

THE SPECIAL SOMETHING

By Kijana Wiseman, M.Ed.

The Special Something

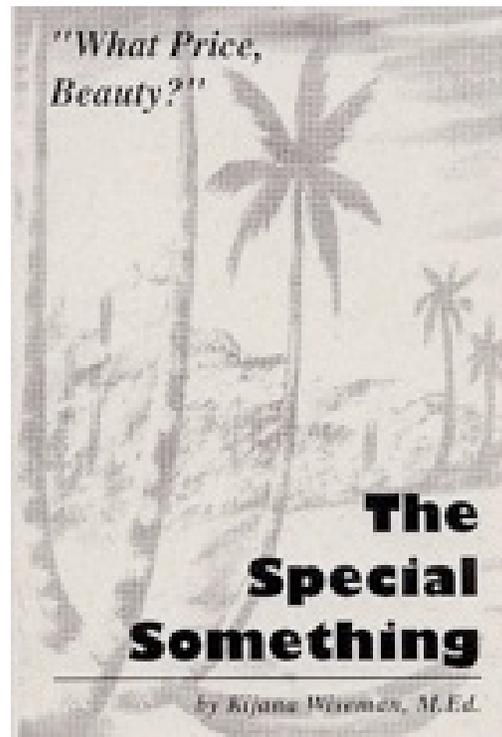
Boima and Bendu, a set of Liberian twins living in Kakata, Liberia, have worked all rainy season on the rice farm. They now want to go with their mother the marketplace in Monrovia, in search of "Something special, something different—a special something!" to buy. At the Marketplace, they see many things but continue looking for something really really special. Suddenly, they spot a huge smiling Mandingo Monkey Seller...

CHAPTER 1

Boima and Bendu Koneh were twins. That means they were born on the same day, by the same mother. Most twins look alike, but not Boima and Bendu. The Koneh twins only looked almost alike. That is because -Boima was a boy and Bendu was a girl. They lived with their parents Yatta and Ziad, their baby brother, Ballah and Grandmama Koneh in the small town of Kakata, Liberia.

Liberia is a beautiful country that lies on the west coast of Africa. Kakata is located just 30 miles north of the big capital city of Monrovia. Though most of the people in Kakata were from the Kpgelle tribe, the twins were of mixed tribal heritage. Tribes are like big groupings of families and their mother, Yatta, was a member of the Vai tribe. Ma Yatta's family were merchants with many booths in Monrovia at the big marketplace. Ziad met Yatta when he attended Tubman High School in Monrovia.

Early one morning, mother Yatta called to them. "Boima, Bendu, finish your breakfast and then get ready-" she said, "-we're going to Monrovia." Surprised, the twins saw that she was wearing her new purple and yellow lappa and headtie. "Today is your Pa's payday and we need supplies. I want to make palmbutter and rice for dinner. I will need some cassava, butter-pears, rice, palm nuts, suck-suck, crayfish, a fat chicken and fresh red pepper." She picked up their little brother, brushed the dirt from his hands and knees and headed towards their great grandmother's house down the road. "Grandmama says she will take care of Ballah for me." She said over her shoulder. "She will also tell Zaid we are gone to market. Dress quick! Then, Boima, go to the road and hail the next money-bus to Monrovia. Don't be slow now! You, Bendu, get my shopping basket and my purse. Quick-quick! I go-come."



Boima and Bendu looked at each other with special smiles growing on their faces. They ran to their room where they took a wash. Boima put on a new purple and yellow shirt Ma Yatta had made for him, shorts and best walking sandals. Bendu put on a yellow blouse and wrapped on a lappa and head-tie her mother had made from the same bright material she was wearing. They both were very, very excited.

Kakata lies on the Tubman Highway, the main road between Liberia's capital city of Monrovia, and Gbarnga the country's second largest city. It is easy to understand why it didn't take long for a money-bus to get waved down by the children. Since it was early morning, there was plenty-plenty room on the bus. As the twins found their seats, they laughed and whispered to themselves and laughed again.

"What are you two up to?" Ma Yatta said—as if she didn't know. She took her seat. "You've been to the market before, so why all this noise?"

Bendu giggled and pointed at Boima who patted his fat pocket. "Today is different!" she said happily. "Boima and I have money to spend today! We have saved it from all the rice-money Uncle gave us."

"Yeah-o!" agreed Boima. "Five months worth! Plenty-plenty money!" He patted his pocket again.

Ma Yatta smiled. "Plenty-plenty money!" she asked eying his pocket with a surprised look. "So I see. And what will you buy with all that money?"

Boima looked at Bendu. Bendu looked at Boima.

"A SPECIAL SOMETHING!" they said together.

Yatta laughed with them as they headed towards Monrovia, the capital city of Liberia and the magic of the huge downtown marketplace.

Chapter 2

They arrived at the marketplace early in the day. Ma Yatta cautioned the twins to be careful as she prepared to leave them to go buy supplies. The twins offered to help her shop, but their mother said "No. You two have your own special shopping to do." She then told them to meet her at the big gate in front of the market when the sun was at two o'clock. "Since we are in Monrovia so early, I will go visit my little sister Besseh in her pepper booth," she said, "We should have plenty of time to get back to Kakata and have the palmbutter finished before your Pa comes home from work. You two go find your special something with your big-big money."

Yatta's suggestion sounded like a very good plan to the twins. Their father, Ziad Koneh, worked long hours at the Firestone rubber plantation near Kakata. Though the money he made was not plenty, sixty dollars a month can go a long way if you have a good money manager like Ma Yatta minding the budget. Today was payday and Ziad would expect his favorite meal when he returned home. They promised to be on time.

At the Monrovia market, there were many many things to see, smell, taste and to buy. There were people walking around selling lappas of many different colors, cloths and textures, there were spoons, pots and pans, combs, long ribbons and bright beads to sew on a blouse or wear in a girl's hair, pants, shirts and a lot of "kwi"2 clothes. There were also many tempting toys at Mr. Sulliman's Corner, a store the children normally stop at near the market gate. Today, the twins looked at Mr. Sulliman in his store, shook

their heads and continued walking. They already knew what was in there. Today, they wanted something special, something different.

Boima kept his hand close to the huge wad of money in his pocket. The market people saw the big money-bulge and began to call for Boima and Bendu to stop at their tables.

"I say, you-Boy! You got money?" said one old lady from her booth near them. "I got roasted plantain! I got roasted cassava too! Fresh, hot and sweet—make your belly quiver!"

"NO!" shouted another merchant down the way. "Come buy peanuts. Roasted peanuts here!"

"Orange here. Orange here. Come drink orange—already peeled, ready to suck. Two for 5¢! Good for you! Orange here. Orange here!"

"Eh, yah! Y'all come eat sugar cane! Sweet-sweet sugar cane!"

Bendu and Boima heard all of this and more, and though sweet oranges with a suck-hole,³ peanuts, plantain and sugar cane were tempting, they kept walking and looking. Looking and walking. They could buy these things in the marketplace any day in Kakata. This was Monrovia, the big city, and they were sure that they would find something special, something different, if they just kept looking.

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As Boima and Bendu walked the marketplace, they saw many interesting things. They heard the sound of drums and saw Fulani dancers from Guinea bounce around on a stone stage in the middle of a square. They stopped for a while and watched a Krahn blacksmith work iron into a large cooking pot.

Suddenly, they heard children laughing behind them. The twins turned and saw a Gio tribesman with a baby elephant being followed by a group of children who seemed to be about the same age as Boima and Bendu. The man was offering rides for money.

"Elephant rides!" the man called as he pulled the elephant along by a rope around its neck. "Only 50¢! Come ride elephant! Only 50¢! Elephant rides...." the man repeated his call over and over again. Though there were children all around the baby elephant, touching and patting it and talking and laughing with each other. The elephant didn't seem to mind. Riding the elephant and eating a roasted cassava root was a dusty, long-legged grownna-boy⁴. He looked very happy to be on the elephant. His smile spread from one ear to the other.

The twins were tempted to take a ride. They could easily afford many rides, but they decided to wait until after they find their special something. "We want to make sure we have enough money," said Bendu. "If we start spending now, we may not stop," she added. Boima knew his sister was very smart. This made good sense.

"Anyway, we can't take that elephant or the ride back to Kakata with us," he added.

Chapter 3

The sun seemed to race across the sky that morning. The day was clear, but very hot and very, very muggy. Boima and Bendu had walked from one side of the marketplace to the other all morning in search of something special, something different.

They walked from the front gate where the peppers and spices were sold to the river stalls in the back where the boats for travel were kept and where Kru and Vai fishermen and their wives fanned flies away from tables filled with fish of all sizes, shapes and colors. They had visited and paid their respects to many of their mother's merchant relatives, then escaped to walk the market some more.

They had walked to the east section where the Fanti weavers made and tie-dyed beautiful cloths with colorful designs and where dresses, shoes, clothes and toys from America, Europe and China were displayed by Lebanese and African merchants. Clothes were everywhere. Some were folded on tables; some were carried; some hung limply in the shade of covered booths while others were spread out on groundmats like dead bodies in the noonday sun.

Food was everywhere, but the twins didn't want to buy food. "We already ate." Bendu reminded Boima. Before they left home, Ma Yatta always made sure they each ate a hardy meal of farina with a biscuit and honey. She had also given them a hot cup of tea made with dried leaves from the mint bush outside their home.

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Around noon, the twins saw Ma Yatta at the bottom of a small hill on the west side of the market. She was among the shaded stalls where the country people brought their livestock—chickens, goats, deer and pigs to sell.

Their mother looked very pretty in her yellow and purple lappa with matching headtie. Her market basket was almost full. She was talking to a toothless old ma while poking the ribs of several of the lady's chickens with a stick the woman had provided her. They saw Ma Yatta attempt to pick up one of the chickens, but it scurried out of reach in the small pen. The old lady quickly caught the chicken and held it by its feet for Ma Yatta's inspection. As she held it above eye level, the old ma turned their mother's face so she was looking away from the sun. That was when Yatta saw her children standing at the rise in the hill.

Boima and Bendu waved to her. Yatta's lovely smile could be seen from even so far away. The noise of the marketplace made yelling useless, but they had no problem understanding her when she quickly clapped her hands together twice and then wagged the right one from the wrist to the fingers while raising her eyebrows. She was using a special sign-language farmers use to talk with each other while in the fields. This one meant "Anything? Did you find anything?"

Bendu sighed and clapped her hands once and then turned them open and empty towards their mother. "Nothing," she was saying.

Ma Yatta bowed her head to the side, touching her forehead briefly before she opened the hand out towards the twins. “No mi’ yah,”⁵ she sent back in sympathy.

Suddenly, Ma Yatta pointed to the sun, raised two fingers at them, and touched her wrist with the fingers before putting one finger up to pull briefly at the skin under one of her large brown eyes. She then pointed towards the front of the marketplace. This was her way of reminding them that they had only two more hours before she would need to see them at the money-bus stand at the front gate.

Boima nodded his understanding as Bendu sighed visibly and lifted her small shoulders in a shrug that said. “Yes, we know.”

Ma Yatta smiled and went back to feeling the old lady’s fat chickens for her palmbutter dinner.

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An hour later, a tired Boima and Bendu decided to escape from the sun. They splurged on an American soda, stopped under the shade of a barren mango tree and sat on an old tree log that served nicely as a bench. They still had not found anything that they both liked.

“The time is almost finished.” Boima said to his sister. He passed her the tall, cool bottle of orange Fanta they were sharing. “We have less than one hour left.”

“Yes, I know—” his sister said, taking a sip, “—but what can we do?”

“Well—” Boima said trying to cheer her up. “—we could go buy sugar cane or go back to that chop-shop⁶ and order hot cassava root and roasted plantains—” Bendu’s face said that she was still not interested, but Boima kept trying. “—I say that we go visit that juicy Lebanese man, Mr. Sulliman near the gate and buy one of the kwi toys he sells... You like those— don’t you?” Bendu nodded sadly. “You always seemed to like his toys,” added Boima with a small smile. Bendu said nothing. “Well? Bendu? Which one will we do?..” Silence. “Talk to me, now.”

Bendu looked up at her brother. Her large eyes were holding back tears. “Oh, Boima!” she sighed. “I truly don’t know! If we buy food, that won’t be special. Food is everywhere. Besides both Auntie and Ma Yatta will feed us more than we can eat.” Boima nodded agreement. “—And each time we buy one of Mr. Sulliman’s toys, they lie broken and spoiled within two— maybe, three— days!” She sighed. “I ...I guess you are right. Maybe we should just go—”

Suddenly, Boima grabbed his sister’s arm. “Look!” he said to Bendu as he pointed. “Can’t we buy one of those?”

Bendu looked.

Chapter 4

A giant man was walking down the sandy market road. His size and the style of his clothing identified him as a member of the Mandingo tribe. He had a white fez on his

head with a flat top and a little gold star in the middle. His eyes twinkled, though he looked to be a very, very old man. The fuzzy beard on his chin seemed to go in all directions at once and was salted with grey hairs. The man's white pants had the roomy legs and large pockets common of Mandingo merchants. His colorful open-armed over robe had a huge double-sided pocket in the middle of his belly. The shirt under the robe was as white as the hat with the gold star.

That hat suddenly jumped forward from the man's head to cover his nose. The man laughed as he reached up and pulled a small copper-colored monkey off of his head. He adjusted his hat to its proper place and sat the monkey on his shoulder. That was what caught the twins' attention. The man exploded with little brown bodies.

Monkeys of all sizes were hanging, jumping, crawling and hiding all over the big Mandingo. Some followed him on leashes while others peeked at you from the big pockets of his gown. It was a beautiful sight to see.

The children sat there wide-eyed, their sadness and their troubles forgotten. The monkey-seller seemed to float past them; a giant curtained boat with many chattering inhabitants. Behind the monkey-seller, Boima and Bendu could see a small two-wheeled cart being pulled by a huge orangutan and two large chimpanzees in chest harnesses. In the cart was a cage holding more monkeys than the children could count without lining them up in a row. Big ones, little ones, skinny ones, young, old and fat ones all chatting away and discussing the wonders of a bag of peanuts that they were sharing.

So fascinated were Boima and Bendu by this wondrous sight that the man and his little parade had passed their tree and turned around the corner near the chop-shop. He was heading down the aisle towards the river before they realized it.

Boima was the first to speak. "We-e-e-ll?"

Bendu smiled.

"Yes! Boima! Oh, yes, yes, YES!" She threw their empty Fanta bottle in a nearby trash can and jumped to her feet. "Quick-quick! Run! Let's see how much they cost!" she said. "Catch him!"

They ran after the monkey-man as fast as they could. Since Boima had on pants, he took the lead, but his sister was not far behind. Bendu ran so fast that the fold-knot that holds her lappa together almost came undone, but she reached down and retightened it without losing a step.

"I say—" Boima called.

"—Old man!" Bendu called.

"Ya kuu nay! Ya kuu nay!"⁷ they said together.

The monkey-seller had not gotten far. Hearing the sound of their young voices, the man stopped, looked and smiled at their beauty. "Ya kuu nay!" He answered their common Vai greeting "Igpo?"⁸ He brushed a long, furry tail out of his eyes. "Hello-yah." He added in English.

The children panted to a halt. "Hello-yah, Old Pa!" Boima said with respect for the man's grey hair. "You have fine-fine monkeys here," he added.

"Are you a monkey-seller?" Bendu asked, catching her breath. Then not waiting for his answer, she added. "My brother and I saw you just now! ...We want to buy a monkey!"

The old man looked at them and grinned. “You want to buy a monkey?” he asked. “Monkeys cost money. I take American or Liberian dollars, but cash money. Now do you have monkey-money?”

“Yes!” they said together.

The monkey-seller laughed. “Oh really! How much money can small pekings like you have?” He laughed again, turned and spoke to the large orange monkey leading the cart. “Plenty big money!!” He laughed again. The lead monkey laughed while the two chimpanzees put their long arms in the air and began to dance happily around in a circle. The little black one on the man’s shoulder jumped up and down, pulled on the monkey-seller’s ear and laughed too. Soon all the monkeys joined in. The noise was deafening.

Chapter 5

Boima looked at Bendu. This would not do. The man and his monkeys needed to know that they were real money-customers. Boima stepped forward and offered his hand to the man. “Excuse me, Old Pa. Please. I beg you. May I ask your name? Tell me your name.”

The old man looked surprised. He saw Boima’s expression and stopped laughing. The monkeys stopped laughing too.

“Ah—” said the monkey-seller as he turned to speak to the monkey-audience in the bamboo cage. “—this small-boy want to know my name. Eh-yah, should I tell him my name?” he asked the small monkey on his shoulder. The monkey sniffed and chattered softly in his ear as if answering. The man listened for a second before he chuckled. “Very well, very well, I will.” He turned to the children. “Seku, good friend....my name is Seku. Seku Kesselee.” He bent down and looked, first at Boima and then, at Bendu. “—And your names?” He offered his hand.

Boima smiled. “My name is Boima. Boima Koneh from Kakata.” Boima stepped forward, took the huge hand and gave it a hardy shake.

Bendu stepped next to her brother. “And my name is Bendu—Mr. Seku.” she said with a small smile. “Boima is my brother.” She stuck out her hand, but before Mr. Seku could grasp it, the large orangutan reached forward and took it.

Bendu’s eyes widened. She gasped a little, but bravely did not jump or pull back. Though she was a little bit afraid, the creature seemed friendly enough. He looked up at her with large coppery eyes and chatted something before turning her hand over to inspect her palm. Finding nothing there, it pointed at the empty center of her hand and began to poke it with a crooked finger and fuss at her. Bendu pulled her hand back and looked confused. She didn’t know what to do. Mr. Seku smiled.

“No, my friend,” he said to the tangerine-colored monkey. “the big-big money is not there.” His eyes twinkled as he turned back to the children. “Maybe it’s at home-yah! Maybe it’s walking the marketplace with your Ma or Pa...eh, pekings?”

“No.” Boima patted his bulging pocket. “Look here,” he said to Mr. Seku, “you see the way my pocket is big-so? The money is there. Plenty-money. My sister and I

worked very hard this rainy season and have saved all our rice-money to buy us a 'special something' today."

The old man saw the bulge and the serious expression on Boima's face. He stood straight. "Ah. I see. Forgive me, good-friend. I did not mean to offend a money-customer." He gently patted the black tail that was wrapped around his neck. "A 'special something' eh?" he said thoughtfully. "And is this special something to be one of my small friends here?" He did not wait for an answer. "Very well then—" he stepped back and waved his massive Mandingo arms toward the cart, "—which one do you like?"

Chapter 6

Bendu looked at all the monkeys. She saw monkeys of different-different sizes, shapes, colors and types. Some in the cage, some on the monkey-seller, some on the ground. The large orangutan that was pulling the cart—the one who had taken her hand— would be very useful on their farm, she thought. She could imagine him working with them side by side in the fields during the day and eating bananas and running and playing with them at night.

"I like that one." she said pointing to him. "How much for that big one?" she said.

"That one?" the monkey-seller stopped smiling. "Oh no, small-girl! I can't sell you that one. That one is a fine friend! He is no average monkey. He is a citizen. He even has a name—" He turned to the orangutan.

"Isn't that so, Mr. Kamara? You hear that? This small-girl likes you. She wants to take you home with her. Do you want to leave old Seku?"

The monkey, realizing he was being talked to by the merchant watched him for a moment before he shook his head negatively from side to side. The man chuckled and turned back to the children.

"See how he is smart—so? And so well trained! No. I can't part with Kamara. He is more like a cousin to me than a monkey. Besides, I am an old man. Who would teach the new monkeys how to pull my cart if I sold him?"

Boima stepped in front of his sister. "I beg you, Mr. Seku. Don't feel bad. My sister meant no harm. She just wasn't thinking. Of course we don't want to buy your friend, Kamara." He looked around and picked out a monkey in the cart that was not quite as big as Kamara. "Is that one for sale? How much is that one there?"

"Ah," said the monkey-seller. "Yes, that one is for sale. See how he is big—so? I got him from a merchant in the Saniquellie Mountains. Normally he would have a big price to match—sixty, seventy dollars even. But—" he looked at the shocked expressions on the children's faces. "—since today is a good day for special things. Let's say a special price.Let me see....Forty?...No...No....Let's say...thirty dollars... just for you."

Thirty dollars! Boima looked at Bendu. Bendu looked at Boima. They both shook their heads. “We will have to buy a smaller monkey,” Boima said. “One with a much smaller price. We don’t have big monkey money.”

“Ah-h-h,” said Mr. Seku. He pulled at the hairs on the end of his beard and patted the little black monkey on his shoulder. “I see— Hm-m-m-m.”

“Hm-m-m,” agreed Boima. He walked around and began to look first at this monkey and then that one. Mr. Seku followed him stroking his fuzzy beard.

Chapter 7

Bendu’s eye caught the actions of the tiny black female monkey sitting on the monkey-seller’s shoulder. Her tail was wrapped tenderly around Mr. Seku’s neck. When Mr. Seku pulled at his beard as if he was thinking, the monkey pulled at her little beard. When he shook his head and put his hands on his hips, she shook hers and did the same thing. When he scratched his head, she scratched the little white spot in the middle of her large black eyes.

Suddenly, the little monkey reached up and adjusted Mr. Seku’s cap for him. Mr. Seku put it back where it was—it seemed without thinking. The little monkey then readjusted the hat again. Again Mr. Seku put it back. Bendu thought that was funny and smiled. The monkey smiled back at her. It had a nice smile.

“How much for that one, Mr. Seku?” Bendu asked, pointing to the little creature. It was so much smaller than the other monkeys, maybe she and her brother could afford it.

“This one? “ Mr. Seku patted the little monkey. “Ah, small-girl. You have too good an eye for quality.” This little Mama is one fine-fine monkey. Her name is Torpu. See how she is tiny so but her brain is even bigger than Mr. Kamara’s here. If I were to sell her, she would cost more than all the other monkeys here put together. But, no. She is like a part of me. My very special something. No, my friend. She is not for sale. Of all these monkeys, only these two , you see—” he pointed to the little black monkey and the big orangutan. “— Torpu and Kamara are my friends—and both of these you pick. Such good eyes, Missy Bendu. Good eyes, very good eyes.” he thought for a second.

“Turn those good eyes here.” He pointed to a long armed spider-monkey. “Look at this one my friends. This is a fine monkey and a big one too. Normally he has a big price, but for you... Let’s see... Fifteen dollars...just for you.”

Fifteen dollars! Boima looked at Bendu. Bendu looked at Boima. They both shook their heads. They looked again at the monkeys .

Boima stepped forward. “I say--” he saw two small monkeys on the ground, one had a crooked tail. “--how much for one of them?”

The old man pulled at the white hairs on his beard. “This one is—ah— twelve dollars—”he pointed first to the black monkey, then the brown one, “—and that one is ten dollars.”

Bendu shook her head and looked very sad.

“We don’t have that much money.” Boima said unhappily.

The old man pointed to an old monkey. “Seven dollars?” he asked softly.

Boima slowly turned his head from ear to ear while Bendu tried not to cry. They did not know that a “special something” could cost so much!

Mr. Seku rubbed his beard, then pulled out one of the kinky hairs and examined it closely. “Hm-m-mm” he said softly, “Ah-h-h, tell me, my friends. How much money do you have for this special-special something?”

Boima looked down at his fat pocket. He squirmed his hand in and turned the pocket inside out. Out popped a thick country-cloth that was tied and balled around a heavy wad. He unfolded the cloth to show their money to Mr. Seku.

It was all small-small change.

Chapter 8

“Three dollars and fifty-seven cents,” Boima said in a small voice.

“Three dollars and fifty-seven cents?!?” The old man said slowly. He bent down to look at the money in Boima’s hand very closely. Little black Torpu leaned forward also while Kamara tiptoed to see better. “Is that what it comes to?”

“Yes, sir.” said Boima softly.

“Exactly...three dollars...and fifty-seven cents?”

“Yeah-0,” sighed Bendu, then quickly added in a quivering voice. “Ee-e-e-eah yah... I’m sorry, but it was so-o-o-o hot and we were so-o-o thirsty. We had more, Mr. Seku, but we bought a cold Fanta to drink.”

“I see.” The monkey-seller stood up again. He looked as if he were going to pull that beard right off his face! “Too bad,” he said sucking his teeth, “Too -too bad for me,” He added.

“Eh?” said Boima not understanding. “Not you, Mr. Seku. Us. Too bad for me and Bendu. We the ones with only small-small money.”

Mr. Seku’s eyes twinkled. “Eh, heh,” he laughed. “You do not understand, good friend.” He said. “No. No. It’s not good for me. Because of something my wife told me this morning when I left home.

The twins looked confused.

“You see, it just happens that I have a real special thing with me here today and she said I could only keep it if I could not find someone who would love it more than me.” He looked at Bendu.

“Missy Bendu. You have such good-good eyes—” He thought for a second. “—and since we like some of the same things, I think maybe you are such a person. Maybe yes, maybe no. I just don’t know.” He put his hand in one of his big pockets. “Would you like to see my own special something, Missy?”

Bendu sniffed and looked at the monkey-seller with big water filled eyes. “Yes,” she said in a small voice. “What is it?”

“Eh-heh. Yes, I think you will like this too much.” The old man pulled his hand out of his pocket and slowly opened it.

“Oh!” said Boima.

Sleeping in the big brown palm was the smallest, cutest, blackest baby monkey Boima had ever seen. It opened its big black eyes to the noon-day sun, looked straight at Bendu, yawned and stretched lazily. There was a familiar-looking white spot between those sleepy eyes. It was beautiful.

“Ah!” said Bendu.

The monkey-seller smiled. “This one is named Beauty and she is very special, not only because of her small size and great beauty, but mainly because she is the daughter of my best friend here.” He patted little Torpu on her head. Torpu promptly patted Mr. Seku on his head and gave his ear a hug. Beauty up looked at her mother, blinked and yawned. The children only had eyes for the little monkey.

Mr. Seku smiled. “Do you know how much this small monkey is?”

Boima and Bendu shook their heads, afraid to even hear the price.

“This small sleeper is ready to leave the nest and any other day would bring me lots of money...but meeting you two has been a ‘special something treat’ for me today.” His eyes twinkled. “So I now understand what my wife was saying. The cost of this pretty one?” He paused. “It is exactly—” he reached down and put the little monkey in Bendu’s arms. —three dollars and fifty seven cents!!!”

Chapter 9

Boima and Bendu laughed with joy.

With eager ears and shining eyes, they listened as the monkey-seller taught them how to care for their sleepy-sleepy Beauty. “She is still a bit of a baby, I’m afraid,” Mr. Seku patted little Beauty’s head “and is sleepy, because of the heat, but once awake, will seem to be everywhere at once! So, watch her closely. Feed her plenty-plenty coconut milk, butterpears, nuts and soft bananas,” he added. “She is not yet smart like her old ma here, so-o-o—” he adjusted Bendu’s arm into a cradle. “— hold your arm just so. Good. That way she will not fall when you walk.”

“Thanky-yah! Thanky-yah, Mr. Seku!” the twins sang like a happy choir after they had paid Mr Seku for their new friend. His job done, the big Mandingo said good-bye to little Beauty and the twins before he continued towards the river stalls.

On their way back to the money-bus stand, first Bendu, then Boima and then Bendu again, held Beauty. Each time she passed hands, the little black monkey would not complain, simply yawn and find another snug sleeping position. Though they were very happy, the twins were worried small-small. They had never had a pet before and were not sure what their mother would say when she saw what their “special something” was. They knew that if Yatta approved, their father, Zaid, would also.

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They found a spot in the shade on the middle step of Mr. Sulliman's store. The children knew they would be able to see their mother walk out of the marketplace entrance. The shop, "Sulliman's Corner" was the point where two streets converged on the marketplace. The two outside walls of the store opened like a three-cornered pie with huge metal doors pushed all the way to the roof of the room. Hundreds of items were in Sulliman's Corner —combs, tins of strange foreign foods, toys and plastic moulds of cars sat on the shelves behind them, everything from sardines to machetes sat there alone and forgotten. Mr. Sulliman stood among them, forgotten also.

"Do you think Ma Yatta will like her?" Boima sat down on the step next to Bendu. Bendu had placed the little monkey in the center of her lap and was rocking her gently from side to side inside her lappa. Beauty seemed to like that a lot.

"Eh-yah," sighed Bendu. "I had not thought about that thing....but look, Boima..." she smiled gently, "...see how she is pretty-so! Ma is sure to like Beauty...I think."

"I say," a voice said above and behind them. "What is this?"

The children turned their heads and looked into the plump face of Raoul, Mr. Sulliman's young son. They had seen him a few times before, but, other than a polite "Hello-yah" had never really spoken. After all, Raoul was a rich Lebanese city boy and they were poor Liberian rice farmers. He went to private school, while they went to Kakata's one public school. There had been very little to talk about...until now.

"A monkey!" The boy's eyes brightened. "Is that your monkey?" He looked over his shoulder to call his father. "Da! Come quick! They have a monkey here!" He looked back at the twins. "Are you selling it? How much? Is this the only one you have? It's a baby isn't it? Where's its mother?"

He was talking so fast and his accent was hard to understand unless you listened very carefully then play his words back in your mind. The twins were just finishing this when Raoul's father, Mr. Sulliman, came up.

"Ah!" he boomed. "Marahaba! My little friends! Boima and Bendu, right?" Boima nodded. "A monkey! No wonder! You come to the market, but I do not see you until now!" He bent down to get a closer look at Beauty. ".....is this why?"

Bendu beamed up at the man and his son. "She is fine, eh-heh?"

"Fine?" Mr. Sulliman smiled. "Ah, my little friend, she is more than fine!"

"Yes," said Raoul. "So tell me...How much do you want for her?"

"Oh!" Boima stood. "Beauty is not for sell. We just bought her from Mr. Seku, the monkey-seller," he waved this hand towards the marketplace behind them.

Raoul looked at his father. "Da, I told you there was a monkey-seller doing market here today! I told you."

"Yes, you did—" Mr. Sulliman looked at Boima. "Tell me, where is this monkey-seller now?"

"We left him making his way to the riverboats," said Boima.

"He said he was going to a marriage feast in Cape Palmas," added Bendu.

"Then he's gone?" Raoul said quietly, "I missed him?" The twins nodded. Raoul began to look so sad that both Boima and Bendu felt sorry for him. That is until Raoul turned back to his father.

“I want her,” they heard him say. “Please, Da, buy that one for me.” He pointed to Beauty. “I will name her ‘Habibi’—just like my last monkey!” He turned back to the shocked twins, but his shining eyes saw only the little sleeping Beauty in Bendu’s lap. “And this time, I have learned my lesson. I will make sure she lives! I will remember to feed her everyday! I will take good care of her. Da, I promise!” He stepped forward and reached for the little monkey. “You girl! Give her to me!”

Chapter 10

“No-o-o!” said a horrified Bendu. She covered the little monkey with the loose flap of her lappa. Her brother stepped in front of her blocking Raoul’s way. Raoul blinked, as if seeing the two children for the first time.

“No? ” He looked surprised. “What do you mean? No?”

“I say, you can’t hear us?” Boima said. “I said this monkey’s name is ‘Beauty’ not anything else...and she is not for sale.”

“What? Why of course she is!” The little Lebanese boy was very sure of himself. He turned back to his father. “Da-a-a-a?”

Mr. Sulliman put a hand on his son’s shoulder and pulled him gently back. “Be quiet, Raoul.” He stepped forward and smiled. “Now, let me see, my friends!” He bent down to look at Beauty closely. “Yes, Beauty is a good name for her.” Bendu smiled small and uncovered the little monkey a bit. Boima moved slightly out of the way, but stayed close to his sister. “I tell you what...” Mr. Sulliman stood, reached in his pocket, pulled out a wad of American dollar bills and peeled off the top one. “Here, I’ll pay you \$10 for her.” He waved the green paper in front of Boima’s face.

Boima watched the money catch the breeze. Ten dollars! With that, they could buy two monkeys the size of Beauty. Or maybe, the next time the monkey-seller was in the market, they could buy one of the bigger monkeys...he looked down at his sister’s face. He saw her swallow.

“No,” he said around the lump in his own throat. “No. We can’t sell our little Beauty for \$10. She is special.” He looked at Raoul. “So, sorry-yah.”

“O-o-oh,” said Raoul quietly. “I see-e-e-e.” Raoul thought for a second, then pulled his father’s sleeve. Mr Sulliman bent down so Raoul could whisper in his ear. Mr. Sulliman nodded, stood straight again and pulled two more bills from the roll of money in his hand.

“Raoul has decided to add his allowance for the week to buy your little Beauty.” Mr. Sulliman said. “Here you go.” He reached for Boima’s hand and put three \$10 bills in it. “That should be more than enough.”

Bendu’s eyes widened in disbelief. Boima’s mouth fell open. Thirty dollars! The twins were not rich. Thirty dollars was half of their father’s monthly paycheck! They lived simply on a farm and had never even held that much money before! The children stared at it for a moment and didn’t quite know what to say. Raoul began to smile.

Boima looked at Bendu. Bendu looked at Boima. Boima nodded, swallowed big and stepped slowly forward.

“Thanky-yah, Mr. Sulliman,” he said bravely, “but we can’t take this.” He very carefully put the expensive paper money in Raoul's chubby hands. “You see, our little Beauty is our special something....we have to keep her...we can’t sell her. Do you understand?”

“No-o-o-o!” said Raoul loudly. “I think you just want more money! A small monkey like that can’t be worth more than this!”

Bendu stood, gathering the little monkey in her arms. “Ah, my friend,” she said quietly, “but, there you are wrong. Mr. Seku sold us Beauty at a special-special price—so we could take care of her, watch her grow—not sell her to someone else!” She looked at all the money in the little rich boy’s hand. “That is a lot of money, good friend, but Beauty is worth much-much more than that.” She swallowed hard. “She is not for sale!”

“But, but—” started Raoul angrily.

“I think you heard my children, small-boy.”

• • •

Ma Yatta’s firm voice came from the street behind them. The twins turned in surprise. Their mother was standing on the sidewalk, full market basket balanced perfectly on her head. She looked like a beautiful bronze statue kissed by bright sunlight and clothed in robes of purple and yellow. The twins, like matching flowers in her landscape, went to stand beside their mother. Yatta smiled at them both and put her free hand on Bendu’s shoulder, while the other kept her heavy basket steady.

“That small creature,” she said to Mr. Sulliman, “to your son, is just another monkey. To my children, she is something very-very special.”

“But—” started Raoul again, but Mr. Sulliman silenced him.

“We are only poor farmers...” Ma Yatta continued. “...and are impressed by your wealth,” She waved her hand at the store, then pointed to the wad of money in Raoul’s hand. “—but, though we have little, Mr. Sulliman, you should teach your son that there are some things in this life that are not for sale at any price...” she looked at him very carefully, and spoke very slowly “...my children’s Beauty is one of those things.”

Mr. Sulliman looked down at his son. “I understand,” He said simply.

Ma Yatta stepped back and smiled softly at her children. “Ah, my dears! What must I do with you?” Boima and Bendu sighed and shrugged their happy shoulders at the same time. At that moment, Beauty awakened, looked around, blinked twice, stretched and yawned loudly. Yatta laughed. “Alright! Quick-quick! Let’s go! Your father—and you three beauties!—need dinner!”

Boima and Bendu beamed with pride as they followed Ma Yatta to take the little monkey—and their newly discovered “special something” home.

Endnotes:

1 Lappa: a colorful cloth that may be wrapped around the body and used as a skirt, dress or headtie.

2 Kwi: A word from the Vai tribe of Liberia that means “devil.” Kwi was first used to describe the Europeans who landed in Liberia. They were thought to be devils because their shoes gave the Africans the impression that they had no toes. Thus, over the centuries European clothing and artifacts are referred to as Kwi.

3 Suck-hole: Liberian marketwomen peel off the bitter outer layer of the oranges they sell and cut a hole in the top so the buyer can suck the sweet orange juice before eating the pulp.

Grownna-boy: A Liberian way of saying "Grown-up Boy." This term is used most often to describe teenagers--mostly boys--who are not quite children and not yet adults. Many grownna-boys are homeless boys who drop out of school. Many of them live on the streets as beggars and thieves.

5 No mi' yah: A Liberian way of saying, "Take no mind" --asking that the person affected by sorrow, or misfortune not feel too badly.

6Chop-shop: A small restaurant that specializes in Liberian and West African meals. The most common meals involve rice dishes with various sauces placed on top. It is believed the word comes from the "chop-chop" smacking sounds people make when they are eating.

7Yah Kuu Nay!: A much-used market greeting in the Vai language: "Hello my friend!"

8Igpo?: The usual answer to "yah kuu nay." The equivalent of "..And how are you?"

9 Marahaba!: An Arabic greeting. "Hello!"

Quiz:

THE SPECIAL SOMETHING

- ___1. Boima and Bendu lived in ____. a. Louisiana b. Luxemburg c. Liberia
- ___2. Their hometown was called _____. a. Monrovia b. Kakata c. Krahn
- ___3. Ziad worked at _____. a. Firestone b. the farm c. school
- ___4. Ballah was the name of Boima and Bendu's _____. a. father b. baby brother c. grandmother
- ___5. One day, Ma Yatta took the twins to Monrovia to _____. a. see an elephant b. the marketplace c. their aunt's house
- ___6. Boima and Bendu had a lot of _____. a. time on their hands b. \$10 bills c. small -small change ...to spend in Monrovia.
- ___7. Ma Yatta asked the twins what they would buy, they answered that they wanted to buy a " _____ !" a. little monkey! b. special something! c. kwi toy!
- ___8. Ma Yatta left the twins that morning, she told Boima and Bendu to meet her at the front gate at " _____." a. 2 p.m. b. 6 p.m. c. Noon
- ___9. While they were walking, the market people called for Boima and Bendu to stop at their tables because they saw the _____. a. bulge in Boima's pocket b. baby elephant c. baby monkey
- ___10. When the twins saw the elephant, they decided to _____. a. take a ride b. pay for the grownna boy's ride c. keep looking.
- ___11. Ma Yatta was going to buy many supplies at the market. She will cook a Liberian meal called _____ for dinner. a. palmbutter b. groundpea stew c. palava sauce
- ___12. The children were just about to give up hope when Boima saw an old _____ man with monkeys. a. Fulani b. Mandingo c. Bassa
- ___13. "___" rode on Mr. Seku's shoulder a. Torpu b. Kamara c. Grownna-boy
- ___14. When the twins asked Mr. Seku about the monkies. He said to them, " Do you have _____?" a. monkey-money? b. monkey-food? c. monkey-toys?
- ___15. First, Bendu liked Mr. Seku's orange monkey friend, then she liked the little _____. a. brown b. black c. white ... monkey he had riding on his shoulder.
- ___16. When Boima and Bendu heard the price of the first four monkeys, they felt very _____. a. happy b. angry c. sad
- ___17. In Boima's pocket, Boima and Bendu had _____. a. \$3.57 b. \$30.00 c. \$13.57 ...to spend.
- ___18. The little baby monkey's name was _____. a. Bendu b. Beatrice! c. Beauty
- ___19. The name of the Lebanese boy who wanted to buy the monkey from the twins was _____. a. Raoul b. Riad c. Ralf.
- ___20. The special something the children received was not a monkey, but... a. a feeling of anger. b. no mi' yah. c. a sense of dignity.

ANSWERS TO THE QUESTIONS

*1. c 2. b 3. a 4. b 5. b 6. c 7. b
8. a 9. a 10. c 11. a 12. b 13. a 14. a
15. b 16. c 17. a 18. c 19. a 20. c*

How Well did you do? Each CORRECT answer is worth 5 points!

SCORE	RANK
95-100	Market Wizard
80-90	Master Merchant
65-75	Store Manager
50-60	Peanut-seller
Below 50	Grownna-boy

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713-521-0900 • 800-546-0540 • Fax: 713 524-7599
Email: kijana@kijana.com

The Author

Kijana Wiseman, M.Ed.



Kijana, a versatile "edutainer" and performer of theatrical and communicative arts, loves what she does —and it shows. A lyric coloratura soprano with a 3.5 octave range, she began performing in musicals at the age of 5 and went professional at 9. She received her BFA in Theatre from the University of Houston and her Masters of Education, specializing in African Theatre, as a result of joint studies at Texas Southern University and the University of Liberia, West Africa. A former Peace Corps Volunteer, Kijana taught drama for six years, performed works from classical to jazz to African rock, modeled in Europe and hosted television programs in Africa and America.

Kijana Wiseman has appeared on stages and in electronic media in over a dozen countries on the American, African and European continents. Ms. Wiseman is a member of the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators, The Texas Alliance of Black School Educators, and the Houston Association of Black Journalists, She is artistically and professionally associated with The Ensemble Theatre and the Community Music Center of Houston and is a performing artist with the National Association for Campus Activities.

Kijana now tours schools, colleges and institutions with her one woman show, "The Griot." As modern day Griot, She and her audiences celebrate life. Taking her audience on a trip through time, she uses comedy, music, slides, audience participation, poetry, on-stage costume changes, characterizations, storytelling and your laughter to unify a divisive multicultural world.

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