



Learn English Through Stories

G Series

G32

Adapted and modified by

Kulwant Singh Sandhu

<https://learn-by-reading.co.uk>

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1. The Bride Price

Buchi Emecheta

CHAPTER SEVEN One of the Girls

Aku-nna had at last begun to feel that she was an Ibuza girl, and she and the other girls of the same age did everything together, except one thing. Every market day at Asaba, Aku-nna met Chike. The two of them sat in a quiet place by the river, and talked. He was teaching her the latest songs from a book that he had ordered from Lagos. Once or twice he gave her a gentle kiss, but that was all. To him she was very special, and he did not want to harm her.

She was getting to know Chike better. Although he talked a lot in the schoolroom, he was often quiet with her. They sat and listened to the sound of the river and the song of the birds, and the music of their own hearts.

Although these meetings remained a secret, it was obvious to everyone that Chike Ofulue was uncontrollably in love. Again and again his father warned him. Chike politely told his father that he was not going away to university without Aku-nna. 'What do I want a degree for, anyway?' Chike said. 'It might get me a better job, but will it make me a happier person? I want Aku-nna, Father. There is no other girl in the world for me.'

'If you marry her,' said his father, 'her family will never forgive us. Already they hate us because we are wealthy and successful.'

'Father, I'm sorry to cause you so much trouble. But I dream about this girl every night. We're so happy, every market day, when I've thrown her bananas into the river and we sit and talk...'

His father smiled. 'And who pays for these bananas that you throw away, my son?'

'I do, Father. They don't cost much - only three shillings. She buys them for one shilling and sixpence, then she has to sell them in the market for three shillings. I buy them, then we throw them in the river and we have the rest of the day for ourselves. It's my only chance of talking to her. Her hut is always full of people.'

'Son, I must ask you one thing. Do not harm this girl! All girls must be virgins when they go to their husbands.'

'Father, nobody must have her except me.'

'And you must not kidnap her either. I know my mother was a slave, but I know how to behave. Tell me when she is ready to be married, and I'll visit her family and ask for her in the proper way.'

'And if they refuse, Father, what can we do?'

'We'll cross that bridge when we come to it. We can't do anything until she's a woman. Keep your eyes and ears open, and be ready to ask for her as soon as she's ready.'

The next day Chike told Aku-nna about this conversation with his father.

'Are your parents coming to ask for me in the proper way, then?' she asked.

'Yes,' he said.

She looked sadly at Chike. 'There will be trouble,' she said. The sun was setting and it was time for him to leave her. He held her tightly.

'I will come to your hut in three days' time,' he promised.

Three days later, on the afternoon of the day Chike was expected, Aku-nna and her friends all went out to look for firewood. There were about twelve of them and they felt safe and strong. Of course, they had no enemies, but in Ibuza an innocent young girl was not always safe. A man with no money to pay a bride price could hide behind the trees. He could jump out and cut a piece of hair from a girl's head. If he did that, she belonged to him for life and no other man could have her. That was why so many girls cut their hair very short... But there was safety in numbers.

When they reached the place where the firewood was, they hurried off in ones and twos. Aku-nna found a particularly big piece of wood. She pulled at it, but it would not come. She pulled harder, and the wood broke suddenly. She fell to the ground, scratching her hand. At that moment she felt a sharp pain in her back. This was the third time, and she knew what to expect. She still had not told her mother, but she knew she could not hide the blood from her friends this time.

Aku-nna sat on the ground and wondered what to do. She could not ask Chike; he was out fishing. 'Well,' she thought, 'I shall have to tell my mother - but it

means I can be married off at any time.' She was afraid of the future and wished things could stay as they were.

As she sat there, she remembered another problem. According to native tradition, the river god did not allow unclean women in his river.

Just then she heard someone calling her name. Aku-nna stood up. Her back ached and she felt stiff all over. Ogugua's face appeared through the leaves.

'Aku-nna,' she whispered. 'What's the matter?'

Aku-nna told her, and Ogugua laughed and clipped her hands. She called to the others. 'Listen, girls!' cried Ogugua. 'We went out to fetch firewood with a girl, and we're coming home with a woman!'

Aku-nna felt mean and dishonest. After all, this was not really her first time.

The sun was going down as the girls walked home, singing and talking.

'Who are you going to marry?' the other girls asked Aku-nna. 'Has anyone asked for you yet?'

Aku-nna shook her head. But Ogugua laughed. 'Many men have asked for her,' she said, 'and my father told them that she was still only a child. But not any more!'

'Who has asked for her?' they demanded.

'The Nwanze family, and the Chigboes. And the Obidi family want her for their son, Okoboshi.'

Aku-nna had been at school with Okoboshi, and had not liked him at all. 'You say Okoboshi's father asked for me in marriage?' she said.

'Yes - and now lots more men will ask for you. You will fetch a big bride price, and everyone will be glad!'

Aku-nna was miserable. 'Surely Ma will not let me marry that horrible Okoboshi!' she thought. 'Ma promised me that I could teach for a year or two before marrying. She will never let my uncle marry me off so soon.'

Aku-nna did not know everything, however. Ma Blackie was expecting Okonkwo's baby, and all she wanted was peace and quiet. She had no time for her daughter, and she could never refuse anything to the father of her baby. Aku-nna was alone, without the support of her mother.

The girls became quiet as they reached the stream. There was an old man there, with three old women. A long way along the bank Chike was quietly fishing. The other girls started to undress, but Aku-nna hesitated. The old man shouted to her.

'What's the matter? Don't be shy, dear!'

The old women guessed at once, and told him to be quiet. They called to Aku-nna. 'Come along, my dear. The river god will forgive you. He will know it is not your fault. And congratulations!'

Suddenly Aku-nna heard someone whistling. It was Chike. He had come nearer, and was whistling their favourite song.

'Brown skin girl, stay at home with the baby,

I have to go in my sailing boat...'

He turned away from her and concentrated on his fishing. But Aku-nna knew that he understood.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Kidnapped!

That evening was a time for celebration. Ma Blackie greeted her daughter with tears of happiness. Okonkwo was pleased too. Today was a very special day for him, and he ordered a party for Aku-nna.

'I'm glad I inherited Ma Blackie,' he thought. 'Now the girl's bride price will come to me. I wonder who will pay the highest price?'

Then he called to Aku-nna. 'Remember, Chike Ofulue is only a friend,' he said. 'Now that you're a woman, that friendship must die!'

'How can he behave like this?' thought Aku-nna. 'He's been in love, and knows what it's like. How can he forbid me to see the man I love?' But she knew the answer. He was not being unkind. He was simply obeying the laws of his people. Sadly she returned to her mother's hut.

Ma Blackie was sitting outside the hut with her friends. They were all laughing and talking loudly. 'Get ready,' she said to Aku-nna. 'Soon the young men will come to visit you.'

Aku-nna knew the custom. Now that she was a woman, the young men of the village were allowed to visit her. She took two headache tablets and put on her best skirt and her new pink shirt. Already she could hear the voice of her first visitor. It was the boy Okoboshi.

'May I come in?' he called.

'I'll kill myself if I have to marry him,' thought Aku-nna. Aloud she called, 'Just a moment.' Then she heard more voices. She came out of the hut to greet the young men. Each gave her a little present. She thanked them shyly, while they looked suspiciously at each other. Then they all went inside the hut, according to local tradition.

'Why hasn't Chike come?' wondered Aku-nna. 'Surely they can't prevent him from seeing me? Will those women outside the hut try to frighten him away?'

Then she heard Ma Blackie's voice outside the hut. 'Go in, then, but not for long. I shall be sending everyone away soon. I need my sleep, you know.'

Chike came into the hut. He greeted the other young men. Nobody answered, and before he could sit down beside Aku-nna, Okoboshi came forward.

'A free man can sit where he likes,' said Okoboshi. He sat down beside Aku-nna and put his hand inside her shirt. Aku-nna screamed, and Chike hit Okoboshi in the face. Aku-nna expected the others to attack Chike, but nobody moved.

Ma Blackie came rushing in to see what all the noise was about. She saw Okoboshi lying on the mud floor with his mouth covered with blood. She gave a little cry and turned to Chike.

'If you must fight, do it somewhere else!'

'Ma,' begged Aku-nna, 'don't be angry with Chike. Okoboshi was horrible. Look - he has torn my new shirt!'

'Don't be so shy and silly. How can he harm you with all those young men watching? I suppose you'd rather let a slave touch you!'

'How can Ma do this to me?' thought Aku-nna. 'I thought she liked Chike.' She burst into tears.

Then Chike was standing beside her. His nearness gave her strength. Friends and neighbours were loudly comforting Ma Blackie.

'Don't worry,' they were saying. 'She'll soon forget this slave, and marry a nice suitable boy. Now don't worry. Just concentrate on your new baby.'

That was another surprise for Aku-nna. So her mother was expecting Okonkwo's child! 'Now he has made her dreams come true,' thought Aku-nna. 'She won't be able to refuse him anything. If he wants to marry me off, she'll let him do it!'

At last the young men left and Aku-nna was able to go to bed. But she did not sleep much.

The next few days were quiet and nothing much happened. Then the night of the dance practice came. In Ibuza Christmas was an important time for everyone. The schools were closed and the teachers were on holiday. People who were working away from home came to celebrate Christmas with their families. Every Christmas, the fifteen-year-old girls did a special dance. The girls knew that for most of them it would be their last Christmas in their fathers' homes. So several times a week they practised the aja dance.

Aku-nna had not practised the dance with her friends in the beginning, because of her examinations. But now the examinations were over and all she could do was wait for the results. So now she joined in the dance practices.

Ogugua helped her, and Aku-nna began to enjoy the dancing very much.

The dance teacher was a tall, thin, proud old man called Zik, who was very good at making and singing the special aja songs. Aku-nna liked him.

This dance was the greatest moment in the girls' lives, and they knew it. 'When we are grandmothers,' said Ogugua, 'we shall take our pipes out of our toothless old mouths and we shall say to our grandchildren, "We did the best aja dance in the world!" '

That evening, Aku-nna and the other girls made their way to the dancing hut, carrying an oil lamp. This was one of Chike's presents to Aku-nna, and it was much better than a burning stick. As they crossed the wide sandy square in the middle of the village, they saw another light coming towards them. It was Chike, and they all greeted him cheerfully.

'I have some good news for you,' he said. 'But if I tell you now, you won't be able to concentrate on your dancing!'

They all begged him to tell them. 'Very well,' laughed Chike. 'Aku-nna has passed her examination. She can now be a teacher if she wants to.'

They clapped and shouted, then they questioned Chike about the boys.

He told them that Okoboshi had failed. 'I'm not surprised,' Chike added. 'He didn't do any work.'

'Okoboshi isn't a bad boy really,' said one of the girls. 'He's his mother's only son, and she lets him have everything he wants. It isn't his fault. Come on, or we'll be late for the dancing.'

They were late anyway, and Zik the dancing teacher was not pleased with them. He made them work harder than ever before.

'Come on, girls!' he shouted. 'Aku-nna, have you got a wooden leg? Bend your knees, child!' The girls practised hard for a long time.

Then suddenly the oil lamps in the dancing hut all went out. There was the sound of heavy feet. Strange voices, men's voices, were heard. At first the girls were too shocked to make a sound. Then they all began to scream at the tops

of their voices. Some of them reached the door and tried to get out. But strong hands were holding the door closed. Then there were more footsteps, and strong hands caught Aku-nna around the waist.

'Here she is!' cried a voice. 'Let's go!'

Aku-nna tried to scream. But a rough hand covered her mouth and she was unable to make a sound.

'What's happening?' she thought. She could hear the dancing teacher's voice, shouting, demanding to know what was going on. Then she was carried on several strong shoulders. The door opened, and out they went.

Suddenly Aku-nna realized what was happening. 'This is the end of all my dreams,' she thought. 'They are kidnapping me.' She could not get away. There were at least twelve men, running, carrying her along. She lost consciousness, and she was still unconscious when she arrived at her new home.

2. Grammar Page

Unit
32

must mustn't needn't

A must and mustn't

You **must** do something = it is necessary that you do it:

- Don't tell anybody what I said. You **must keep** it a secret.
- We don't have much time. We **must hurry**.

You **mustn't** do something = don't do it:

- You **must** keep it a secret. You **mustn't** tell anyone. (= don't tell anyone)
- We **must** be very quiet. We **mustn't** make any noise.

B needn't and don't need to

You **needn't** do something = it's not necessary to do it (but you can if you want):

- We have plenty of time. We **needn't hurry**. (= it is not necessary to hurry)
- Joe can stay here. He **needn't come** with us. (= it is not necessary for him to come)

You can also use **don't/doesn't need to**:

- We **don't need to** hurry.

Note that we say '**don't need to do**', but '**needn't do**' (*without to*).

Compare **needn't** and **mustn't**:

- You **needn't** tell Steve. I can tell him myself. (= it is not necessary)
- You **mustn't** tell Steve. I don't want him to know. (= don't tell him)

C needn't have (done)

Study this example situation:



Paul and Sarah reserved a table at a restaurant.

But when they went to the restaurant, it was almost empty.

They **needn't have reserved** a table.

This means: they reserved a table, but now they know this was not necessary.

Compare **needn't (do)** and **needn't have (done)**:

- Everything will be OK. You **needn't worry**. (it is not necessary)
- Everything was OK. You **needn't have worried**. (you worried, but it was not necessary)

D needn't have (done) and didn't need to (do)

He **needn't have done** something = he did it, but now we know that it was not necessary:

- Why did he get up at 5 o'clock? He **needn't have got** up so early. He could have stayed in bed longer.

He **didn't need to do** something = it was not necessary to do it. It doesn't matter whether he did it or not:

- He **didn't need to get** up early, so he didn't.
- He **didn't need to get** up early, but it was a beautiful morning, so he did.

You can also say 'He **didn't have to get up**' in these examples.