



Rich

Solomon squatted at the roadside. He stared, empty-minded, at the already cracked earth coated in dust by occasional passing traffic. Only days before this road had been a raging river, cluttered with everything it could snatch from the village and carry aloft on its relentless tide. Solomon had tried to help others snatch a goat from the water only to be pushed aside. Even in disaster he was unwelcome. It was like that in his village for anyone who contacted AIDS. No-one ever asked how a little boy could be responsible for such a fate, or considered his innocence.

Solomon, orphaned when his parents died and himself showing signs of weakness, had been taken in by his aunt Ama. She had given him sleeping space and shared a little food with him. He was really too big to be cared for but too small to look after himself. Not strong enough to work in the fields, he tried to busy himself around the village. He helped as well as he could with the women's work mostly, in hope of extra rice. Now, after the flood and with little food aid reaching his village, Solomon's share had become smaller and his hunger greater.

This morning he had wandered aimlessly on his own and now tired by his sad, lonely walk he sat by the roadside, nodding sleepily. He was stirred suddenly by the sound of an approaching lorry, in low gear, winding its way slowly round deep ruts and potholes.

Solomon retreated into the safety of the bushes to watch the lorry pass. Four soldiers were in the back of it. Two of them were standing, trying to steady themselves as the lorry jolted them from side to side. They were fighting over a sack. With a string of unrecognisable expletives, the soldiers fell apart as the bag tore and rice and beans spilled out. The soldiers fell on to their knees to scoop the contents back into the bag and shouted to the driver to stop. He could not hear their voices and took no notice of the banging on his cab. The lorry moved on at its same monotonous pace. Solomon peered out after it, watching a slow trickle of rice and beans running from the tail of the lorry.

As soon as the vehicle disappeared round the next bend in the road, and the sound of the engine died away, Solomon crept into the road. He kept looking around him, all the while fearful of the soldiers returning. He gathered grains of rice and beans into his hands. There was too much to hold. He slipped off his shirt and gathered four corners to make a bag, laying it down every few yards to put more of his findings into it.

The work was slow. It was hard to keep dirt out of his treasured pile. Grains and beans could easily disappear into cracks in the road. He became so engrossed in his work that he failed to recognise how tired he was until he heard another vehicle approaching. He retreated to the bush again to wait and rest. The small lorry stirred up the dust, obliterating the last of the rice.

Solomon sat and looked with pride at his gleanings. But what should he do with it all? Hide it here and come for a little each day? Wait till dark and take it home secretly so no-one else would know? But there were no secrets in the village. More tired than he realised, he dragged himself to his feet and clutching his make-shift bag of treasure, started for home. At last, after many rests, he collapsed by the door of his aunt's house, still clutching his shirt bag. Aunt Ama was unconcerned until he held up the shirt. She took the shirt, looked in, and gave a loud cry of surprise. She looked alarmed for a moment, then for the first time in many days she smiled. She put the bag down, gave Solomon a drink of water and put one arm round his shoulders. Solomon's happiness brought tears to his eyes.

There's enough here for many days, said Aunt Ama. Solomon looked up into the hollowed faces of the children who had gathered when they heard Aunt Ama's cry.

No, he said. Perhaps it was knowing what it meant to be left out that prompted him to say, *Let's all have a little. The supplies may come tomorrow.*

Aunt Ama and some other women prepared a meal to which other villagers contributed from their meagre stores.

There were some who were reluctant to accept the gift when they knew how Ama had come by it, but they enjoyed it all the same.

Solomon's health declined each day now. However short his young life, there would be one day to stand out above all others - a day, surely remembered in heaven - that day when he was rich - when he knew the joy of sharing - when he felt himself to be the richest person in the world.