Learn English Through Stories

G Series

G30

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Buchi Emecheta

CHAPTER THREE
The Funeral

Most ceremonies in Nigeria combine European customs with native ones. Ezekiel Odia himself was a Christian and a church-goer, but he always called in a native medicine man when he wanted one. Ezekiel's funeral was like that too, with both native and Christian ceremonies.

In Nigeria mourning is an art. You do not just cry; you shout and sing about all the good things the dead person did in his lifetime. Some people are such good mourners that they are paid to mourn for complete strangers.

As soon as family and friends in Lagos heard of Ezekiel's death, the mourning began. Aku-nna and Nna-nndo were the chief mourners. They were expected to cry particularly loudly and desperately; after all, it was their father who had died. Aku-nna had seen her mother cry at the deaths of relations, so she knew what to do. She sang about her father.

'My father was a good provider. My father went to church every Sunday. He was a good husband to my mother, Ma Blackie. He bought me many dresses. He was kind to me. He sent me to school.' This was followed by a long, wordless cry of sadness. Then she sang, 'Who will be kind to me now? Who will send me to school? Who will feed me? Who will be a good husband to my mother?... Mother, come back from Ibuza! You have lost your husband. He married you according to local custom, and then again in the Christian church. And now he has gone. Come back, Mother! You have lost the father of your children...'

Aku-nna did not stop, even when the other mourners became tired. This was expected of a daughter. 'She is doing very well,' the neighbours said to each other.

Nna-nndo did not use many words, but screamed and threw himself about. The men held him so that he did not hurt himself. He soon stopped crying, but Aku-nna was encouraged to continue. It was right for girls to cry more than boys.

By this time the room was full of people. They poured in from all over Lagos. Each new arrival looked at the two children, listened for a moment to Aku-

nna's crying, then went out onto the veranda and started to cry too. They all knew that death would come to everyone. So they did not cry only for Ezekiel and his children. They cried for themselves too.

Gradually, the mourners became tired. The first part of their mourning was almost over, and one by one the men went out into the open air. The near-relations of the dead man remained inside the house, crying and singing.

The moon was full and bright. It was a hot night and the men took off their shirts. They joined hands in a big circle and began to move from side to side, wordlessly. Then a voice rang out. The singer was calling on Death.

'Wake up, Death, and see what you have done! You took Nna-nndo's father away from him! You took Ezekiel away before he could enjoy the bride price from his daughter Aku-nna. You took him away for ever and ever!'

Now the men began to dance - still in a circle, hand in hand. Round and round they went, faster and faster, kicking up clouds of dust, singing loudly and wildly. The women came out to join their men. Soon the circle became too large and broke up into several smaller ones. The men's job was done. They had called Death from sleep. Now it was the turn of the women to sing for Ezekiel on his last, lonely journey. Each woman had a gourd with small stones inside. As they danced and sang, they shook the gourds and the stones inside sounded like raindrops on a roof.

Then the Christian songs began. They mixed with the noise of the gourds and the death songs and the crying of the mourners inside the house, in one storm of sound. Then, gradually, the mourners became tired, and the singing and dancing and crying stopped. Cool native wine and plates of nuts were handed round. Tired mourners slept on the ground.

The moon disappeared. The grey morning mist was everywhere; then the sun rose, and a new day began.

Indoors, Aku-nna had not slept much. There were too many people, and some of them were noisy sleepers. At last she got up carefully from between the sleeping bodies.

One of her uncles was asleep across the doorway of the room. He woke and greeted Aku-nna sleepily. When Aku-nna tried to return the greeting, she discovered that she had lost her voice. 'How will I be able to cry at Father's funeral now?' she thought.

She went to the big water pot. Every family had one, and it was Aku-nna's job to fill theirs for her family every evening, so that her father could wash himself in the morning before leaving for work. Aku-nna knew that she had not filled the pot because of all the events of the evening before. But when she lifted the tin cover, she was surprised to find it full of cool water.

'Who did this?' she wondered. 'Perhaps one of the neighbours did it.'

Then suddenly the realization of her father's death hit her. 'I shall never see my father alive again,' she thought. 'His death has changed my whole life.' She wanted to cry aloud, but she had no voice. Her whole body felt heavy with sadness. But she used some water from the pot to wash her face and mouth. Its coolness made her feel a little better. She walked back to the apartment. Then she heard a voice calling her name.

'Aku-nna, oooo!'

She set out in the direction of the voice. She could not answer; her throat was still too sore. Her chest felt heavy. She pulled at her thin shirt.

'Aku-nna!' said Uzo crossly. 'You'll tear your shirt! You have no father now, to buy you new clothes. Nobody will buy you any until you marry. Then your husband will take care of you.'

'Ah well,' said another woman, 'they'll marry her off quickly. Then her bride price will pay for Nna-nndo's education.'

'That won't be difficult,' said Uzo. 'She's not ugly, and she's nice and quiet and intelligent. Any educated man will be glad to pay a good price for her.'

'Is that supposed to make me feel better?' thought Aku-nna. Her fear of the unknown future grew and grew.

The sun climbed in the sky and the food-sellers were out in the street, carrying their pots of hot foot on their heads.

'What do you want for breakfast this morning?' asked Uzo.

'I'm not hungry, thank you,' replied Aku-nna. 'Where is Nna-nndo?'

'He's with Mama John. He'll be all right. Come on, let's get some bananas for your sore throat. Mine is sore too, after all that crying.'

The rest of the day was like a bad dream. People came and went. They sang and danced and cried. Nna-nndo and Aku-nna sat quietly among all the noise and the comings and goings.

'I wish the children's mother was here,' someone said. 'They look so lost.'

They felt lost too. Suddenly there was a loud noise outside the house, and for a moment the noise inside the house stopped. The dancers stopped dancing, the Christians stopped singing. Everyone began to shout and scream.

'Cry now,' shouted Uzo to Aku-nna. 'Cry. Your father went into hospital a few weeks ago, and now he has come back! He has come to say his last goodbye.'

Then the children understood. Their father's body had been brought home. Aku-nna and her brother were taken to a neighbour's apartment, where they waited until Ezekiel's body was ready to see. Then they were called to pay their last respects to their father in his narrow wooden box.

Uncle Uche pointed to little Nna-nndo. 'Look,' he shouted to the other mourners. 'Our brother is lying here now, but he is not dead. He has left a son behind him. One day we shall all be proud of Nna-nndo...'

The time soon came to close the box. Aku-nna looked down at her father's body. 'How small he looks,' she thought, 'and how different, in his best suit.' She threw herself down in a storm of crying. Then the box was closed for ever.

Akinwunmi Street in Lagos had never seen such a long line of mourners on their way to the graveyard. The factory had sent their own special funeral car, with NIGERIAN ENGINE FACTORY painted on the side in gold. Ezekiel's friends from work laid him in the car. Nna-nndo and his sister followed the car, and after them came the singers from the Christian church. Hundreds of friends and neighbours followed, together with anyone else who felt like joining the group. Last of all came the mourners with their death songs and dances, their hand-clapping and their stone-filled gourds. A horn-blower was there too, blowing and blowing until his face was red. Other men had empty bottles and tin teaspoons. They knocked the spoons against the bottles as they walked along.

Ezekiel's body was lowered into the grave. Nobody cried any more. Aku-nna watched her brother pouring a handful of sand into the grave. Automatically, wordlessly, she did the same. Then all the other mourners began pouring sand, soil, stones, anything they could find, over her father's body. She wanted to

call to them, to beg them to be gentle. Then she realized how silly that was. Her father was dead. He could not feel it.

The gravediggers were impatient to finish the job. The sound of the soil hitting the box was like a final goodbye to the children.

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'Always remember that you are mine,' their father had said. Aku-nna took her brother's hand and they walked together out of the graveyard.

CHAPTER FOUR
The Journey to Ibuza

The journey from Lagos to Ibuza is like a bridge between two different worlds. Lagos is a very busy port, the old capital of Nigeria. But it is above all a town of the Yoruba people. Ibuza, on the other hand, is a small town of the Ibo people, and it lies near the great river Niger that gives Nigeria its name.

Several weeks had passed since the funeral of Ezekiel Odia. His wife, Ma Blackie, had returned to Lagos from Ibuza to find her husband already dead and buried. Friends and relations were very kind to her and the two children, but life in Lagos was too expensive for a fatherless family. So Ma Blackie and her children had to return to their home town, Ibuza, where Okonkwo, Ezekiel Odia's elder brother, and his family lived.

The children were sad to leave Lagos. It was the only home they had ever known, and Aku-nna wondered very much what their new life would be like. As the bus carrying them to Ibuza drove out of Lagos, she stared out of the windows, thinking and worrying. She knew only that she would have to marry, and that her bride price would help to educate her brother Nna-nndo. She did not mind that too much, but she wondered what her husband would be like. She hoped she would not have to marry a farmer, as she had heard how hard farm life could be for a woman. But there was nothing she could do about it, except ask God to help them all.

The bus hurried through many little Yoruba towns. After it passed Benin, the countryside changed. The soil was redder and the forests were thicker and more mysterious. The women were tall and beautiful and carried themselves proudly.

Ma Blackie and the children slept a little during the night, and before sunrise next morning they reached Asaba, which was the nearest town to Ibuza. The bus stopped in the market place near the river, and the children were woken by the voice of a food-seller. 'Buy my tasty rice! You'll love it!'

Nna-nndo woke Ma. 'We're hungry, Ma,' he insisted.

But Ma was cross. 'You haven't washed your face, son. Aku-nna, take your brother to the river. You must both wash your faces and hands. Our relations will be here at sunrise, because today is market day. I don't want them to see

you both looking dirty. Take this pot and bring me some water too, so that I can wash my face.'

'But I want some rice now, Ma,' begged Nna-nndo.

'No wash, no rice, do you hear me? Nice people wash before they eat. Go and wash your face.'

Nna-nndo was ashamed. He followed his sister obediently, looking back longingly at the rice-seller.

The sun rose, warm and golden. Ma Blackie and the children all enjoyed their rice, and little hot cakes too. While they ate, their bags were unloaded from the bus.

'Soon our people will come,' said Ma. 'And they will take us to Ibuza.'

'Is it far to Ibuza?' asked Aku-nna.

'Only seven miles. We shall be home soon. Ah, look! Here they come. They've seen us!'

She pointed to a group of about fifteen women who were coming towards them. Each was carrying a big basket of cassava on her head. Ma Blackie called out to them and they hurried to welcome the Odia family. They were kind and sympathetic.

'We'll sell our cassava quickly in the market,' they told Ma. 'Then we'll help you to carry your luggage to Ibuza.'

And in less than half an hour the women were back. They shared the family's bags and boxes between them, and they all walked together towards Ibuza, talking cheerfully all the way.

A big, loud-voiced girl called Ogugua carried Aku-nna's school books on her head. 'I'm sure we shall be friends,' said Ogugua. Ezekiel's elder brother Okonkwo was her father, so she was Aku-nna's cousin. 'You know,' she said, 'we were both born in the same week - you in Lagos, I in Ibuza. I've heard so many nice things about you. We'll be like sisters - especially if your mother comes to live with my father.'

'Why should my mother live with your father?' asked Aku-nna, puzzled.

Ogugua laughed. 'You're almost fourteen and you still don't know our customs! Your mother will become my father's wife. My father has inherited everything your father owned, and he has "inherited" your mother too.'

'Oh dear!' cried Aku-nna.

'Don't worry, cousin. We shall all live happily together. Look - you see that woman over there?' She pointed to a tall, thin woman in front, who was carrying Ma Blackie's cooking pots on her head.

'What about her?' asked Aku-nna.

'Well, her husband was a big man in a white man's job somewhere in Northern Nigeria. Three years ago he died suddenly.'

'How terrible!' said Aku-nna.

'Yes,' agreed her cousin. 'Well, they'd been married for ten years, and they only had one daughter.'

'How terrible!' said Aku-nna again.

'But listen,' said Ogugua excitedly. 'That woman was inherited by her husband's brother. He is a chief - an obi. He has other wives, of course, so she's not his first wife, but she's very happy. And now she has a son!'

'Wonderful!' cried Aku-nna, clapping her hands. 'It's just like a story in a book.'

They were a long way behind the others now, and Ma Blackie turned and called out to them to hurry up. Suddenly Aku-nna looked at her mother like a stranger. She realized how tall and straight and handsome Ma Blackie was. 'Poor Ma,' she thought, 'She's never had to work in the fields or carry heavy baskets. I hope her new husband is kind to her.' She thought about her own education. Her father had talked of sending her to college, but there was no hope of that now. 'I hope my new father will let me stay at school and get my certificate,' she thought. But there was nothing she could do about that.

The women had started talking again and Ogugua was listening to every word. But Aku-nna walked along deep in thought.

Suddenly they heard a bicycle bell behind them. The rider, a young man of perhaps eighteen or nineteen, was very tall and thin, with a pointed chin. He was a teacher at the church school in Ibuza, where Aku-nna and Nna-nndo

would be going. He knew Ma Blackie and had heard of Ezekiel's death, so he greeted her warmly.

'Children,' said Ma, 'this is your new teacher.'

'Good morning, sir,' said Aku-nna and Nna-nndo shyly. The teacher looked kindly at Aku-nna. She felt shy, and looked down at the ground. He talked cheerfully for a while, then rode off towards Ibuza.

They walked past the Ibuza farms with their yam and cassava plants, and they met men on their way to the fields. When they reached the little Atakpo stream, they rested on its bank.

'Come and have a swim,' said Ogugua to Aku-nna. 'With all these people watching?' said Aku-nna, shocked.

'Don't be shy, cousin. What are you hiding?'

'Some men might see me,' said Aku-nna. 'What if that teacher is still somewhere around? He might see me.'

Her cousin laughed. 'What if he does? Why should your body be more interesting than all the others? And anyway, he's had lots of girlfriends.'

Ogugua swam away from her cousin. She was not pleased. She had seen the teacher staring at Aku-nna and she was a little jealous. She swam back to the bank, where Aku-nna was sitting with her tired feet in the cool water.

'You must take care,' Ogugua said. 'Don't get too friendly with that teacher. He's not one of us. No nice girl from a good family is allowed to talk to him.'

'Why? What do you mean?' asked Aku-nna. But Ogugua swam away again without answering.

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They arrived in the village by mid-morning. Okonkwo was waiting, and when he saw them in the distance, he took off his good clothes and put on old, dirty ones. Then he sat down on the floor and began to cry loudly. Other people heard him and came to join in. It became a day of mourning for Okonkwo's brother, Ezekiel Odia.

'Who married his wife in church?' they sang. 'Who bought rich gifts for his children? Who was a good provider?' On and on they went.

'How strange,' thought Aku-nna. 'Five minutes ago the women were all discussing the latest fashions.' When even Ogugua began to cry, she had to do the same. 'If this is how they behave in Ibuza,' she thought, 'I'd better do the same. After all, I'm going to be one of them.'

The young men of the village started to build a special mourning hut for Ma Blackie, and in less than two hours they had finished. She had to stay there for nine full moons and mourn for her dead husband. During that time she was not allowed to leave her hut, or have a bath, or cut or comb her hair. And the women had prepared an old, torn dress for her to wear.

However, Ma Blackie had arrived in a new black cotton dress, which caused some argument among the women. Some said that Ma Blackie could wear her new dress during her mourning time. Others said she must wear the old one.

It was Okonkwo who decided. He was the head of the family, and he planned to become a chief as soon as he could get enough money together. He had already inherited his brother's wife and everything his brother owned, and now he was looking forward to getting a good bride price for his brother's daughter.

'Let Ma Blackie wear her new dress if she wants to,' he said kindly. 'It's bad enough that she's a widow. Why must she be dirty as well?'

Okonkwo's three wives all understood the message behind his words. Okonkwo wanted his dead brother's widow to stay in the family, to be his fourth wife.

2. Grammar Page

Unit 30 — may and might 2

A

We use **may** and **might** to talk about possible actions or happenings in the future:

- I haven't decided where to go on holiday. I **may go** to Ireland. (= perhaps I will go there)
- Take an umbrella with you. It **might rain** later. (= perhaps it will rain)
- The bus isn't always on time. We **might have** to wait a few minutes. (= perhaps we will have to wait)

The negative forms are **may not** and **might not** (**mightn't**):

- Amy **may not go** out tonight. She isn't feeling well. (= perhaps she will not go out)
- There **might not be** enough time to discuss everything at the meeting. (= perhaps there will not be enough time)

Compare:

- I'**m going** to buy a car. (for sure)
- I **may buy** a car. *or* I **might buy** a car. (possible)

B

Usually you can use **may** or **might**. So you can say:

- I **may go** to Ireland. *or* I **might go** to Ireland.
- Jane **might be** able to help you. *or* Jane **may be** able to help you.

But we use **might** (*not* **may**) when the situation is *not real*:

- If they paid me better, I **might** work harder. (*not* I may work)

This situation (**If they paid** me better) is not real. They do *not* pay me well, so I'm not going to work harder.

C

Compare **may/might be -ing** and **will be -ing**:

- Don't phone at 8.30. I'**ll be watching** the football on TV.
- Don't phone at 8.30. I **might be watching** the football on TV. (= perhaps I'll be watching it)

We also use **may/might be -ing** for possible plans. Compare:

- I'**m going** to Ireland soon. (for sure)
- I **might be going** (*or* I **may be going**) to Ireland soon. (possible)

D

might as well

Helen and Clare have just missed the bus.
The buses run every hour.

We **might as well** do something = we should do it because there is no better alternative. There is no reason not to do it.

You can also use **may as well**.

- A: What time are you going out?
  B: Well, I'm ready, so I **might as well go** now. *or* … I **may as well go** now.
- Buses are so expensive these days, you **might as well get** a taxi. (= taxis are as good, no more expensive than buses)