

LYDIA

Joanne De Jonge and Marjo Rouw¹

Lydia was gathering sticks for Mother's cooking fire when she heard the sound. She stopped and listened. Was it a "mota"? Not many "motas" came to the little Nigerian village of Nyankwala. The road was little more than rough hard ruts in dry weather. During the rainy season it was sticky, gooey mud. Some days not even one car came! But once a month the missionary came from Wukari. Maybe this was the missionary's "mota" she heard. She laid her handful of sticks on the ground and ran toward her round mud-brick home.

"Mama! Mama! I hear a mota. I think the missionary is coming!"

A short black lady in a neat, colorful cloth wrapper came to the door. Lydia's two little sisters peeked from behind their *mama's* skirt. They all stood quietly and listened. Sure enough, they heard a *mota*. Soon the missionary's car came bouncing along and stopped right in front of the house.

Mrs. Fran Boer stepped out of the car and came toward them, smiling broadly. Pastor John Boer came around from the other side of the car. *Mama* called Lydia's daddy, and they all shook hands, very happy to see each other. Then the adults sat together in the shade, talking to each other.

Pastor Boer and Lydia's daddy did most of the talking. Daddy was an evangelist. He told the story of Jesus to the village people. Boer came once a month to see how he was getting along. Most of their talk was about daddy's work.

Lydia didn't listen very long. She went back to work, picking up sticks. While she worked, she kept thinking how nice it would be to go home with the missionaries. She would like to live with them for a while. The more she thought about it, the more she wanted to go.

¹Joanne De Jonge and Marjo Rouw; original source and ed. of this digital edition, Frances A. Boer. *Hands across Africa*, based on an interview with Frances A. Boer. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988. Chapter 10, pp.60-64.

When the weekend was over, Lydia saw the missionaries get up to go home. Quickly she ran to her mother. Her big dark eyes sparkled with excitement. *"Mama,"* she said, "I want to follow them!"

Mother looked at her in surprise. Then she said to Mrs. Boer, "Lydia wants to go with you."

"You would have to stay a whole month!" Mrs. Boer replied. "We cannot bring you home if you get homesick. You are only seven years old. You will probably miss your home."

"But I want to go," Lydia insisted. "I won't become homesick. Please, may I go with you?"

Finally both Mother and Mrs. Boer agreed. Lydia could go. So she ran to the *mota* and hopped in, just as she was. She had only her little short skirt and sandals. Her mother did not get a suitcase or pack other clothes for her, because Lydia did not have anything else to wear.

It was thirty miles to Wukari, where the Boers lived. Lydia had never been so far from home! And everything at the missionaries' house was different. Lydia was used to a hard, dry mud floor; the missionaries had little rugs on cement floors. Lydia thought that felt good under her bare feet. She had never slept on a bed, but Mrs. Boer made her comfortable on a cot. The food was different too, but Lydia liked it. Strangest of all, Lydia thought, was the language they spoke. Lydia could not understand English, and the Boers did not speak her language, Jukun. But soon they all were speaking Hausa together, the common language used between different ethnic groups.

Mrs. Boer took Lydia to a store the very next day and bought material to make some pretty new dresses. Lydia liked that very much. But Mrs. Boer also took her to a doctor, and that frightened Lydia at first. Like many Nigerian children, Lydia had never seen a doctor. In fact, many children become ill, and many die because there are not enough doctors. But Lydia soon grew and became healthy and strong.

Lydia soon became like a daughter to the Boers, who had no children. They loved her, and she was very happy at their home. The month that she stayed there seemed to fly past.

Soon it was time to return to her village, Nyankwala. Lydia was glad to see her family again. She ran into her house, quickly changed to her old short skirt, and then played with her brothers and sisters just as she used to. There was so much to tell them!

After the weekend visit, she saw the Boers get up to go home. She ran into her house, changed her clothes again, and came out wearing her new dress. Then she hopped right into the missionaries' car. She wanted to go back with them!

From that time on, the Boers' home was Lydia's home. She returned to Nyankwala to see her real mother and father once a month. The rest of the time she lived at the missionaries' house.

Lydia loved living with the Boers. She and Mrs. Boer chatted together as they worked. If someone asked her whose daughter she was, she said, "Mrs. Boer's." And if the person said, "But that cannot be; they are white and you are black!" she would say, "God can do anything!"

One day when the Boers were in Nyankwala, they said to Lydia's father, "We would like to send Lydia to school. She should learn to read and write."

"To school?" her father asked, surprised. "Why should a girl go to school? Girls do not have to learn to read and write. They can do their work just as well without that."

But after they talked it over, he finally agreed. Lydia would go to school.

Lydia went to Ebenezer Christian School in Wukari while she lived with the Boers. With lots of help and encouragement from them, Lydia learned quickly and enjoyed school tremendously.

A little over a year later it was time for the Boers to go back to North America for a vacation and a furlough. What could Lydia do? She wanted to keep going

to school. The Boers found another family in Wukari with whom Lydia could live while they were gone. So Lydia still lived in Wukari and stayed in school, although her missionary “parents” left for a while.

Soon it was time for the Boers to return to Wukari. During their time away, God had given them a baby of their own. Lydia loved her new “brother.” He was so different from her, with his pink skin, blue eyes and straight blonde hair. And when later God gave the Boers a baby girl and, still later, another baby boy, Lydia was happier still. She loved to run her fingers through her “siblings” silky hair, and then feel her own tight curls.

At times Mrs. Boer would ask Lydia, “Why did you want to leave your home and your own father and mother to come and live with us?”

Lydia would answer, “I don’t know. I just wanted to. Something inside of me wanted to.”

Note from Fran Boer: For further stories about Lydia, go to the Boer memoirs, *Every Square Inch: A Missionary Memoir*, vol. 3 throughout, at < www.SocialTheology.com/boeriana.htm >, especially pp. 16-19.