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Sosu and the Bukari Boys

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Sosu looked at the money in his mother's hand and remained standing. He looked around to see if his father was around and was glad he wasn't.

Despite the birthday party last night, Sosu woke up this morning feeling uneasy. The day was Wednesday and the Bukari Boys—the B.B. of Eden School—had something to show one another. Bukari did remind Sosu the previous day about the mid-week show, so he couldn't pretend that he had forgotten.

He was supposed to prepare, and that meant some extra money in his pocket. So how could his mother give him the same amount as she did every day? He folded his arms across his chest and frowned.

"Take it," Mrs Anku said, adding, "please."

But Sosu, looking like an angry boy who had been hurt, shook his head, frowned, and kept standing. Vivian had already received her stipend and was walking towards the gate.

How he wished Uncle Sam hadn't left. But right at dawn his uncle had left. His uncle loved travelling at dawn in order to beat traffic, he claimed, although he used public transport. Sosu really wished his uncle was around, for he would have easily asked him for extra money for his mid-week show with his friends at school.

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Then Sosu saw his father coming into the house. Sosu noticed that his father had lost a little weight, quite unlike his usual self. But he looked strong and sturdy.

"What's going on?" Mr Anku asked. "You kids are getting late for school."

Mrs Anku made another attempt to encourage Sosu to take the money, but Sosu looked away. "Take it before I change my mind." Sosu turned to look at his father, still frowning; but he refused to take the money.

"Take it at once!" Mr Anku shouted, moving towards Sosu. Now the angry boy knew what his father would do if he continued to be stubborn. Slowly he took the money and went towards the gate.

"Hey, Boy!" Mr Anku called out, "Not even a thank you?" Sosu stopped but refused to turn to look at his parents. He heard his mother say, "It's all right; things will get better."

Throughout the morning, Sosu's heart was burning with anger. He watched Mr Quist teaching Mathematics, his favourite subject, but his mind didn't follow. When the bell rang for lunch break, he remembered the small amount of money he had in his pocket and resumed his worries. What would he do when he met his friends? They would display their wealth and tell how their parents were good to them, but he would have only a few cedis to show off.

Sosu felt his parents were very mean; otherwise, why did they give him such a small amount of money? Look at his friend, Bukari, who always brought a lot of money to school! He wore a pair of bright white canvas shoes and a new school uniform. Bukari's father's car dropped him at school every day while he and Vivian had to walk.

His thoughts were interrupted when Bukari came over to him. "Hey, why are you still in the classroom? Let's go out!"

"Yeah, let's go!" Sosu got up, pretending to be happy. Outside, their friends, Sunka and Abi, joined them.

"Let's go for fried rice," Bukari announced. He was the leader of their four-member group calling themselves the Bukari Boys, or BB for short. They were all December born, which was why they became close friends. Every lunch break was like Christmas for the Bukari Boys.

At the rice seller's place, Bukari displayed his generosity. He bought plenty of fried rice and enough chicken for each boy to have two pieces. The other boys made generous contributions. When it was Sosu's turn, he felt too ashamed to bring his small amount of money out of his pocket.

After the meal, they sat under the big mango tree to talk about other people. When the conversation became more lively, Sosu decided to ask Bukari a question.

"You've got a lot of money, Bukari," said Sosu. "Your father gives you a lot of money, doesn't he?"

"Not my father," Bukari replied; "it's my mother who gives me money. She's very kind." That reply made Sosu feel even more angry with his mother for giving him and Vivian a small amount of money for school.

Back home, Mrs Anku sat on a wooden stool in her kitchen. Sosu's behaviour in the morning still worried her. Since she returned from the market where she sold beads and bangles for girls, her mind had been occupied with thoughts about her family.

She knew she was doing her best to look after her two children and husband. The money she got from her trading fed her family and paid their fees and bought some clothes for them. They were not rich—not like other families Sosu was comparing them with—but she knew they were doing their best.

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Ever since her husband lost his job, things had been extra tough. Every day Mr Anku went out searching for a job and often returned home late and sad.

Sometimes the money was not enough, so Mrs Anku had to work extra hard, which caused her backache and neck-pains. This school term, things had been difficult, so she had to postpone the payment of her children's school fees. Even now she had only managed to pay half the amount.

All these weighed her down as she peeled the yam for the evening meal. Her aluminium saucepan still had some of the dried fish soup she prepared three days ago; that would do for this night.

Now the kerosene stove she just lit had gone off. When she checked, she noticed the stove had run out of kerosene. She reached for the coalpot and filled it with charcoal. The smoke from the unburnt coal entered her eyes and drew some tears. But Mrs Anku kept fanning it until the smoking ceased.

In times like these, Mrs Anku knew what to do. She didn't want her children to see her in a sorrowful mood. So after she peeled the yam and left it on the coalpot to boil, she went to the bedroom. Her favourite Bible verse was "Put all your worries on God, for He cares about you." That was what she went to the bedroom to do: to put all her worries on God through prayer.

That evening after supper, Mr Anku called everybody together. It was time for the evening devotion. Sosu spoke little during the discussion. Even when he was asked a question, he answered in a few words.

He was irritated when his father asked him to pray for him to get a job and about the second part of their school fees. He prayed, but his heart was full of anger.

The next morning, Mr Anku left the house early.

"Someone asked me to meet him early at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs," he told his wife as he went out. "Who knows, a job may be coming my way."

That morning, Mrs Anku decided to talk to Sosu and Vivian before seeing them off to school.

"Listen to me," she said. "Don't get angry with your mother, huh, Sosu, and you too, Vivian. I wish I could give you extra money every morning, but things are hard for us, and you know it. We thank God that we don't sleep on empty stomachs or go naked. Your father will soon get a job and things will get better. Even then, we have to be economical in whatever we do. Remember what your uncle told you when he was here. You must be good citizens, and that begins at home." She spoke a few more words and then saw them off. She hoped that her advice would enter their thoughts. Just as she left them, she turned to Sosu and asked casually, "How's your friend, Attipo?"

"He's not my friend."

"Well, but be gentle with him."

"I'll try, Mother."

Sosu and Vivian were late to school. Something was going on at school when they got there. Sosu was surprised to see the assembly still in session. At nine his mates ought to be in class; why were they still at assembly?

He dropped his bag in the classroom and went out to join his mates at the assembly grounds. He saw Mr Quist writing something in his notebook. Sosu knew what it was: the teacher had written his name in that notebook and would deal with him later.

The head teacher stood tall and lanky in front saying something very serious to the whole school. Sosu saw his friend Bukari standing in front too. His face looked very sad.

Sosu saw that Bukari had been crying. Why? What happened? Then, at one corner of the assembly grounds, he saw someone else and knew there was trouble. It was Bukari's father!

"Look at him!" Sosu heard the head teacher say, pointing to his friend Bukari. "You've brought disgrace on yourself, your parents, and to this school."

Sosu looked around and saw Sunka. "What's the matter?" he asked. But Sunka whispered to him, "Keep quiet!"

Sosu kept quiet and waited to see what would happen. He saw Attipo leaning on his crutches and standing at the back and remembered what his mother told him a moment ago at home: "Be gentle with him."

Sosu heard the head teacher saying, "We've told you never to steal anything from anybody—not even from your parents or from your friends." The head teacher looked around at the pupils. "Have we told you this or not?"

"You have told us," they chorused. Even Sosu said the same although he still didn't know what was happening. "Then," the head teacher turned to Bukari and asked, "Why did you do that? Why have you been stealing money from your father?"

Sosu saw Bukari look down.

"Look at me!" the head teacher shouted. "Hasn't your father been giving you enough money?"

Bukari gazed at his father before saying, "Yes, Sir, he has."

"Why then have you been stealing your father's money?"

Oh, so that's what's happening? Sosu thought. Now he knew it.

In Eden School, if a pupil did something very bad at home, the parents reported him to the head teacher. They would call an assembly and publicly punish the pupil. Some parents and teachers were against the rule, but many of them agreed that it was a good way to bring discipline to the school.

But Sosu was shocked. *So his friend Bukari was a thief? So he was telling lies when he said his mother gave him all that money to bring to school?* Then he started getting afraid. What if the head teacher were to ask Bukari who else spent his stolen money with him? What if Bukari pointed to him and their other friends?

"Thank you, Mr Ziblim," the head teacher said as he turned to Bukari's father. "We will take care of the rest."

Mr Ziblim said, "Thank you," and walked to his car and sat at the back. Sosu watched as the driver drove off.

It was a sad day for the Bukari Boys. To be disgraced was one thing Sosu feared most. He watched as the head teacher himself took the cane. Bukari cried like a child, and his cry put fear in Sosu. That day he vowed never to do anything that would bring him or his family such a disgrace.

The more he thought about what happened, the more he felt sorry about his attitude at home. Where would he hide his face if he was the one being punished in front of the whole school?

Alone with his mother in the evening, Sosu felt very sorry. He even cried as he narrated the incident that happened at school. "The money you give me for school is okay," Sosu heard himself say. "I'll never compare myself with others again."

Mrs Anku hugged her son and thanked God silently for sparing her family such disgrace.