

MISSION TO ENUGU

By

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Munachi Mbonu Books

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Chapter One

Planning to Sneak

“**AMAKA, REMEMBER WHAT** I told you. O, nne? The meat in the fridge will last you the entire time. Warm that and eat. Make sure nobody touches the fish and ponmo. When your father and I return from our trip, I’ll personally dish some of those out for you. **Ị na-anụ?**”

My mum wasted no time dishing out her instructions. We had just finished observing family prayers. Amaka nodded, as the others

who had all been given assignments. I alone wore a face to suggest that there was something unsettling about the night. All ten of us were present in the living room; mum and dad sat on the couch. The rest of us children sat on the floor.

“Dad, are you sure you don’t want to take me with you to the east? Daaaad? I really want to see how everything is happening over there, especially the big house you said we have. Dad, p-l-e-a-s-e!” I was on my knees, even before I could finish my plea.

But that didn’t help my case. Rather, everyone laughed. “This small pikin, you want to join them to travel. This house is big enough for you to play very well. After all, that’s what you like. You even need to help Tochukwu; you’re meant to ensure she doesn’t crawl into the gutter,” my older brother Sunny said, making everyone laugh again.

“I’m not a pikin o. I’m the big girl, very big girl. I’m six years old,” I replied with a protest.

Amaka took over from Sunny as if they

had it planned out.

“O ya now. Go and start working, let me tell my boss to employ you.” This time, there was increased laughter. She continued, “look at me, I’m 26 and I can’t even join them because I have to take care of everyone at home including you. And yet you, at only six years old, you want to start traveling upandan, everywhere, yenyenyen. Why not fly at once?” she thoroughly taunted me, pulling a face, slurring her speech and crossing her arms.

I looked away from where she could see my face to fire a side-eye at her. I then sat back down on the floor with my eyes tearing up.

“Ify angel, don’t cry, you hear? Don’t you worry, you will surely go to Enugu. I promise you. That day will come. Not just now. But it will come, I promise you.” My dad reassured me as he gestured to me to walk up to him and hug him. I did so as he wiped the tears off my eyes.

“Cry cry baby,” Chinonye taunted me, with her tongue stuck out.

“It’s okay now, leave her alone,” Amaka said to Chinonye.

Everybody tried to say something at this point. It sounded like a burst of murmurs. My family is big, a typical Igbo home with eight children in a large house. Our house was in Kaduna, instead of Enugu and I had never been to the east. Actually, I had been, but not at a time I could make or keep memories of my own. My parents left Enugu when I turned two. I longed to visit the famous coal city because of the many stories my siblings told me. Each of them repeated the same lines whenever we told stories and talked about Enugu:

It was usual to hear Amaka say,
“The sand there is red.”

Sunny would then quickly add his voice, as if he had been waiting for Amaka,

“Enugu is so cold and chilly, sometimes you can’t even see the buildings because they’d be covered in the fog.”

Ikechukwu would hop in,

“The mango there is so big and juicy.

Bigger than your head.”

Nkuri often came last,

“The okpa is so orange-looking and fresh with smoke coming off it.”

I had heard enough and thought I must go see everything out for myself.

All my siblings, except Tochukwu, had personal stories to tell about the city. It made me sad every time they narrated their stories. Truly, I liked Kaduna, and the big house we lived. It gave me space to play all I wanted, but I longed for a taste of another city, one which I’ve been told is my city of origin.

I was still in my father’s arms when I asked pointedly, “dad, when will I ever come with you?”

He responded with fatherly gentleness, “don’t worry, Ify. Soon. Very soon.” He then patted my back.

“Ify, o ya, go and climb your bed and sleep. Your daddy and I have to sleep early. We are leaving this house at 4 o’clock in the morning. See now, it’s almost 10pm,” my mum cut in,

taking me off his arms because her patience was wearing out.

“Amaka please take Ifeoma to sleep before she puts something in her mouth. Now, everyone, to your bed,” my father asserted, picking up the two hymnbooks he and my mum had used during the prayers as he stood up to go to their room downstairs.

Chinonye and I ran upstairs to our room which we shared with Nkiru. It faced the room Nnenna, Amaka and Tochukwu shared. I climbed onto the mattress and positioned myself beside the window while Chinonye and Nkiru went on the double bed they shared. From my view, I could see where mummy and daddy usually parked their car. It made me sad, really sad, that I won't be able to travel with them. But I couldn't sleep.

“Why do you want to go there, anyway? The trip will be so long, you'd be bored out of just sitting in the car,” Chinonye was offering advice as she came over to my mattress, as if she had been reading my mind.

“Still, I need to go there. It carries a magical feeling within me,” I answered and turned to face her.

“If you are so bent on it, why don’t you just sneak into the ...err not the car, but I mean you can... you know, just find a way to... since you want to go to Enugu.”

For a moment I was struck by the idea Chinonye introduced. Before I could turn to face her and say anything, she had gone back to her bed.

I started thinking. Could this happen? And if it did?

I hushed my voice at once and asked her, “can you help me?”

“Help you do what?” she responded, lifting her head up from her bed.

But I had already tiptoed to her bedside.

“Sneak into the car, of course,” I replied.

“Are you joking?” Nkiru cut in. “No, I’m not. I really want to,” I said with giggly seriousness.

“Okay, you have to stay up until 3 o’clock

to enter the car,” Chinonye tutored me.

Nkiru heard that part but hissed and turned her head to the other side of the pillow.

“I’m going to sleep and when they catch you, don’t wake me up with your cry.” Her sermon was totally ignored as Chinonye and I waved it off with a smile.

Chapter Two

Sneaking In

I GOT MY school bag and started packing random stuff I'd need for three days. Hours passed. We packed and giggled. We even acted out every scenario we could think of.

“What if they caught me when they get to Enugu?” “What if they saw me before they even left”. Many thoughts ran through my head.

Three pairs of everything went into my bag. Underwear, trousers, shirts, everything.

I even packed my blanket with my barbie doll and her hairbrush for the trip.

Chinonye went to Amaka's room to take her phone to keep track of the time. "It's 2:30am, are you sure we won't start going already?" she asked.

"Let's go," I told her, gesturing for her to come with me. I wore my backpack and my clothes and woke Nkiru up from her half-sleep tell her goodbye.

"See ya in three days," I said to her with giggly joy. Chinonye and I walked out of the room and down the stairs with our shoes in our hands. Every tip toe we took was with so much caution. It took us almost five minutes before we left the house. Our mum was such a light sleeper, she could wake up if a cock crowed once. We feared she might pick a sound.

The door was such a major challenge. Opening it suddenly sounded like the whole house was falling apart, especially the locks. But we made it through. Luckily, mum heard none

of the sound. We ran out towards the car in such excitement because the second hardest part of our mission had been completed. Now we headed for the hardest part, which was to stay completely silent till we got to Enugu. We got over to the car and opened it. Our parents never bothered to lock it. There was always something to pick up from the vehicle given the size of our family. Tonight, that became an advantage for us and thank God, it was an SUV with a deep floor. I was getting ready to close the door behind me, when Chinonye hopped in suddenly.

“You’re coming too?” I asked her confused.

“Duh, Of course I am. Who would you play with in Enugu if I didn’t come along? she asked. We giggled again.

I brought out the blanket I had packed and covered my body, head to toe.

“Wait, what will you wear over there?” I asked her as she climbed into the boot.

“I’ll wear your clothes and wash them. We’re basically the same size.” Her answer was sensible. It didn’t take long before my eyes

closed and I fell asleep.

...

“My dear how many more hours, it’s already ten o clock okwia?”

My mum asked the question, settling inside her seat for the umpteenth time. The journey was now several hours gone.

My father responded, “better sit well nwuye m, we have between three and four hours left.”

My eyes blinked open. I was confused. I almost got up before I realized the surface felt like that of a moving car. I recalled where I was and realised that my parents hadn’t noticed I was their guest.

What about Chinonye, I thought to myself. The bumpy roads were surprisingly comforting, probably why I slept for so long. I wonder how they hadn’t even seen me with the blanket off my whole face.

I thought it was because of my tiny body.

I covered myself again, realising I had become hungry and thirsty. But I held it, because I would soon eat sweet okpa and big mango. I could play with the red sand and see the thick fogs. I couldn't wait. An hour passed as my tummy rumbled. I was really thirsty and my dad's farts were almost killing me. I really wished I could sleep again but not this time. I had been overcome with wakefulness.

My dad eventually rolled down the window glass, causing the air conditioner to leave and for fresh air to come in.

“Finally, my dear, we are in our place” he said with relief.

My mum rolled down her windows to the end, to fully take in the air. A huge gust of wind came to me. Unfortunately, it was followed by dust. The fight to sneeze was extremely hard, but I soon lost it.

“Achoo,” a loud blast forced its way out of my nose, after I had tried unsuccessfully to muffle it. My dad stopped the car.

Chapter Three

Back to Kaduna

“**NNE M, WHAT** was that?” He asked with a troubled face.

Mum couldn't believe her ears either. But the sound had gone out.

“Nwoke m, is that a child?” my mum asked, sounding extremely scared.

I didn't wait for them to search before revealing it was me.

“Surprise!” I said, causing both of them to scream. My dad had suddenly pressed the

car horn. They couldn't believe whom they were seeing.

I giggled but they didn't return the face.

“So, you and Chinonye decided to do this nonsense, kwo? Don't worry, you'll see what happens next,” my dad said, surprisingly turning around.

“Wait daddy, where are you going? We're already here,” I said, with real unhappiness building inside me.

“My friend, would you keep quiet. How could you have thought of this, to sneak into the car? Who will be taking care of you in Enugu? Did you think your dad and I were coming here to play?” my mum snapped back. I was shocked at their response and remained silent. I started crying.

“If I see another tear drop from your eyes, I'll give you something to really cry about,” my mum said, her words carrying finality.

It was another nine hours on the road before we arrived home in Kaduna. Stepping out of the car made my legs wobble because

we had travelled for almost an entire day. As we got to the door to knock, my dad's voice bellowed:

“Go and shower and eat. After that, come straight to my room.”

My mum added, “you will be severely punished; you and your sister.”

Amaka opened the door with Tochukwu in her arms.

Our faces were down. Chinonye and I looked at each other

“Ah-ha, you guys are back already?”

She looked at me and started laughing, already knowing what had transpired.

“Everybody, come downstairs,” my father yelled, once we were in.

In less than a minute, all seven of my siblings were in the living room.

“Go and kneel down in the middle, both of you,” my mum said, to Chinonye and me.

“The next time you put up such an act as this, you will not step out of this house again and that applies to all of you. Your mother and

I are seriously disappointed with this thing you two have done today,” my dad added.

“In fact, after Amaka has made your eba and soup with neither fish nor meat, both of you are to write five hundred lines saying you’re sorry,” he continued.

Chinonye and I remained silent. I looked over to Nkiru who was suppressing her giggles. This caused another teardrop to leave my eyes.

“You had better not cry, because those tears of yours won’t change anything,” my mum spoke with so much wrath.

My face fell. I looked at Chinonye and then back at the floor, thinking to myself: what a silly idea this was.