

ISUA

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[Assignment: Describe a memorable moment or experience in your life. Use concrete details that appeal to the reader's senses. Also, please keep in mind these questions: Is your description to be objective or subjective? What dominant impression do you wish to convey? What is your angle of vision?]

(1) Though I was different from Isua in the color of my skin, in my standard of living, in my age and in my traditional upbringing, I saw in him much of my own personality and many characteristics that I knew I yet needed to develop. That's what made Isua stand out from the dozens of other children in the faraway village of Mbioto.

(2) I went to Africa with a group of Christians on a youth work mission during the summer of 1985. Upon our arrival at the mission's compound in southeast Nigeria, we were met with the wide and wonder-filled eyes of dark-skinned children to whom a white person was an oddity. The next day we decided to take a walk through the village, and giggling, bright-faced children began tagging along. Isua was walking next to me on my right, and he cautiously reached out to grasp my large hand with his small, worn one. Holding hands is a sign of friendship in Nigeria; when two friends talk they hold hands. I didn't know what to think when I first arrived and observed men walking around holding hands, but I got used to this. When I asked Isua his name, he answered in a small and coarse voice. I misunderstood him the first time. "Josua?" But he corrected me, and after several tries I got it right. He could say my name. I asked him how old he was, but he didn't know. He looked nine or ten from his size.

(3) He was skinny, especially his face and neck. His cheekbones were set high on a face that seemed to come to a point at his mouth. His eyes were deeply set. He reminded me of a small gibbon monkey in his facial appearance. As we walked under the overhanging greenery of the rainforest along the narrow, puddled path, I noticed how large his feet were in comparison with the rest of his body. They were feet that had rarely, if ever, been covered, and though the tops were as tar-black as the rest of his skin, the bottoms were orange from tracking through the clay and vegetation. His black skin was ashy and wrinkled from the toll of the sun and elements and resembled that of an old man, yet the energy and youthful curiosity in him belonged to a young boy. He wore the signs of poverty. An unbuttoned, tattered shirt and dingy shorts barely clung to his frame. He had worn them many days without change.

(4) Though our words were few, our conversation was meaningful and largely non-verbal. A mutual curiosity inspired us each to find out about his new friend's ways. He was shy, but he made an attempt to teach me about his world. "Banana tree," he pointed out. His speech was slow and deliberate as he made sure I understood his teaching. He spoke excitedly with his peers in his native Efik language and they laughed about us. He called me "mbakara" which meant "European."

(5) The next morning when our group began our building project of constructing a generator shed and a Christian bookstore, Isua showed up at the work site with a machete in hand to help us clear the thick block of jungle bush that was to hold the bookstore's foundation. I have rarely seen a person young or old work as steadily and efficiently as Isua did. He quickly and gracefully used his dangerous tool to mow the tall grass and greenery. He was used to such work. He had worked with his machete several hours a day in his family's cassava patches and in gathering grasses for making mats. Though he was half my age, he had probably worked more than I had in my lifetime. I didn't see him much during the next few weeks because of his responsibility to his family.

(6) Isua came to be a little brother, and I envied his boyish playfulness and curiosity. But I also envied the maturity and responsibility that went way beyond his years. That's why Isua impressed me so much.