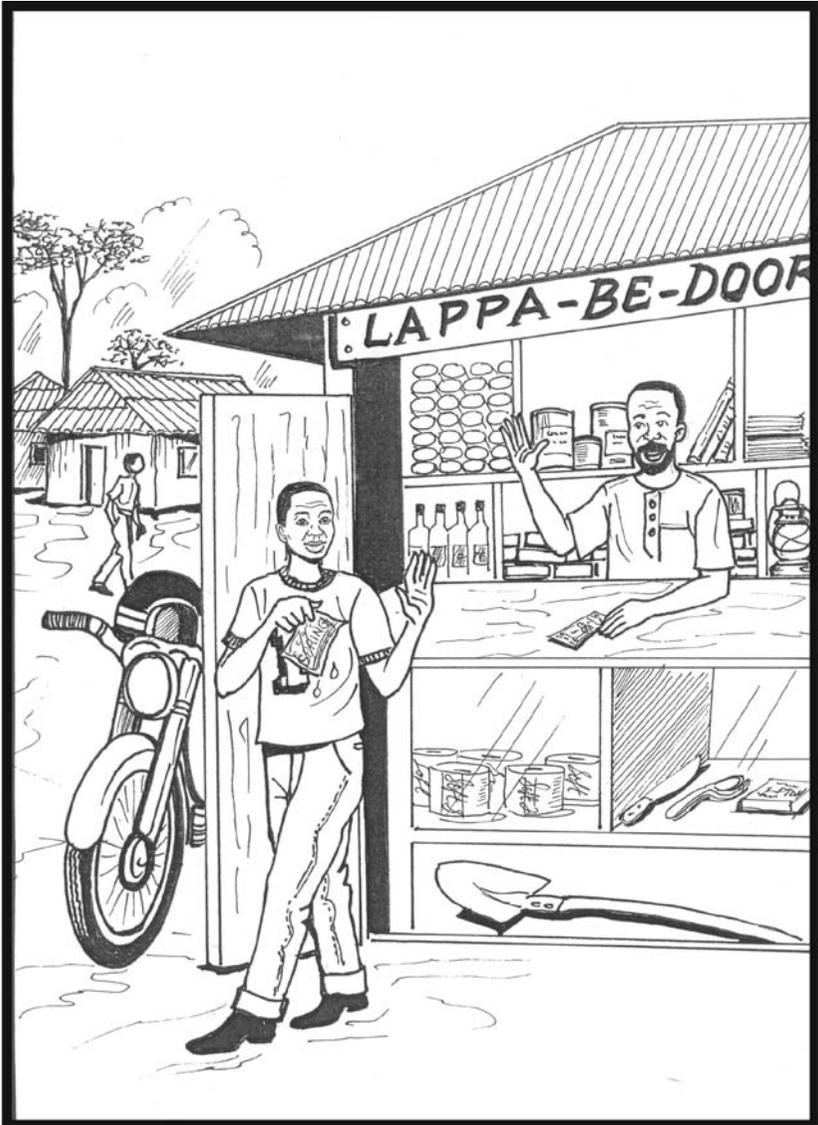
He sat down to rest. He thought about what had happened. "This is wrong, very wrong," he said. "People should be given jobs based on their skills, experience and education and not because of their family, friends or social connections."

Hours later, a pickup truck came and took Ben to town. When he got home, he explained the story to Sam. Sam laughed and said, "I told you, but you did not listen to me."

"But we need to work together to change this ugly practice." Sam agreed with Ben and they decided to bring about change by working hard and honestly and showing what they believe by how they live.

Ben told Sam, "You know, people watch what you do rather than what you say. If you live by example, you can't change every injustice. But at least you can make a difference and change people's hearts one at a time. One day things will get better."

**END**



# WE ARE ONE

*By Watchen Johnson Babalola*

The sun was very hot. The breeze was still.

No one asked for a ride on his pehn- pehn.

So Pehn-Pehn Ben rode up the road to a shop. A sign at the top of the door read 'Lappa-Be-Door'. He got off his pehn-pehn and went into Lappa-Be-Door.

"Please give me cold water," he said to the shop keeper.

"How many bags?" asked the shop keeper.

"One," answered Pehn-Pehn Ben.

The shop keeper gave Pehn-Pehn Ben a bag of cold water.

Pehn-Pehn Ben gave him ten dollars.

"Thank you," he said to the shop keeper.

"You are welcome" the shop keeper said with a smile.

"This is your change."

Pehn-Pehn Ben took the change.

He went back to his pehn-pehn and rode away.

Down the road he met a little boy.

The little boy had a tray of candies.

"Buy your sweet, sweet candies here!" the little boy called out.

Pehn-Pehn Ben stopped to buy some candies.

He took the change that the shopkeeper gave him from his pocket.

He saw that it was ten dollars.

The shop keeper had made a mistake!

Ben bought five dollars candies from the little boy.

The little boy gave him his change.

Pehn-Pehn Ben took the change and rode back to 'Lappa-be-Door'.

"Hello again," said the shop keeper when he saw Pehn-Pehn Ben. "More water?"

"No, good friend," said Pehn-Pehn Ben. "I did not come for more water. I brought your money."

"My money?" asked the shop keeper.

"Yes," replied Ben. "I gave you ten dollars when I came to buy cold water and you gave me ten dollars back. So I still have five dollars for you."

"Oh, thank you my friend," said the shop keeper. "You are an honest man. Thank you plenty!"

"You are welcome," said Pehn-Pehn Ben with a smile as he rode away.

The next day, Pehn-Pehn Ben picked up a woman who was trying to carry a bag of rice. While on the road, the rice began to slip out through a small hole in the bag.

"I am not far from my house," said Pehn-Pehn Ben. "If you do not mind, we can pass there and put this bag with a hole in a good bag."

“O-kay, my friend,” the lady agreed. “All my rice is wasting.”

When they reached the house the woman saw a picture of Pehn-Pehn Ben’s grandmother on the wall.

“Is this old lady Nay-goe?” she asked.

“Yes, do you know her?” asked Pehn-Pehn Ben.

“Yes, she is my mother’s big sister. My mother left the village many years ago but she has a copy of this picture on our house wall. She is always talking about her and her grandson that she raised before the war.”

“What!? I am that grandson that your mother is talking about,” said Pehn-Pehn Ben. “And I remember my grandmother used to tell me about her younger sister called Tomah who left the village and never returned.”

“Tomah is my mother. So, you are my family!!” said the woman. “My name is Gorpue.”

“My name is Ben,” he said laughing.

They told each other about themselves as they packed the torn rice bag into a good one. Then Pehn-Pehn Ben rode with Gorpue toward her house.

“I am staying right here,” she said as they parked before a shop. “This shop belongs to me and my husband.”

Pehn-Pehn Ben smiled as he read the sign at the top of the door: ‘Lappa-be-Door’

“I was here yesterday” he told Gorpue. “The shopkeeper made a mistake and gave me more change.”

“Aha! So you are the one that my husband told me about yesterday,” said Gorpue. “He said that he was surprised because many people would have seen it as their ‘blessing’. But you came all the way back to give him his money. Come inside and meet him. He is not just a shopkeeper, he is your family.”

Pehn-Pehn Ben laughed and said, “So you see how we are all one in this country. If I had used that money yesterday, I would have been stealing from my own relative.”

“That applies to everything else too,” agreed Gorpue. “When we act good to someone, we are probably doing good to a relative or a friend of a relative. And when we act bad or rude to someone, we should be mindful that the person could turn out to be a relative. We all need to be careful how we live, for truly we are one.”

**END**