



- ONE -

A FINE WAY TO DIE

We bounced so forcefully we would have become airborne if we were not wearing seat belts. My companion, Boafu, ducked to avoid impacting the headliner above the shotgun seat. He grinned at me and shook his head, slinging sweat from his ebony skin.

“They will pave it one day, Boss. I promise.”

“What? And spoil our fun?”

Little did he know how much I meant what I said. I had turned my back on the glass-smooth German Autobahn—speeding along in high-performance BMW and Mercedes-Benz automobiles—for the chance to crawl across Africa just like this, road hazard to road hazard. I wouldn’t miss it for the world.

Our sudden bounce had not come from too much speed. Rather, I was being typically careful hauling our precious Christ for all Nations (CfaN) cargo for Evangelist Reinhard Bonnke. The sudden lurch had come when the front wheels of the big Iveco truck had dropped into a dry season chuckhole that I had not seen. The hole had formed at the bottom of a huge rut with walls rising twelve feet high on either side of us. The hazard could not be avoided. Our path was a one-way dirt track through the jungle.

The air brakes hissed as I brought the truck to a full stop. Our cassette player had been filling the cab with worship music. I switched it off to concentrate on my next move.

On this sunny day in 1990, we were making our way from Mamfe to Ikom, near the border between Cameroon and Nigeria. In this jungle region, deep ruts would form during a tropical deluge as trucks and automobiles became stuck in a bottomless quagmire. The spinning wheels of vehicle after vehicle would dig the mud hole successively deeper. Stranded cars and trucks were forced to wait hours or even days, hopelessly mired until another vehicle arrived with sufficient power, traction, and cable to pull them free.

That is why I had installed a large power winch on the front of my truck. It held a long spool of cable that had been an instrument of rescue dozens of times over the years.

During the dry season, which runs from October through February, the deep ruts of the tropical African rainforest are baked until they become cement-like channels like the one we had entered on this fine day. The unexpected bounce we had experienced could be counted a blessing compared to the trials of navigating this route during the rainy season.

“Thank God it’s February, eh, Boafo?”

“We thank God, Boss. And we thank Bonnke for only preaching in the dry season.”

“Indeed, a lesson learned at my expense many years ago.”

I reached to the dashboard and triggered a drive lever. Electronic switches released a gasp beneath the cab as air pressure engaged three axles to the drivetrain. I could feel the low range gears align with a thunk. At full power, our six-wheel drive, turbo-charged diesel revved to a high RPM and cautiously edged forward.

Checking my mirrors, I watched as each axle of our tandem trailers dropped into the hole behind us. A small increase on the

accelerator was all it took to lift each axle out and move us gently forward. Thus, all seventy tons of Reinhard Bonnke's crusade equipment—platform, lighting towers, generators, and sophisticated audio electronics housed in two containers behind us—passed through the hazard unharmed. I shifted the transmission from low range to high and resumed our cruising speed of about thirty-five miles per hour.

I smiled to myself at a job well done. This was my calling and ministry.

Call me a truck driver for Jesus. More specifically, call me a truck driver on the African road for Jesus. I love it, I live it, I breathe it, and I never feel more fulfilled than when hauling this cargo that has been responsible for introducing millions to the saving knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ. But as always, there are enemies and obstacles to overcome on the salvation road.

For example, just yesterday Boafo and I left the city of Bamenda. The CfaN meetings there had been wonderful yet challenging. As we set up the platform against the wall of the soccer field, we heard rumors that we were not wanted in this city of 250,000 people. Local factions had sworn to drive Bonnke out.

On the first night 30,000 people came to the field. As Reinhard preached, I saw a stone fly over the wall and into the crowd. It was a signal for an entire mob to begin hurling hundreds of large stones over the wall. Local pastors rushed to the center of the stage and used their umbrellas to deflect the attack from Evangelist Bonnke.

"Father, forgive them for they know not what they do," he shouted repeatedly into the microphone as the stones continued to fall.

Many in the audience were seriously injured, falling to the ground bleeding and screaming for help. After about twenty minutes the police arrived and chased the mob away. Ambulances, taxis, and private automobiles were called to take the injured to area hospitals. Chaos seemed to have won the day.

I looked at the shiny new cab of our Iveco truck, a piece of equipment we had recently upgraded. To my dismay, it looked as if it had been through a hail storm. Its finish was dimpled from dozens of direct hits. From that point on I would remember Bamenda whenever I looked at my truck.

Reinhard and the local pastors huddled on stage. They prayed and took counsel. The consensus was that the meetings would continue in the face of this opposition. The local leaders would seek an increased police guard posted beyond the wall.

“I have learned a hard lesson here,” I said to Boafo. “I will never set the platform against a wall again.”

He nodded. “It gave cover to the enemies.”

Through the next three nights, the forces set against us were defeated. The following night’s crowd grew to 50,000. A total of 195,000 attended the four nights of preaching, with 45,000 registering decisions for Christ—another blessed mission accomplished in Africa.

I had hired a crew of fifty from local churches to help us disassemble the equipment and stow it in containers. Boafo and I supervised. Once everything was packed, we hit the road that same afternoon, camping by the road as darkness fell. As usual, I spread my bedroll on top of the first container to avoid the vermin that might crawl over my body in the night if I slept on the ground. Boafo chose to sleep reclined in the truck cab.

On this, our second day of travel, we hoped to cross the border of Nigeria and spend the night at a hotel in Makurdi. After that, another long day on better roads through the most populated areas of Nigeria would deliver us home to the great city of Lagos.

As we rumbled along the Mamfe–Ikom Road, the temperature rose to nearly 100 degrees Fahrenheit with more than 90 percent humidity. This was the norm for equatorial Africa in February, and

we drove with the windows open. A shirt soaked with sweat provided poor man's air conditioning as the tropical breeze passed through the cab.

The moving air also helped mitigate the working man's patina, which might otherwise have been overpowering. We had stayed in the empty containers during the entire Bamenda crusade, guarding our equipment against mischief from the local enemies of the gospel. This meant that we had not found access to a bath or shower. I had been able to have a sponge bath before the opening night, but after that it seemed counterproductive in a city where 99 percent of the population bathed less than once a week anyway. We blended well.

The work of disassembling the crusade equipment, as always, was physically demanding. I can testify that under such conditions a working man soon abandons his cologne and underarm deodorant. First-time visitors to Africa are often appalled by the body odors, but I can testify that the human brain has a wonderful capacity to eventually ignore such unpleasantness—especially when there is no possible escape. By this time, on the road headed for home, I smelled only success.

Our seventy-ton load continued to rock and roll across the uneven clay track through the forest. At last, in a clearing ahead, I saw the border crossing come into view. The typical barrier with the crosshatched pattern of red and white was down, stopping all traffic. There were a number of tent shelters among a phalanx of wooden sheds on either side of the road. A dozen soldiers dressed in jungle camouflage were walking around the buildings carrying automatic weapons. Something about their attitude put my senses on guard.

My senses have always peaked to high alert when going through border crossings. Many things can go right or wrong in such places. My eyes search to the right and left of the road as we approach, cataloging the buildings, the personnel, and the number of cars waiting to cross. I am taking inventory, looking for anything unusual.

In this case, delays were obvious from the two dozen vehicles waiting in line. This was a remote crossing. There were plenty of personnel on hand. Why were they holding up traffic? While delays were typical, I thought the number of soldiers unusual.

Before leaving Lagos I had read of unrest brewing in the county. President Babangida, a ruling general who had seized power in a military coup, had promised to return Nigeria to civilian rule in 1990. As the year began he had reneged on his promise, announcing that civilian rule would not happen until 1993. Riots had broken out. Rumors were rampant that another military coup was brewing among mid-level officers in the national army.

Another possibility tickled at the back of my mind. CfaN had scheduled an upcoming crusade in October to take place in Kaduna, a Muslim stronghold in the north. Much talk about the possibility of violence at those meetings had made the news. Also, many factions in the Nigerian military were Muslim, with hostile feelings toward Christians.

I pulled the truck into line behind a number of Land Rovers and regular automobiles, shutting off the engine. There was no use burning fuel as we waited. I knew from experience that we might be here for hours, even days.

We watched the activity before us. Almost immediately several soldiers seemed to notice our truck. They began to gesture and point. Soon, four of them broke away from the others and began walking toward us down the line of automobiles.

“I don’t like it, Boss.”

“Yeah, something’s up.”

One of the soldiers walked around the tractor and trailers before coming to a stop at my window. “You are with Bonnke?”

“Yes.” He must have identified me by the name *JESUS* spelled in large red letters on each trailer.

“Start the truck and follow me,” he ordered.

The soldier then walked back up a frontage lane beside the main road. I fired the engines and crawled slowly along behind him, passing the other waiting cars. The occupants watched us with great curiosity. They had obviously been waiting for a long time, and we were headed toward the front of the line. The soldier signaled that I should park close to the main gate. I had the feeling that they had been waiting for us to arrive.

The soldier told me to bring my passport and other documents and step down from the cab.

Boafo handed the usual packet of documents to me.

“If I am not back in three hours, try to get to a telephone and call for help.”

The soldier led me to a tent on the left side of the buildings. Beneath the shelter a large man, a military commander of some unidentifiable stripe, sat at a table. He signaled that I should place the documents in front of him. I did. He studied them, inspecting my picture in my passport. He glanced up at me and nodded. Standing abruptly, he said, “Come with me, Mr. Wentland.”

The officer swung his rifle strap over his shoulder and led me out of the tent onto a path behind the buildings. This was not standard procedure. Few requests like this had ever been made of me at a border crossing. In my mind, a red warning flag went up. As I moved along the path, the other four soldiers closed in behind me with guns at the ready. Now all of my warning flags were flying at full mast.

I recalled graphic newspaper stories of unauthorized executions that took place on the orders of renegade officers. Or perhaps this man was a Muslim with radical sympathies who would now take matters concerning the upcoming Kaduna crusade into his own hands.

Another scenario seemed even more likely. I remembered how in a neighboring state I had sat down to breakfast under the rule of a

friendly president, and by the end of the meal a coup had taken place. A new president was in power and we listened to the radio as he declared a new direction for the country. The friends of the former president were now the enemies of the state.

I searched my memory, trying to recall if Reinhard Bonnke had been shown in Nigerian newspapers shaking hands with President Babangida. In fact, heads of state often sought to be seen with the evangelist for political advantage. I wondered if another military coup had taken place as we traveled the Mamfe–Ikom Road. Rapid switches in power often resulted in violent purges in order to seal the authority of the new government.

We walked across the clearing and neared the edge of the dense jungle. The officer did not slow his pace but took a path into the forest. As the darkness of the jungle canopy closed in overhead, I realized that I had prepared myself for this day long before it happened. I began talking to the Lord in my mind.

Father, if this is my last day on earth, I praise You. It has been an honor to serve the name of Jesus in Africa these eleven years. If I die as Your servant, I know You will comfort my loved ones. It is well with my soul.

As I passed through the jungle, it no longer seemed dark. The greens of the trees and shrubs around me were warm and fragrant and glowing with life. I reached out and touched them as I passed, praising God in my heart. My Creator had fashioned every living thing here, and He was with me now. I was not alone walking this jungle path.

The trail seemed long. I began to look for signs of a freshly dug grave. My body would decay quickly in the acidic soil of the tropical rain forest, but on resurrection day, every scattered molecule would reassemble and be transformed into an eternal body that would rise to meet the Lord in the air. *These trees will clap their hands*, I thought. *Lord, You do all things well.*

We came to a small clearing with a mud hut beneath a thatched roof. Coals smoldered in an open cooking pit in front of the dwelling. A goat was tethered to a tree and chickens wandered about, clucking nervously and eating insects. I saw no pile of fresh earth.

At the hut the officer turned to face me. He seemed nervous, unsure of himself. I stopped, and the other soldiers stopped on either side of me. The officer walked toward me. He stopped again. "Is it true? I must know, is it true?"

"Is what true, sir?"