

## The Long Road

The rainy season had carpeted the Zambian flood plain with opportunistic cattle, and the one road to Mongu dissected it like an American football touchdown line. What Billie wanted most in his life was waiting for him at the end of that road, but the 59 miles might as well have been edged with every college linebacker for as easy as it was going to be for him to reach his goal. A beat-up sedan rusted brown came barreling by him, spewing gravel on his bare legs, then slowed down.

“Hey Billie! Coming to school today?” A dark boy with white teeth yelled out the driver’s side window, arm hanging out and slapping the door for emphasis.

“Nah, man. He’s got too many house chores to do,” the boy in the passenger seat replied.

Laughter and dust from the only car in town choked the lone boy walking, as it sped off toward the low-slung cement block building the village called school. The weight of the two plastic jugs of water he carried on his shoulders gave him a backache but he gritted his teeth and kept walking, determined to keep his balance. His father expected those jugs before breakfast.

Billie grunted as he dropped the containers beside his family’s mud hut alongside the road, the only road from his village of Senanga to the capital city of Western Providence, Mongu. Travelers were few; luckily for them it was the start of the dry season and the likelihood of getting bogged down in mud was low, but they’d have to watch for the pocked out areas that dotted this stretch, like the spots on the leopards in Kafue National Park.

Mizanda came around the back of the hut and acknowledged his son with a low grunt.

“Only two jugs? You’ll have to fetch more at noontime.”

“Da, I have school. It’s review for the English testing,” Billie said. When his father did not respond, he added, “It’s important, Da.”

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“Water isn’t?”

“Da, please. Can it wait till suppertime? I’ll get twice as much then.”

“What’s more important, to respect your father’s wishes or your English review?”

Billie looked down at the black soil, cracked dry at his father’s feet. “I’ll get it now, Da,” he said as he turned to start the trek back to the handprint water tower that had been there since he was born, fifteen years ago. The squat tower sat in a field beside the Zambezi River, marked with foreign hands in red, white and blue paint. He reached up and placed his palm against the blue one marked *Billie* in another’s print, mirroring it like a twin.

He wondered again about the Billie on the water tower. His mom never spoke of him and his father never talked of anything but how many chores needed to get done with a sick wife and only one son. He walked fast to get to school, but he was still late. Students crammed the dusty room, ranging in age from five to Billie and his colleagues, who were the oldest at fifteen. Now it was time for them to either get funding from the mission for American college or figure out a way to scrape by in this community.

Their teacher, Mr. Thomas, clapped his hands to get everyone’s attention.

“For those of you going to Mongu for your college testing, there’s been a problem with the mission director driving here tomorrow.”

Billie looked up quickly as Mr. Thomas continued, “Clive has offered to drive you boys to the testing center. You still need to meet here at 2 p.m. tomorrow.”

Billie turned to look at Clive, the boy whose family owned the only car in Senanga. He was grinning back at Billie. He closed his eyes and clutched his hand over his stomach.

The day passed quickly, concentrating on reviewing for the test that could get him in a real university. If he did badly on that test it really didn’t matter what Clive and his cronies did to

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him. He'd be stuck on the endless loop to fetch water for the remainder of his life, like a noose that tightened but never snapped. When Mr. Thomas tapped his fingers on the paper Billie was hunched over, he looked up questioningly.

“Yes sir?”

“Go home, Billie. You can't cram any more into your head today. Go sleep on it.”

“Yes sir.”

The hut was darkening with the evening sky. A long shadow fell across the floor as he stood in the open doorway. His mom was lying on her pallet in the center of the circular room. Her complexion was darker than Billie's, yet he noticed how pale she had become since the last dry season. She struggled with a smile as her son entered the one-room hut, reaching out her hand for him to grasp.

“My boy,” she said in her soft voice and he wondered, if she hadn't been sick for so long, if her voice would be different, if she would be different.

“Mama.”

She closed her eyes and for a moment he thought she may slip away, but she just stretched her smile and whispered, “Love you, boy.”

They sat for a few minutes. When the silence started asking questions he spoke the most persistent one, “Mama, why did you name me after the man named Billie on the handprint tower?”

Her breath came slow and even and he thought perhaps she had drifted off to sleep but then she spoke, and when she spoke her voice sounded like the one he imagined earlier she might have without her sickness, “We have to have hope.”

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It wasn't exactly the answer he was searching for, but it was a more concrete answer to that question than she had ever given, and so he sat in contemplation while he rubbed her hand in his two that had grown larger than hers.

“And, I love you, boy.”

“I love you too, Mama.”

The next morning Billie made three trips to the handprint tower, ensuring his parents would have plenty of water until his return the next day from Mongu. He tended the fire pit, mashed the maize meal and added it to boil for the nashima paste that would last several meals. He roasted some tubers in peanut powder and cayenne pepper for chinaka, his father's favorite dish. He swept out the dirt floor in the hut and yard.

Finally, it was time to walk to the school for the long ride to the testing center. His mother had fallen asleep on her pallet and he kissed her gently on her forehead, something she would not have allowed had she been awake, even though the missionaries had said this would not contaminate Billie with her illness.

“So you are off then.” Mizanda appeared beside the entrance to the hut, as if summoned by Billie's illicit touch.

Billie looked at the dusty feet of his father. “Yes, sir.”

“Testing won't get your mother's meals made.”

His father stared at Billie like he could pin him to the spot with his glare. The rattle of Clive's car passing by on the way to the schoolyard jolted Billie into his first step past his father.

“I have to go Da.”

His father didn't answer as Billie stepped past him and started jogging down the road toward town, fearful that he would call him back and forbid him to go, even when he was far

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enough away the river drowned out all other noise. He could see his colleagues gathering around Clive's car, with him still in the driver's seat, like a king on the village's only throne.

"There he is. The *boy* we've been waiting for." Clive made the word boy a slur.

"Ok, boys. Listen, it's about a three-hour drive to Mongu. Most of the major washouts have been patched up but the ruts can still get pretty deep. Take your time. You should get there in plenty of time for a decent night sleep at the mission before the testing tomorrow morning." Mr. Thomas gave each of the boys a hearty pat on the shoulder for good luck, except Clive who never got out of the car.

"Yah, yah. Boys let's get in and get on with it then," he yelled from the driver's seat.

They finished a hasty good-bye and scrambled in to the vehicle. Shadrick claimed his regular spot beside Clive. Melo and Sonkwe pushed each other over the bench seat in the back, making room for Billie who slid in last. They shot out of the schoolyard with a stuttering clutch, waving to the children that ran behind them through the yard and down the main road until they passed the last hut. Clive pushed his foot to the metal floorboard, causing the car to lurch forward with a burst of speed not unlike the cheetahs that sometimes attacked the stragglers of the cattle herds that moved in for the grasses that sprouted after the wet season.

"Hey, house boy, you think you're gonna do better on the testing than me," Clive asked, staring at Billie in the cracked rear view mirror. "You think you're going to college?"

Shadrick chorused, "Yah, you think you're going to America? Your Poppa has too many house chores for you to do. Maybe you should buy a dress in Mongu to wear while you carry water and mash corn meal." Shadrick laughed and punched Clive on the shoulder. Melo chuckled softly into his hand in the back seat while Sonkwe sat with eyes wide, looking back and forth between the front seat and Billie sitting beside him.

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Billie looked out the side window at the dusty road beside the Zambezi River, the only landscape he, and his father before him, had ever known. He wished he could bottle up the boys words and throw them out the window, into the waiting rush of the river, have them ride its current all the way down to Victoria Falls where they would shatter apart as they descended into Mosi-oa-Tunya, *the smoke that thunders*, forming new phrases, new meanings.

“You know what I think, Shadrick,” Clive said, still staring at Billie. “I think Billie *boy* here doesn’t understand that he’s not as smart as he thinks he is.”

“Melo, who’s got the car,” Clive asked, switching his glare to Melo.

“You do, Clive.” Melo stole a contrite sideways glance at Billie.

“That’s right. I knew you were a smart one, Melo. Maybe you’ll make it to college with me and Shadrick.”

“How about you, Sonkwe? You starting to feel a little crowded back there?” Clive stomped on the brake pedal and skidded to a stop so suddenly, Shadrick’s head made a dull thudding noise on the dash and Sonkwe half fell into the front seat.

“Hey, Sonkwe, I know it’s crammed back there but you have to stay in the back,” Clive said as he shoved the other boy back roughly.

“Out,” Clive motioned to the door with a swift motion of his head, looking at Billie.

“But Clive, it’s like 54 more miles to Mongu,” Shadrick said, laughing nervously.

“Well, somebody’s getting out of the car. Any of you want to take Billie’s place and walk to Mongu?” He looked at each of them in turn until they cast their eyes to their laps. Billie grabbed his small sack that contained a clean shirt, small cake of soap, bit of nashima, and a dog-eared toothbrush.

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“No man, you’ll be leaving that.” Clive’s voice had gone low and dangerous and Billie recognized it as the voice he reserved for private meetings behind the school building, when Billie would leave with bruises under faded cotton. His face burned as he dropped the sac and stood back from the car.

“Sonkwe, make yourself useful and shut the door,” Clive said. Sonkwe looked at the door handle as he pulled it shut.

“Hey, Billie! Why don’t you just swim to America? The ocean’s that way.” Clive pointed out the window as he jolted off, leaving Billie in a cloud of dust and misery.

He looked to his left and saw the 5 miles back to his village. He looked to his right and saw the 54 miles to Mongu. Behind him was the Zambezi River, diminished from the overabundance of a month ago, shrunken back to a tamed flow. In front of him was the vast plain of grasses, which were starting their annual drying up, mirroring the Zambezi. He looked down at his two feet. Fifty-four miles. Could he make it in time for the testing tomorrow morning at 7 a.m.? The weight of his father pulled at him to turn back and walk the easy distance to his hut and his familial responsibilities, as he turned in the direction of Mongu.

All that afternoon he jogged. When he got thirsty he drank from the banks of the river, watching for crocodiles and giving the hippopotamuses a wide berth. He scanned the horizon for big cats, having grown up with horror stories about predator attacks on humans. Yet, still he jogged until he had to walk. The treetops carried the sun when he reached the marker post that told him he had 35 more miles to Mongu. Billie’s legs ached, but he pushed on another hour in dusk.

When the dark overcame him he allowed himself a rest and stretched out on the gravel road. He didn’t dare leave the road now, as he couldn’t be assured that he would be able to find

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his way back to it in the black. The growl of a big cat startled him awake. He got up and started walking, the crunch of gravel under tennis shoes the only indicator that he was staying on his path. Animal sounds punctuated the darkness: hippos trumpeting, hyenas cackling, grass owls screeching, leopards growling. At one point, he thought he heard his father calling him back all the many miles to his village. By dawn, with the rising sun, Billie saw another milepost in the distance. He had 10 more miles to walk. He sunk to his knees and cried, his hands trembling as they rubbed his weary face. He stood and gingerly walked to the riverbank, splashed cool water on his face and arms, reviving him enough to continue his journey.

The sun was above the collection of buildings that sprung up from the road when he finally reached Mongu. Every part of his body cried, but he didn't have the energy to weep. He knew the testing center from Mr. Thomas's descriptions and he walked in. Clive, Shadrick, Melo and Sonkwe sat in the first row with a few other boys their age behind them. They looked clean, rested, fed, and surprised.

Billie turned his focus on the administrator who walked from the front of the room to the door where Billie stood.

"Yes?"

"I'm here for the testing. My name is on the list."

The administrator's eyes had a familiar glint as he said, "You want to take the test? That'll be 25,000 Kwacha."

"The testing has already been paid by the mission."

"Oh, you're right. But the pencil to take the test will be 25,000 Kwacha."

Billie searched the desks of his comrades, ignoring Clive's sniggering from his seat. There were three pencils in front of Clive, freshly sharpened. The others had two and when Melo



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went to reach one of his out to Billie, Clive shot him a murderous glance and gave a minute shake of his head. Melo placed the pencil carefully back.

Billie abruptly turned and walked outside. His mind raced in circles. How was he going to take that test? He had to take that test. Should he go to the mission and ask for more money? The mission was across the city and he needed to be taking the test now. It was a timed test and he was already late. His glance frantically scanned the street, taking in the pedestrians and vendors hawking their wares, dried fish, tubers, hats, cheap sunglasses.

He looked down at his dusty fatigued body. He had nothing to sell. Except, maybe his tennis shoes, which were already third-hand when he got them, but they were still, even with his long journey, better than most of the home-made shoes many people wore. He quickly bent and pulled them off, waving them in the air and frantically calling for a buyer. Twenty-five thousand Kwacha was expensive for a pencil. Twenty-five thousand Kwacha was cheap for a pair of shoes.

A woman with a shrewd look snatched them up and didn't even bother to haggle with Billie over the price, scurrying off with her bundle clutched to her chest as if he might run after her and grab them back.

Billie handed the money to the administrator and took his pencil and test. The next three hours Billie answered test questions like he was singing, like he was God and knew everything without struggle. He created mountains and valleys and aircraft with his answers. Clive could no longer torture him. His mother was no longer ill. His father understood.

When he finished the last question and looked up from the test, he saw that although he was the last one to start, he was the first one to finish. He turned the paper in to the administrator who leveled him with an astonished gaze, and walked out of the building and back to the road.

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He looked to his left and saw the cluster of buildings that was Mongu. He looked to his right and saw the long devastating stretch of road to his village. He looked down at his bare feet, swollen and blistered from his horrendous night.

The weighty pull of the buildings called to him to seek solace in their shade, as he started his long walk back to the village. He shrugged the weight off and continued. He knew he could make it. His journey was going to be longer than many people's he knew, but the distance didn't bother him anymore.

When a rusted brown sedan sputtered up to him, he did not slow down.

"Hey man, get in the car," Clive shouted.

Billie kept walking, looking at the horizon.

"Don't be stupid man, get in the car," Shadrick said.

Billie kept walking, looking at the horizon.

"I said get in the car," Clive bit out.

Billie stopped. He looked at Clive and the others in their forced vanity and said, "I would rather walk the road with the cheetahs than get in a car with a snake."

"It's a long way man," Clive said, but he couldn't hide the quiet sound of admiration in his tone, or maybe, Billie thought, his ears were just hearing sharper than they had the day before.