



## About the Setting

### Niger, West Africa

The story “On Sunday There Might Be Americans” is set in remote villages in Niger, West Africa. A country of 10 million people, many of them members of nomadic tribes, Niger is located in sub-Saharan Africa south of Algeria and Libya and east of Mali. The Sahara extends into Niger’s northern regions. Close to the Equator, Niger has extremely high daytime temperatures, with little rainfall in many regions. Droughts are the main threat to food production, and malnutrition is a persistent health problem. According to Peace Corps data, roughly 25 percent of children under the age of two are malnourished, resulting in one of the world’s highest infant mortality rates. Since 1962, over 2,600 Peace Corps Volunteers have served in Niger, the majority working in rural communities, where 80 percent of Niger’s population lives. Their main goal is to provide sufficient nutrition for all families. (Niger is pronounced either NY-jer or nee-ZHAIR.)

## ON SUNDAY THERE MIGHT BE AMERICANS

*By Leslie Simmonds Ekstrom,  
Returned Peace Corps  
Volunteer, Nigeria\**

Musa sat up on his mat and he knew he was done with sleep. He strained to see a sign of light beyond the door of his mother's hut. The muscles in his legs were jumping already and he had to stand. He walked to the door and pressed his eye against the crack in the straw. There above the rim of the compound wall he could see a sliver of blue. It was Sunday morning.

Each night the family began their sleep outside, the suffocating heat of day lingering long past sunset. But in the chill Sahara dawn, one by one, they dragged their mats back inside the thick mud walls of the huts, where Musa shivered now though he'd wrapped himself in his blanket. He pulled back one side of the door and looked into the compound. Only his uncle, Old Baba, still lay asleep in the middle of the compound, stretched out like a crane skirting the edge of the river, his arms spread like wings and his cracked, spindly toes almost pointed. Old Baba slept soundly whenever he closed his eyes, warmed by the dreams of the cities he'd seen when there had been work on the other side of the desert.

Musa turned back to look at his mother. She lay on her mat with his baby sister, Fatouma, folded into the curve of her body. He knew his mother's dreams. Sometimes when she first awoke she called him by another name. Then she would tell him a story about one of his brothers or sisters who'd died of spots, a cough, or a mysterious fever the village doctor couldn't cure. He remembered some of their faces.

He stepped out of the hut, pretending not to notice the other wives of the compound emerging from the doors of their huts, kneeling to light fires where they would cook the morning meal. One or two had already gone to the center of the compound to pound millet and, soon after, the thunk of their heavy wood pestles joined in a rhythm that reverberated through the village. The sound of the pestles made him hungry for porridge, but today he could leave without food—it was market day. The cars would drive up from the capital city, full of Europeans looking for things to buy. There might be one who would let him follow in the market and be the go-between when they wanted to bargain with a merchant for something to buy. Maybe this would be an American. Americans would pay 10 or 20 times what anything was worth, and then they'd give you a tip so foolish and large that you could buy food and a pair of sandals on the same day.

Musa slipped out through the forecourt, hoping the other wives wouldn't see him and gossip that his mother never fed him. He stood for a moment in the narrow door of the entrance hut, listening for the sound of his name; but he had not been noticed. He pulled the blanket up over his head and walked

*\*The author later lived in Niger.  
See page 118 for her background.*

out into the village, staying close to the wall, following it around to the rear where he could face the eastern sky. The sky changed slowly, veiled by a dull brown haze. Rain had fallen only three times this year and the slightest wind stirred the arid earth into the sky, where it stayed.

Musa's compound was at the back of the village. From where he stood against the wall, he could watch people on their way to the market, treading the wide, worn path that ran through the uncleared bush. They moved almost silently in the early light. He heard the bells of a train of camels before they emerged out of the haze, bringing in salt from the desert. The gray-white slabs hung in rope slings on either side of the camels' humps, bobbing heavily with each long, loose stride. The drivers, seated high above their cargo, swayed forward and back, forward and back. As they came nearer, Musa could hear the clucks of the drivers urging the beasts on and the deep, irritable growl the animals gave in reply. The men might have been half asleep, but they kept their feet pressed against the base of the camels' woolly necks, pushing hard into their flesh to keep them moving forward when they smelled the river and strained to turn toward it.

The women who scurried along the path carried large calabash bowls on their heads and babies tied against their backs. Musa knew the bowls would be laden with roasted groundnuts, dried okra, guinea corn, or locust bean cakes. His mouth watered, although even if he had the money, he wouldn't stop them now. They had to hurry. From his village it was only three more kilometers to town, and some of these women might have left their villages two hours before dawn, to arrive early at the market grounds, hoping to get a good place where there would be shade at midday. The Europeans could arrive at any time of day, taking shelter from the dust and heat in the machine-cooled rooms of the hotel.

He saw a woman on the path whom he recognized and ducked his head into the blanket. She had been a wife in his compound, the second of his father's younger brother, but she'd quarreled too much so he divorced her, sending her back to her village with all her belongings tied in a bundle on her head. She had been industrious but the other wives called her greedy, and they were glad when she was gone. He saw her glance up at the compound wall, her neck askew from the weight of a tray of bottles on her head. She could only roll her eyes toward the wall to take in as much of her former home as there was to see in the flat, cracked surface. When Musa's father had been prosperous, he'd had four wives. Long ago, his mother had been the favorite, and Old Baba once told him that she had been the most beautiful.

Musa pressed his back against the wall, let his knees bend and his buttocks slide to a seat on his heels. From here, he would watch the new sun as it rose

above the horizon. When it had come between the earth and the first branch of the gao tree, he would check his mother's hut. If she had not awakened, he would leave without food.

"So you have not yet gone, Ugly One," his mother said, seated at a fire near the door of her hut, her eyes squinted with sleep.

"It's still early."

"Baba's goat has milk," she said. "You can have milk if you want it." She held out a small, round gourd. Now the wives would say she spoiled him.

"Give mine to Fatouma." Musa squatted near the fire to feel the heat of the coals. In a few hours the air would be as hot.

"Eat porridge at least." She handed him a bowl full of yesterday's pounded millet. It had not been heated through.

Fatouma toddled out of the hut on her fat baby's legs, hurrying to sit near him. "Moo-SA," she called. He opened his blanket to set her on his lap and wrapped her up beside him so that only their faces peeked out.

"You look like two morning flowers," his mother said with pleasure, "waiting for the sun to open your leaves." Abruptly she lowered her eyes and stirred the fire, poking it too much, fearful of what she had just said. Tempting Allah.

"But Fatouma is so ugly," he said, easing his mother's anxiety. "Allah would never want to take this ugly child." He felt his sister's body warm against him and gave her his porridge. He pulled her closer to him, looking down into her clear, dark eyes. Seeing her brother's face so near, she reached up and touched his chin, twisting up her mouth in the way she knew would always make him laugh. He laughed to please her and pressed his cheek against the soft down on top of her head.

Musa joined the stream of people on the path that led into town. A group of Bela women, grunting like beasts of burden, came up behind him, pushing past anyone in their way, eager to reach the market and unload the wood racks they balanced on top of their heads. Each rack held a half-dozen clay jars, but these women, their shoulders deep and muscular as men's, could bear the precarious weight of the load. Their dark skin, black as a cooking pot, already shone with sweat. Musa had to jump out of the path to avoid the tilting racks.

Three Fulani girls, sisters most likely, rode by on donkeys alongside the path. Each wore an identical head cloth, brilliant green and woven with golden threads—too fine for a bush market. These were girls whose fathers might wear a watch. They laughed and talked too much as they passed the others, who traveled on foot, and one of them looked at Musa, turned her head to

stare at him, speaking to him with her eyes. Uneasily, he looked away. This had begun to happen often, even with girls in his own village. He had grown tall for his age, but he was still too young to answer back.

The path ended at the river where the market grounds made up half the town. The hotel sat on a rise above the river, surrounded by flame trees and high white walls. When he came within sight of the hotel, his stomach contracted, as it always did, seeing that there were at least a dozen boys milling around, expectant, hovering near the hotel gates. He saw no cars there yet. The road at the post office, by which the cars always came, was quiet and empty. The morning air still felt cool. The sun barely showed through the murky sky.

Musa walked near the group of boys, keeping his distance, cautious of their intensity. Many of these boys were his friends with whom he studied the Koran at the malam's house, but no one wanted competition when the Europeans arrived from the capital city. Like a pack of hunting jackals, each was on his own. Perhaps many Europeans would come today and there would be enough for all of them. If they were lucky, there would be Americans.

A tall, green car came fast around the corner at the post office, making a dust storm, and the boys ran, frenzied, straight out in its direction. They met it head on and jumped out of its way to run wildly at its sides, back toward the hotel. Musa joined them, shouting at the Europeans who sat cool and impassive inside the enormous car. The hotel gate swung open and the guard leaped out from behind the wall. He came after the boys with his cattle whip, beating them away. The leather snapped against Musa's thigh and he swallowed a yelp of pain.

There were six men in the green car. Six opportunities to be the go-between. They got out and dropped money into the palm of the guard. The guard followed behind them so none of the boys could get to them before they entered the hotel. Musa knew they would have coffee and bread before they went into the market. He tried to see beyond them, to the inside of the hotel. He had heard stories of the wondrous tables there, covered with crisp, white cloth and spread with sugar and butter set out to be eaten at will.

A small gray truck came more hesitantly around the corner, stopped, then turned away from the hotel and drove directly into the restless throng of animals tethered for sale at the market's outer edge. A man with pumpkin-colored hair and skin speckled like eggs stuck his hands and arms out of the truck, taking photographs, one after another, of the bawling baby camels tied in clusters on the open grounds. The boys left their position at the hotel gate,

tearing toward the gray truck. Musa stayed where he was, rubbing the flesh that still stung from the snap of the guard's whip.

Now a white sedan appeared at the post office road. A Peugeot. Musa could name the car. He felt the thrill of self-importance, as though he alone possessed secret knowledge of the world outside his village. The Peugeot moved slowly into the large open space that separated the market from the hotel.

Inside the Peugeot, he could see one man, one woman, and their child, a little boy leaning out the window, whose hair seemed to shine with silver light. Musa touched his own head, pressed his fingers down into his dull black, tightly curled hair. The woman in the car held her child as he stretched out the window. "Cow," he shouted, pointing his finger at a wild-eyed bull rocking its head against ropes that tied it to a tree. Musa thought he recognized the little boy's word. Was it English? These might be Americans, and the others hadn't heard.

Instead of going through the hotel gates, this car drove up next to the wall of the hotel compound. The swarm of boys ran back to the Peugeot, and the guard came at them again with his whip, cursing their mothers because he stumbled and nearly fell. The man locked the car and walked with his wife and child toward the market, the guard hovering around them until they had gone too far from the hotel. Musa ran with the pack, circling the couple to offer help in the market.

"Leave us alone," the man shouted in the boys' own language. "We don't need you," he bellowed, his white man's accent falling hard on the wrong syllables. But none of the boys wanted to be the first to give up. "Get away from us!" He raised his arm threateningly. The boys moved back, more amused than afraid. Many Europeans who came up to the market were like that. They wanted to be on their own and wouldn't ask for help even if you followed them around all day.

One of the boys sent up a shout and the rest of them turned like a herd of sheep and stampeded toward the hotel, bursting into the dust of another car. Musa watched them go and turned to look toward the market. He could already see a shimmering mirage hanging above the market stalls. The heat of the day had already begun. The sky had cleared and the sun seemed to be eating the air. This might not be the Sunday he had hoped for. He should have taken some porridge.

The young couple were walking into the cattle lot, moving cautiously around the nervous, long-horned animals. Their little boy pointed his finger again and again, twisting in his father's arms, excited, his eyes wide. The

woman stopped to watch a Tuareg man paint yellow lines on the backs of his bulls, to identify them and mark them for sale. Her husband placed the boy on his shoulders, spoke a few words to her, and he left her. She was alone. Musa's legs moved before his mind had made its plan.

The woman walked briskly into the marketplace without the usual hesitation of a European. She seemed at ease in the noise and clutter of an African market.

"Gud marn-ning, Madame," Musa said, the only English he knew, phrasing the words in a lilting tone that he thought sounded friendly. He alternately galloped and tiptoed as he spoke, trying to maintain a strategic position at her side. The woman ignored his greeting, gave him a look of impatience, and made her way through the crowd, heading into the center of the market.

He watched her go. She was tall and slender as a young girl, with hair yellow and straight as millet stalks. She wore pants the same as her husband's—washed-out blue and tight as skin. The shirt she wore was no finer than those he'd seen on boys coming back from the capital city. How strange it seemed. These people would spend on one bottle of beer what a man in his village couldn't earn in a day's work, yet they spent no money on the clothes they wore, and the women dressed as plain as the men. He glanced down at her shoes. With sudden excitement he almost turned to shout at one of his friends. She was U.S.A.! The white cloth shoes she wore had a bright blue symbol on both sides, shaped like the blade of a butcher's knife, curved back at the end. Only Americans wore those shoes.

The American woman stopped at the stall of a Hausa merchant and knelt down to examine a pile of his painted glass beads. The merchant ceremoniously opened a box to show her more beads, then another, and when she didn't react, another and another, making grand movements with his arms, like a storyteller, pouring out the beads on the mat where he sat on the ground. They formed little pools of color all around him. He thrust his hand under her face to show her a necklace, which seemed to irritate her, and she stood up to move on, the merchant shouting at her to come back and buy something—look at the mess he'd made for her.

Musa followed her, staying close, guarding his claim, pretending he'd been hired. They were walking through the pottery lot, Musa noiselessly on her heels, when the woman stopped suddenly. She stepped aside, out of the path that separated the grain pots from the water jars, and stood there waiting, her back to him. Musa froze. He turned around and walked the other way. Then she stepped back into the path and continued in the direction she'd been

going. He turned again to follow her. After a few more minutes she whipped around and looked him straight in the eye. Musa lowered his head and passed her, as though on his way to some purpose. She walked off in the opposite direction, disappearing into the dense, noisy crowd.

Musa maintained his ploy for only a minute, then spun on his heels and darted into the rows of fragile clay containers. He craned his neck to find her, then anxiously looked down to watch his feet, taking small, careful steps between the pots and jars, avoiding the disaster of a debt he couldn't pay.

The American woman was not far away. He saw her. No other boy had found her. But he leaped too quickly into the next narrow path, and his foot hit the top of a long-necked water jar. It fell over on its side. He heard an old woman screaming at him—a shrill, toothless voice that made people turn and look. Musa stopped in the path, wishing he'd never left his mother's hut.

The old woman stood up, shaking her hands at him, imploring Allah to strike down this dangerous boy. She lifted the jar to show a gathering group of market women the damage that had been done. Miraculously, the jar came up off the ground in one perfect piece. The cackling old voice stopped in surprise. Musa lifted himself into the air and galloped down the path in search of his American.

She had stopped in a path that wove through a field of enameled tinware—dozens of bowls, pots, cups, and trays displayed on the ground, brightening the hard-baked dirt with their painted fruits and flowers. Among the tinware, a half-dozen Bela girls stood in front of his American. They giggled and pressed against each other, holding their henna-dyed fingertips delicately over their mouths. The girls were all dressed the same, wrapped in indigo cloth that gave up some of its inky color on their skin. Plastic rings and beads covered the girls' heads, woven into the thin, intricate braids they wore hanging down stiffly on all sides. They smelled of honey.

One of the Bela girls wanted to sell the American woman a bracelet, and a small crowd had formed to watch. The woman was interested in the bracelet, but she couldn't understand what they were saying about the price. Now she would need him.

Musa spoke up in careful French. "How much would you like to pay, Madame?"

"Five hundred francs," she answered.

Musa addressed the girls in their own language. The people of his village looked down on the Belas, whom they considered coarse and low, but one of

the girls had large, soft eyes, gentle as a calf's and full of words. She turned from Musa's glance and lowered her eyes to the ground. He was distracted by his need to look longer at this shy Bela girl.

"The white woman will pay five hundred," he said. The Bela girls rolled their eyes and giggled; they tilted their heads and whispered. They loved the crowd and were taking their time. "Five hundred," Musa repeated, almost inaudibly. His mouth felt full of dust and he longed for a drink of the river.

At last one of them answered him, holding her fingertips over her mouth like a little red-orange cage, feigning modesty. "Not less than seven hundred and fifty," she said firmly.

Musa looked up at the woman. "They want one thousand francs, but I'm sure I can help you. I will tell them seven hundred and fifty."

She listened to him and repeated the amount he would offer. He nodded. "All right," she said. "Good."

"She has agreed to pay seven hundred and fifty," Musa said. The girls squealed and leaned on each other in a haphazard circle. They studied Musa, flashing their eyes at him. Bold girls. He had to look away from them, but his eyes darted irresistibly back to the shy one, who was watching him, too, her head down, stealing a glance sideways.

The American woman counted out the coins, took the bracelet, and slipped it on her arm. The golden white brass lost some of its radiance against her pale skin. But she seemed pleased. As she walked away from the Bela girls, she was smiling. And he had helped her. He looked around to see if anyone noticed, staying close to her, making helpful comments. Which she seemed to ignore.

Suddenly Musa saw Aliyu. Sly Aliyu with the angel face who saw Musa's American.

"*Bonjour, Madame,*" sang Aliyu, and held out both his hands, filled with rough clay beads. "My mother made these," he said in French.

The liar! "Your mother eats with hyenas," Musa muttered, his head turned away. If his American understood what he'd said, she might disapprove.

Aliyu ignored the insult and looked up appealingly at the woman. "My mother made them yesterday in our village."

"How much?" she asked. She spoke directly to Aliyu, ignoring Musa, her go-between.

"Seven hundred and fifty francs," smiled Aliyu.

The woman was furious. "Your mother eats with hyenas!" she snapped at

Aliyu with the angel face, and Musa was staggering back and forth, holding his stomach, shrieking with laughter. This was *his* American!

She turned her back to Aliyu and walked away. Musa followed, suppressing his triumph for the business at hand. He could see that her shirt was wet and stuck to her back; she would be done with the market now. If she gave him 25 francs, he would buy rice and sauce. If 50, he would buy rice and sauce with meat. Today he would have meat.

She took off the heavy Bela bracelet and put it in the bag that hung over her shoulder. She looked at her watch, lifting her hand to shield her eyes from the glare of the sun. "It's too hot." She looked at him now, spoke directly to him, using words in his own language. He held his breath. "I will eat at the hotel. Then I want to go back into the market. Can you help me buy a Tuareg ring?"

"Yes," he said, trying to appear serious and mature.

"I will be back soon." She walked away then, heading for the hotel. She took out a cloth and wiped her face. She did not take out any money.

Musa followed her to the hotel, taking no chances. He would wait there until she came out again. Somewhere in the shade on the other side of the wall, he could hear the guard sleeping noisily. One half of the double gate stood open and Musa looked inside, all the way to the wide glass doors of the hotel. He watched the woman disappear behind one shining panel of glass and for a moment he saw his own reflection—an almost beautiful, too-thin boy in rumpled khaki shorts and a T-shirt that hung awry at the bottom. He thought again of the Bela girl. He imagined himself a young man coming back from the capital city, bringing her a gift the likes of which she would never see in this bush market. By then he would be living in "the hut of the unmarried sons." He would wear new creased pants and a shirt as crisp and white as the hotel tablecloths.

He looked into the sky to judge the time. It was midday. The sun seemed to have ridden on wings that were closing down around him, suffocating him. He felt his head grow light, as though it would separate from his body. Other boys who had followed a European in the market might already be paid by now, sitting at a food stall under a thatched roof, eating rice and sauce. Rice and sauce. He would be satisfied with stale porridge. Musa slid down into the thin shade against the wall and set his swelling head against his knees, wondering why Allah had made the world unevenly.

He woke at the sound of a car's engine. He opened his eyes to see that the

sun had left the top of the sky. He had slept too long. Shadows dropped from the trees around the market grounds. He looked out behind the hotel where the afternoon sun made a hundred thousand mirrors dance on the surface of the river. Boys his age, some of them naked, dived and rose up through the cool, sparkling water, rolling and turning on the surface like hippos. He would join them soon.

He heard the creak of dry hinges and looked over to see the guard walking the gate open. The guard saw Musa and slashed the air with his whip. Then he bowed absurdly low as the tall green car drove out through the gate. Large black letters marked the car: RANGE ROVER. Who had followed the white men in the Range Rover? Which of his friends there in the river had received more than 25 francs?

The sound of laughter came from behind the wall, a child's. The little boy with the silver hair ran out through the gate and turned to look behind him, bending his legs with his hands on his knees, as though to brace for a run. Musa's American came out after him, let her son run a few paces, then grabbed him up in her arms. The husband walked out after her, held out his hand to the guard. Musa heard the sound of more than one coin.

The husband took the little boy and walked to the car. She followed behind, taking a cloth out of her bag and tying it around her hair. The guard bowed and smiled, leaning toward her, his brown teeth coming too close to her face, and she hurried past him.

Musa stood up.

The woman did not see him, took quick steps along the wall toward the white Peugeot. She opened the car door, got inside, and rolled down the window. She was not going back into the market.

The car moved back toward Musa, passing the guard, who doffed his dirty hat and bowed again. When the car stopped in its backward path, his American twisted her head around to take a last look at the market. "Oh," she called, seeing Musa there. "I forgot about you." The Peugeot turned its wheels and sped away from the wall, making a long dust cloud that flared wider and higher at the post office road.

Musa looked again out behind the hotel. A herdsman was forcing his cattle into the river, smacking their hindquarters with a strip of curled hide to get them across the shallow water. Musa's friends stopped their play to whoop at the timid cows. He decided not to join them. He could swim just as well farther down the river, near his village.

“There you are, Ugly One,” his mother said. “It’s late. What did you do in the market all day?”

“I helped a woman from the capital city. An American. She wanted to buy a Bela’s bracelet.”

“You bargained with a Bela?”

“Yes, but only for her. My American.”

“And did she give you something for your work?”

“Two hundred francs.”

“So much!”

“I bought you a fine new water jar. And red bracelets for Fatouma.”

“Did you eat in the market?”

“I ate rice and meat. I ate so much meat I can barely move.”

“But you are moving very well, I see. You can’t eat a little more?”

“Maybe some porridge. A little.”

His mother filled his bowl to brimming with pounded millet. It was fresh and hot. He breathed in the steam as it rose to his face, clearing his head of the market dust.

“So where is our new water jar?” she asked. “The old one is frail as Baba’s bones.”

“It was too big. I had to leave it in town.”

“With Fatouma’s bracelets?”

“Yes. I’ll get them next week.”

“You will try again next week?”

“Americans come every Sunday,” he said, and he stretched out his legs to make a place for Fatouma.

### ‘ON SUNDAY ...’

#### GLOSSARY OF TERMS

*Compound:* A walled living area consisting of a courtyard and huts where a man lives with his wives and children and often other relatives

*Go-between:* In Niger and other African countries, a young boy who helps tourists barter for produce, crafts, or the work of artisans selling their wares at large, native markets

*Calabash bowls:* Gourds of various shapes and sizes that are cut in half, scraped out, and used as bowls or cups

*Ugly One:* In Musa’s culture, people try to understand why children die so easily. To make sense of it, they assume Allah enjoys the company of children in heaven. Mothers therefore try not to call attention to anything special about their children that might cause Allah to take the children to join him in heaven.

*Bela women:* Women from the nomadic tribe named Bela. Women and girls from this tribe often bring produce and crafts to sell at Sunday village markets.

*Fulani girls:* Girls from the nomadic tribe named Fulani. Women and girls from this tribe often bring produce and crafts to sell at Sunday village markets.

*Ploy:* Trick

*Henna-dyed fingertips:* Fingertips that are dyed a reddish-orange, a custom for young girls of the Bela tribe

# READING AND RESPONDING TO *ON SUNDAY THERE MIGHT BE AMERICANS*

## Overview

This lesson plan will help you and your students explore the meaning of the short story “On Sunday There Might Be Americans,” by former Peace Corps Volunteer Leslie Simmonds Ekstrom. The story was first published in *Living on the Edge: Fiction by Peace Corps Writers*, a collection of Peace Corps Volunteer fiction edited by John Coyne (Curbstone Press). Many Peace Corps Volunteers are inspired to write about their encounters with other cultures—especially relationships or events that held great meaning for them. Often their writing is a way of preserving their memories of important people, stirring events, and significant places in their Peace Corps experience. Sometimes it is a way of thinking through differences in cultural values—or reflecting on personal changes they may have experienced as a result of their Peace Corps service. And sometimes it is a way of sorting through their experience of leaving the United States, a land of plenty, and encountering cultures and peoples who may lack the basic necessities of life.

Leslie Simmonds Ekstrom served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Nigeria, a country in West Africa, from 1963 to 1965. Before starting her story, she tells readers what prompted her to write it:

*As a Peace Corps Volunteer, I'd always loved being part of the excitement and commotion of an African marketplace. When I lived in Niger as a Peace Corps staff spouse, I didn't have the freedom I'd had as a [Peace Corps Volunteer] and I missed being “among the people” in a bush marketplace. Except for the sassy, noisy boys who demanded to guard your car, barter a price, or carry your loads, the market that most reminded me of my Volunteer days was at Ayorou, near the Mali border. One Sunday at Ayorou, a small boy followed me all through the market. He was shy and hesitant and I thought I could ditch him, but then he'd reappear in my shadow again. I finally paid him to go away. But I kept thinking about him—what his life might be like, how he perceived Westerners, and how easily Westerners become oblivious to the lives of ordinary people like him. Trying to imagine his life, I wrote “On Sunday There Might Be Americans.”*

“On Sunday There Might Be Americans” is a story about many things: It's about a young boy taking responsibility for his family's survival; about how close family bonds bring balance to difficult economic conditions; about a young boy's hopes and dreams; and about how it feels to be overlooked and ignored.

On the deepest level, it is a story about seeing yet not seeing others. The difference between seeing people only with our eyes and seeing them with our minds and hearts is immense. This story is a way for you to explore these

issues with your students. It is also an opportunity for your students to experience what it's like to grow up in a culture very different from their own.

Ekstrom's nonfiction articles and commentary pieces have been published in numerous community publications, as well as the *Washington Post*. Her fiction has appeared in *The Bridge*, a national publication on cross-cultural affairs.

### About the Setting

Niger, in West Africa, a country of 10 million people, is located in sub-Saharan Africa, south of Algeria and Libya and east of Mali. The Sahara extends into Niger's northern regions. Located close to the Equator, Niger has extremely high daytime temperatures and little rainfall in many regions. Drought is the main threat to food production, and malnutrition is a persistent health problem. Many Peace Corps Volunteers work in rural areas of Niger to improve the nutritional status of children and pregnant women.

According to World Bank data, Niger is one of the poorest and least developed countries in the world. According to statistics for the year 2000, Niger ranked 173 out of 174 on the United Nations Human Development Index—an assessment of social, health, and economic conditions. According to Peace Corps data, roughly 25 percent of children in Niger under the age of two are malnourished, resulting in one of the world's highest infant mortality rates. Nearly a third of the children born in Niger die before age five from malnutrition and poor health conditions. The life expectancy for the total population is 45 years. According to World Bank statistics for 1999, only 23 percent of Nigeriens over age 15 can read and write, and only 24 percent of school-age students attend school.

You can find additional information about Niger on the Coverdell World Wise Schools website at [www.peacecorps.gov/wws/water/africa/countries/niger/](http://www.peacecorps.gov/wws/water/africa/countries/niger/).

## STANDARDS

### National Council of Teachers of English/International Reading Association

- *Standard 1:* Students read a wide range of print and nonprint texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world.
- *Standard 2:* Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions of human experience.
- *Standard 3:* Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts.
- *Standard 5:* Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.

### National Council for the Social Studies

- *Theme 1: Culture.* Social studies programs should provide for the study of culture and cultural diversity so that the learner can explain how information and experiences may be interpreted by people from diverse cultural perspectives and frames of reference.

### Suggested Instructional Sequence

In this lesson plan, we present many ideas for reading and responding to “On Sunday There Might Be Americans.” In particular, we have differentiated the instructional activities to provide options for using the story with younger or less able readers, as well as with older, more sophisticated and skillful readers. Our suggested lesson sequence is a flexible springboard for tailoring instruction to the needs of your students—and to your state or local curriculum standards.

We’ve also developed this lesson plan to address specific language arts and social studies standards using the *Understanding by Design* curriculum framework (Wiggins and McTighe, 1998). The framework, based on “enduring understandings” and “essential questions,” is described in detail in Appendix A to this collection on page 174. You can find the enduring understandings and essential questions that we suggest for this story in the margin opposite.

## DAY ONE

### Purpose:

- To introduce the story to students and have them reflect on its setting.
  - To stimulate group discussion about the story’s meaning.
1. Provide students with information about Niger presented on page 119. Show students a map of Africa and point out Niger in West Africa.
  2. Ask students what they think the lives of Nigerien children and teenagers must be like. Give the students an opportunity to share their thoughts with a partner.
  3. Explain to students how Leslie Simmonds Ekstrom came to write “On Sunday There Might Be Americans,” using the information provided on page 118. Ask students what they think Ekstrom might have wanted readers to be thinking about as they read her story.
  4. Tell students they will be reading about a day in the life of Musa, a 12-year-old Nigerien boy. Refer them to the Glossary of Terms on page 51, then have them read the story. Ask them, as they did when reading “I Had a Hero,” to try to visualize the different scenes in the story as if they were creating “a movie in their minds.” Also ask them to highlight sentences or passages of particular meaning to them and to jot down notes in the margins regarding anything that may raise questions or cause confusion.
  5. When students have finished reading the story, ask them to form groups

of three and share their highlights and questions. Then conduct a class discussion to address anything the students are confused about or that raises questions.

6. Explain to students that there is no one right answer when trying to interpret a story. Different individuals will respond to a story in different ways, based on their own perspectives and life experiences. Suggest that reading a story is enriched by hearing many different interpretations and then selecting those that have the most meaning. With these thoughts in mind, ask students:
  - What do you find significant about this story?
  - What ideas do you think Ekstrom wanted her readers to be thinking about?
7. As you conduct a discussion about these questions, different students will focus on different things. Some students may focus on the personal and cultural differences between Musa's life and their own. Some may focus on the relationships in Musa's family. Others may focus on the issue of poverty. And still others may focus on the way the American woman was so caught up in her own world that she simply ignored Musa and what his needs might have been. All these interpretations will help students recognize the many rich facets of "On Sunday There Might Be Americans."
8. Additional questions to stimulate discussion (have students discuss these questions with a partner before beginning a class discussion):
  - Why did Ekstrom choose this particular title for her story? Does the title make sense to you? Why or why not? Is there another title you would have used?
  - Why do you think the author ends her story the way she does? Remind students that since this story is fictional, the author could have ended it any way she wished. So why this particular ending?
9. *Journal Entry:* For homework, ask students to reread the story, complete the story frame on Worksheet #5 on page 123, and respond in their Reading Journals to the following prompts:
  - What does this story leave you wishing you knew more about?
  - What experiences does this story make you think of?
  - What do you think is really important about this story?

### Enduring Understandings:

- Sometimes we are so caught up in our own world that we really don't "see" others—or realize how they might see us.
- To avoid misunderstanding—or possibly hurting—others, we need to see the world from their perspective, in addition to our own.
- Reading enables us to see the world from many different perspectives and expand our worldview.

### Essential Questions:

- How do you learn to see things from another person's—or another culture's—perspective? Why bother?
- What does it take to put ourselves in another's shoes? Why bother?
- How does reading help us expand our perspective on the world, ourselves, and others?

### Grade Levels:

This lesson plan can be adapted for use with students in grades 6–12.

### Assessments:

Group discussions, journal entries, graphic representations of key ideas, extended writing assignments.

### Note to Teachers:

In preparation for the next day's lesson, here are approaches of a more factual nature to check students' comprehension of the story:

- Describe Musa's surroundings and what they tell you about his life and economic situation. Who are the people living in the same compound with Musa? What does this tell you about the local cultural family traits?
- Explain the dynamics between the pack of boys "hovering near the hotel gates" and the people driving the cars through the gates.
- How does the man in the white Peugeot respond as the pack of boys circles the car? What do you think of his response? How would you have responded?
- When one of the Fulani (a nomadic tribe) girls looked at Musa, "speaking to him with her eyes," he didn't "answer back." Later, when the Bela (another nomadic tribe) girls were "flashing their eyes at him," this time he looked back. What do these encounters reveal? How can you relate to this?
- As Musa looks at his reflection far off in the hotel doors, he thinks about what could be in his future. What are his dreams? How are they like yours? How are they different?
- Reread the dialogue at the end of the story between Musa and his mother. What is taking place between the two of them? Do you think Musa's mother understands what really happened at the market? What keeps Musa going back to the market on Sundays?

## Worksheet #5

## Story Frame: Understanding Musa

*Directions: Fill out this story frame in response to the following prompts:*



*In this story, Musa's problem starts when:*

*After that:*



*Next:*

*Then:*

*Finally:*



**DAY TWO**

**Purpose:**

- To help students see the world from Musa’s point of view.
  - To allow students to capture the essence of the story using graphic representations.
1. Remind the class of the visualization strategy they employed in “I Had a Hero.” Ask them in what ways using this strategy increased their comprehension. Ask whether they have tried to use visualization as a comprehension strategy in other classes. Which ones? How did the strategy work?
  2. Tell students that you’d like to try the visualization strategy again to help them increase their comprehension of the story. This time you will be focusing not only on mental pictures but also on feelings. You would like them to put themselves in Musa’s place and try to “walk in Musa’s shoes.” Ask students to close their eyes and picture in their minds the following:
    - Musa holding his baby sister in his lap and feeding her his porridge.
    - How Musa must have felt as he was walking in the crowd of people going to the town market.
    - All the boys swarming around the large green car filled with wealthy Europeans going to the hotel. Feel how Musa must have felt as he watched them.
    - How Musa felt when he looked inside the hotel gates.
    - Musa following the American woman around the market hoping she would ask for his help.
    - Musa being distracted by the shy Bela girl.
    - How Musa felt when the American woman allowed him to be the go-between so that she could buy a bracelet.
    - How Musa must have felt in the heat of the day when the American woman went into the hotel.
    - How Musa must have felt looking into the hotel knowing that this world was closed to him and that he could not go in.
    - How Musa must have felt when he realized he had slept too long and woke up to find that the Americans were leaving.
    - What Musa must have felt when the American woman said to him: “Oh, I forgot about you.”
    - Musa returning home to his family with nothing to show for his

day at the market. Feel how he must have been feeling.

- How he must have felt when he returned home and his mother offered him a fresh, warm bowl of porridge.
- How Musa must have felt when he told his mother he would try again next week because “Americans come every Sunday.”

3. In a class discussion, ask students:

- What visual images in the story were particularly striking to you?
- How easy or difficult was it for you to put yourself in Musa’s shoes? Why?
- What makes it hard to see the world from another person’s point of view?
- Did the American woman see the world from Musa’s point of view? Why or why not?
- How do you learn to see things from another person’s point of view? Why bother?

4. Now ask students to turn to the Story Frame and questions they responded to in their homework. Have students compare their Story Frame in groups of four. Tell students not to expect that each Story Frame will be the same. Different students will think that different things are important in the story. Ask them to see what they can learn from their group’s Story Frames.

5. After five minutes or so, ask several volunteers to share the content of their Story Frames with the class.

6. Then have students discuss their responses to the journal prompts they completed for homework. Remind them that these are not easy questions to answer and, in fact, there is not one right answer to the questions. These are questions that call for personal interpretation. Encourage students to express many different ideas and to back them up with quotations from the text.

- What does this story leave you wishing you knew more about?
- What other experiences does this story make you think of?
- What do you think is really important about this story?

7. Ask students to discuss their responses in groups of four. Follow this with a class discussion.

8. One way to encourage students to express different points of view is to remain nonjudgmental about their responses. Remind students always to support their viewpoints with examples from the text.



9. *Graphic Representations:* Allow sufficient time for a discussion of these questions. Then ask students to form groups of three. Give each group a large sheet of paper and some felt-tipped markers in various colors. Ask the groups to draw symbols, sketches, or other graphic representations that capture the main ideas in “On Sunday There Might Be Americans.” Research (Marzano et al., 2001) has shown that when students are able to represent key ideas nonlinguistically, their comprehension increases.
10. As students may not have enough time to complete this activity in class, ask each student to come up with his or her own symbols, images, or sketches for homework. Ask students also to look in various magazines for photos that may represent the main ideas of the story and to bring these photos to class. Let students know that in the next session they will return to their same group of three and finish their graphic representations of the main ideas of “On Sunday There Might Be Americans.”

### DAY THREE

#### Purpose:

- To encourage students to probe the deeper meanings of the story.
  - To help students relate important ideas raised by the story to their own lives.
1. Have students rejoin their groups of three and complete their graphic representations. Provide glue sticks to groups that have magazine photos to add.
  2. After groups have completed this assignment, ask each group of three to share their graphic representations with another group of three. Group members should be able to provide good reasons for the particular images they selected to convey the story’s main idea. Have the groups share their graphics with the class. Then, post each group’s graphic representation on the walls around the room.
  3. *Cooperative Learning Activity:* Reassemble the class into no more than five groups. Give each group a number from one to five. Explain that you will give each group a different question to respond to.
  4. Here are some suggested questions. Write each on a separate sheet of paper. Number each paper with the question number. Staple three or four sheets of blank paper behind the paper with the question on it.
    - In what ways did the American woman not really “see” Musa? If

the American woman had been able to see Musa not only with her eyes but also with her mind and heart, what do you think she would have done differently? Why?

- How do you think the world within the hotel gates and walls is different from the world Musa lives in? What does it feel like to be an outsider?
- Musa wonders “why Allah had made the world unevenly.” Why does he wonder this?
- What disturbed you most about the story “On Sunday There Might Be Americans”? Why?
- Like the American woman, sometimes we are so caught up in our own worlds that we really don’t see others—or realize how they might see us. How could we change this? What would we need to do differently?

*Reading a book is like rewriting it for yourself....You bring to a novel, anything you read, all your experience of the world. You bring your history and you read it in your own terms.*

**Angela Carter**  
Author

5. Once you have prepared the questions, explain to the five groups that each will be receiving a different question about the story. Each group’s task is to read the question, discuss possible answers, arrive at the best answer(s), and write them on the attached sheets of blank paper. Each group will have five to seven minutes to do this. Ask each group to select a discussion leader, a timekeeper, a “gatekeeper” (explained momentarily), a recorder, and a reporter. (The discussion leader’s role is to read each question to the group, to read previous responses to the question to the group, to make sure that each group member has a chance to contribute to the discussion, and to permit only one person to speak at a time. This role is an important one, so you will want to make sure that the class knows these ground rules. The gatekeeper’s role is to support the discussion leader by ensuring that all members are being listened to. The recorder’s role is to write down the group’s responses to each question. The reporter gives the final summary, and the timekeeper gives the “two-minute” warning.)
6. Call “time” at the end of seven minutes, at which time each group passes its question and answers to the adjacent group. In this way, each group will have a new question to answer, but may benefit from thinking about the answers from the group that previously answered that particular question.
7. Repeat the process, call time, and have each group again pass its question to the adjacent group. Ask the discussion leaders to read the group’s new question, as well as the answers from the previous group(s). The process repeats itself for a total of five rounds until each group has its original question back.

8. At this point the groups read all the responses to their original question and discuss and reflect on the responses in order to present a summary of the responses to the whole class. Ask each group's reporter to present a summary of the responses to their question to the whole class.
9. Since this is a cooperative group process, it works best when each member of the group has a role to play. We've suggested the roles in #5. You may want to add others.
10. *Journal Entry:* In all likelihood, it will take the rest of the class period to complete this activity, so you will need to process it the next day. For homework, ask students to respond to the following prompts in their Reading Journals:

- As I think about the activity we just completed, here are some things that I came to realize about the story's meaning that I hadn't thought of before:
- As I think about "On Sunday There Might Be Americans," what surprises me is ...



**Purpose:****DAY FOUR**

- To stimulate further thinking about the meaning of the text.
  - To provide students the opportunity to craft an extended written response to the text.
1. Ask students to share their journal responses from the night before with a partner and then in a class discussion.
  2. Remind students that when the class read “I Had a Hero” and “‘Magic’ Pablo,” they explored the idea of character and strength of character. There was a discussion about how character can sometimes be viewed as the mark you leave on another person. Ask students:
    - What impression or mark did Musa leave on the American woman?
    - What impression or mark did the American woman leave on Musa?
    - What impression or mark did Musa leave on you?
    - What do you see as Musa’s strength of character? What are the character traits that most impress you about Musa?
  3. After exploring these questions, talk with students about the ways they think reading can provide new perspectives on the world. Ask what new perspective they gained on the world as a result of reading “On Sunday There Might Be Americans.”
  4. Talk to students about the ways they think writing can help us make sense of confusing or complicated experiences. Ask why Ekstrom might have written “On Sunday There Might Be Americans.” What was she trying to make sense of? (See page 118 for her explanation.)
  5. *Extended Response to Literature:* To conclude work on this story, have students respond to “On Sunday There Might Be Americans” through an extended piece of writing. They will have many options to select from:

**Responding Through a Personal Narrative:** Write a personal narrative, using (or adapting) one of the scenarios below:

- Describe a time when someone (a friend, teacher, coach, group of kids) made a you feel completely left out, invisible, disregarded, or ignored—or a time when you made someone else feel that way.
- Describe a time when someone seemed completely oblivious of your feelings and needs—or when you were oblivious of his or hers.
- Describe the similarities and differences between a Sunday in your

life and a Sunday in Musa's life. What are the reasons your life is the way it is, and what are the reasons Musa's life is the way it is? What does comparing your lives make you think about? Describe a "new Sunday" in Musa's life the way you'd like it to be.

**Responding Through Fiction:** Write a piece of fiction, based on one of the ideas below. Your fictional account should include characterization, description, setting, and dialogue.

- Rewrite the ending of "On Sunday There Might Be Americans" in a way that is credible to readers, based on what they know about Musa and his situation.
- Write a sequel to "On Sunday There Might Be Americans" that begins at the point where the short story ends.
- Write a fictional piece of your choice that in some way reflects the ideas in "On Sunday There Might Be Americans."

**Responding Through Letter Writing:** Write three letters: the first from you to Musa; the second from Musa to you in response to your letter; and the third from you to Musa in response to his letter to you. Or write a series of letters from you to the American woman and from the American woman to you.

**Responding Through Poetry:** Compose a narrative poem about Musa that captures the essence of "On Sunday There Might Be Americans"—and that also captures the way in which this story relates to your own life. In your poem, rhyme is not as important as expressing the essence of the story, your response to it, or the way the story may have changed you.