

LETTERS FROM SIERRA LEONE

Soon after he graduated from college in 1985, one of our sons decided to join the Peace Corps . He asked to be assigned in Africa, and eventually was sent off to work in Sierra Leone. After some preliminary orientation in the U.S. he began his tour of service in the summer of 1987. During his 2-year stint in the Peace Corps, he wrote a series of letters to his family and friends, many of which have been preserved. A letter's arrival was a significant family event, and the recipient made several copies and forwarded them forthwith to other family members and our son's close friends. Here are those letters that have been preserved. As you can see, some of the people he met anchored themselves deeply in his heart and we ache for them during the terrible turmoil that has since overcome their country.

18 July, 1987

[This missive came on the back of a TWA Great Destinations Postcard: Menu a la Card—transatlantic menu choices]

Mom: Pretty classy. Things are great. I'm happy. Can't wait to get off this stupid plane and party in London for 11 hours. People here are really cool. Many elder volunteers. Many retirees. One woman is going to Sierra Leone with Peace Corps for the second time. She is 69. Get your application now. You'd love it. Hope Otis [*nickname for dog Amos*] is doing good. I imagine you've emaciated him by now. Dinner was awful. New Orleans was great. We stayed in a really plush hotel. Take care, love, R. PS Amos - woof woof, bark bark, whine whine, itch itch.

Undated

Mom- I'm doing good, live virus shots have me down physically. Emotionally I'm doing pretty good. I am jotting you this quick note tonight to relay some semi-important info. Habib (Peace Corps Director) is going to States tomorrow, and he is willing to take our mail with him. I apparently will not be able to be frank in my letters on matters relating to S.L.'s policies. Mail is opened and read. People have gotten in hot water for writing controversial statements in letters to home. Volunteers have had to leave their countries in some extreme cases. Anything I write that is underlined will be taken to be opposite. Out of time. All is well. I'm really enjoying myself and my health is good. Love, R

Undated

[From Freetown, Sierra Leone]

Life here is very interesting. Many things are a lot more extreme. The people are very nice. The beach is the most beautiful that I've seen. We either have water or no water. People here seem to be loaded or very poor. They are happier though. There is a Sierra Leonean saying that best translates into "Get get, no want. Want want, no get." It is something that the English language could butcher and cover up the meaning. Life has been very good to me these past days. Everything happens very fast. This new batch of trainees (we aren't volunteers for another 7 weeks) has formed a very cohesive group. They are all friendly and accepting. Some are critical and discerning, but not enough. I think this will change. Right now we are in Freetown. It is the Capitol City. It is perched on hills overlooking a large natural bay. Geographically it is much like San Francisco. The analogy stops there. The streets (that I've seen) are teeming with people. Most of them are little kids. You frequently see

families sitting in front of their houses. Everyone (it seems) in the family is there. It is not uncommon to see 25-30 family members together. If you ask someone "How large is your family?" they will have no idea. The extended family concept is very big here. Many of the men have polygamous marriages. This apparently is more in practice up-country. Up-country is everything but Freetown. Tomorrow, we are going down to the big marketplace. It sounds like it will be like a big zoo. I can't wait. Our language lesson for today was to learn how to bargain (i.e. barter) in Krio. The sellers are going to love it. 20 Peace Corps (Piskohs) with little Krio and plenty of money wandering around trying to buy things while testing their language proficiency.

People here are very observant of dress codes. All of the men always wear pants. Shorts do not show enough respect. Unfortunately, I get to comply with this trend. The gara cloth, which is locally made, is very beautiful. It is cotton woven into patterns and then it is intricately tie-dyed. It is then made into clothing and embroidered. Matching pants and shirts are very trendy. The Big men (important VIPs) all wear leisure suits. Proper dress is demanded at all times. We are seen as ambassadors here, and are expected to act accordingly. It is much more proper here. We are being trained to be non-confrontational. I don't mind it too much, if we weren't, we'd be even more obvious and blatant than we already are.

Tomorrow, we can go to Songo. We will be individually put in homes of families of the village. It is a fairly large village, about 400 houses and 4,500 people. We will stay for 6 weeks. While there we will learn to speak better Krio, and learn about the Sierra Leonian approach to teaching. This includes corporal punishment. It will be interesting to try and maintain discipline without resorting to it. All of the national teachers apparently use it. In Songo, the people are predominantly Christian or Muslim. It appears that we'll be woken every morning by the Muslim call to prayer. I think 5:30 is the designated time. Tonight we were given lessons in taking a bath in a bucket with a cup, using a hole in the ground as a latrine, and lighting mosquito coils. When we arrive in Songo there is going to be a big reception/party. Apparently a large portion of the town will be there. I have been chosen/designated to give a speech for our group. Don't know what I'll say, I think I will wing it.

We've been pumped full of many shots lately. Today it was gamma globulin and rabies. We've also had typhoid, cholera, yellow fever, polio/rubella, measles, mumps and maybe more. Parts of this letter were written under the influence of live viruses. It is very hard to hold a train of thought while slightly sick with the above.

Our bartering went well. We paid the lowest prices for the things we bought (compared to other PCs). We also found a bar and a cheap taxi back home. The hotel we are staying in is pretty comical. The electricity comes and goes on whim, there is never any water (including for the water) the light bulbs are burnt out, there are tons of mosquitos. I have little bites over my body. I think that the Aralen (anti-mosquito medicine) is working. I'll know in a few days once the incubation period is over. Generally I am healthy. I have a little bit of the "runny belly" but that seems to be the norm.

Meals are a riot. They are served on West African Internal Time. WAIT. and WAIT. Everything works in slow motion here. You get used to it. If you say that something starts at three, you think about going to the function at three (very earliest). We have been somewhat shielded since we interact in a large part with each other. The real work starts in Songo. The party/free ride is over.

I really love it here. It is not easy, but I am very pleased. Time has gone slowly for these two weeks. This not because it has been bad, but because we've done so much. I hope this letter makes it through the oh-so-reliable mail system. This is Letter #1. R.

July 29, 1987

Mom: All is well. Haven't been sick yet. Have managed to get the dreaded runny belly. The mind is well also. Hope you have heard that the way to send me mail is by aerogramme to the private mail bag address. Hard to believe that I left home only a few 2½ weeks ago. I am sitting under a large open air grass roof, we call it a bafra. The medical doctor is blabbing about disease. We are about to be hit with cholera #2, Rabies #2, and tetanus (unless I can talk my way out of it.) It is relatively useless info that is being spewed. I survived my initial malaria scare. On the first night in Freetown, I was bitten by about 25-30 mosquitoes. The incubation period passed without event.

I have started teaching. For the most part, I really enjoy it. I am in Songo now. It is the site of the Peace Corps training. We will be here for another 5 weeks. The kids in Songo go to school for part of the summer so we can practice teach on them. it is fairly rigorous, and we don't have much free time. The kids in the school are not too thrilling. Most of them have a very poor background in math and science. Before you teach them anything, you have to revert to the basics. They are paid a small fee to come and be attentive. Obviously, many of them come for the money rather than the schooling. The education system here is very muddled. Kids are taught to memorize and repeat material. There is very little understanding and almost no intuition. The actual math teaching is turning out to be a lot more challenging than I'd originally thought.

Food here is pretty different. Everybody eats rice all of the time. If food is good, it is called sweet. Even if there is no sugar in the food, if it is pleasing it is called sweet. There is a variety of sauces, or "soups" as they are known, that are poured over the rice. They are all very peppery and pretty good. Cassava leaf is a staple. It is mashed into a pulp and then doctored up to taste good. Right now, we eat Peace Corps food. We get imported rice and pineapples from a can. You can walk out on the street and buy fresh pineapple and locally grown rice (both are better). It is a problem to feed our whole group. it consists of 50 trainees, 10 volunteers, 12 culture and language informants and another 10 miscellaneous.

I am living with a Sierra Leonean family now. They are called the Bangura's. They couldn't say my name, so they renamed me Dawo Bangura. The kids call me Mr. Dawo. The children are fun to be around. They speak more English than the older family members, and I can carry out some parts of a conversation. There is a little 5 year old (or so, no-one knows their real age) named Isatu who hugs me every time I walk into the house. The other night, she fell asleep in my lap. They are becoming like an inherited family.

One of the most common sights around here is a goat, with a rope around his neck that is tied to a stake (uprooted), running away from screaming kids. I get up very early in the morning (5:30 ish). The day is dictated by the sun. I am really enjoying it here, and I don't regret my choice. I have been safe from illness for a few days, and I think that my body is beginning to adjust. Hope all is well. Woof, woof, bark. Love, R

September 23, 1987

[Part A of F]

Mom/Dad: Haven't written in a while, so I guess it is about time I got off my butt and did so. This last month has been eventful (to say the least). I now live in a town called Largo. It is a small town of about 3,000-3,500 people. The people are predominantly subsistence farmers growing rice, corn, sweet potatoes, cassava leaf and citrus fruits. Largo is in the eastern part of the country. To the north is diamond mining land. There are a few dreamers in my town who are looking to strike it rich in nearby soil. From time to time, they find small low grade industrial diamonds. One day a crew of 6 found two, worth 1200 LE, or about \$48. it was a so-so day. They have high costs in kerosene and land lease payments. These guys, all brothers, call themselves musicians and miners. When the weather is nice, they are miners, when it is rainy (too cold for them to work) they are musicians. Hanging out playing guitar, drinking palm wine, and playing tapes on a rarely seen boom box. Just like unemployed musicians should do. One day they tried to teach me to play guitar. The one guitar has 1/2 of the strings left (4) and is badly out of tune. Needless to say, it was comical. Billy, He's a Christian (they are big on that here) was the one teaching me to play. He is actually a good musician (the only one) and used to play in a popular Salonian band. Unfortunately the economy does not support things like that any more. So for the time, they mine, and dream for the day that they can escape to a better life. For this reason, they remain unmarried.

Down the road lives another friend of mine. His name is Pa Musa. He must be about 70 years old. For here, that is an eternity. He sits on his porch, a favorite past-time here, and watches the few passers by. He greets most of them in the following manner.

He Indiamo BuWa [friend, hello]

They Mn BuWa Bi Sic [yes, hello, thank you]

He Gbo Gbi Gahu? [how are you?]

They Kai ii ngwo ma [literally, there is no rust on God. Actually = I'm fine]

They Obia be? [How about yourself?]

He Nyabe alhamdulillah [myself Islam is great]

They Eeye mala hoi. [see you later]

He Mn Mala Hoi [Yes , later]

Over and over and over. He is teaching me a small amount of Mende (which is the above). But is tough. It is a Bantu language. The pronunciation is all screwed up. The other day I brought him a kola nut (bitter caffeinated local product which combined with something else gives you Coca-Cola's name. Here a kola nut is given as a sign of respect/friendship. Earlier when I had passed, he said "send for me." This means, when you go to the market, get one for me (no matter what you're getting.) So, when you go to the market, you buy two of whatever. You then show (subtly) the person that you are sending for that you have two and give them one. This shows that what is good enough for you, is the same as theirs. Showing equality. Something like that. I am sending a second letter to Dad. I'd appreciate it these got circulated to the below (listed his friends). R

September 23, 1987

[Part B of F]

Dad/Mom - (send one copy south and to addresses in adjoining letter that I sent to Mom). Continued.....

I am the only ex-patriate in Largo, and this make life strange. I have to explain a very comical situation. On my porch right now are two young kids playing with my cards. I never thought that there were simpler card games than war. I was wrong. They mess the cards face down in a pile. They turn them face up one by one. If suit (flower as they call it) is already showing, then you get to take the pair of cards. Winner has most cards. I let them play amongst themselves. Somehow it is a little boring. The best part is that these 6-year old girls who are playing have less than 1-year old babies strapped to their backs. The babies are screaming out loud, crying as much as possible, because they are petrified of the Pomwi (Pooh-mwi), the dreaded white man. The daring ones touch me. The others are afraid. I think that they think I am either evil, or they will turn white. Who knows.

I live in a pretty great house. it is located on what they call "the school compound". Sounds ominous, but it really isn't. That just means that my house faces the primary school. The secondary school, National Islamic Secondary School, is behind the primary school. My house is typical in structure of every house in town. it is cement with a "zinc-pan roof" (I don't know what this means, but that is what they call it). Wood doors, and wood shutters that open to the outside. Out back, there is a small cooking area where I have my 3-stone fire. There is also a latrine and a wash yard. The latrine is a hole in the ground that you get to squat over. Assorted chair/seat contraptions have been used in other places in the past, but they have been abandoned because of the number of snakes and rats that nested in them. I wash by getting a bucket of water from a gravity-fed piped water system about 100 yds away. The water works is a new project (less than three months old). Last year, power lines were built into the town by some enterprising Chinese construction crews. The lines come up the main road and nose dive into the ground, going no where. A few problems. (1) no-one could afford the electricity. (2) no-one can afford to get their house wired for electricity. (3) no-one can afford any items that actually use electricity. A mite short sighted, but as they say here Aw fuh Du, or in English What To Do? The above is in Krio, a pidgin form of English developed by escaped slaves who came to Salone some 200 years ago.

Food here is interesting. People eat once a day, and when they do, they eat a mountain of rice with some sort of sauce. The sauces have about 5-6 varieties. All of which I have grown to like. The sauces are extraordinarily high in pepper content. Cassava leaf, or Saki Tambo, the favorite here tastes something like peppery grass at

first. I have grown to like it. All of the sauces also are cooked in palm oil, another acquired taste. The country has a certain odor to it. It is a combination of sweat, urine, palm oil, shit, smoky fir, and I don't know what else. oh well, more to come. Love, R.

September 24, 1987

[Part C of F]

To All: (Mom, Dad, Karley, Craig, Debbie, Eric, Pete, etc....) Please send copies to the above if you receive this original.

Well it is now Thursday, and the first week of school is nearly over. It is between classes so I am taking time to write some quick notes. My school is called the National Islamic Secondary School. The name is much more impressive than the school. We have 8-9 teachers, the final number is still undetermined. We will have about 150-175 students. It is unknown because some are still working on the farms, and it will be a while before we really know. I am the maths (as the call it here) and physics teacher. As you can guess, the level is somewhat lower than in the U.S. There is a push and shove between teaching towards practical agricultural adaptation and teaching towards the GCE, General Certificate of Education. something like a national high school equivalency exam. there is the struggle between teaching to the 2-3-5 students who may have a shot at passing the GCE and teaching to the rest who may have slid thru the school system. Passing grade is a 50. that of course depends on how hard you test. So it is a little misleading to say that 50% knowledge is enough for a pass. Well, not too much. Students graduate as a class. If they pass enough subjects, the pass them all. This is often quite obvious. The school has 4 rooms, one for each of the 4 forms. There is, of course, no lab or library. We do have hopes of building a library this year. About 8-10 boxes of books have been accumulated in the last few months in anticipation of this. If you see any miscellaneous books at a garage sal, etc., please feel free to send a box. Any books are OK. These kids have seen probably about 10-15 books in their entire life. It is amazing how little creativity they have. to have any book in English will let them practice reading from something other than the chalk board or their own written notes.

My principal's name is Hashim Sesay. He is on of the most ambitious Salonians that I have run into. He has great plans for the school. He wants to build a lab, a library, and a large agricultural farm. The idea is to make the school more vocational, and to produce money so it can lower fees and provide more locally grown food. it is an ambitious project, but it can certainly work in some reasonable degree. One problem with the schools is that none of the teachers have been paid in 4 months. With this in mind, there is little incentive to come off of their farms, stop working on the harvest so the can teach for free. Not a lot of nutrition in satisfaction. At times, I have gotten very lonely here. At worst I am severely depressed, verging on crying. Other times, I am incredibly bored, ready to tear my hair out for lack of anything better to do. Sometimes I am very busy and am exhausted at night, and sometimes, I am so happy that my face hurts from smiling so much. I'm serious about the last one. Oh well, I'm trying to strike a balance in there! Somehow, I imagine it will happen sooner or later. Love, R

September 24, 1987

[Part D of F]

Mom/Dad/Family/Friends: This splurge of letter writing is really quite amazing. Don't know how long I'll be able to keep this up. I'll try. I appreciate your mail, and I guess you feel the same. Well, I guess it is time to talk a little more about my situation/predicament. I now live in the east whose predominant tribe is Mende. My given name in Mende is Juma. It means Friday. They name many kids this if they are born on this day. I told them that I was born on Friday (mostly because I liked the name). There seems to be a desire here for giving people names. I had another name when I lived in Songo: Dao Bangura. I think Juma is a more long-lasting type. People here have their birth names, and either a Christian or a Muslim name. If a Muslim has been to Mecca, he is called Alhaji. If he is a she, she is Aja. It is a title of respect in Islam. No matter how you address a

person who has been to Mecca, you preface it with Alhaji/Aja. The Muslim religion is very popular here. I think in a large part because of its ability to adapt to African culture. Some call the versions of Islam here “Folk Islam”. Others would be very annoyed at this title. There are a fair number of evangelical fundamental Americans hopping around the country. You know, the country is poor and has the highest infant mortality rate in the world (1986) because they are not Christians. Because they don’t believe in God, they are doomed to poverty and corruption. Believe it or not, these actual words were uttered to me by a Pentecostal Reverend type. I met him one day as I was hitch hiking to Freetown. He and a Salonian picked me up in their brand new Land Rover. Is I got into the car, I was hit by a blast of cold air. Probably the only air-conditioned vehicle up-country. I didn’t question who the guy was, I just figured he was in the diamond business raping the land and the people. Who am I to sacrifice a free incredibly comfortable ride, that will take 4 hours, for my ideals when I will have to sit in the back of a pickup truck with 25 other people (no exaggeration) incredibly uncomfortably for 6-8 hours and have to pay money at the end. Not a whole lot of grammar in that last sentence, but it will have to do. So we pulled away. I noticed a large Playmate cooler on the floor of the car. Somehow I guessed that this guy didn’t eat rice. As we were driving along, John (the National) opened it up and got out softs (sodas here) for the 3 of us. I took a Pepsi, leaving tonic water for this unknown white rich driver. He insisted. I let him. He then broke out his wife’s homemade chocolate chip/walnut cookies, and banana/walnut bread. First chocolate in 6 weeks. So I started to drink, out of politeness I opted out of the two real cheese sandwiches (haven’t had any real cheese yet). The driver then said that he’d better pull over to the side of the road “for this”. I thought, Oh we’re stopping to eat, ok, not bad. Well we pulled over and he said..... [To be continued]

September 24, 1987

[Part E of F]

As I was saying, he said “John, will you lead us in prayer?” It was not short. I almost started laughing. I was sitting there thinking to myself, “I must be hallucinating”, but I haven’t been doing any drugs. Here I am in an impoverished 5th world (3rd world getting worse) sub-Saharan tropical African country, where I am supposed to be leading a rough life while I work to make things better. And here I am in an air-conditioned (too cold if you want to get technical) plush brand new car getting free soda and chocolate chip cookies, etc. Listening to an incredibly long prayer about how God is good and great and when you really get down to it is a pretty cool dude. Well, maybe that is my interpretation of the prayer. I was the only one in the car who seemed to be questioning the reality of the situation, so I did not voice my views. We drove off and started on minor conversation. So, what do you do here? Oh, me? I’m a Peace Corp. How about yourself? I’m a Pentecostal missionary. (Hm a missionary, I couldn’t have guessed that by now!) Oh that’s interesting, I’m an atheist. Well that’s quite different from me. Have some Pringles (you know, Pringles Potato Chips. Yes, he had them in his car.) Well after that we argued for 4 straight hours, the entire way to Freetown. Surprisingly, we kept it very light and both enjoyed the trip. Every once in a while, John (the Salonian in the front seat who I later determined was brainwashed) would come out with statements like “You mean there are people in America who are not Christians?” or after a particularly rousing counterpoint from the Reverend (I never did learn his name) John would say “Yes God is truly wonderful”. Well the gist of the Reverend’s side was that I must have more faith in there not being a God than in there being one. His reason was that having a God gave a person a reason for living while I had not reason to bother living at all. I said that Yes I did probably have more faith on my side but I differed on my pointless existence. Of course, we got into a long discourse on evolution. No new arguments, but he was really good. He really believed all that shit. Also, he accepted biblical readings as the actual accounts of truth. It really wasn’t an argument, because were basing our opinions on entirely separate sets of facts. I would call it a discussion. I laughed a lot, because it was pretty funny, and I didn’t want to get booted out of the car. Well, we got to Freetown, shook hands, and I found a friend after which we promptly headed to the nearest bar and laughed like hell, got drunk, and cussed at each other for a while. Thus ends this story. As with the rest of the letters in this alphabetical series, please circulate to the designated. Love, R

September 24, 1987

[Part F of F]

Dear Readers: When last I left you, I was ranting about some bizarre tale. Now I'll try to get back to what this place is like. Lets try the dressing style. There are many different types of clothes, most are easily classified. We'll start with women. Women for the most part wear a lapa (measure of cloth) wrapped around their body. In the village while cooking or around the house, this is always the case topless almost all of the time. Breasts are not much of an object in this country (except for babies). In more business like settings (market, visiting friends or outside of immediate house area) women wear dresses with matching scarves tied around their heads. The material is usually pretty nice. It is many times gara cloth (woven with really cool patterns) that has been tie-dyed to some very beautiful pattern. Otherwise it is printed with some (usually) ugly pattern. One type of cloth has a picture of the President and a banner underneath him saying "J.S. Momoh, our President". Another alternative banner says "God bless Sierra Leone". Things like that make this country great. What a great motif. Girls were the same in miniature. Young ones run around in underwear. Boys wear pretty funny clothes. Many thrift agencies send second-hand clothes to 3rd world countries. They end up on little boys here. Somewhere along the line, someone couldn't figure out how to distribute them to the needy, so they sold them. Quite enterprising. Anyway, you see things like heavy metal t-shirts, Burger King, Dallas Cowboys, etc.... Anything you saw at home 5-10 years ago is here. The boys also wear shorts of the same variety. The laundry method here does not do much for elastic waistbands. (Beating clothes with a rock.) so all of the boys run around with their shorts falling down (no underwear of course). The only thing keeping the shorts up are their dicks. (I really tried to think of a more delicate way to put that, but I couldn't so there it is.) Men are classy dressers. There are a fair number of tailors in Salone, so the men can get clothes made as they desire. So they wear suits. Leisure suits. Yes, you know exactly what I'm talking about. Early '70's. Pretty mod looking. They often go for great materials, like all white. Shoes are hip. High heels for men is in. Bell bottom pants are also a favorite (ugly colors of course). The first few times that you see some of this you laugh. The rest of it, you laugh all of the time. You can't help but smile. The traditional dress is quite beautiful. Same gara cloth tie dyed like the women but in pretty normal looking pants and shirts that you might on an off chance see in the US, especially at a Dead show. For the most part, everyone here wears flip-flops or half-backs, as they call them. Just plain old cheap hard plastic flip flops. They last a long time and can't be ruined, so they are the perfect match for the climate. They even come in designer varieties. Well mom, since you have been nominated as temporary distributor of the mail, I will close by thanking you in advance for doing this dirty task. As far as I know, the list includes Debbie, Dad, Craig, Karley, Joan, Eric, Peter, Dave, the Frenkels. If you drop a note in with Dave's copy to send his on to Mike Moore, I'd appreciate it. Love, R

September 29, 1987

[Part A of G]

Dear Craig, Karley, Mom, Dad, Debbie, Dave, Eric, Peter, Joan, Naomi and Gabriel (Mr. & Mrs. Frenkels didn't sound right either) and whoever else is getting bored with my mail:

Well, here goes another round of mail. Today, I think I shall write about prospective projects that the school will be undertaking. The school is new and has a lot of room for improvement. As of now, we have four classrooms and a staff room, barely enough desks, no textbooks and we are rationed chalk. Mr. Sesay has managed to collect an assortment of books totaling nearly 4 full cartons. With time, this will improve.

In the very near future, Sesay and myself are going to work up a project proposal and grant application. In all likelihood, we will apply through the Peace Corps Partnership Program. This program matches prospective American philanthropic types with Peace Corps related projects. The requirements are fairly rigid. (1) the proposal must be a request of the town, not a suggestion of a volunteer. (2) the town must pay for all of the labor for the project, and 25% of the material costs. (3) the town must have applied to and exhausted other potential donor banks. (4) the project must not be one that will require more economic aid in the future (self sustaining or low upkeep costs that the town can afford.) (5) the town must genuinely need the project. The list goes on. The reason for many of these rules are quite obvious (to myself). Many times, a volunteer will be placed in a village where he is not needed. He will be bored. He may suggest something like "You know, the school doesn't have a library, lets get some money and build one". So he now has something to do and he has an excuse to go to Freetown a few times. Once to get the application, once to bring it back filled out, once to check on progress and answer return questionnaires, etc.... Well the project goes thru and the money comes, but the town is not ready to meet its end of the bargain because they did not fully understand what actually was

needed to be done. So the town drags on and Peace Corps won't release the funds until the town has acquired its share of materials. So the town does, and Peace Corps releases funds. The funding isn't sufficient since inflation has risen 50% since the application was filed. So the town has a building with no roof or floor and it keeps the books it has received in a teacher's house. One day the books are 'stolen'. Oh dear. Sounds a little far fetched? I can't even begin to tell you about how many failed projects I've seen. Success rates are remarkable low. School projects are especially hazardous.

Now for my school's project. Since my village is primarily agricultural, the school is geared towards agriculture. The idea is to build a school farm. The principal wants to grow rice, corn and citrus products. He wants to get goats, chicken and rabbits. We already have the land, but it costs a lot to start this up. Once it is running, it will produce enough profit to keep the farm going (20 acres). it will provide jobs in the summer for students so they can afford fees and books. it will produce more locally grown food which will hopefully cut down importation of foods. It will teach students to better utilize their land (land use here is at a fraction of the potential. It will hopefully slow the migration of the rural youth to urban centers* (where they have trouble getting jobs). It will provide more protein to the town which presently only gets it in the form of fish and peanuts, and to finish above (*) it will teach farming as a way of life. Drawbacks are also great. It is a large project, thus will be hard to manage. Theft of crops and animals is a foreseeable problem. The present Principal is an honest man. What will happen when he leaves and the next one who is less honest does not get paid for 3-4 months? Don't know. On the surface, it sounds great, but it will take a horrendous amount of work. We, no doubt, will try. I hope it works, but the problem I am most worried about is theft. It is a big problem in this country. When there is very little money, it is hard to resist temptation. The ones who do, I really respect. Some accept theft as a way of life, bitter for what they don't have. Others accept what they have and make do. There are very few of them. The more you see, the fewer of them stand clear. I hope that I don't find muck on my Principal. He is a good friend, and it would be very disappointing. Love, R.

September 30, 1987

[Part B of G]

Dear All:

Today I'll talk about economics. (The day in the life has been postponed). This is going to cover a wide area of opinions and realizations about the country's inner workings. First local agriculture. The weather is broken into 2-3 seasons From May to early October is the rainy season. It rains a lot, every day at least once. Towards the end, very heavy rains come to indicate the end. Early October - November brings tremendous lightning and thunderstorms and the start of the Harmattan. This is the dry wind blowing south across the Sahara. It lasts for a few months. It is reputedly the nicest part of the year. Cool, dry and windy. Then comes the dry season lasting into May. Unbearable heat. I think I shall hate it. But wait, this is about economics. well, the growing of food and season change has tremendous impact on local economy. Food is harvested in the Harmattan and early Dry. It is the season of plenty There is lots of rice, lots of vegetables and lots of fruit. By the end of the rainy season, the hungry season has come. The country does not eat well July - September. What happens is this. After the hungry season, people harvest rice and feast. They feel that since they have just suffered, they deserve to eat a lot. So they cook lots of rice and waste a lot. There is also an abundance of other food stuffs. But they love rice and they have plenty of it. So they eat lots of rice. By the time the rains come, they are low on rice (from waste) and there are no longer alternate food sources (the excess was left uneaten, rotten in the dry season). So the people go hungry until the next harvest. All of the fabulous development agencies (particularly USAID) then do a neat trick. Instead of giving developing countries financial aid, they give (you guessed it) rice. Low nutrition white rice. Native rice is higher in nutrients and other things that your Mom told you were good for you. when do they give this generous gift? Right before harvest! The government dumps it on the market to get much needed money. To sell it, they have to cut the price due to the high supply of native rice. So they drive local income down, and provide a disincentive to produce rice. Great. The farmer says "My rice is not worth selling, so lets eat it. We have just suffered thru the hungry season." And the cycle continues.

Nationally, corruption is a problem. It is now October, and the teachers have not been paid in 3-4 months. This generally goes for all government workers. So many Principals live off school fees (you know, the ones that go to buy supplies for the school.) Men who have access to trucks, borrow them and run trips between towns

making a profit by taking passengers. They of course get stopped regularly at police check points. the police check to insure that the vehicle is properly inspected, registered, licensed and not an illegally driven vehicle. Well that is what they claim. (They check for overcrowding too.) In actuality, the vehicle pulls up to a check point, the driver runs out and bribes the policeman, and off we go. Virtually every lorry/taxi or other kind of ride that I've ever been on has stopped to bribe either the army or a policeman. One time, I was on a poda (pick-up truck with a metal roof welded on) There were 4 in front, about 25 in the back, 3 hanging on the back, myself and 4 friends on top, with a huge load of wood. All a very run of the mill ride. Numbers quoted are by no means extreme. We were stopped at a checkpoint, the army made us get off the roof (it was unsafe). So we walked around the checkpoint and got back on top of the lorry some 75 feet down the road. No big deal. And of course, I assure you that this incredibly evil corruption has not penetrated the upper ranks of the country's government. The President is the most scrupulously honest person since George Washington. The slogans read "J.S. Momoh needs your help to make Sierra Leone great again." God bless the man. R. Next: ...A day in the life of R Watt

October 1, 1987

[Part C of G]

Dear All: Here comes the long awaited "Day in the life of Me."

Woke up early in morning. I sleep with my window open and I could see somewhat. I couldn't read my watch yet, so I knew that I wasn't late yet. Had to piss really bad. I think that I need to increase my salt intake. I have been drinking a lot and pissing more. It just goes right through me, and I always feel a little dehydrated. Slept a little longer, putting off the inevitable cold water bath. Woke again alter, I can barely see my watch. It is 6:15. Lay in bed for a while longer. 6:30 now, can't put off the inevitable. Get up and walk outside to the latrine. It is basically a round hole in the ground surrounded by 4 walls and a roof. One of my neighbors, J.S. Bockharie, saw a 6 foot black snake in there yesterday. He tried to kill it, but it escaped down the hole to a nasty existence. There is no seat or anything above the hole because rodents inhabit them when they are not being used. Sometimes, they inhabit them when they are being used, making life unpleasant for the user. So, I make a lot of noise going in to scare anything in there away. Old Newsweek makes fine toilet paper. \$7 (equivalent) for a roll of TP just doesn't make it into my budget.

I then go down behind a few houses, greeting everyone I see, to get to my "water source". In my case, it is a gravity fed pipe borne water supply. It comes from a deep well up a hill fairly nearby. The water is untreated, but I haven't gotten sick from it. yet. I guess I'm pushing my luck, but there have been a number of times when I haven't had much of a choice (guest at another person's house). So I get a bucket of cold water and lug it back to the washyard which adjoins the latrine. Again, I make plenty noise going in. The first thing that I bought in-country was a big plastic cup. For washing. I have my own method. First, I bend my head over and slowly trickle the water thru my hair, being careful not to pour it all over my body. The next cup, I dump down my back all at once. This is usually a shock, but it is the only way I can bear to do it. Then I soap and shampoo up. It is possible to get clean, but only if you have patience. I then proceed to dump (slowly) cups of water thru my hair to rinse the shampoo. Again, I keep all cold water off of my body. When the shampoo is gone, I rapidly pour cup after cup over my body to get rid of the remaining soap (who cares about the dirt). By this time, I am freezing cold, so I grab my towel and run back into my house where I jump under my electric blanket and crank my stereo--no, wait a minute, wrong country. I run back into my house and dy off as much as possible, and then baby powder myself. Getting dressed while slightly wet is a bad idea. You will get nasty crotch rot, athlete's foot and other assorted fungal itches in a hurry. I have just rid myself of crotch rot and some mystery back itch. I solved this by putting some (Dettol (disinfectant similar to Lysol) in my bath water. It probably isn't good for me, but it brought much relief. The itching was horrible. I would be standing talking to someone, and an overwhelming itchiness would come over my back. I would be itching all parts of my back as hard, fast and much as possible. I would literally tear my shirt off to get at it. This would last 2-3 minutes. Really unbearable. Same thing with jock itch. Awful. Then I would get dressed for school. Long pants mandatory. in this culture, wearing shorts is a sign of youth. Short pants are part of the school boys uniform. Older men never wear shorts outside of their house. So I wear long pants and sweat. A lot. I then go to find my bread which is hanging from a string in a bag. the string is tied diagonally across one corner of my house. Unfortunately, the ants (which I have many) have discovered this hiding place. The bag is full of small red ants and the bread has what appears

to be a thousand or so inside. No breakfast today. I'll have to devise a better hiding place, but these ants are pretty tricky. So now the school bell clangs. In actuality it is an old car fender (metal) hanging from a tree. One-two (slow) on-two-three (fast) is the chime, over and over. it is rung precisely at 7:30 (+ or - ten minutes) every school day. So I walk past the primary school and say "Hello" 20 to 30 times to assorted little kids. Tomorrow, the school... Love, R.

October 5, 1987

[Part D of G]

Dear Dad, etc: Continuation of the Day series.

After walking thru waves of little kids at the primary school I walk a short distance to the secondary. (I think that I now know what it is like to be a famous basketball player. Each morning I have a pack of short kids follow me, hang on to my arms, waist, etc... It is like a pack of my very own fan club. Very much of an ego inflator.) I am usually one of the first people there. Michael, Mr. Sesay's nephew is the first. He unlocks all of the padlocks on the classroom doors. He is there today with Lahai and Mohammed. Lahai is a Form IV student. He is very studious, but not the brightest. he comes from a very poor family. He sits in the front of the class and tries. He wants to get a scholarship and go to college and America. So does every other kid/person that I've met here. With rare exceptions, this route is seen as the way to escape their present situation. Mohammed is a Form III student. he is not terribly studious, but very bright. He sits in the back looking bluff (term for cool, disinterested) In actuality, he is always paying attention and has all the answers. Not a bad kid, never disrupts the class. So I greet everyone and go into the staff room and sign the staff attendance register: Duncan R Watt 7:40. The school is supposed to start at 7:45. The other teachers then trickle in. Mr. Sesay, the Principal and my best friend/guardian, is next. He is tall and skinny. A good man. He and his family have taken care of me since I set foot in town. Without him, life here would be much more difficult. Next is Alhaji Fofanoh. He is the senior teacher (second in command). He does not have to be here. He chooses so. He teaches Arabic, Islamic religious knowledge and French. He lived in Egypt for 20 years, studied Arabic and electrical engineering. He is a very religious (Muslim) man. He has been to Mecca 7 times. Anyone who has gone to Mecca is called Alhaji (man) or Aja (woman). He could live pretty much anywhere in Salone or Africa. If he wanted, he probably could get residency in a developed Western nation. Quite man. I don't know him too well. Next are the school leavers (as Sesay calls them) arrive. These are recently graduated high school teachers. They have taken their "O" levels and are waiting for the results. They are called such because they recently left school. The Ministry of Education does not recognize them nor allow them to teach. Generally they are not terribly useful. We have 2-3 teaching in my school. Last comes Mr. Boma. He's an older looking journey man teacher. He's probably not too bad, but a bit lifeless for my liking. So we hang around and wait for Assembly. Assembly is when the students line up by Form. They get addressed by the Principal, and say a Muslim prayer. Then they sing the National Anthem. The late kids are made to stand on one side until Assembly is over. They are then beaten. They get hit anywhere from 3-6 times of varying degrees. Some get whacked really hard. It is not terribly pleasant to watch, so I avoid it. Classes start following this spectacle. These go on pretty much as expected. The level is pretty low, and the students can be pretty unresponsive. it is hard to teach a kid with a hungry belly. The kids can also be incredibly non-creative. They are almost brain dead sometimes. Their whole education has been copy and memorize, listen and repeat. The concept of independent thought is not given enough attention. Not having many books for reading is also a big hindrance in the development of thought.

Dad—I guess you've figured out that I have appointed you secretary for this batch of letters. Mom has all the names and addresses. Love, R.

October 6, 1987

[Part E of G]

All:

When I walk into the/a classroom, one student says, "Class stand". And they all slowly do so. Then in something approaching unison say "Good morning, Sah." It is almost comical. They have had this strict regimentation drilled into them for years, and are very bored by it. then I write my name on the board "Mr. Watt" every time. A few students will repeat it as I write it. They seem to enjoy saying "Watt". It sound funny to them. I guess it is funny in the same way that I find Mbewie, Kargbo, Jalloh, Gbao, Yayah and Fofanah to be strange. If you couldn't tell, those are last names. First names include Fumba, Bobor, Usman, Umaru, Boday, Jabiru, Amadu, Alpha, Bockarie, Isatu, Samatu, Fatmatu, Rugiatu, Shrku and Siaka (Shaka). There is a lot of repetition. It is not uncommon to have three brothers with the same name. In school lists they are Mohamed Ba I, Mohamed Ba II, and Mohamed Ba III. Class always starts slowly. Usually, the teacher before me has dulled them. Maybe I will do the same today. I have tried to get a big degree of interaction in my classes. I have learned most of the names, but sometimes I draw a blank. Each day I try to assign homework, but it is hard to grade because the kids just don't have the paper. So they write it in their exercise books and I have to walk around and check it. Most teachers do not assign homework. It's a real pain to keep a hold on 35 kids while looking at individual homework. Exercise books are about 5 inches by 7 inches. The kids will have a few of these each. If they are lucky, they'll have one per class. They usually have about 40 pages (80 sides). They are supposed to last the entire term. This means they economize on space and take fewer notes. I usually have a good number of kids come to the board and do problems simultaneously. I run around the class saying "Fast, Fast, who's done?" as I check the other students in the class. I think I am what most people would refer to as a mess teacher: not very formal, uses big hand motions and jumps about while talking, gets chalk over entire body, and sweats a lot. It seems to work pretty well. Most of the kids are actually paying attention and understanding what is being taught. This is nice.

One of the things that has gotten on my nerves lately is the fact that I have yet to see a syllabus. I really don't know what topics I should teach. They usually have huge knowledge gaps in their education. Every once in a while, they will recall some strange advanced piece of information. Kids that can't add and subtract negative numbers know the quadratic equation. They don't have a clue what it means, but someone made them memorize it once. The Form IV kids are uptight about the GCE (General Certificate of Education). It is like a high school equivalency exam and an SAT combined. If they pass it, they might be able to go to college. It's a long shot, but it's either that or subsistence farming. They get uptight when I teach them fundamental math. They want to know the GCE level info. Some fail to understand that they can't do higher math without some basics. They think it is like history. You can pick it up at any point. So here is the big argument: do I teach to the GCE to help 1 or 2 escape, or do I teach to the class with hopes that I can work in practical math they can use on their farms? Love, R

October 7, 1987

[Part F of G]

Dear Dad (etc...):

Let's see, where did I leave off. Must have been in the middle of the school day somewhere. School is 8 periods long with no breaks in between classes except for a 15 minute morning break and a 15 minute lunch break. At the morning break, I usually go to get oranges. They are Le1 each or 3 for Le2. About 1-2 cents each. If I really felt like it, I could get them free from my neighbors, or steal them off of any of 100 trees. I choose to stimulate the local economy. People here eat oranges very differently than we, and in my opinion, they have learned something we haven't. They take the orange and slice off circles of the skin (1 cm in diameter) being careful not to cut through the white rind into the flesh. What is left is a white ball. They then cut the top (see diagram) off and such the orange, rolling it back and forth to squeeze all of the juice out. Fresh squeezed OJ, fresh off the trees, very cheap and little effort. I eat about 6 a day. I love it. The lack of rind makes it easy to squish out the juice. Try it. it is worth the effort.

[Diagram - pending during development of requisite web graphic skills].

After the oranges, it is back to class. (Sometimes I get bananas, a bunch for Le1. Africans eat bananas opposite from the way we do, bottom first. They then pick out the small space in the bottom of the banana, and eat it.)

All of the above prices are considered outrageous. Used to be about 1/10 the price 5 years ago. Slowly the kids get less responsive as the day goes on. This, I suppose, normal. Hunger is the driving factor. Most kids/people eat one meal of rice and sauce per day. Usually it is a huge amount. By volume, I eat about 1½ - 2 liters of rice each afternoon. After school, I go to my house, pull my big comfortable chair out onto my porch and write. I have been writing about 1-2 letters a day since I moved to Largo. Part of it is boredom, the bigger part is I want to put thoughts on paper. Every day it seems like huge events occur. In between letters that I write, I forget what I have written, because I am only scratching the surface of what I see and feel. There isn't enough time or patience to write everything. I also try to read a little in the afternoons. Around 3 o'clock, Jisu or Olive (two of Sesay's kids) comes with my rice. I tried cooking for myself, but was losing a lot of weight and was getting very frustrated. At my low point, I was down 16 pounds from my American weight. It is a lot of rice. Takes me four heaping plates and two sessions to eat it all. Unfortunately, it is a lot of volume and little value. In the morning, I eat bread and processed cheese then oranges/bananas, a big glass of reconstituted full cream powdered milk, then rice and at night I eat roast corn or peanuts (called groundnuts here). I think that I have managed to stabilize my weight. The milk has helped a lot. Sometimes if I am lucky, Titi (woman who cooks rice for me) makes me fried potatoes. She fries sweet potatoes in palm oil with peppers onions and some other unknown local product. They are amazing. I can't eat enough of them. So I eat my rice. Then comes the day long parade of visitors. First are Joseph and Victor (6 and 8 years old). They are my neighbors. They can be pretty cute sometimes. They always bug me for food. I make a point of not giving them my rice. I'll give them fruit once in a while, and they give me tangerines once in a while. If I gave them rice, it would insult the elder people who live near me. Inviting someone for rice is a respectful thing to do. Also, I don't want their parents to depend on me to feed them. It could be a dangerous habit. If they know I'll give them rice if they are hungry, I'm afraid the parents will feed them less. I don't want to disrupt their present way. So I try to be cold even when I know they will not get to eat more than a few bites today. R

October 8, 1987

[Part G of G]

Dear All:

Time to finish this eternal day thing. After Victor and Joseph bug me, numerous other small children come and annoy me. Hombog is the Krio word for it. I am, at this time sitting on my porch doing one of a few things: reading a book, writing tomorrow's lesson plans (I have just figured out how to teach addition of negative numbers. I use positive negative and no money. If you have positive money, fine, everyone knows what that looks like. If you have no money, fine, "look in your pocket." They know what I mean. Negative money is when they owe me money. -5 Leones is 5 Leones they owe me, or to get back to no money they have to cough up 5 Leones somehow) writing letters or working on the school's proposal for books, farm material, etc. I own the only deck of cards in the area, so the kids all come to use them. Older people come to "pass time" with me. This is when someone comes (or you yourself do it) and sits on your porch (the national pastime) and stares forward with you. Minor conversation is nice, but not necessary. You get very used to sitting around with people with no conversation. Try it for 3-4 minutes with someone you don't know. To me it used to feel pretty uncomfortable. This goes on for a while. Usually it is not as boring as above. That is an extreme. Then I wash dishes, take a bath because I've been sweating incredibly much and finish my lessons. It is now about 6 o'clock. My friend James comes by. He is somewhere between 30 and 50 years old. He doesn't know. His body is very weathered from working his entire life on farms. He has no wife, just one brother. A very small family indeed. He passes my house on the way from his farm to his house. Every day he has poyo. It is part of his income. Poyo is palm wine. He usually gives me a cup or I buy it. And I usually give him kerosine or some other comparable item (rice, etc.) He farms for his food and sells poyo for other things he needs. Generally about as good as they come here. Really nice person. Totally uneducated but wise, in a sense. He has nothing and he knows it, so he lives with it. He doesn't complain. Saloneans complain all of the time (and they have good reason). The economy sucks and the government workers get paid 3-4 months late (if at all) and many people are corrupt just to get by. There is a Krio saying: uvai ya tai clehm kau, na de dehm go it. Or roughly, where you tie a can up, it is in that spot he will eat. The meaning: man will use anything to his advancement. The application is to government employees. They force bribes out of people to get anything done. Policemen make people bribe them to get thru checkpoints, etc. etc. So James and I drink poyo and talk about teaching Americans to eat cassava leaf. He was pretty excited to hear he had made it into one of my letters. He sort of had

the impression that he is famous in America. I had to try pretty hard to explain that the readership of my letters is pretty small. After that, it is dark and he goes home because he is tired. Then I go to Sesay's house for an hour or two to pass time. We usually talk about the school, listen to his shortwave (BBC News except no batteries lately), talk politics (about how bad American policies can be), play with his million kids, and eat roast corn. This is a fun part of the day. It and the afternoon are best. Teaching can be tiresome, but is somewhat satisfying. I go home pretty beat and fall asleep under my mosquito net by 9:45. Love, R

October 9, 1987

Dear Mrs. Watt:

I am very pleased to write and inform you that R is staying here with us at Largo, a village with approximately 2,500 inhabitants in the Eastern Province of Sierra Leone, and 204 miles from Freetown.

He is very friendly and seems to be getting used to our way of life here in Largo. One would expect that there would be problems of changes in diet as we Sierra Leoneans eat a lot of rice, but no. He has overcome that.

As R might have told you, he is teaching in a school where my husband is Principal. There is much intimacy between him and our family. It is in regard that I have expressed my desire to know members of his own family, especially you for he is always talking about you.

Please know that your son is in safe hands. He is well cared for so do not entertain any fears about his safety. Besides, we have begun understanding ourselves as he can well speak our patois, or Krio, and a little of our dialect, Mende.

The kids join me to say hello to you and the entire family of yours. Yours sincerely, Jemaima Sesay

November 4, 1987

Debbie/Mom/Dad:

Today I feel like two years will not be enough time. I am thinking of projects and work that will spill over into a third year. Who knows? Tomorrow, I'll probably think that another two days will be too much. I have been tho.. (can't spell that word anymore) completely enjoying life here. It has not had the ups and downs that were prevalent in my first month in Largo.

This past weekend I had to go to Bo for a Peace Corps meeting. I figured that it would be pretty useless, but a good excuse to see my friends. At the meeting I heard a lot of bad news. The first thing that I saw when I got to Bo was a questionnaire in my mailbox. The education program in Sierra Leone (both governmental and Peace Corps) is in trouble. Teachers have not been paid. In some extreme cases, including my principal, teachers have not been paid since June. Teachers are striking by leaving school after teaching one or two classes. They call it the Go-Slow. Anyway, the questionnaire was on the education program (Peace Corps). It gave 5 choices: (1) I want to transfer to another country with Peace Corps. (2) I want to transfer to another Peace Corps program in Sierra Leone. (3) I want to terminate my status as a Peace Corps volunteer. (4) I want to end my Peace Corps service early (90 days). (5) I want to stay as I am. They want to cut the education program in half. That means about 50 of us have got to go. I sense that they will not force this upon us. If you want to stay, fine. People have found it very difficult to work with education in this country. How can you improve a system, when the government does not pay our counterparts? Many of the Peace Corps had come here hoping to work hard and accomplish something of value. Instead, they have been placed in schools that aren't working, in schools that don't need them, and in schools run by dishonest principals.

A lot of Peace Corps are nearly ready to jump ship. They just need a good enough avenue of escape. So much for that. After that, our first meeting was on rioting. What to do if/when there is a riot. What to do if your school is having a Go-Slow. oh, how pleasant. Then I hear on the radio that Major General J.S. Momoh, the impressive President, has announced an economic state of emergency. I think that maybe inflation (sever) is on the way. Then I ran into a friend who had gotten chloraquinne-resistant malaria. She said, it is only in the east. Oh, no problem. I live in the middle of Mende land. In the middle of the Eastern Province. Then I hear that Nixon Memorial Hospital has diagnosed chloraquinne-resistant malaria. Oh, no problem. Nixon Memorial Hospital is approximately 24 miles from my home. I'm really not worried. I think (hope) Peace Corps is too slow to do anything about it. In any case, it is out of my hands. I am really happy and basically able to brush nonsense like the above off. My school has started evening classes for Form IV. We are going full steam ahead. The rest of the country (and Peace Corps) are not so fortunate. Well on to some sweet poyo my friend James, the poyo trader (??tapper??) has just come by.

November 20, 1987

Dear Pat:

I have recently received your letter and wish to thank you for replying so soon. It is pathetic to learn that you were in Scotland last month to say goodbye to your mother who is on her death bed now. I'm sure you must have returned shortly after that. From your letter, it seems that you intend paying a visit to R next year if all goes well. We pray that all goes well so that you can come and see Sierra Leone for yourself and especially Largo where R is stationed.

Largo is a rural community with a population between 4,500 and 5,000 inhabitants. Most of these people are peasant farmers practicing agriculture on a small scale. The town is found in Eastern Province about 204 miles from the Capital City, Freetown. But like all rural areas we're removed from the hustle and bustle of urban life which makes life interesting here. But because the town is located on a major trunk road we are certain of getting transport any time of the day either to get to the Provincial towns of Kenema (14 miles away) and Bo, the second largest town in the Country. How was your return trip from Scotland. It must have been eventful I guess. R is doing a fine job here. He is teaching Mathematics and Physics. And the kids enjoy his teaching very much. My husband is very pleased to have him on the staff as he is hard working and cooperative. Hope to hear from you again. Thank you. Yours, Jemaima

December 26, 1987

Dear All:

Guess I haven't written in a while. Xmas in Salone is all right. Don't' really have much to say so I'll dictate facts until I stumble on to a subject of general interest. Fro Christmas, a bunch of us expat elites came together in a town call Jimi-Bagbo. It is a town of about 1,500 people. It has one of the 4 government secondary schools in the country. (The rest are run privately or by missions.) A few problems. Jimi is very difficult to reach, it is in a remote area, has little transport to it, and is at the end of one of the worst roads in the country. What's more, it has no local market. Its situation makes it nearly impossible to recruit enough teachers and students. Presently it is running at about 25% of its capacity. It should have 800 students, but it now has 200. No surprise that the school was built as a political move. Corruption is not very shameful. There is a saying I once heard that is very applicable here. "The only remaining sin is getting caught." In a few days time, a bunch of us are going to a place called Sulima. It is on the ocean on the Liberian border. The current economic situation makes it a pretty remote place. Parts of the movie "endless Summer" were filmed there. (Another, I think, political stunt.) I don't really know what that movie is about, but I hear it is bad.

I was in Freetown for a few days before Xmas. A few of my friends dragged me to one of the Freetown

Casinos. Oh God, they are trying to attract a bigger tourist trade. Good luck, they need it. I put on my only decent pair of pants (not very clean) and a pink oxford Brooks Brothers shirt which I had purchased in Freetown's Junks (clothes flea markets) for less than 50 cents. Such a great buy that I can't get over it. At the casino, I saw some pretty amazing stuff. The dealers were really bad. Lots of misdeals were made. Didn't seem important though, nobody minded. The players did get a little annoyed when the dealers (consistently) forgot to pay them. The managers (American looking) had looks on their faces that could only mean "These Dealers are Boobs, but at least it's warm and we are making a profit." More Freetown to come. Love, R

Undated

Debbie and the rest:

Today: African Justice. I have a friend who lives down the road from me about 3 miles way. Her name is Catherine, and she is another Peace Corps. Her house is an old Leb(?) shop and it is right on the main road. Recently she has had a bunch of things stolen from her house. One day, her thermos disappeared. She thought that maybe she left her door open when she went to get a bucket of water. Then she began noticing little things were vanishing, so she decided to stop letting little kids in her house. I thought that people were coming through her ceiling. She lives in a huge house kind of like a warehouse. One day she notices the tools to her Honda (bike) are gone. Her coffee pot, her coffee mugs, her powered milk, can opener, plates, a towel I gave her since hers was stolen, etc. etc... So she goes to her Chief after this big theft occurs (she slept through it) and the Chief comes up with a genius-like idea. They think the thieves are coming thru the ceiling of a room off the back of the house (I found footprints) so they take a nail and bend it over an unused clasp on the door. Hey, surprise, the next day it is bent open and more tidbits are missing. Back to the Chief. Now here comes the real stroke of genius. The Chief assigns these shady characters as watchmen. They think that they are the thieves, but they don't know. Logic. Assign the thieves to be watchmen and if anything gets stolen, hold them responsible (for being poor watchmen) and flog the shit out of them. Great. That would make me feel safe. The other alternative is to round up the known thieves, search their houses, and beat them. Bound to find the truth that way too. It is like a big silly game. Catherine is a coffee achiever/addict. They stole her mugs, her pot, her thermos, and her powdered milk. They really must be commended for striking so convincingly at a sore spot.

My house is nice and secure. I haven't been visited by Tifs (pronounced Teefs). Apparently, there are a lot of Tif men in Largo. I have good neighbors who keep their eyes open, and my house is away from common paths. It's funny, at home I wouldn't think twice about going to the police if I was robbed. Here, it is not at all obvious what you should do. Go the Chief?

January 3, 1988

Dear All:

Ah, now for continuing tale of then neighborhood feud. I can't really remember what I wrote about in the last letter, this one might be slightly redundant. Anyway,.... One day Mr. Saidu came to me with a typewritten letter. He'd just come from Kenema. The letter was one of congratulations. He had just been promoted to the rank of Supervising Teacher. Sounds fairly innocuous, right? Turns out he really stepped on some toes with that one. He had gone to Kenema and gotten his foot in the door for the job. The order of rank in the primary school system is as follows: Supervising Teacher; Headmaster; Head Teacher; Teachers (others).

The Supervising Teacher goes around to various primary schools, does workshops, gets paid better, and loafa a bit. The present rank of the Largo folks is as follows: Supervising Teacher - vacant; Headmaster - Mr. Chehlig; Heat Teacher - Mr. Bockarie; Teacher - Mr. Saidu.

So in effect, Mr. Saidu leap-frogged over both Mr. Bockarie and Mr. Chehlig. The status quo thing to do

would have been to bring them all up one notch. With the new hierarchy, suddenly Mr. Saidu (a former peon) was now their boss. This really intensified their hatred.

Mr. Saidu now wields his power over the others in a flaunting fashion. He really sticks their noses in it from time to time. Then Elizabeth Bockarie got into a huge fight with Saidu over a past loan. Elizabeth loaned him money about 6 months ago. Saidu kept putting her off, saying he would pay her later. Then, after not asking for about a month, she asked him for it, and he told her that he didn't recall such a transaction. Oooh..... She hadn't told Mr. Bockarie about the loan because he would have been annoyed. Now she told him. He was pissed. She was really pissed. She stood in front of his porch (with him sitting on it) and yelled at him, at the top of her lungs, for about an hour. I've never seen her get so angry. After that event, it turns out they no longer talk to each other. They live a good 20 feet apart. This arrangement can be humorous. The best still hasn't come yet. A new bombshell. It turns out that both Mr. Bockarie and Mr. Saidu are having an affair with the same woman!!!! As you can guess, this doesn't help matters any. I don't really know how this came about without them knowing about each other. This sealed their hatred of each other. Other things have contributed: Mr. Saidu is a drunk, Mr. Bockarie is a non-drinker. The primary school has a meeting and Mr. Bockarie suggested that the orange tree behind Mr. Saidu's house should be picked and the oranges given to the kids. Mr. Saidu used to get free run of the tree since he was a teacher in the school and the tree was right behind his house. Mr. Saidu is no longer a teacher in the primary schools (reasons Mr. B) so he shouldn't get the fruit. The pettiness continues... Love, R

January 9, 1989?

Dear Mom:

Things are O.K. A bit boring if anything. I am on a letter-writing binge. It has been a good 2½ - 3 months since I thought about writing a letter. Somehow, I got out of the habit. over the Xmas holiday, I did a fair amount of traveling. I went to one place called Bonthe Island.

To get there, we had to take a 5-hour boat ride down a river. The boat was great. We were sitting on top of it the whole way. There must have been 60-70 people packed in the thing. We slowly chug-chugged the whole way there. The scenery was really great too. It would have made a great set for a movie. We stopped along the way at some small bush villages to pick up and dump off passengers. In some cases it was a matter of slow down and you jump. Other times we just rammed into the mud bank. Mostly, we did a neat maneuver (see diagram) making a U turn and bumping the side of the boat gently against the bank. Along the way, women came wading out into the water with trays of oranges and fish to sell. You had to do a balancing act to throw your money, grab the produce and stay on the boat.

The island used to be a big trading area for the big companies like PZ and CFAO. They ran profitable businesses. Buy produce, sell it for foreign currency, buy European goods, bring them to Sierra Leone (and other countries) and sell the for local currency, then buy produce and so on. After a time, the Sierra Leone government decided that these companies had too much of a good thing, so they took away their export licences and gave the sole right to export produce to the SLPMB (Produce Marketing Board). The SLPMB was run by Bigmen. They bought the produce, sold it for foreign currency and bought Mercedes-Benz cars. The business died. The SLPMB is now essentially defunct. Bonthe Island is a monument (crumbling) of what it once was.

On the island (it is bg-60 miles by 30 miles or so) they sold fish cakes. These cakes are not what we think of when we say fish cake. the take a small 5-6 inch fish, dip it in batter and deep fry the whole thing. Eat the whole thing. The first time I had one, I started eating the tail first, I slowly crept towards the head and then without thinking, I stuffed it down. Yum. They were good. No complaints. The fish was fried in very hot oil. This caused the bones to become brittle and easy to eat. It is amazing what you can eat if you set your mind to it. Take care. Love, R

January 19, 1988

January 19, 1988 Mom:

Haven't written much lately, but I doubt that you are very surprised. My letter-writing habits are not so great. Life in Largo is OK. School has started and classes have reached their normal pace. Hope things are going all right for you. I must say that when I heard that your mom died, I didn't have much a reaction. I don't think I really know how you felt/feel about it. This combined with Bill's engagement must have made Thanksgiving an odd day. You say both were events to be thankful for, but I think I would be hard pressed to find many positive adjectives to describe them if I were you. When it rains it pours. I still think that you moving out was the smartest thing that I have known you to do. I do know that.

I wonder how X-mas was in Richmond. The holiday season was full of blues here. No family and no tradition. Ate rice for Xmas. I was with about 6 other Peace Corps friends of mine, so it wasn't bad. I hope you and Debbie had a good time. You may know that she is again threatening to visit. I hope this threat turns into an action. I miss her quite a bit. In a way, I am glad that this holiday business is over. I traveled around the country quite a bit and talked to my cohorts about the continent that we left. Mae me miss home very much. Much of our conversations dwelt on American food. We don't get to eat much besides rice. An occasional beef or egg sandwich is the incredible variety. Another part of our discussions was on Debbie (and others' equivalents.) Made me want to come back. oh well.

If you get in the package sending mood, I have some suggestions. Hint hint. Kool-Aid (non-sweetened). Picture of Otis (big one). Things like M&Ms are good. Doritos (nacho cheese). Mmmmm yum yum. It is hard to figure out exactly what I miss. Miscellaneous junk food that keeps is good. It is good to send these things in a tin. Rats get into most packages as do ants. I have even seen a one-inch diameter hole chewed through Tupperware by a rat. I will try to send more stuff home, but it seems that every time I get to Freetown I spend all of my money and am broke. I should be calling in about a month or so. I will be trying to write more. I need to start another series up for circulation.

Karley's love affair sounds like it is pretty amusing. From your letters, I can't tell whether it is good or bad for her. She sounds happy anyway. Love, R

January 22, 1988

Dad/Mom, etc:

The other day my school had one of the most ridiculous meetings that I have had the privilege to witness. An "emergency" meeting was abruptly called in the middle of the day. The topic was a "thrift and credit society." Sounded hokey to me. The first thing that we did was have a prayer (Muslim) led by one of our teachers. All 8 of us were there. My Principal (a pretty good guy) starts out in a very formal low tone: "Gentlemen we have called this emergency meeting here this afternoon to immediately discuss the very important matter of creating a thrift and credit society at National Islamic Secondary School-Largo." The school is small and everyone is on a first name basis, but the other teacher's like to act seriously and formally at meetings. This whole country, in fact, is very big on pomp and formality. He continued "As this is an abruptly called emergency meeting, we will leave the minutes of the meeting off the record. The first time on the agenda is to determine whether or not there is a need for such a thrift and credit society. Before we go about creating such a society, we must first decide whether it is worthwhile to do so. So, I ask you, Gentlemen, is there a need for a Thrift and Credit society?" At this point I began to wonder if it was appropriate to ask what the hell a Thrift and Credit Society is. One of the other younger teachers (fresh out of high school himself) began to formulate a serious question of his own: "Before I can make a decision about the necessity of such a Thrift and Credit Society, I need to know more about the specifics of such an organization." So my Principal says "Before we can decide on the particulars of the society, we must first decide whether there is a need for such a society. If there is no need, then we won't bother to create it. If there is a need then, Gentlemen, we can continue, YOU SEE." (He likes to

say this a lot when he is making a point. It makes people feel stupid, and it is intimidating.) So, Gentlemen is there a need for a Thrift and Credit Society? Yes or No? It is simple. So this young teacher spits back the same question/statement as before. My Principal responds with a couple of You See's and asked again about the necessity of such an organization. This went back and forth a few times until finally I said that he didn't know what the hell a T&C society was and maybe it would be good if the Principal sat down and sketched out what he was talking about and explained it before we could determine the need. Revolutionary. We only argued about this for 10 minutes, making the meeting 15 minutes long already. Not bad, 3 seconds of work accomplished. So we broke up the meeting and talked for 5 minutes more about when we could reschedule this emergency meeting. It is no wonder nothing every gets accomplished here. R

January 22, 1988

Mom/Dad, etc:

Today I am helping some kids read. They are my Form IV students. For the most part, their English is really bad. They all talk Krio which is a really bad influence. Krio is much easier to speak than English. If you speak Krio and are trying to learn English, it is very difficult. they are reading basic stories from about 6th grade. One of the problems is the American vocabulary. Words like cliff, ledge (geographical) are tough. The land doesn't really have some of these features, and they don't have TV to show them what it is about. Then you hit things like Golden Retriever, Airedale, etc. Every dog here is the same kind. A localized type of mutt. Then we came across a sentence "I gotta...." Eeek, what is that doing in Readers? I found myself explaining the most bizarre words. Many were very simple. It is a wonder they can understand anything written in English. When I teach, I use very repetitive phrases. If I use too many new words, we'll end up doing vocabulary instead of maths.

English is the only language that these kids can write and read. They all speak Mende properly, but it is not a written language. The level of proficiency is really low. A couple of weeks ago I met a guy in Bo who is trying to gain support for this writing system that he developed. He calls it African Script. It is basically a phonetic language (words are actually written as they are pronounced). Presently, Mende is printed in an Anglicized version which uses the English alphabet to describe non-English sounds. Things like Kp, Gb, Nd, and Ny are common at the beginning of words. The only problem is that these letter combos are only representations of the sounds. an English speaking person trying to imitate these combos will approach the actual sound, but never get very close. It is very frustrated to try and learn these sounds by the above writings when the sound is really a separate sound into itself. Anyway, I am big on this African Script. The man (Oosman Bangora) has translated (with other people) over a dozen languages into his system. the idea is that Africa could have a writing system for all of its languages (sub-Saharan). This would help preserve the original language. As it now stands, many languages are being subjected to constant alteration. I really got excited about this idea when I first heard of it. It would be great to have a non-European imposed system of anything here. This one seems to have potential. If it is workable, it will probably take 100 years. Who knows. R

February 22, 1988

Dear All:

Time has come to write about my favorite topic in Largo: The Bockarie-Saidu Feud. Who are these people? Saidu, or more properly, Robinson Momoh Saidu, is my neighbor. I share a duplex with him. (What? Duplex's in Africa?) I can only explain it by saying that it was cheaper to mush two houses together than to build an extra wall and extended roofs on both of them. He lives there with his wife Isatu (probably L20 years) and three kids. One named Zainab (female born of Isatu), one named Victor (completely in Saidu's own image, the kid is a pain in the ass) and Joseph (very adorable). Joseph and Victor were born of a different mother. Saidu must be in his late 30's or so. He has a couple of wives (probably 3) none of them simultaneously.

The next house down contains the Bockarie family. Headed by D.C. and Elizabeth, both of the same age (roughly). They have 6 girls (a curse in this place.) Come to think of it, if I had 6 girls, I'd think it was a curse too. (I love making statements like that in letters. No-one can get mad at me, accuse me of sexism or argue at me.) One of their girls is named Miatta. She is my only true love in this hemisphere. Too bad she is only 9 years old. If I adapt quickly to African standards, I'll be able to marry her in about 5 years. She'll be an old maid at 16. (Are you laughing, or wondering if I'm serious?) Anyway, this letter is not about my indiscretions with 7, 8 and 9 year-old girls but about the neighborhood feud. The last house in the row contains Mr. Chehlie and family. The 4 houses are situated in their own area next to the primary school.

When I came to Largo, Mr. Chehlie was the Headmaster and Mr's Bockarie + Saidu + Mr.s Bockarie were all teachers in the school. The big rift is between Mr. Saidu and the other two Misters. All are egotists. All three used to belong to the UMC church in town. Saidu then made a power play, and helped to start a new church here: the New Apostolic Church. It is from Germany, very evangelical. The church's leaders are called Apostles. They believe that at the second coming of Christ (or who-ever it is that is supposed to come) the Apostles will be the first to be told of His coming. They will in turn inform all the swell members of this nifty congregation. I think this guarantees liberation, I am absolutely convinced that the Church is a Neo-Nazi church. It comes from Germany and looks very suspicious. So they came to town one day and baptized a bunch of folds. That same day, they made Saidu a preacher and Mr. Lahai (another teacher in the primary school) a deacon. So, the lines are drawn. all the Saidu backers in the UMC defect to the New Apostolic Church to hear Reverend Saidu spout his dogma. The Muslim teachers look on with amusement, and can't figure out what is really going on. So this Church proceeds to hold services in the Primary School: right in front of Bockarie's house they sing hymnals in such a horrible way that even the rats and cockroaches have left the Bockarie house. Tomorrow: the plot thickens. Love, R

February 25, 1988

Dear All:

This place makes me laugh (as they say) too much. Yesterday, we had big rhetoric-filled staff meeting. A variety of local topics were discussed. One was the purchase (or desired purchase) of a volley-ball net. At present, we don't have any sports equipment. One of our teachers (the Games Master) was pushing for a net and ball. He'd already scouted out one of each. so he informed us all, and my Principal (who would rather use the money for something else) skirted the subject and ho-hummed his way around it. Well, we can't agree to buy something that is second hand if we haven't seen it, we are looking into the matter, etc.... etc.... effectively brushing it off. This morning, the same teacher (the Games Master) was standing in front of the school with a big flawless volleyball net unfurled for anyone to see. All the kids said "Great, we have a new net" and "When did we buy it?" Ha Ha Ha. Nice little power play. I imagine it will be difficult for the Principal to squirm out of that one. So now, I think, to appease him and perhaps get out of buying the net, my Principal called a Quick Hush meeting of the five Form IV teachers. We all came and found out the topic was "How to split up the fees for the evening classes among the teachers." Aha. Everyone left that one with a neat Le200 in their pocket. I tried to argue my way out of it, but they basically insisted to further legitimize their own shares. I'm going to buy exercise books or something with mine to give to anyone who'll work for it. You know, 'No Charity'. Isn't that what Ghandi said? I'll put these kids to work on the school's new site for an hour or two and let them go away with an exercise book each. Not a bad deal for them. A book is Le20. A workman's wages for a full day is Le15-Le20. Another topic at the staff meeting was about changing our Mission. It is now the National Islamic Mission. They don't do anything for us. Largo wants to get funds to put up a new school building. I am also trying to get funds thru Uncle Sam. There was a lot of yelling about how the Saudi's send bucks to the Islamic Missions in this country, but it gets eaten up by the Big Men in Freetown. We had a lot of discussion about how our mission was the worst, etc.. etc... So after bashing the mission for stealing our petrodollars, my Principal quietly informs the staff that our Mission is a Home Mission. (i.e. no outside funding.) Sierra Leone (not a terribly rich country) does not put many bucks into things like Islamic missions. The predictable answer: Well, they are crooks anyway. I love it. You can make completely unbased accusations. Nobody will argue with you, they will just qualify. Well the Mission may be a bunch of crooks, but Largo is a town full of lazy bums, etc.. etc.. Love, R

March 1, 1988

The Tragic and Rapid Rise and Fall of Med-O-Kwah-Koh (Commonly known as Mohamed Bangura). Part I.

Mohamed came to Largo in mid-to-the-end of October. He had finished secondary school two years ago. Secondary school runs up to the 5th Form. There is an optional stage (6th Form) that runs for two years. It is most closely related to Junior College in the States. He had just come from the 6th Form and he wants to go to college next year. He came to help out our teaching staff. We were short a history and government teacher. He filled the role perfectly. It is not uncommon to have "school leavers" teaching in the secondary schools. There are not enough educated folks to go around. Half of our staff is made of these 'school leavers'. The term is derived from the fact that they just left school themselves.

Mohamed was instantly a hit. Big and good looking, talkative and witty. People like him.... at first. He was never boring to be around. He became quite the ladies man, the young girls were all fairly impressed. He had one feature, however, that he kept away from the public. He always kept one hand in his pocket. At birth, he'd had polio. One arm was shorter than the other. It never fully developed. If you didn't know to look for it, you wouldn't notice. After some time, Mohamed became more and more at home and more and more bold in his adopted town. My friend David, who is teaching me Mende, used to say that it was all 'cheap publicity' or 'cheap popularity.'

Mohamed was being everybody's friend. He was the Big Man on Campus. Whether it was criticism or praise, everyone commented on him. Now for some background on his personality. He is the most opinionated person I have ever met. That is saying a lot. He by far surpasses anyone else. When he talks, his eyes get very big. His forehead gets tense. He foams at the mouth. He presses a point, yells out "Right?" demanding your response. He doesn't wait for your answer. He presses another point, etc.. etc... Sometimes he accidentally spits on you when talking. He is so wrapped up in what he is saying he doesn't notice. It is best to keep your distance that way the flecks of spit have a better chance to disperse. He argues to win. He doesn't (or rarely does) care what the issue is. He quickly stakes out his side and argues like crazy. It doesn't matter someone is disagreeing...
Contd.

March 2, 1988

Part II - The Rise and Fall:

Or not—that, obviously, is not the point. He has an enormously fragile ego. Somehow it is related to his hand. His need to reassert himself is so great in his mind that he perceives disagreeing people and viewpoints as aggressive attacks on his being. One day I was describing him to my neighbor (Mr. Saidu) and I said the only way I could describe him was as a fanatic. In every sense of the word, he was one. He is crazy. He has absolutely no control over himself. Earlier in the day, another person had described him to Saidu by also calling him a fanatic.

In class, he talks constantly. One time a Form I boy said, a little bit too loudly, "This man talks too much." Mohamed heard him. He proceeded to flog him. (Flog is our pleasant word for beat or cane). Six very hard strokes. He then proceeded to flog everyone that had laughed at the comment. As far as I could tell, this was reaching into the high teens and low 20's. Flog 20 kids? You bet. I went elsewhere to avoid the yelps. Some days, he would come into the staff room with a mutilated cane. He had used it so much that he had worn it out, split it several times down the middle. That is no easy task.

One day he was talking for Form III and he told them that his father was richer than any of theirs was. Wow. Let's add pettiness and one-up-manship to his fine list of traits.

Abu Grey, a 6 foot 6 inch giant of a kid, crossed Mohamed's path one day. He was not taking notes on day. Grounds for a flogging. He mercilessly whacked Abu twice who then put his hands behind his butt. Mohamed whacked him across the forearms causing a huge welt to form. Abu turned to him, looking down, and said "Don't beat me like I'm an animal." Mohamed looked at him and started to yell at them for having no respect for his teachers. Abu repeats his statement with a little more force. Both were stewing. Mohamed looked at him and said "Na mi yu de kotts" which is Krio for are you cussing me? Ooooooh.... That set it off. Mohamed was held back by another teacher and Abu walked into the staff room calmly by himself. He stood against the wall with his hands crossed. Mohamed came storming in screaming at the top of his lungs, waving a cane about in a mad fashion. Continued...

March 2, 1988

Part III - The Rise and Fall:

He walked up to Abu, poked him in the face (an inch below his eye) with his cane, threw his books down and yelled out a challenge to fight Abu. He bared his fists undersides both facing him. He looked like a 1920's Jack Dempsey type boxer. Abu looked ready to squash his head. If I had money, I would have bet that Abu would have eaten him alive. Mohamed is a big guy (over 200 lbs) but you just don't fight people as big as Abu is. Mr. Sesay dissipated the fight. Abu was punished and nothing was said to Mohamed. He was outrageously out of line, and his actions were dismissed. The next day, Mr. Sesay addressed the kids and gave them wise pieces of wisdom like "The teacher is always right." Incredible. Two days later there was to be a concert (a combo of skits and songs done by students). The day of the concert proved interesting.

At mention of Mohamed's going to the concert, Mohamed said he was going as an ordinary person, not a patron. Patrons are invited to donate money to the event. It is somewhat honorable. He was bruised because he was not invited as one. One student, Mohamed Brima, made an off-the-cuff comment, "Star seven is going to boil tonight". What he meant was that there was going to be some pot smoking tonight. Both Mohameds had been in the same school together in Kenema. Mohamed Bangura was apparently notorious for smoking large quantities of dope. He heard the comment and immediately took insult. He approached the student and said "OK Brima, if that's how you want it, this means war!" That's what I like best about this place, the cozy atmosphere in which teachers and students peacefully coexist. Mohamed Bangura then stormed away out of the class room. As usual, foaming at the mouth. By now, he had precious little respect left. He was fading fast. Next: The last scene.

March 2, 1988

Part IV:

The next day when class met, Mohamed Brima was sent home. He was to go get his father, he had been caught smoking cigarettes. He went to get his Uncle (David, my teacher) but he couldn't come, so he got his Granny. Mr. Sesay decided that the father was really necessary, this wasn't business for women. He went to put his books in the class room, and he met Mohamed Bangura. He said "Brima don't pass this way." Mo Brima explained he wanted to put his books in the class. Mohamed Bangura then grabbed him by the collar, started yelling at him and slapped him in the face. Mohamed Brima slapped him back and they started swinging at each other. Mohamed Bangura bit Brima on the head. Brima whacked Bangura pretty good and tore the collar off of his shirt. Bangura had to be restrained and the student walked away. Mr. Bangura, after being held back, left the school and followed Brima and his Granny. About 100 yards away he caught up and started the fight again. Slowly and methodically, Mohamed Brima (the student) beat up Mohamed Bangura (teacher). He thoroughly whooped him and kicked him the face as he lay on the ground.

It was obvious to all that the student was totally in the right and the teacher totally in the wrong. But, this is

Africa. Along with authority goes the right to be incorrect and have your peers back you up. The other teachers felt that if they publically reprimanded this teacher, then it would look badly upon them, and would encourage students to attack other teachers. Wait a minute. Who attacked who? If they let the students know they were right, then this would happen again. So their outcome, punish the student and quietly tell the teacher off, allowing him to keep his job. If he left, we wouldn't have a history and government teacher. I felt we should say "Good riddance" and scrap the bastard. I was completely alone. They really think and believe in authoritarian ways and means. I hate it. it is incredibly unjust. Mohamed Bangura held out. he said he was insulted by the decision laid down. He wanted the student suspended for a month. He refuses to come back unless this step was taken. Again, I said fire him. I was getting lukewarm support this time. The incident has slipped away, Mohamed Bangura left town. Basically everyone was making a mockery of him. Somehow, I know it won't change him a bit. He totally believes that he didn't make a big mistake. He feels that he wasn't to blame. It's a shame. His personality will continue to waste his brain and potential. Love, R.

March 9, 1988

Devils in Largo – A Comedy in Four Acts: Part I.

In the last two weeks, my school has been the stage for seizures by Devils. It started one day in Form I. I was walking by and I noticed a girl lying/laying prone on the ground. Hmmm. I look in and all the kids started laughing. "What is it?" "Fatmata has been seized by a Devil." Hmmm. I figured it was some sort of epilepsy or who knows what. Great, let's whisk her over to our high tech medical facility and give her a drink of eye-of-newt juice. Another teacher came up and said "Is it a Devil?" (How did he know?) Yes. Well lets bring her into the staff room. I thought this was a bad idea. Let sleeping dogs lie. Let this kid sleep it off. She seemed to be in a deep sleep. The other teacher turned to go to the staff room and looked at me knowingly. "This girl has a Devil. It's quite common." Oh, is that so. Four kids then picked the girl up and she started violently squirming (much to the delight of the rest of the class). [The only thing I could think of was one time in a fishing boat off Cape Hatteras (or Cod) watching an eel squirm after it had been hooked.] So they dragged her into the staff room and laid her on the floor. Alhaji (one of our teachers) rolls in and takes charge. He whacks her for a while and pours water on her. No response. This kid is really deaf to the world. She is really out of it. After about 10 minutes, he gets her to stand up. Her eyes are open, but she might as well be a zombie. No flinching when something is waved in front of her. Nothing makes her blink or react. Alhaji has a great idea. He holds on to her elbow and starts speaking Arabic: Muslim prayers. The girl is not responding. I went outside and laughed really hard for about 10 seconds and came back. I really didn't want to miss this one. She is back on the ground. Ha! Islam has failed. Every kid in the school is dying to get a look. This is definitely not serious, but more of a freak show. About 10 minutes later, Alhaji starts whacking her on the legs and pinching her. A Form III girl is helping. The Form III girl can barely control her. Continued...

March 9, 1988

Devils in Largo - Part II:

Laughter. For her, this fun. Real live excitement. The girl's eyes open. She look blank. Slowly she comes around. She sheepishly dusts herself off. She looks a little confused, like she has just woken from a deep sleep. One of the teachers then walks her home. End of that one.

"So, Alhaj, what is this all about?" He smiles at me. "Well, sometimes people get possessed by Devils. The Devils seize the person from time to time. It can be anywhere from once a week to once a month. If the Devil stays for a really long time, the person will be crazy." I nod, "Of course."

He continued "There are a lot of big cotton trees (very tall, 10 feet in diameter at base) around Largo. largo also has the Kambui Hills (small mountains) near by. Folklore tells us that it is in these trees and hills the spirits like

to stay.

OK, sounds interesting. First a few notes. The girl was not consciously faking what was going on. She was genuinely comatose. There is no way a conscious person could have not reacted to the way they were provoking her. What gives. It seems she really believes that she has a Devil so much that the thought somehow overtakes control of her body from time to time. Beats me. I definitely think it is some weird quirk of the mind. Do I try to explain that to folks here? No. Does not compute... At all.

Later in the week, lo and behold... Mary (Form II is laying on the floor) is seized. Basically the same sequence over again. Same comatose look. No faking. Something is controlling her and it is not her everyday mind. Then, a few days later, Mary convulses again. The kids are really loving it. I even have on convinced that it is all a sham, a bizarre twist of the psyche. Today, Fatmata is stricken. I guess her Devil didn't want to be outdone by Mary's. This time when she is aroused, a piece of advice is given, "Fatmata, you really must tell you Pa to do something about this Devil." Ho Ho Ho. Take her to the sorcerer so he can give her some JuJu to drive the wicked spirit away. (Yes, sorcerers and JuJu do exist). I'm thinking about getting a Devil myself. They seem to be quite the rage these days. If only I could convince it to strike on the weekends when I'm not quite so busy. Love, R

March 24, 1988

Mom:

As usual, Africa is hot. Today is one of the worst. It is the kind of day that makes you sweat so much that your pores get tired. No need to pee today. I started sweating before I got out of bed. Took a bucket bath and started sweating before I was able to dry myself. I now have a book between my arm and this page to keep the letter from getting drenched. In about a month, the rainy season will start. I will be extremely happy. Except for the fact that folks stay inside during the rains, I think I'll really enjoy them. The heat business is a lot of nuisance. I can't think of a better way to put it.

It is hard to believe that it is 8 months since I left home. 250 days have passed. I think that after this summer, I will feel like I am on the way out. In a few weeks this term will be over. That is how I see time here. In chunks. After I make it thru a chunk of time, I look ahead to the next chunk. In a way, I am buying time. I sometimes feel that I am just forcing myself to stay to satisfy me ego. Then, I find something that really makes me feel good about and enjoy this place and I think that I really want to stay. Which is the reality? Which is the intruding thought? Definitely it is neither. It is just my head at work trying to keep me amused.

I don't really believe that boredom will set in here. there is always something to throw you off guard. Today, the village crazy-man came to visit. He babbled at me for a while. Then in perfect English he blurted "Can't you be kind if your wife isn't here?" I gathered he was begging. I think he was referring to Catherine who is another Peace Corps who lives a few miles away. My neighbor then came and made him go away. I want to do something to help the guy, but it would just encourage return visits from him and other beggars. I am too visible. I can hardly do anything in a low-key manner. Love, R

March 24, 1988

Dad:

About 3 weeks ago, a cartoon showed up at our school. It was a series of pictures and rude comments about the teachers. I was one of the few spared. I took one look at it and restrained my laughter. It was actually quite sarcastic and funny. At the very least, it was creative. Creativity is a trait that these kids totally lack. I figured that this thing would be no big deal. Who cares. Kids are kids and so am I. The other teachers were quite

insulted. They wanted to have a serious investigation. The had trouble controlling their anger.

We are now in the second week of our investigation. As a member of the Disciplinary Committee, I get to see every aspect of this circus. The Committee has three members and the staff has 7. It makes us sound important and established if we have Committees and Chairmen. I was placed on the Committee (I think Mr. Sesay thought it would be amusing to me) with the others. If I ever disagreed, they could always out vote me. After grilling a dozen or so students, we reached a conclusion. We don't know who did it. We suspect a group of them. We told them that they were liars and threatened to expel them. None broke the silence.

Tomorrow, we are going to resort to strong measures. We are inviting an old Granny to the school. Why? She is a sorcerer. She is going to come do some mumbo jumbo and point out the guilty parties. Her decision will be treated as law. The kids who are in question have to bring their Pa's. It is going to be a spectacle. I can't wait. This place is really a bit too theatrical at times. Love, R

March 28, 1999

Mom:

Time again for fun letters from your son. Trivia Quiz

- 1 What is your younger son doing in West Africa?
- 2 How much does he weigh?
- 3 Besides rice, where does he get most of his calories?
- 4 Does he have any pets on the dark continent?
- 5 What is the maximum number of letter he has written in a single sitting?
- 6 Name the two things that he frequently likens his stay here to.

Answers on the back. I am enclosing Le2. Please use it in the following manner: 50% to reducing the cost of our last phone call and 50% to reducing the budget deficit for 1987. I want to do my part to make America great again. Love, R

Answers

- 1 Primarily, he is doing nothing
- 2 143 lbs
- 3 Beer (Star Beer) during trips to Freetown
- 4 Just Peeves
- 5 11
- 6 A jail sentence and an endless vacation

March 29, 1988

Dad:

Hope the 'married life' is suiting you well. Haven't received any mail for a while, so I assume all is well. On this side of the world, things are just as screwy as ever. I'll be back in Freetown sometime towards the middle or end of May. I'll give you a ring then.

I'm doing pretty good. I can take things much more in stride than I could 3, 6 or 9 months ago. Folks here seem to take things easier. I must be picking it up. If things get screwed up (as they always do) you just have to laugh.

Sitting in my school, I found an Iranian publication. It is really funny. Salone is about 60+% Muslim. About ½ are probably not very serious at all. Anyway, you see a lot of Iranian lit. I need to write an excerpt of a letter for you. "I commend your efforts towards ensuring the success of Islam. Concerning the article "Choosing a wife" I am still not enlightened about the process. The common practice here is to impregnate a girl before marrying her. If she fails to become pregnant, she's done with. Please address this issue to help me towards enlightenment." Ha Ha Ha. [This came from Nigeria] This was wedged in among pieces of propaganda about the great Imam Khomeini and the twin evil Satans, U.S. and U.S.S.R.

The Salonians that I know seem to take things as they want to. They'll listen to Islamic Doctrine if it suits them (ie multiple wives, and male superiority). I don't think they could ever muster up extremist positions like the Iranians.

The kids in my school want me to pick up a religion. Why? Because everyone has to have a religion. You have to believe in God? There is no animosity here among Muslims, Christians, and Bahai's. This is true, I think, because all religions came by the way of missionaries. It is not home grown. With rare exceptions, religious practice is pretty mellow, nobody is very righteous about it. My neighbor, who is a preacher, gets drunk every day—especially after Sunday church service. Love, R

March 29, 1988

Mom:

I'm off on yet another letter writing binge. This is the 9th in about 20 hours. The last time I did this, I wrote 11 one night. We have this stuff here that is called kola nut. People jokingly refer to it as the African biscuit. They come in a variety of sizes. From about the size of a dime (3-D) to about 1½ inches in diameter. They are basically loaded with caffeine. Perhaps there are other miscellaneous fun chemicals in them, but I don't know. We have speculated that they are the source of half of Coca-Cola. No conclusive proof yet. People chew them a lot here. Even though the country exports tons and tons of coffee, kola is the preferred stimulant. Whenever you to ask a favor of someone, it is common to bring kola. Here the word is used in a more general sense. It used to be that to bring kola was a sign of respect. The first time I met my Chief, I brought him some kola nuts. Now you can bring anything and call it kola. A friend got robbed and he needed a police report. So he bought 2 gallons of palm wine, went to the policemen and said "Look guys, I have come to give you kola." They then sat down, wrote the police report and got drunk together.

Anyway, the letter writing stint was kicked off by an enormous quantity of very fresh kola. B.K., a local crazy-man, cam to visit me and tell mem Hello. He brought about 30 nuts. When you chew these nuts, your mouth turns orange. it is a stain, and it is very hard to get rid of. It makes one look pretty foolish. The orange stain on my teeth and lips is a nice contrast to my white skin. I also never learned to properly eat things. This lack of skill is continually causing me to get palm oil all over my hands and mouth. Some day, I'll learn. I have just learned of a place where elephants can be found in Salone. I want to go and find them. I have gotten pretty excited about the idea. It wounds like it will be an enormous pain in the ass, but so is everything else here. Love, R

April 7, 1988

Mom:

How is the Richmond? This place is, well.... Somewhat undescribly and unbelievable. When folks here are fed up with Salone, they say Na Salone. It means "O' Salone" more or less. The real meaning lies in the fact that it conveys a sort of helpless feeling about life. O' Salone, you screwed me over again and I can't do anything about it. Similarly, folks say Na Gohd. It is applicable in the same sense. It is also used as an excuse. If something fails, it is not because of poor work but Na Gohd. If the lorry breaks down 5 times on a 10 mile ride, God made it that way. It doesn't really occur that the lorry driver is the one who refuses to invest any money in the vehicle. He also constantly "fixes" the engine problems by using a rock. Na Salone. If a kid fails a test - "Na Gohd." "Mohamed, are you going to pass my test?" "Mr. Watt, if God agrees." "Mohamed, if you study, God will agree."

No one is responsible. If they screw up, they are easily forgiven. People will also laugh at just about anything. To borrow a quote "In an environment in which tragedy is genuine and frequent, laughter is essential to sanity. Such laughter is neither callous nor humorous." To me, this sums it up pretty well. There is a tremendous feeling of futility and impotence here. Sometimes it really annoys the shit out of me when someone or something gets swept away by an event. It is very frustrating. I think I have now lost my point. I just stopped to eat rice, and got lost when I returned. Oh well, probably wasn't too important anyway. Things are OK. Today I am enjoying. Hopefully I'll say the same tomorrow. Na Salone. R

April 8, 1988

Mom:

Have gotten sick of Aerogrammes. Envelopes are more fun. Included is a dragon. Origami is fun. Only problem is that I am using up all of my friend's paper. Send some. Anything you want to send to dull the boredom is all right by me. Packages can be sent to the address that I get airmails. Be sure to register it. How's that for a bold plea for goods?

Today I went to the bank. It was weird. I found out that I got overpaid by 5 months salary. Imagine my surprise to find 25,000 Leones in my bank account (About \$500). Hoo wee. Uncle Sam is an idiot on more than one continent. I am going to Freetown on Sunday to get it cleared up and to get money for cement for my town. The PC bureaucracy will probably blame me for not realizing the overpayment sooner. Peace Corps Salone is quite possibly the poorest run organization I have ever seen. This is no exaggeration.

Hope Otis is: a) not fat, b) not stupid, c) obedient as ever, d) not a beggar, e) gold. Take care. Love, R

May 5, 1988

Mom, etc...

Wahoo. Just had my first Fool-Aid party in Africa. One of my friends gave me a packet of NutraSweet Raspberry Kool-Aid. it was a big hit. All the kids freaked. It was an incredibly exciting event. I can't stand the stuff, but everyone else had a ball. I had to try hard to stop fights from breaking out. In short order, 12 kids had red hands and red mouths.

I had visions of myself in a Washington suburb. Blonde-haired all-American Mom with an apron. A frightening thought.

Two of my friends, Leif and Marcia Carlson, just left Salone. They came at the same time I did, but tired for this god-awful horrid pitiful excuse of a country. Anyway, they left me their shortwave radio for last US \$. I am now going to do my best to listen to baseball games. You folks on the home front are very bad at keeping me informed on world events. It was by mere chance that I heard the orioles were 0-21. Looks like I'm on my own for the baseball front.

Now, directions for ginger beer. Take ginger root and beat it. Mix with water and sift out particles. Add beaten pepper (cayenne type). Take sugar, caramelize it, and add to the mixture. Yum, yum. Sometimes there is a ton of pepper. It is actually quite good. They call it the poor man's soft drink. Just another example of the fine goodies that are available in side Salone. Everyday I've been eating pineapples. They are a little expensive, but it sure is great to have fresh pineapple 3-4 times a week. Fresh mangoes every day and other fruits. This goes a long way towards compensating for all the rice I'm forced to eat.

Right now I'm getting lectured by Isatu. She is telling me that I don't get a girlfriend I'll get sick. She is now implying that non sex = bad sickness. Oh well. It's about time someone offered me a woman for the 150th time. Again, women are a commodity in Salone. People deal their sisters and daughters like playing cards. Love, R

May 5, 1988

Mom, etc....THE SCAM. The Characters:

Mr. Sesay - my boss/friend/caretaker, a Muslim

Mr. Saidu - my neighbor, a self-made preacher (somewhat of a pompous dickhead)

Isatu - Saidu's 18-year old wife, quite attractive

National Islamic Secondary School - my school, a bunch of crazy fanatical followers of Islam. A truly barbaric crowd (Principal = Sesay)

New Apostolic Church - Evangelical fundamentalist Christian church from Germany. (Priest = Saidu)

Me - just an onlooker. My hands are not inside this business. (A Krio-ism)

Sesay and Saidu are good friends on the exterior. they maintain a business-like friendship. They bad talk each other to me. I love to listen to it. Saidu says Sesay doesn't know how to run the secondary school. He says he is weak and doesn't know how to keep things under control. Sesay wails on Saidu's personality and his church. Mr. Sesay and I are always cracking jokes about the so-called evangelists. We say that the only reason they are Christians is to allow themselves to drink palm wine. Saidu gets bombed just about every day. They are building a New Apostolic Church in town. Sesay says it is just a facade for a drinking hall. Isatu's Pa is an old Alhaji (been to Mecca). He wanted Saidu to convert to Islam and to stop drinking. Mr. Sesay said (of Saidu) "Convert to Islam maybe, but stop drinking never."

Mr. Sesay managed to get Saidu to steal building supplies from the church. We are about to build on an addition to the school with them. These religion-mixing events are heavily under wraps. Mr. Sesay is also fooling around with Isatu. Isatu says that when your husband is away, you have to enjoy. Mr. Sesay says "when the cat's away, the mice come out to play." Isatu uses me for info. She wants to squeeze money out of Sesay. I tell her when he gets paid so that she can time her requests/demands appropriately. Folks in Salone are real characters. You can never really see who has an allegiance to who. Love, R

May 5, 1988

Dad, etc...:

Mangoes are in full swing. They are the best fruit that I have ever tasted. They are incredibly good. You can eat many of them and you won't tire of their taste. I have about 7 trees within 25-30 feet of my house. When the wind blows, they fall on my roof. The loud thump on the zinc roof is like the starting gun for a track race. At the bang, myself, Isatu, Victor and Joseph run to the sound and fight for the ripe fruit. Seniority usually wins. Hey, give me that Mango, I'm bigger than you. In about a month, I am going to try and dry some to send back. Supposedly they are OK when dried.

The rainy season is turning out to be a real dud. It is mid-May, and the rains are not coming. They are supposed to start coming on in late March/early April. In May they are supposed to come about every other day or so. In June to July, it will rain every day (a lot). It is not raining at all yet. We had a false alarm a while back but nothing since. I think the rains are coming later and later each year. The rain forest is getting slowly chewed up. this country is headed for trouble. Ecologically, politically, agriculturally and economically this place is going to crap.

I got a ride a while back from a businessman. In his words, "This country is pure shit... and getting worse every day." He's right. The school system is horrid. Kids who are finishing primary school must take a SAT-type test. Many of them bribe the proctors to get a good result.

When I came to Salone, I came with a group of about 50+ Peace Corps. The next group to come will have about 5. My program is being scrapped. This government is full of rogues and thieves. Pa Siaka (ex-president) was talking on the radio about the new government. He said, "Under me, my ministers stole thousands of Leones. Under Momoh, they steal millions." This country should be a very rich place. Instead, we have the fabulously rich and the fabulously poor. It is not uncommon to see a man with a Mercedes living next door to a family with no money for rice. So they are not eating today. Some people are so unashamedly corrupt. This place has millions of \$\$ in diamonds and not a penny of that money goes to any good. R

October 24, 1988

Dear Family:

Things seem to have cooled down here. No more bizarre news for now. I am in Freetown celebrating the birth of the Holy Prophet Mohammed. No, I didn't plan it. it is a national holiday and the office (PC) is closed. it is a little difficult to accomplish anything if no one is at work. Sometimes, it is a bit annoying to travel 240 miles just so that I could sit around and wait. Oh well.

Lately, I have been doing some deep soul searching to determine what I am going to do when I leave here. I have made a list of jobs that I would like to hold in the future:

- 1) Guy behind the counter at a bagel shop
- 2) Carpenter - Cabinet Maker
- 3) English teacher in China
- 4) History Professor
- 5) High School Math Teacher

6) Wine Maker

November 18, 1988

Mom:

Been a while since I've written, so I'm getting my butt in gear. Things as always are the same in Salone. Everything sucks. Nobody gets paid. Nothing works properly. Oh well. The biggest problems that this country faces: inertia and the condoning of petty theft.

Peace Corps News Flash: PCV in my group went nuts. He was sedated and stuck on a plane for DC. His escort: a psychiatrist and the biggest guy in our group to keep him under control should anything happen. He got intensely paranoid about getting sick and dying. Some people have no grip. He was worried about the lack of medical facilities and proper health care? Wow, you mean he found that out now? After a year and a half? Anyway, as I've learned during my on-the-experience training, if you get medical problems, you have to bite them on ass and deal with it yourself. Nobody else will do that for you. I felt a little strange when hearing about him freaking. I guess I feel like I should have a first shot at making a statement about medical facilities in Salone since being struck by lightning and then appendicitis. My new past-time is making fun of serious situations. (My own.)

Dr. Zeller our fearless PC Doc, got into a serious accident in his Land Rover. A Citylink bus going to Freetown passed/ran him off the road. The vehicle rolled down an embankment and just missed rolling down into a gorge of sorts. Head injures mild - Do. Betty (his wife) left country on a stretcher. Jeanette (older woman in my group) collapsed lung. All three flown home. Wow!! I'm staying home. This place is too screwed up. I'm content to sit on my verandah, read books, suck oranges and watch my chicken lay EGGS! Yes, my chicken is about to hatch 10 chicks. She has been sitting on them for quite some time. A feast is planned (May-June).

Days left is a mere 236. Sounds like I'm counting. Well, yes. it is hard not to. I like it here, but after I have left, I know that I will remember loving it. There are enough good parts to sweeten up the bad. These last few weeks have been the best ones that I've seen in a long time. July-Aug-Sept until late October was a disaster. I have finally settled back down and slowed my self down enough to enjoy myself. The secret of enjoyment here is to pace yourself with everyone else. If you don't, you'll just fry yourself.

Back in school. I think (know) that the educational level in Salone is deteriorating (rapidly). The economy is shot and a holder of a school certificate or college degree can do little other than teach. Business is where it is at. Diamonds, gold, cocoa, coffee and rice. Not healthy competitive business. Theft, price controls, artificial shortages, government prices vs. black market rates, and smuggling combined with bribery, embezzlement and other forms of corruption in government to make morality a forgotten theory. Oh yeah, I forgot about extortion. nevertheless, Sierra Leone is beautiful in all of its filth. it is remarkably unique and alive. Alive with what, I don't really know, but there is a lot of it.

Thanksgiving is coming. And do I have plans. Yes, I'm going to sit down to a delightful plate of rice and fish. Yum, yum. I can't wait to get back to the land of real food. All of my memories are of food. I think of you, and I think of drinking tea, Bass, Cran and vodka, Dunkin Donuts, coffee (as I did whatever I did to your front porch) eating apple pie with ice cream. That seafood stew you cooked once. Face it Mom, you've been reduced to a tantalizing buffet. I can only remember people and places by the food I ate and drank there or with them. Amos is a big bag of Alpo and Milk Bones. I think of Pine Creek Court and to me it is wheat toast and tea. Karley is a pile of egg rolls. Enough. I can't take it any more. My stomach is grumbling. The only consolation is that I eat as many bananas and oranges as my heart desires. As you might guess, fruit gets old after a while. I think that upon my return to the U.S. I am going to demand to be taken directly to Wendy's for a Wendy's chicken sandwich. Everything is OK. Love, R

Undated

[Letter printed at the end of a carbon-copied page headed "The West African Examination Council SC/CGS Time Table, 1988", – a schedule of exams from May 19 through June 13]

Looks impressive (arrow points to the schedule). What a typing job by me, the school typist. Ha. The kids will get creamed on most of the tests. The government has a new method of paying its employees in Salone. They now have "pay teams." These Members of Parliament and other Big Men drive around in their Land Rovers and pay people directly. This allows them to find out who the non-existent ghost workers are. Apparently there was some confusion/problems with my school's vouchers. Mr. Sesay was not around to explain, so they took TiTi (his wife) and hauled her off to Kenema saying that she was the only valuable possession and that she would be his collateral. She is very pregnant and was very disappointed about being kidnaped. Oh well. At least the teachers finally got paid a little bit of money. On 11/18 they paid them for July and August. It is now almost December and they haven't been paid for September. Ridiculous. Their pay even by this country's standards is very low. The teachers sometimes joke about going to see if their chicken feed has come yet. A big problem of all of this is that there are no new teachers (or very few) entering the field. The system is held together by people like Mr. Sesay who was educated in the 60's and 70's when the economy was good and US/UK missionaries were running good schools. Now everything has gone to pot. Fortunately, I haven't. Health (both body and mind) is quite good. It's nice not to be in a slump. Love, R

November 26, 1988

Oh. Time to write. Thanksgiving was a blast. Found out it was Thanksgiving the day after it occurred. So much for that holiday. School term is winding down and I am beginning to plan for Christmas. I'll probably trek around a bit and try to visit a Game Reserve in the north. I am going to try and see crocs and pygmy hippos.

In early January, we have an in-service seminar. We'll all get together and bitch about how nothing works and about how incredibly out-of-touch Peace Corps Administration is. They are talking about having some language training at this seminar. Last year we told them that the language training for Mende and other local languages was inadequate. Looks like they are just getting around to it. With only 5-6 months to go, nobody cares and the idea is pointless.

Last year, they did a big analysis of the education (PC) program in S.L. They decided that it was unproductive to put Peace Corps in bush schools like my own. This is true. The government gives no support and most schools are falling apart (internally). Only in the big towns is there enough private money to make things run. And there, they only run in a limited sense. The evaluators (some nice guys from DC and some idiots) decided that Peace Corps should get away from sending math/science teachers and move towards vocational ed—a marvelous idea. Rumor has it they are going to flood us with 36-40 math/science teachers next summer. Typical.

I have now determined that I never want to work for the U.S. government again—I never really thought that I did. But now I am absolutely positive. It would take some serious creativity to figure out new exciting ways to do a poorer job than our Administration presently does. Anyway, I am starting to seriously think about teaching English to dirty Commies in China. (90-91 or 91-92). [As if I need to be convinced that their government is any less of a failure.] Love, R.

December 5, 1988

Dad: African Tidbits.

The Disappointed African. There is a man in Largo named Amara. He is somewhat of a kook. In any case, he is

fairly nice. He is an albino. His skin is pink, hair white, eyes red. He has huge (6 inches wide, 12 inches long) patches of black. Gives a blotchy effect. Looks like an alien creature. People (mostly kids) refer to him as the above. If he catches someone calling him that he beats them. I think it is the result of some easily avoided birth defect. Albinos are a very high percentage (comparatively) of the population.

The African Life. Jisnoh, pronounced as it is written, is the Krio equivalent of "just now". It is the most commonly spoken lie in this country. When will you pay me back? Jisnoh. When is the lorry leaving? Jisnoh. In the first case, Jisnoh is translated as never. 2nd case = anywhere between 2 minutes and 3 hours. If you ask whether something is going to happen and the person you are asking doesn't really know if or when it will occur, Jisnoh is the appropriate answer. it is a cross between "maybe" and "sometime today."

Mango Harvest. The trees around my house have just been robbed of their fruit. A bunch of boys came from the primary school and climbed the trees with long sticks. The mangoes rained on my roof for about 10 minutes. 10 minutes later, the kids had finished them all. Now the entire area is littered with mango pits. This attracts an unbelievable number of bees. They come in swarms (loud Buzzzzzzing). You rarely see them, and do your best to avoid them. R

January 5, 1989

Dad:

Not much new here. School has, in theory, reopened. No one is coming yet, so I am trying to catch up on some letter writing.

After I talked to you, I found out that I will be getting a 10-speed mountain bike from Peace Corps. Should be great. I will now get a chance to go to some places that I've never been. Among them is a hydro-electric dam that the Chinese built some 20 miles north of me. it will also give me a chance to get back into better physical shape. My weight is skyrocketing. Now up to 143 lbs.

I've started cooking my own food lately. From time to time, I come up with some pretty good stuff. Potato soup is my most consistent winner. Over the New Year, a friend showed me how to make banana-sweet potato curry. Very tasty. My biggest problem is that the things that I cook all turn out with the same taste. Part of that is a function of limited supplies. I am also a bit timid in trying new things.

Rice harvest is now in full swing. All of my neighbors are counting bags of rice and estimating how long their stockpiles will last. The song of the moment is "Things are getting worse.... Everyday." Speaking of getting worse, how is George Bush? I heard about some Libyan fighters getting shot down. The next morning, Sierra Leone (my part and the part I was traveling to) was covered with a dense fog until 10:00 to 10:30. Very unusual. We all laughed, and made jokes about radioactive waste and nuclear war.

Salone is now going into the ugly time of year. The dry season. it is already beginning to look brown. We haven't had rain for about 2 months now. It will be another 4-5 before it really comes again. One of the worst things right now is the dust. A thin coating of brown dust covers everything. anytime I go anywhere on transport I get covered head to toe. Gives my skin a reddish tint. At night I bundle up inside of warm clothes. socks, sweatshirt, sweat pants and lie under a heavy blanket. Many times I wake up early in the morning because of the cold. To my knowledge, it has not (recently) dipped below 68 degrees. I guess that I have become somewhat used to the climate. I'll be writing more. Love, R.

January 20, 1989

Dear Dad:

Lately I've been riding around on my new bicycles. it is great. it is kind of difficult to get up any great speed on the dirt roads, but I am enjoying it. School is not running. The teachers haven't been paid in ages (nothing new) and the teachers are finally doing something about it. they are staying at home. The result is that I have absolutely no work to do. No work = lots of bike riding. Today, I am going to find a waterfall that is near Kenema. So far, I've had my bike for less than a week and have gone about 90-100 miles. It is doing wonders for my physical shape. I am planning all sorts of trips for the near future.

Some of the people from my group are starting to talk about leaving. If they get permission, they can leave as early as May 1. I will be here until mid-July. School closes (I guess that it can only do that if it opens) on July 12. After that, my plans are a little sketchy. In any case, I should be back home around September or so. I am very much looking forward to this East Africa trip. I'll go to Freetown at the end of this month to find out the details. Take care, R

July 25, 1989

Mom:

Leaving this home today. It's time to migrate back and find another one. Been some time since I've written, Huh? Just trying to get myself in the Post Card frame of mind. Love, R



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