



**Learn English Through Stories**

**G Series**

**G29**

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# 1. The Bride Price

Buchi Emecheta

## CHAPTER ONE

### Father Goes Away

Aku-nna turned the key in the lock and pushed open the door of her family's one-room apartment in Lagos, Nigeria. To her surprise her father was standing there in his work clothes, with his hat in his hand. He looked like a criminal who had been caught stealing.

Aku-nna and her brother Nna-nndo stared at him. 'You ought to be at work,' their silent looks said. 'You ought to be at the factory.' But their father did not offer any explanation.

Nna-nndo was eleven. He was a tall boy for his age. At school he was just starting to write with ink, and he was proud of this. However, although he was very clever in other ways, Nna-nndo was very slow at book work. There was always ink on his fingers and on his school uniform. Sometimes he rubbed ink on his woolly hair. When people asked him why, he always replied, 'Ink makes my hair blacker!' He loved a joke, just like their mother, Ma Blackie.

Ma Blackie was a huge woman, as tall and straight as a tree, with extremely black, shiny skin. She was always smiling. But behind her smile Ma Blackie had a problem. She seemed unable to have another baby.

In 1945, the local men came back from the war in Burma. All their wives had babies soon afterwards - all except Ma Blackie. Now, five years later, there was still no sign of another child. Her husband, Ezekiel Odia, had sent her to all the native doctors that he could afford, but without success. At last she decided to make the two-hundred-mile journey to her home town of Ibuza. There she asked the river goddess to send her a baby.

While their mother was away, Aku-nna and Nna-nndo had to take care of themselves and their father. He worked hard at the factory, building railway engines, and his job was important to him.

He was a small man with a small voice. People often wondered why he had married such a big woman. The answer was simple. Like most men of his age, Ezekiel had married his bride when she was still a young girl. But Ezekiel's bride did not stop growing! They were a happy couple and the difference in their

height did not seem to matter, except that when Ezekiel wanted to say something serious to his wife, he had a habit of standing on his toes.

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Today the children were surprised to see their father at home. There he stood, anxiously turning his old hat over and over in his hands. Aku-nna came nearer to him. She was only thirteen, but she knew that all was not well in her family. She often heard the other women talking about Ma Blackie's childlessness. She often heard her parents arguing too. Her father went on and on in his small sad voice, reminding his wife how much she had cost him.

'I paid double the normal bride price for you,' he told her. 'And we were married in church. But what have you given me - just one son!'

He did not speak of Aku-nna. She was only a girl. Also, she was too thin. Her parents were ashamed of their bony, unhealthy-looking daughter. And that was not all. Aku-nna was often ill. If there was any sickness or fever in their street, Aku-nna always caught it at once. Often her mother begged her to decide once and for all whether she was going to live or die.

'If there's anything I hate,' she said again and again, 'it's an ogbanje - a "living dead"!'.

Ezekiel Odi often felt sorry for his daughter. She looked like him, and she was like him in other ways too. She was small, and not at all dark. Her skin was a light milk-chocolate colour. Her eyes were large and shining. When she was happy and excited, they shone like stars. When she was sad, their light disappeared.

At her birth, her father named her Aku-nna, which means 'Father's wealth', because he was thinking of the bride price that she would fetch. To him that was something to look forward to, and Aku-nna was determined not to disappoint her father. She planned to marry a wealthy man who could afford an expensive bride price.

'I will not leave my father's house without all the proper ceremonies,' she thought, 'One for the beautiful goddess of Ibuza, and one for the white man's god in church. Then my father will call up the spirits of his great-great-grandparents and ask them to guide us.'

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But on this burning-hot day Aku-nna forgot all about her bride price and felt a new sympathy towards her father. She moved nearer to him, sharing his anxiety.

Then he spoke. 'They want me to go to the hospital for a check-up. I shall be home for the evening meal.'

The children looked down at their father's painful foot. 'That stupid foot,' Aku-nna said to herself. 'It always gives poor Father a lot of trouble.'

It was the effect of the war. Her uncles had told her that. 'The white men could not fight in Burma,' they told her. 'It was too hot and wet for them. So they sent West African soldiers instead. Your father was lucky to come home alive. Many African soldiers died - but not from the bombs. They died of disease and fever and poisonous insects.'

Her father never talked about it, but his wounded foot often swelled up, particularly during the rainy season. The factory doctor did his best, and the native doctors asked the spirits to make the foot well again, but still it sometimes swelled up. Now it had begun to trouble Ezekiel again, and the other foot was starting to swell too. But today he was wearing his work shoes, and his feet did not look too bad.

'So why,' wondered Aku-nna, 'does Father seem so unhappy? He says he's only going to the hospital for a check-up. He'll be back for his evening meal. So why is he looking so anxious, so disturbed?'

Aku-nna did not ask her father this aloud. That is not the way well-brought-up Nigerian children behave. Nigerian children respect their parents and do not question them. But the anxiety was still there. Something was very wrong, and she knew it.

She laid her small hand on his and said, 'I'm going to make you hot soup and yams, just the way you like them. So, Father, please hurry home and enjoy your evening meal while it's hot!'

Ezekiel smiled lovingly at his daughter. For a moment the sad look on his face disappeared.

'Thank you, little daughter, but don't tire yourself out.' He put his hat on his shaved head. 'The key to the big cupboard is in my grey trousers. If you want any money, take it from the big cupboard. But spend it very carefully.'

The children did not understand why their father was so worried, and they were afraid to ask. Clearly he did not wish to discuss the matter further. He became businesslike, like someone preparing for a final departure. His work-blackened hands touched this and that, picking things up and putting them down again. He told them to be good children, and to respect all adults. He told them to make him proud of them, because he cared for them, because they were his life. At last he went to the door.

'I have to go now,' he said, and added, 'Always remember that you are mine.' His small lips were trembling and it seemed to the children that he was trying desperately not to cry. Helplessly they watched him. He touched each child softly on the head, and went out of the door.

The children followed him. They wanted to beg him to wait. But Ezekiel did not wait. He hurried like a man who is called by the gods... He must obey, or be lost for ever.

The children watched him go. Ezekiel crossed the dirt road in front of the house in which they had their small apartment. A lorry loaded with wood came slowly past him. It blew up a cloud of dust that covered Ezekiel. He did not turn to see if the children were watching him. He just walked on. The dust from the lorry hid him from sight, and when the dust blew away, Ezekiel had disappeared.

The children watched the empty road for a while. Then they began to feel hungry, and decided to go in and eat.

They remembered their father's words: 'Always remember that you are mine.'

## CHAPTER TWO

### A Death in the Family

The evening meal was ready, but Ezekiel did not come home. 'Soon it will be dark,' thought Aku-nna. 'If Father doesn't come home soon, I'll tell the neighbours. Then they will take care of us.'

She sat on the veranda outside the house, watching and waiting for her father. Then she saw Uncle Uche and Uncle Joseph coming towards her. She knew that her father did not like them. Uncle Uche was the laziest man in town, and Uncle Joseph never stopped talking about other people's business. But she was so glad to see two adults that she jumped up and ran to greet them.

'How are you?' she said. 'My brother is still out playing. Father will punish him when he comes back.'

She smiled, but the uncles did not smile back. They looked rather serious. But that was their business, and Aku-nna did not ask questions. She showed them the good, hot soup and the yams that she had cooked for her father.

Uncle Uche sat down tiredly. 'You've done very well,' he said.

Uncle Joseph looked at her a little anxiously. 'I'm thirsty,' he said.

Aku-nna hurried to the shelf behind the curtain and fetched her mother's best glass. She poured some water from the big water cooler and gave Uncle Joseph the glass. He drank quickly and asked for more. 'I hope Uncle Uche won't want any,' she thought. 'If he does, there'll be no cool water for Father when he comes home.'

But when Uncle Uche spoke, he did not ask for water.

'Your father isn't coming home tonight. He's going to stay in hospital for a while. They want to find out why his feet are swelling like that. I'll look after you and your brother while he's away.'

Aku-nna opened her mouth and closed it again. 'Father didn't tell me the truth,' she said to herself. 'He said he'd be back for the evening meal. Why did he lie to me, and tell Uncle Uche the truth?'

She looked up at Uncle Uche, and she saw for the first time that his eyes looked red and sore. He spoke gently to her, telling her that the hospital was nothing to be afraid of. But he and Uncle Joseph both seemed near to tears.

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Three weeks went by, and still Ezekiel had not come home from hospital. Ma Blackie heard that her husband was ill, and sent a message from Ibuza asking what was happening. But her family in Lagos decided not to tell her the whole truth. They sent a message back telling her not to worry. 'Your children are being well looked after,' they said. 'Ezekiel will be in hospital for a day or two, but he will be home very soon. Your business is with the river goddess. Don't worry about your children - they are in safe hands.' So Ma Blackie stayed in Ibuza and concentrated on asking for another child.

'Father has been away exactly three weeks,' thought Aku-nna as she sat on the veranda. She wondered when she would see her parents again. She missed them both very much. For a short time she had enjoyed 'playing house', but she soon became tired of it. 'Why can't things be the way they used to be?' she thought. 'Everything has changed so much.'

The sun was hanging like a huge red ball in the sky. Whistles blew at the nearby factory. It was four o'clock and the workers were on their way home. The wives and daughters of other families in the house picked up their pots and their yams and hurried towards the kitchen that everyone shared.

This kitchen was a large room with sixteen small wood-burning stoves. There was a stove for each family. Each cook lit the stove, then cooked the food in a pot on the burning wood. Aku-nna had no father or husband to cook for, so she just sat there, thinking and worrying.

Dick, one of the houseboys who worked for another family in the house, looked towards her and looked away again without speaking. Most young Nigerian men spent a year or two as houseboys. They worked for their unmarried cousins or uncles and went to night school, while their male relations saved up the bride price for their future wives. Aku-nna's own father had been a houseboy too. Usually Dick laughed at Aku-nna, but today he seemed kind and sympathetic. She wondered why.

Suddenly she heard a shout. 'Aku-nna... oooo!' It was Aunt Uzo.

'Yes, Auntie!' Aku-nna called, jumping up and looking in the direction of the shout. Aunt Uzo came nearer and greeted her quietly.



'I'm glad I've found you at last,' she said. She looked tired. In her arms she carried a big, strong baby boy. Aku-nna saw the baby and smiled, and Uzo smiled too.

When she smiled the tiredness left Uzo's face for a moment and she looked young and carefree again. Then her old tired look returned. But Aunt Uzo was not an old woman. This baby was her first one, and he was eighteen months old. Uzo was probably only about nineteen years old, but her fat, greedy baby seemed to tire her out.

Uzo was a famous storyteller who knew hundreds of wonderful stories. 'Tonight I will tell you a new story,' she said. 'Hurry and do your cooking now.' As Aku-nna hesitated, Uzo spoke sharply. 'You heard me, girl - now hurry!'

'Why is it so urgent?' Aku-nna wondered. 'And what is so different about today?' She looked at Uzo's face, but found no answer there.

She went to the kitchen and tried to light her stove. But the wood would not burn. She knelt down and blew and blew. The smoke blew into her eyes and nose. Around her in the smoke-filled kitchen other people were busy with their cooking. Normally they sang and talked. Today they seemed unusually quiet.

Dick was cooking at the stove next to Aku-nna. He looked at her kindly. 'Your wood isn't dry enough,' he said. 'Here, move your pot onto my stove. I've finished now.'

Aku-nna was very surprised. Dick had never been so kind to her before. She started to cook yams for herself and her brother.

Soon she had finished. Her eyes were red and sore from the smoke and her chest felt tight and painful. She stood up and walked out of the kitchen with her pot on her head. On her way back to their apartment she looked for her brother, but without success.

She entered the apartment and found Uzo there, without her baby. Uzo looked troubled, and Aku-nna noticed for the first time that her eyes were red and swollen. She wanted to ask why, but that would not be respectful. Uzo spoke sharply to Aku-nna.

'Hurry and eat your share of the supper. Your brother will come home when he's hungry. Don't wait for him.'

Aku-nna obeyed, while Uzo stared emptily out of the window. Then there was a loud knock at the door and Aunt Mary appeared, holding Nna-nndo by the hand. She too looked very unhappy.

Suddenly Aku-nna understood the reason for the sudden visitors, their red, swollen eyes and the uncomfortable silences.

'Father is dead,' she thought. But at the same time the whole idea seemed unreal. 'This isn't happening to me,' thought Aku-nna. 'It's just a dream. Soon I shall wake up and Father will be here.'

Then her brother's high, childish voice broke the silence. 'We have no father,' he said.

'But Nna-nndo, you are wrong,' thought Aku-nna. 'It's worse than that. We have nothing. Our father named you Nna-nndo, "Father is the shelter". We have not only lost our father. We have lost our shelter too.'

It has always been like that in Nigeria. When you have lost your father, you have lost everything. Your mother is only a woman; she cannot do anything for you. A fatherless family is a family without a head, a family without a home.

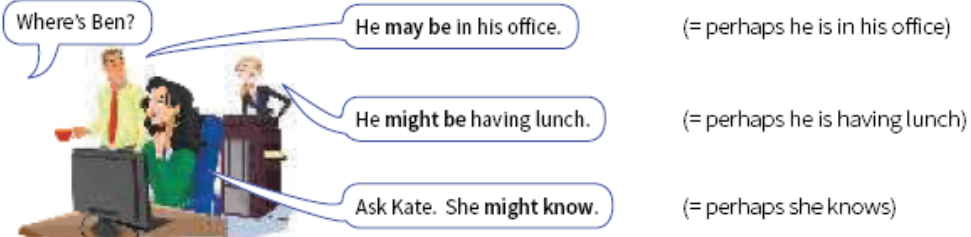
## 2. Grammar Page

Unit  
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### may and might 1

**A** Study this example situation:

You are looking for Ben. Nobody is sure where he is, but you get some suggestions.



Where's Ben?

He **may be** in his office. (= perhaps he is in his office)

He **might be** having lunch. (= perhaps he is having lunch)

Ask Kate. She **might know**. (= perhaps she knows)

We use **may** or **might** to say that something is possible. You can use **may** or **might**:

- It **may be** true. *or* It **might be** true. (= perhaps it is true)
- She **might know**. *or* She **may know**.

The negative forms are **may not** and **might not**:

- It **may not be** true. (= perhaps it isn't true)
- She **might not know**. (= perhaps she doesn't know)

I/you/he (etc.)	<b>may might</b>	(not)	<b>be</b> (true / in his office etc.) <b>be -ing</b> (doing / working / having etc.) <b>know / work / want</b> etc.
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Note the difference between **may be** (2 words) and **maybe** (1 word):

- It **may be** true. (**may** + verb)
- 'Is it true?' 'Maybe. I'm not sure.' (**maybe** = it's possible, perhaps)

**B** For the past we use **may have ...** or **might have ...**:

- A: I wonder why Kate didn't answer her phone.  
B: She **may have been** asleep. (= perhaps she was asleep)
- A: I can't find my phone anywhere.  
B: You **might have left** it at work. (= perhaps you left it at work)
- A: Why wasn't Amy at the meeting yesterday?  
B: She **might not have known** about it. (= perhaps she didn't know)
- A: I wonder why David was in such a bad mood yesterday.  
B: He **may not have been feeling** well. (= perhaps he wasn't feeling well)

I/you/he (etc.)	<b>may might</b>	(not) have	<b>been</b> (asleep / at home etc.) <b>been -ing</b> (doing / working / feeling etc.) <b>known / had / wanted / left</b> etc.
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**C** **could** is similar to **may** and **might**:

- It's a strange story, but it **could be** true. (= it is possible that it's true)
- You **could have left** your phone at work. (= it's possible that you left it there)

But **couldn't** (*negative*) is different from **may not** and **might not**. Compare:

- Sarah **couldn't have received** my message. Otherwise she would have replied.  
(= it is not possible that she got my message)
- Why hasn't Sarah replied to my message? I suppose she **might not have received it**.  
(= it's possible that she didn't receive it – perhaps she did, perhaps she didn't)