

To Yah, my loving grandmother, who sacrificed  
everything so that I could live

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# THE BOY *from* PLEEBO

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A story of perseverance, survival,  
and never quitting on a dream

*by Sylvester Youlo, MD*

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the boy *from* pleebO

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PART I

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*IN THE BEGINNING*

## CHAPTER ONE

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**I SAT ON THE DOORSTEP SOBBING**, trying hard to stop the tears, but they wouldn't stop. I sniffled and wiped my nose with the back of my hand, but my nose kept running.

I hadn't lost a toy. I hadn't been injured. Nor had I received any form of corporal punishment.

Not that these things would make me cry as much as I was now.

I didn't own any toys, or at least no one bought me any toys to lose. The few things that I called toys were those that I made myself. An airplane made from the small leaf of an orange tree—a leaf cut into an intricate shape that would spin when pinned onto a thorn from an orange tree, held in front of me with an outstretched arm while running into the wind.

Nor did I lose one of my kites, made from the old, imported foreign newspapers that littered the dust-covered streets. Kites I made by crisscrossing the spines of coconut leaves onto newspaper to create what barely resembled a kite. Kites I spent hours making and remaking, but that would barely take off before tumbling down to the ground or, worse yet, getting caught in the branches of the many trees in our neighborhood, paper torn to pieces, rendering the kite useless as the wind flowed through the torn paper.

I didn't lose my wire car—a toy made by cutting and shaping wires so that they resembled a toy car—something I recently had become fascinated with since managing to befriend our new neighbors across the dirt road from our house. I had spent everything that I could offer—nickels, dimes, and food—so Sieh would make me one of my own, just like he and his younger brother had done for themselves.

No, I didn't lose a toy.

Punishment? Corporal punishment?

Yes. I got that a lot, maybe daily. It was expected.

Misbehave and you could get a slap, usually on your back or butt, right when you weren't suspecting it. Do something worse, like speak disrespectfully to a neighbor or stranger, and you would get whipped with a cane and “peppered.”

Oh, yes. I'd been peppered—many times.

In this form of punishment, several people held you down on the ground on your back while a solution made from leaves—“fever leaves” they called them—was mixed with a small amount of pepper and poured into your nose, mouth, and eyes. Then they would turn you over, onto your stomach, and whip your buttocks, all in the name of discipline.

On the occasions when Grandma would catch me off guard, most often early in the morning when she woke me from sleep after I had forgotten that I had done something wrong the previous day, she would spit a mouthful of that pepper solution into my eyes and begin whipping me with her cane. I could only stop the whipping by running out of the room, deftly unlatching the door at the same time, and emerging into the rising early-morning sunlight, to freedom, screaming but immediately stopping the crying once I was out of her reach.

I hadn't been injured. Oh, no. I wouldn't be crying if I'd been injured.

Injuries were a big part of my childhood repertoire. Scars all over my body remain a testament to many self-inflicted injuries. I never passed on a challenge, no matter how risky the task was. The attitude that “once another person has done it, I can do it, too” was always there, from the beginning. And I stepped up to the challenge often.

Like that day when Junior and Perry, the children of the new Assembly of God chief pastor, who had recently moved into the three-story mansion that stood on top of the hill overlooking our home, made that bicycle. It wasn’t anything you could really call a bicycle at all. The rusty frame was from an old bicycle, perhaps ridden by the children of the white missionaries who built and once lived in that mansion before our time. But the rest of it wasn’t anything like a bicycle.

The tires were made of wheels from two old wheelbarrows. There were no pedals. The only way to ride the bike was to roll down a potholed, rain-water-track-laden, gravel-covered dirt road that led down the hill from the mansion. The challenge was to keep one’s feet on the frame of the bike without stopping until reaching the bottom of the hill. The person who could do that without falling would be named best driver.

Scores of neighborhood kids had tried but put their feet down on the ground, out of fear, before reaching the middle of the hill where the potholes were most pronounced. When it came my turn, I didn’t relent.

I kept my feet on that bike, bouncing in and out of potholes, sliding and skidding on the gravel, until I reached the very bottom of the hill. Just then, right at the junction of the receding hill and level ground, the worst of the potholes—actually a gutter that divided the street into two halves—caused the bike to spin, making a 360-degree turnaround, leaving me with one knee on the gravel and rocks as I was dragged to a stop, my flesh left behind, kneecap exposed.

I didn’t cry. I didn’t even let anyone at home know what had happened as I tried to hide my exposed kneecap from Yah, as our family affectionately called Grandma. It was only the next day, when I couldn’t straighten my leg to walk from the pain, that she noticed.

That was me. I didn’t cry easily. Crying was for the weak. A man crying and showing emotional outbursts was looked upon as weak in our culture. Boys—men—weren’t expected to cry easily. Crying or expressing emotions gave neighbors a chance to make fun of you as weak and pathetic. I didn’t want to be called a crybaby or weak.

But I was crying today, sitting on Yah’s doorstep. I didn’t care or have time to think about the neighbors. In fact, I hadn’t thought about anything of this importance until today. But the significance about what I had just heard flooded my mind, and that made me cry even more.

As for Yah, she went about her business preparing something for breakfast. She didn’t comfort me as she often did, even after I had been punished because of a bad deed.

I was often the first in our home to wake, and the rest of the household was still asleep.

It was during that inconsolable crying that a neighbor came by. It was early for him to be up, but it wasn’t uncommon. Sometimes the neighbors woke early to scavenge under the cola nut trees—a few of the trees that covered our neighborhood—to pick up the nuts before the kids collected everything to sell for a few nickels. Saturday was often the best day for the elderly to scavenge since most children had the luxury of sleeping in.

“Why are you crying this early morning, young man?” he asked me. “Wipe your tears and tell me.”

His name was Yleh. We called him Bhor Yleh—Bhor is a title of respect in the Grebo language, one of several languages spoken in Liberia. He was known to us as the uncle of my uncle’s wife, Ms. Mary George. A bald-headed, short, and stubby man, he was a nice neighbor who lived about a quarter of a mile from our house.

I tried stopping the tears to tell him my story, but it was difficult. He reached out to me with one elbow on his bent knee, the palm of that hand supporting his chin, stretched out his free hand, and ruffled my hair to comfort me. He waited, seemingly not in any hurry, to hear what I had to say.

Surprised—elders usually didn’t care if you were crying since it was assumed that you had been punished—I looked up at him amid misty, foggy eyes and saw the sincerity on his face. He really wanted to hear my story.

It wasn’t uncommon for children in our town to receive punishment for wrong deeds. No one cared if you were crying for being punished. It was the norm.

But this man wanted to hear my story on this early morning. So I told him.

It was the end of the school year, and we had received our year-end report cards. I was going to have to repeat the third grade. Never before had I been forced to repeat a grade level. But I wasn’t bothered by it. When I got home from school that evening, I had taken my report card and nonchalantly given it to Yah, my grandmother.

Yah wasn’t literate. She didn’t speak or understand the English language. But she had some understanding of how a report card was supposed to look.

The card was a hard sheet of paper folded in half. On one half were my grades and averages for the first semester. The other half showed my second semester grades. Our school system was modeled on the American system, with the year divided into semesters.

The grades were recorded in red or blue ink. A red mark was a failure; blue was a passing grade. In general, the more red marks you had, the worse your grades were.

After years of seeing report cards, Yah knew this. She even knew that the last column on either half of the report card was the average for the semester, and too many red marks in this column meant that you had either failed the semester or, in the case of the second semester, the grade level. Thus, when I gave her the report card from third grade at the end of that year, she immediately knew that I had failed the grade level, even before I casually told her.

“That’s my report card, Yah. I failed,” I said before running off to fetch my wire car.

I knew what my punishment would be. She was going to pepper me. I knew it, and I expected it. Even though she didn’t immediately say so, she was going to find the opportune time to punish me for failing the third grade, and especially for failing in such a manner as I had done.

Yah opened the card but said nothing that evening.

I ate dinner and then went out to play with our neighbors. Sieh, my wire-car buddy, a boy about two years older than me, and his brother Dweh, about a year younger than me, didn’t attend school. They wouldn’t understand anything I told them about having to repeat the third grade. But riding my wire car and learning how to make one of my own with them was something we had in common.

I went about my business the rest of that evening. Then, the following morning, Grandma surprised me as I sat in front of her bedroom door waiting for the rest of the household to awake. Instead of doling out the usual corporal punishment, she did something different.

“Do you know your father?” she asked as soon as she came out of her room and locked eyes with me.

Of course I knew my father. A group photo that he took years ago with my mother and four of his colleagues hung in our living room. But that wasn’t all. There was a very nice black-and-white photo of him as well. This one was my favorite.

In this photo, he was nicely dressed, handsome, a young man in the prime of his life. He sported a small beard and an afro. In the background was a small airplane. I didn’t know where or when that picture was taken, but I had my own imagery of what my father was like.

“He must have been traveling to somewhere important on that plane when that photo was taken,” I often thought. “Maybe it was the day he left Pleebo for Monrovia. He must have had, or his parents must have had a lot of money for him to be traveling on a plane.”

No poor man in Pleebo, the town where we lived, could afford to travel on a plane. Many poor people couldn’t even afford traveling in a vehicle. I figured that if my father was traveling on a plane, he must have had a lot of money. He lived in Monrovia, the capital of our country, and he was rich. He probably had his own car, a house, and a good job. He didn’t have to toil on a farm as most people in our town did.

Then there were the stories that Mary George, the wife of Uncle Lavocious, the oldest son of Yah, told me occasionally.

“Your father was a very handsome young man living with his parents just across the road there,” she would tell me, pointing to the house where my wire-car buddy Sieh and his family now lived. “He was also very brilliant. In those early years there was no one in any of his classes that could top him. He was always the top student in every class.”

I knew all this. I had heard the stories several times. I knew my father. Plus I had even met him—once.

“Your father could’ve been anything he wanted,” Yah continued that morning. “Everyone knew him as the smartest of his generation. But what did he become? A drunkard, without a job. He now lives in Monrovia on the little means provided by his sister, Martha. Do you want to be like him?”

That was the first time that I heard about this side of my father. It saddened me. For several reasons, the image I had of my father as a rich man with a great job, a car, and a house had been adjusted over the years. But not to this extent. This was a shocker.

My resounding answer was no, even though I didn’t say so to Grandma. If this was my real father, I didn’t want to be like him.

But there was no reason to doubt anything that Yah said. She never said anything unless she knew it to be true.

That was why I was crying that morning. My heart was broken. All the expectations and dreams that kept me going were shattered into small pieces in that instant. The father whom I had looked to as a measuring stick for success—subconsciously for so many years—wasn’t what I imagined him to be.

But I knew there had to be more to the story and Grandma was just telling me the abbreviated version.

**BHOR YLEH CONSOLED ME.**

“Let me tell you a story,” he said.

This immediately caught my attention. I loved stories—folktales, stories about heroes, knights, and all the sword-whirling characters in ancient tales. I spent a lot of time listening to and learning from the stories our elders often told under the cover of moonlight.

These were unwritten tales, learned by word of mouth, passed down from generation to generation. For some reason I felt it was important that I knew them as well. After all, our elders learned these stories, which enabled them to pass them on to us. I listened and learned and in turn told the stories. And as I learned to read, I enjoyed stories about heroes and swordsmen in Western culture as well.

“There was this town of animals. The lion was the king, and all other animals were his subjects,” Bhor Yleh said. “Problem is he ate some of the animals for meals. In fact, the deer didn’t live in this town because they were the animals that the lion ate the most.”

I stopped crying as I quickly realized where this story was headed. In fact, I thought I knew the story this elderly man was going to tell.

Stories about the lion as king and other animals as subjects abounded in our folktales. But even so, these stories fascinated me because they often involved another very clever animal: the jackal.

The jackal of our folklores was a small animal that lived both in the open and underground. He was very proud and would boast to other animals about how he was smarter than their king, the lion. In fact, he was so smart that he could make the king do anything for him, including serve him. He could prove it if they wanted him to.

Some of these assertions reached the king, and they angered him. But whenever he was confronted by the lion, the jackal denied these claims. In fact, the cunning jackal always managed to find something that would require the king to help him; in turn the jackal would boast about the fact that the king served him. In this way he outsmarted the lion king.

“But there was this one animal that the lion wanted to eat badly,” Bhor Yleh continued. “The jackal was a small animal that did all that he could to avoid being eaten by the lion. Then one day after the king exhausted every means he could to get the jackal without success, he came up with one last plan. He was going to outsmart this little animal.

“The lion called together his household and his closest advisers. He told them that the jackal had been telling stories about him and that he had a plan to outsmart and eat him once and for all. He was going to play dead and by so doing get the jackal.”

The angle on this particular version of the story was new to me. Soon I had forgotten that I had been crying earlier. I listened intently to the new story. For a brief moment, I wondered why no one had told me this story before. I thought I had heard all the jackal

stories there were because some of our elders repeated them time and time again. But I had never heard this one.

Nevertheless, listening to the elder's story, I thought the lion's plan didn't appear to be so smart. Playing dead was not a novel idea. Why hadn't the king thought of this idea a long time ago?

"I will play dead tomorrow,' the lion king said. 'You will arrange my funeral, and during my viewing, you will place my big sword in my right hand. As it is, every subject will come to pay homage to the king by viewing me and saying his farewell. When the jackal comes over my coffin to look, I will take my sword and strike him. Then I will show that little animal who is smarter.'"

So the king did. With no word of his being ill, he was suddenly dead. The entire town was surprised.

Word quickly spread around the village that there were no plans to keep the lion king's body around. The announcement went around the province that the king was dead and that his corpse would be available for viewing that afternoon before being laid to rest. Every subject was encouraged to come pay homage to the lion king. In fact, everyone was required to pay homage to the king.

So the animals came, huge numbers of them, crying, some happy tears and others sad, because their king was dead.

But the jackal was skeptical. The king was too healthy to die suddenly without cause. Something didn't add up.

But then again, life is unpredictable, the jackal thought. He owed it to himself, his family, and the king to pay homage like everyone else. So he went to the king's funeral. Yet he was still skeptical about it.

"As the jackal approached from the distance," continued Bhor Yleh, "he noticed something sticking out of the king's coffin. He couldn't make out what it was initially, but as he got closer, he quickly recognized it. It was a sword."

The clever animal wondered why the dead king held a sword. Burying a king with his sword was not unusual, but a dead king with a sword protruding out of his coffin was strange. For some reason no one seemed to notice this as the procession to view the king continued. But the jackal noticed.

I began to smile. The elder smiled back at me. I knew where this was going. The jackal had figured out the king's plan. He was going to do something smarter as usual. Thoughts of what the jackal would do in this instant quickly flooded my mind. But I wasn't ready for what Bhor Yleh told me.

"The jackal immediately, after recognizing what was going on, began singing in a loud voice for everyone to hear," Bhor Yleh said. He began to sing.

"Please remove the sword from the lion's hand before we mourn his death. Please remove the sword from the lion's hand before we mourn his death,' the jackal sang as he stood at a distance from the king's coffin," the elder continued.

"Soon everyone at the viewing began to pay attention. It was true. The king was holding a sword in his hand. If he was dead, how come he held so tightly to his sword? But it wasn't long before the king became frustrated, jumped out of his coffin, and began chasing the jackal. Everyone was stunned, but no one dared to say anything. The lion had been outsmarted by the jackal once again," Bhor Yleh completed his story.

By this time, I had temporarily forgotten my grief. I was laughing at how the jackal was always so smart.

Having finished telling the story, the elder said his farewell. As soon as Bhor Yleh left, I turned my attention to what Yah had told me earlier. I thought about Bhor Yleh's story, and I thought about what I had just learned about my father. Nothing in the two stories connected with each other. The harder I tried, the more I thought that there was no connection. Even today, as I retell this story, I still don't see a connection. But I felt moved.

Thus, after the elder left, I made up my mind never to repeat another grade level again. I wasn't going to be like my father.

**I WAS BORN IN MARCH 1976**, in Pleebo, a small town in Maryland County, one of the smallest counties in Liberia, on the West Coast of Africa.

Liberia is about 43,000 square miles, just a little larger than the State of Tennessee. It is bordered on the north by the Republic of Guinea, on the south and southwest by the Atlantic Ocean, on the east by Ivory Coast, or *Côte d'Ivoire*, as the French call it, and on the northwest by the Republic of Sierra Leone.

With a population of about three million, the history of Liberia, often disputed by aborigines, was written mostly by American-born individuals. It is written that a group of black individuals calling themselves free slaves began emigrating from the United States in 1816, seeking a place to settle back in Africa. Their origins were mixed and included people whose ancestors were from several countries in Africa and elsewhere, including the Caribbean Islands.

They repatriated here and subsequently set out on the path to independence. In the end, Liberia was divided into counties, originally nine counties and subsequently expanded to thirteen. Montserrado County, and its major city, Monrovia—the first area where the free slaves established their colonial hold—became the capital of the country, its economic center, and the seat of its government.