

8. Victory!

I thought: I should drive slowly on this dusty road; otherwise, I'll be kicking up dust, and I didn't think the traders in the market stalls to the left and right and their customers would appreciate that. I had to admit, the Peugeot 504 was a great car to drive around in, wonderfully comfortable. And, because it was a station wagon, you could take practically everything with you.

It was swelteringly hot, as was always the case here. Still, thankfully the dry air in this part of Burkina Faso made the heat comfortable.

I was still rattled by the story Annelies had told me this morning. My goodness! They had discovered that a couple of western countries had shamelessly sold medicine that had been rejected in their own country to the Burkina Faso government, who had naturally assumed that the medicine was fine. Christ almighty! Who knows what tragedy may have come from that, perhaps without anyone ever knowing about it? But then again, ethics wasn't the West's strong suit.

In my rear-view mirror, I spotted a man on a sort of handcar on wheels, the kind used by people who are not or no longer able to walk, frantically pumping the handle up and down. He seemed to be gaining on me. As I watched, he came closer, so close that I was afraid he would crash into the Peugeot's back bumper. I stepped lightly on the gas pedal just to be on the safe side. You never know. Huh? Where did he go? I could no longer see him in my rear-view mirror. Weird...

Aaah! I jumped in fright. I suddenly heard rattling next to me. The man on the handcar appeared next to my open window, his head level with mine, so close that I could have touched him if I'd stuck my hand out far enough. His head was large, dark, almost pitch-black, with tiny frizzy hairs on top; the sides of his head were practically bald. He was still a young man. I guessed that he might have been in his early twenties, probably younger. His head was bathed in sweat as rivulets trickled down his face left and right, undoubtedly caused by his frenzied pumping on the handcar. He looked so determined, as if his life depended on it! He suddenly turned his head briefly to look in my direction, and I looked into his large, jet-black eyes. His beaming smile showed a perfect row of pearly-white teeth.

He was clearly having trouble keeping up with my Peugeot 504. His head continued to bob alongside me and didn't seem to be gaining speed. His panting drowned out the handcar's rattle, and I could smell his sweat. I very slowly, very carefully lifted my foot from the gas pedal so he wouldn't notice. I saw how he slowly started to nudge ahead of me, little by little, until he passed me completely. With a sudden jerk, he swerved his handcar back to the right; he was now riding in front of me. I lifted my foot very slowly from the gas pedal, determined to make sure he wouldn't notice. He raised his right fist triumphantly in the air and pumped it up and down several times as he jerked his head to the left and right in a kind of victory dance. His left hand continued to pump the handle without stopping. I slowed my speed a little further and felt the tears rolling down my cheeks...