CHIBUNDU ONUZO

MAYOWA and the SEA OF WORDS

BLOOMSBURY

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To Tara, Nathaniel, Derin, Jemie, Fara, Jama, Niko,
Ife, Dara, Isobel and Phoebe,
Who all make me an Aunty

CHAPTER ONE
A Ban on Jumping

Mayowa Althea Howard was eight years old when she first jumped on a book. It was a warm summer's day, and all the windows in the Howards' flat were open. Outside on the street, she could hear the noise from passing buses and tinkling cyclists.

Mayowa shut her bedroom door, placed *Oliver Twist* on the floor and launched on to Charles Dickens's masterpiece.[1] Nothing happened. She tried again, landing with a thump. Still nothing happened. On her third try, when the force of her landing ripped the book cover, her father walked into her bedroom without knocking.[2] He

[1] Depending on who you ask.
[2] A very bad habit.

was smiling at the thought of the long summer holiday stretched out before them.

'We're going to—' he started to say and then he saw Mayowa.

'You know you're not supposed to do that,' her father said, in his sternest, most teacherly voice. Mayowa stepped off the book guiltily.

'But I saw Grandpa Edward doing it when he last came here.'

'And your mother and I said you were never to copy him.'

'Copy who?' Mayowa's mother asked, coming into the room, humming a jazz tune. Mayowa signalled for her father not to tell, but Tommy could never hide anything from his wife.

'She was jumping on a book,' he said.

Mayowa's mother bristled like a porcupine.

'I told you she would pick it up from him.'

'It's not that bad, Wunmi,' her father said. 'It's just a harmless family tradition. Some people smash plates at weddings. Some of the Howards jump on books.'

'It is not harmless. Let me feel the book. Mayowa, bring it to me.'

Oliver Twist

Mayowa had been hoping to slip away while her parents debated traditions. Instead, she placed *Oliver Twist* in her mother's hands. Wunmi ran her fingers all over the damaged book. She was blind and her fingers served as her eyes.

'Look. She's torn it,' her mother said. 'What if she jumps on a library book?'

'I would never,' Mayowa said with indignation,[3] but her mother ignored her.

'What if she does this at school and gets labelled a troublemaker? Do you want our daughter to get a major strike or worse, be excluded?'

Mayowa wanted to shout, 'Everybody just calm down,' but telling her Nigerian mother to calm down didn't sound like a good idea at that moment.[4]

Mayowa's mother turned to her.

'Mayowa, my love, listen to me. You are never to jump on a book again.'

'But—' she said.

'You heard your mother,' said Tommy.

And that was how Mayowa Althea Howard came to be banned from jumping on books.

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[3] Everybody knows you must treat library books with extra care.
[4] Or at any other moment.

CHAPTER TWO
A Barrier Breaker

The Howards lived on the third floor of a tall brick apartment building, minutes away from where Sherlock Holmes solved all his crimes. Living there was like living in a multilayered sandwich, Mayowa thought. Some levels were delicious ham and cheese, others were curious coronation chicken and a few were stinky tuna mayo.

Tuna mayo was Mr Dixon on the second floor. He wore grey and had very sharp ears. One plink on the piano after 7 p.m. and he would storm up the stairs demanding Wunmi stop that racket or he'd call the police.

Wunmi was an accomplished pianist and she filled their flat with the complex, beautiful sound of jazz. Mr Dixon had once asked her why she couldn't play any

proper music instead of that jungle noise. Tommy said Mr Dixon's reaction to jazz was R-A-C-I-S-T. This was how Mayowa's parents said 'racist' when Mayowa was close by.

Tommy could spell most words forward and backward. He was a Maths teacher at a school that ten years ago was always in the news for S-T-A-B-B-I-N-G-S but now made the news for all its pupils that went on to Oxbridge.[5]

Eight days after Mayowa was born, her names were chosen in a special ceremony that her Nigerian grandfather flew from Lagos to attend. Grandpa Razak gave her the name Mayowa, which meant, 'One who brings joy to the family.' And Grandpa Edward decided on the name Althea after a famous tennis player who won many trophies.[6] When she was old enough to look things up on Wikipedia, Mayowa had seen that the other Althea had 'broken down barriers'. After that, Mayowa always strode purposefully through the turnstiles on the London Underground.

In school, Mayowa averaged average. She was brilliant at Literature, passable at Science and despite her father's best efforts, terrible at Maths. She was neither the tallest

[5] Short form for Oxford and Cambridge Universities. Camford didn't quite catch on.
[6] Althea Gibson (1927–2003), female African-American tennis player and professional golfer.

nor the shortest, the brightest nor the dimmest, the fastest nor the slowest.[7]

Yet Mayowa knew that one day she would grow up to surprise the world. She had been named after a barrier breaker and a barrier breaker she would be. She just assumed she would have to wait until she was grown up and paying taxes. Her predictions might have proved correct if Wunmi had not got her big break in the year Mayowa turned ten …

[7] At this point, you must get the picture.

CHAPTER THREE
The Big Break

Every musician longs for their big break. Some get it too early, when their emotions are still green and their characters unformed. Some get it too late, after many disappointments, when their personalities have soured like old milk. A lucky few get it at the right time, neither so young that success goes to their head, nor so old that chocolate biscuits have lost their flavour.

Mayowa's mother had played with her jazz band for many years. She had played in school fetes, dingy bars, county halls, bar mitzvahs, bat mitzvahs, christenings, birthdays and weddings, but never funerals, because jazz is too upbeat for death. She had played for audiences that talked over the music, audiences that didn't particularly

like jazz, audiences that chomped through chips while she poured out her heart through her fingers onstage.

Then finally the invitation came to tour America for two months of summer. Wunmi's band would play New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, Baltimore, Memphis, and the holy grail of jazz, New Orleans.

When the invitation came, three weeks till the summer holidays, there was much excitement in the Howard flat. This was it. The big break was finally here.

'Can I come?' Mayowa asked.

Her question put an end to the celebrations. A multi-city tour was no place for a child. Nor could Tommy stay behind in London with Mayowa. Wunmi would need his help in all those strange, new cities.

'I won't go then,' Wunmi said.

'No!' said both Mayowa and Tommy. They knew that sometimes a big break came round just once in a lifetime.

'Maybe I can stay with one of the Grandpas,' Mayowa said.

'Your mum and I will think about it,' said Tommy. 'Come on, bedtime.'

Lying under her covers, Mayowa thought about the advantages and disadvantages of staying with

each grandfather. Grandpa Edward, also known as the nineteenth Baron Edgerley, was a retired naturalist. Whenever Mayowa visited Edgerley Hall, she and Grandpa Edward roamed the grounds, tracking deer, looking in birds' nests and gathering frogspawn. He could point out all the birds on the estate, like red kites, ospreys and grey plovers.

The problem was not the outside of Edgerley Hall but the *inside*. It was a grand house with eighty rooms, half of which were uninhabitable due to mould, wood rot and inheritance tax. Grandpa Edward had chosen to work for passion instead of money, which was why a third of the windows in Edgerley Hall were boarded with wooden planks and there was no central heating in one of the wings.

Compare that to life in Lagos with Grandpa Razak. Grandpa Razak's house was smaller than Edgerley, but what it lacked in size, it made up for in comfort. Mayowa never had to climb stairs because there was a lift. A chef cooked any dish she could dream of. Grandpa Razak lived on the Lagos waterfront, and Mayowa just had to ask and she could go out on the lagoon in one of Grandpa Razak's boats.

All in all, Mayowa favoured Lagos over Edgerley Hall.

She could hear her parents talking in the living room. She crept out of bed and pressed her ear to the door.[8]

'She can't go to Nigeria. She'll come back spoilt rotten,' Mayowa heard her father say.

'It wasn't that bad,' said Wunmi.

'Yes it was,' her father countered. 'May forgot how to wash a dish after three weeks in Lagos. She wouldn't even pick up her own clothes from the floor. And you know how busy your father is. She'll hardly ever see him.'

'What about your dad? She can't stay with him,' said her mother.

'Why not?'

'I don't want her jumping on books,' Wunmi said, her voice becoming angry and hard.

'It's a harmless Howard tradition and we've told him not to do it in front of her.'

'Stop saying that. It's not harmless. In my culture, books are prized possessions,' Wunmi said.

Her mother only said 'in my culture' when she was very upset. It was going to be a long discussion. Mayowa crept back to her bed.

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[8] Eavesdropping is an even worse habit than walking into a room without knocking.

* * *

The next morning, Tommy walked Mayowa to West London School for Girls. It took them seven and a half minutes, ten if you dawdled. They stepped straight into the London rush hour. The whole city was hurrying to work. Shoes clipped on pavements. Cars stood still in traffic. Cyclists whizzed past, the fastest vehicles on the road.

'Your mum and I have decided that you'll go to Edgerley for two months this summer,' Tommy said.

'Oh,' Mayowa said, trying to hide her disappointment.

'I thought you liked Edgerley,' said Tommy.

'I do. And I want Mum to have her big break,' Mayowa said, avoiding a swinging briefcase.

'That's not for you to worry about,' Tommy said. 'But remember, you're not to go into the library. Not even if Grandpa asks you to.'

'Is it wrong to jump on books?' Mayowa asked. She knew her mother wouldn't like her asking, but she couldn't help herself.

'It's not wrong, but it's strange and your mother doesn't want people to think you're strange. When she was your age, many people thought she was strange because she was blind. It was hard for her.'

Mayowa was curious about her mother's childhood, but she was even more curious about book jumping.

'Why does Grandpa do it?' Mayowa pressed before her father tried to change the subject.

'I don't know. When I was your age, Grandpa and I used to jump barefoot.'

'Barefoot?' Mayowa asked with surprise.

'Yes, barefoot,' Tommy said, chuckling at the memory. 'My mother also didn't approve. We didn't do it all the time. Maybe once every six months. Each time we jumped, he would ask me if I felt anything.'

'And did you?' Mayowa asked.

Tommy glanced at her, as if only just realising they were discussing the forbidden subject.

'Well, I felt the book under my feet. Nothing else.'

They were by the school gates, but Mayowa still wanted to find out more. She stepped aside for girls to walk past her.

'Didn't you ask Grandpa what the tradition meant, or how it started?'

Her father sighed. 'May, you know how your mother feels about this. Let's just drop it.'

There are some people in the world that must know things. They must know why trees grow upwards and time

runs forward. Why elephants have tusks and babies are born without teeth. Why house prices in London never fall and summers in England are always rainy. Why poo is brown. Why blood is red. Why we sing. Why we dance. Why we die.

Mayowa was one of those people. She just had to know.[9]

'All right. I'll stop asking,' she said to her father. But in her mind, Mayowa silently added, 'I'll stop asking *you*.'

'Have fun at school,' Tommy said, giving her a hug.

'Bye, Dad.' Mayowa turned and walked through the school gates.

For a hundred and fifty years, West London Girls had stood on the corner of Hanover Street, taking girls in their childhood and releasing them to the world as women. Former students had gone on to be pop stars, judges, doctors, actresses, and there was even an old West London girl who had *almost* become Prime Minister.

'May,' Anjali called out. She was Mayowa's best friend.

'Hey, Anjali,' Mayowa said.

Anjali had had a growth spurt in the last year and was now a head taller than Mayowa, to Mayowa's annoyance. When they'd met on the first day of Year 1, they were

[9] In some cultures, such people are called scientists. In others, they're called busybodies.

both the same height and both wearing their hair bunched in two. Since that first day, they had sat next to each other, sharing stationery and Haribo, when they could get some.

Their morning lessons passed in a blur of isosceles triangles and French nouns. When the lunch bell rang, a buzz of excitement swept through the class. Rumour had it that Clemmy Trotter would be handing out invitations to her tenth birthday party that afternoon.

For most of the year, Clemmy was disliked for the whiny voice in which she boasted about her parents' mansion in Knightsbridge.[10] But in her birth month of June, she became the most popular girl in school. For last year's ninth birthday party, her guests had been treated to a helicopter ride and high tea at the Dorchester. Who knew what the Trotters would do for ten?

'Do you think we'll be invited?' Anjali asked Mayowa as they walked to lunch.

'Don't know and don't care,' Mayowa said.

But of course, she did care. They sat down to their meal of rice and chicken curry, but in the corner of their vision they watched Clemmy march through the dining hall, holding a clutch of envelopes like a postman

[10] No knights have ever been spotted in Knightsbridge. There's no bridge either.

on a mission. In order to take their minds off Clemmy's VIP party,[11] Mayowa blurted out, 'I have a family secret.'

'If it's a secret, don't tell me,' Anjali said, always a stickler for rules.

'It's not a proper secret. It's just my grandfather jumps on books with his bare feet and nobody will tell me why.'

'Maybe it's yoga,' said Anjali. 'My grandpa stands on his head when he does yoga.'

'Really?' Mayowa said. 'Does it hurt?'

Before Mayowa could find out if doing a headstand hurt, Clemmy was at their table.

'I would like you to attend my birthday party next week,' Clemmy said, holding out a golden envelope to Mayowa. Mayowa leaned forward and then stopped.

'What about Anjali?'

'Sorry, Anjali, not this year,' said Clemmy.

Mayowa withdrew her hand and said stiffly, 'Thanks for the invitation, but I won't go without Anjali.'

'Don't be silly, Mayowa. You must go and tell me all about it,' said Anjali, putting a brave face on the matter.

'Mayowa, you'll be missing out,' Clemmy whined.

[11] Very Important Person or Very Important Poo, depending on who you ask.

'We're going to Disneyland Paris for the weekend. And that's just one of the things.'

Disneyland Paris! Mayowa had never had the chance to go because her parents also worked for passion instead of money. Mayowa looked with longing at the golden envelope. Then she looked at the brave smile pasted on top of Anjali's disappointment.

'No thank you,' Mayowa said.

Clemmy's face turned an angry red.

'I didn't even really want you to come. But my mum said we needed diversity,' she shrieked.

Mayowa wasn't sure what Clemmy meant by 'diversity' but her tone sounded unkind. Mayowa stuck out her tongue and blew a raspberry.

'I'm sure you'll have a nice time with all your fake friends.'

Clemmy stamped her foot and stormed off.

'Mayowa!' Anjali exclaimed when Clemmy was gone.

'What?' Mayowa shrugged. 'Someone had to tell her.'

There were twenty minutes left of lunch, which was just enough time to join the game of rounders starting on the playing field.

'Last one outside is a mouldy Haribo!' Mayowa shouted.

* * *

At home time, Wunmi was waiting by the school gates. She was the most stylish mother, Mayowa thought. She wore a red silk scarf, large beetle-black sunglasses and in her right hand was her bright yellow cane. Mayowa walked up to her and said 'Mum' before touching her, so as not to startle her.

'Hello, my love,' Wunmi said, reaching for Mayowa's cheek and stroking it. 'Your skin feels dry. Did you cream it this morning?'

'Yes, Mum,' Mayowa said, but it was no use. Once Wunmi felt dry skin, she sprang into action.[12] Swiftly, she withdrew a pot of cocoa butter from her handbag.

'Oya,' Wunmi said.

Mayowa smeared the thick cream on her face.

'Make sure you rub it in,' her mother said.

Mayowa groaned. 'It makes me look shiny.'

Wunmi patted Mayowa's cheeks and was satisfied. 'Shiny and beautiful. So how was school?'

'Clemmy Trotter invited me for her birthday party, but I said no because she didn't invite Anjali.'

'That was kind to Anjali but perhaps unkind to Clemmy,' Wunmi said.

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[12] For centuries, the war against dry skin has been bravely fought by Nigerian mothers.

‘No, it wasn’t. She said she only invited me because of diversity.’

Wunmi froze.

‘She said what?’ Mayowa’s mother said softly.

‘What does it mean to be invited for diversity?’ Mayowa asked.

‘Never mind, May. I’ll have a word with Clemmy’s mum.’

They linked arms and walked home. Once they stepped into their flat, Wunmi placed her cane in the umbrella bin and stopped being blind. Everything was set in its precise place, from the saucers in the cupboards to the milk in the fridge. To preserve the magic of their home, nothing could be moved. Once, Mayowa had accidentally swapped the salt and sugar tins. Wunmi ended up eating salty cereal that morning.

‘Get started on your homework. I’m making jollof for dinner,’ Wunmi said.

‘Yes!’ Mayowa shouted.

Jollof rice was her favourite food in the world. She liked it better than pizza, macaroni and cheese and even spaghetti bolognese.

Mayowa sat at the kitchen table doing sums while her mother chopped onions, blended tomatoes, seasoned

chicken and boiled rice. The first time Anjali came to their flat, she'd whispered to Mayowa while Wunmi made them some hot chocolate, 'Are you sure your mum is blind?'

When Mayowa's homework was finished, the rice was ready and Tommy was home.

'What are we celebrating?' he asked, smelling the jollof.

'Mum's big break,' Mayowa said.

'Well, it's not a party without fried plantain,' Tommy replied.

'Dodo,' Mayowa corrected. 'You don't say baked flour, Dad. You just call it cake.'

'I stand corrected. Dodo coming up,' her father said.