

EFUA TRAORÉ

CHILDREN
OF THE
QUICKSANDS

A MESSAGE FROM CHICKEN HOUSE

Efua Traoré won our *Times*/Chicken House Competition with this rich, strange and magical story of a family feud. Here, old mythologies clash with new beliefs – and it's all bound up in the true magic a young girl brings to heal the deepest of wounds. You're about to explore an astonishing contrast of settings: the busy streets of Lagos, the dusty countryside village, and even a magical world beneath the quicksands. Hold your breath, we're going in . . . and it's going to be simply brilliant.

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, likely belonging to Barry Cunningham. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial 'B' and a long, sweeping tail that ends in a small loop.

BARRY CUNNINGHAM

Publisher

Chicken House



EFUA
TRAORÉ

CHILDREN
OF THE
QUICKSANDS

Chicken
House

2 Palmer Street, Frome,
Somerset BA11 1DS
www.chickenhousebooks.com

Text © Efua Traoré 2021
First published in Great Britain in 2021
Chicken House
2 Palmer Street
Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS
United Kingdom
www.chickenhousebooks.com

Efua Traoré has asserted her right under the Copyright, Designs
and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as the author of this work.

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted or utilized in
any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or
otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Cover and interior design by Helen Crawford-White
Typeset by Dorchester Typesetting Group Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

The paper used in this Chicken House book is made
from wood grown in sustainable forests.

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data available.

PB ISBN 978-1-913322-36-6
eISBN 978-1-913696-05-4



*For my daughters
Shola, Enina and Leila.
And for Ese.*



1

Holidays at the Other End of the World

Simi climbed into the taxi reluctantly. The seats were threadbare and it smelt as if the last passengers had been goats. She wrinkled her nose, desperately trying to suppress a new wave of anger and tears.

Her mum, who had just given the driver instructions, came around the car and put a slim hand on the still open door. Simi ignored her, folding her arms across her chest and looking straight ahead.

‘Simi, it’s only for two months,’ her mum said softly.

She didn’t reply.

‘Please don’t make this more difficult for me

than it already is. I am so happy to have found this new job. But I have to go to London for training and I can't leave you alone in Lagos for so long. And you know we really need the money now that your dad and I . . .' Her mum broke off.

Simi winced at the reminder of the divorce they had all gone through in the past year.

'Simi, believe me, if I had any other option, I would definitely have chosen it, rather than send you there. But we do not have the money for any summer camps and I do not have any other family than *her*.' The way her mum always said '*her*' made Simi really nervous about meeting her grandmother.

She felt her mum's eyes on her, hoping she would smile and say that she understood, that she forgave her. Simi did not look up. She had spent the last weeks begging. Telling her mum that she was thirteen and old enough to stay at home alone. That she could borrow the money for a summer camp from her dad, who definitely had enough of it. But her mum had shaken her head and ignored her pleas. So now she ignored her back.

Her mum sighed, then pulled something out of her handbag. It was a little envelope.

‘This is for *her*,’ she said. ‘You must give it to her immediately. On the spot! And I mean as soon as you get there!’

Simi looked up, irritated. What was in the letter? And why was her mum acting so strangely again? All this secrecy really annoyed her. She didn’t know anything about this woman who was supposed to be her grandmother. She hadn’t even known that she existed until recently, when the holiday decision had been made. Just like that: ‘*You’re going to your grandmother! That’s where you will spend the school holidays!*’

And as far as Simi had understood, this grandmother lived in the middle of some jungle! A place called Ajao. She would even have gone to stay with her dad and his fancy new girlfriend instead. But her mum was too proud. She would never ask him or anybody else for help.

‘Are you listening to me at all?’ she asked impatiently. She held the letter under Simi’s nose. ‘It is very important that you give her the letter at once!’

‘Yes, yes. OK,’ Simi muttered and took it from her. She slid the envelope into her rucksack, which was on her lap. For a brief moment she felt her mum’s hand on her shoulder. Then the rusty car door slammed shut with a rattle and Simi immediately felt the sticky air enclose her like a heavy blanket.

Simi suddenly panicked and rolled down the stuttering window to make one last attempt.

‘Please, Mum! Can’t you at least take me there? Only until . . .’

Her mum immediately took a step back. Her expression tolerated no further discussion and Simi gave up. She knew that stony, distant look all too well. Whenever it came to the subject of the past or her family, her mum fell silent and became a total stranger to her. The past was an absolute taboo. Simi had always assumed that her grandparents had died in a bad accident or something, and that her mum couldn’t bear to talk about them.

She sighed. Now she would have to go alone to this grandmother that she had never met. And she would just turn up at her door unannounced. Her

mum had come most of the way, taking the five-hour bus journey from Lagos with her. But now Simi was to travel the last stretch to Ajao in the taxi on her own.

‘But what if she’s not there?’ she’d desperately asked on the bus earlier.

‘She never goes anywhere,’ her mum had replied dryly. ‘Except into the forest to her heathen . . .’ She had stalled before continuing more gently, ‘She visits a few neighbours, but everyone knows where to find her.’

‘Yes, but what if she is not, erm . . . not living there any more?’ Simi had stammered. She had actually wanted to say ‘alive’.

‘She still lives in Ajao,’ her mum had replied. ‘And she is *alive*.’

‘And what if she doesn’t feel like having her granddaughter for two months without being asked?’

But her mum had just shaken her head. ‘She’ll take you in. She’ll be very glad to see you.’ And that had been the end of the matter.

Now her mum gave the old driver a few more instructions. His name was Mr Balogun, and he

had been very excited to hear where he was to take her. He even recognized her mum from years ago.

‘You will be in good hands with him,’ her mum said as the car rattled to life.

And that was that.



2

Journey to the Unknown

The journey to Ajao turned out to be terribly exhausting. The untarred road was deeply rutted by rain and erosion, so that the driver only made slow and difficult progress. The car screeched and moaned so much that Simi worried they might not arrive in one piece.

To the left and right, the dense forest crowded into the road. Tall trees and bushes, higher and thicker than she had ever seen anywhere around Lagos, gave the road a pleasantly cool shade. But at the same time, the forest, towering high above them, felt threatening.

‘What are these trees?’ she asked the old driver, who hadn’t spoken a word since they left.

‘Trees?’ He turned his gaze from the road to look at her, and she immediately worried about him not seeing the next pothole.

‘What are those trees called? The tall ones,’ she asked a little louder.

He looked at her from underneath his wrinkled eyelids. Brown teeth stained with cola nut flashed as his mouth split into a crooked grin. ‘Iroko! This is iroko tree. Tree of spirits,’ he said in a cracked voice.

She nodded quickly and breathed a sigh of relief when he finally turned back to face the road. *Tree of spirits*. His words echoed in her mind like ghostly whispers, and she felt queasy as she stared at the long-limbed trees.

‘Woman, where I go take you, she be grandmother,’ he said after a short while.

That didn’t sound like a question, but she felt she had to say something, so she replied, ‘Yes.’

‘She very good woman. She very well known by people.’

Well, not known by me, Simi thought, and looked out of the window listlessly.

After an hour’s drive, as Simi had feared, there

was a loud crash and the car got stuck in a pothole. The driver made a hissing sound and clicked his tongue loudly.

‘You help me,’ he grumbled over his shoulder.

He got out of the car, bent down and disappeared from view. Simi opened the door and got out gingerly.

The old man knelt in front of the car on the rough ground, muttering.

‘*Kiakia!*’ he suddenly called. ‘Quick!’ He pointed to the back of the car with a crooked index finger. ‘Push?’

Simi stumbled quickly to the rear. A sudden rustling sound in the bushes beside her made her look around nervously. The huge iroko trees on both sides of the road trembled in the breeze and seemed to arch over her like agitated giants. Goosebumps formed on her skin as she remembered the driver’s words.

‘Push!’ the driver called again.

Simi’s head jerked up. The rustling from the bushes came again and she tried to put away all thoughts of snakes and other animals that might be lurking in the forest. She began to push the car

with all the energy she could muster.

The car hardly budged.

What if they did not get the car out? she thought as she looked around fearfully. In the last half hour they had not driven past a single village or town or seen a single person.

Simi pushed again with all possible force, sweat breaking out in her armpits. The driver heaved against the car at the same time and this time the car clattered briefly.

‘More!’ he shouted. He twisted the steering wheel through the open driver’s door and pushed the car at the same time. Simi pushed with enough strength to burst her veins. She wanted to get out of this place as quickly as possible.

After three attempts, it worked. The car jerked out of the pothole.

‘*Kiakia!*’ the driver called again.

Simi jumped into the car, dusted off her dirty hands and breathed out in relief. As the car began to move again, she pulled a book from her rucksack and used it as a fan. The old man’s driving was more cautious now, and gradually she became tired. She leant her head against the seat,

despite the risk of her braids smelling of goat, and closed her eyes.

When Simi woke up, the car was slowing down and they were driving into a village. She sat up and looked out of the open window. Everything was the colour of dark red clay – the houses, the compounds and the road. Even the rusty iron roofs seemed to want to blend in.

On either side of this one red road Simi counted ten houses, which were not much more than little huts. She saw goats, chickens and naked toddlers running around. Under a huge mango tree two elderly men faced each other on a bench, playing a kind of board game with large round seeds. Simi groaned. No TV, no internet or phone to chat with friends, just a board game with seeds. How was she ever going to survive eight weeks here?

She glanced at her phone. Zero signal! She sighed. What had she expected?

At the end of the village, just before the road disappeared into the forest, was a tiny house made of the same reddish-brown clay as all the others. Two faded wooden shutters framed a

single window beside an open front door.

The driver parked the car in front of it. They had arrived.

‘Ajao!’ he announced.

Two hibiscus bushes adorned the yard in front of the house. The leaves and flowers were covered with red dust, so even the plant was the same colour as the whole village. A large pot stood waist high next to the front door, a small cup hanging on a cord from the handle.

Suddenly, a tiny woman appeared at the threshold. The woman had appeared so suddenly that Simi drew in her breath sharply.

She had a colourful yellow scarf tied around her head and she wore a floor-length green caftan. Cowry-shell chains dangled at her wrists and ankles, and she was barefoot.

Her grandmother was not quite as old as she had imagined, but she knew immediately that it was her, because she looked exactly like her mum. And like Simi. They all had the same little nose, serious, sharp eyes and defiant mouth. Three generations with one and the same face.

Once again Simi felt sad and confused. Why

had her mum been so secretive about her family?
She climbed out of the car.

The old woman's sharp eyes were fixed directly on her.

The driver had already taken Simi's suitcase out of the boot and was carrying it to the door.

'Mr Balogun, welcome,' her grandmother said. 'How are you?' she greeted him, then looked right back at Simi.

'*Ekuirolele* – good afternoon,' the driver replied. 'My body is fine, thank you.'

'Congratulations, I heard you got your eighth great-grandchild,' her grandmother said.

'Yes, Iyanla.'

'The gods have blessed you well.'

'Yes, I am a blessed man, thank you, Iyanla.' He placed Simi's suitcase in front of the door.

'Good evening, erm . . . grandmother,' Simi said bending her knees respectfully.

'Welcome, my child,' the old woman said. 'It is good that you have finally come.'

Simi did not know what to say. Her grandmother did not appear in any way surprised to see her. She did not ask any questions. She just

stood there in the doorway as if she had known that today she would get a visit from her granddaughter.

How many times had Simi tried to imagine this moment? Her fantasies of stuttered explanations, confusion, hugs or maybe even tears now seemed totally silly. She had a sudden feeling that you did not have to say much to this woman. Somehow, she already knew everything.

Simi had the very uncomfortable feeling her grandmother could read her mind.

The car coughed itself back into life.

‘*Duro*, wait,’ her grandmother called. ‘I have something for your grandchild!’ She went inside.

Simi did not know if she should follow her or remain on the doorstep. She decided to wait.

The driver killed the engine and got back out of the car.

Her grandmother returned with a small package wrapped in banana leaves. The driver took it respectfully in both hands and bowed his head.

‘Your granddaughter should rub the ointment on the baby after bathing her in the evening. It will keep illness away.’

‘*Ese gan,*’ he said, bowing again. ‘Thank you, Iyanla’.

Her grandmother nodded. And when the driver was gone, she turned and went inside the house.

‘Bags do not grow legs to carry themselves in this part of the country,’ she called over her shoulder.

Simi took off her sandals, grabbed her suitcase and hurried in after her grandmother.



3

Iyanla

It was quite dark but pleasantly cool inside the little house. The floor under Simi's bare feet felt soothing and she was surprised to find that it was made of clean, polished red clay. Her eyes slowly adjusted to the dim light and she looked around. Her grandmother was nowhere in sight. There were two more doors, one closed and one open, leading into a tiny corridor.

In one corner of the room was a small table and a bed-like sofa covered with a hand-woven blanket in dark red and orange. Pretty yellow curtains covered the small window. A straw mat lay under the table, and on it stood a clay bowl with cola nuts. The decoration was simple but friendly. Her

mum preferred darker colours and monotones. Their little flat in Lagos was filled with all possible shades of grey.

Simi put down her heavy suitcase and her sandals, and walked gingerly through the open door towards the back of the house.

A tight corridor led into a slightly larger passageway, which obviously served as a store-room. On one side, Simi saw tall shelves filled with foodstuffs. Underneath, yams, green plantains, a large tin of palm oil and a bag of rice were neatly stored against the wall. On the other side, hundreds of little clay pots, vials and packages, wrapped in brown paper or dried leaves, lined the shelves. Simi stood and stared.

‘Why do I have the feeling that you were sent here in ignorance?’

Simi jumped. She had not heard her grandmother approach.

‘In ignorance?’ she asked, swallowing nervously.

‘Your confusion is clearly carved into your face. And since I know your mother well, my name probably never crossed her lips.’

Simi shifted uncomfortably from one foot to

the other.

‘She had no choice? Things were tight and she saw no other way out? Is she in trouble?’ Her grandmother’s eyes were so sharp now that Simi had to look away.

‘How . . . how do you know? Did Mum call you after all?’

Her grandmother waved a hand. ‘Do you see a telephone anywhere?’

Simi felt her face heat up, and once again regretted her quick tongue, which was always a bit faster than her brain.

‘You mean she did not even tell you what sleepy village she was sending you to? Were you expecting to find a telephone here?’

‘No! I mean, yes, of course she told me, I, erm, I just forgot that.’

‘May I now know what made your mother send her daughter to me when we have not spoken in years?’

‘M y parents got divorced . . . last year, and my mum has to travel for work,’ Simi said slowly.

Even now, a year later, she did not like to talk about the divorce. She pushed the words out of

her mouth and tried to ignore the bitter taste they left behind. Her dad's words to her mum in one of their many quarrels came back to her: *Nothing ever makes you happy . . . You carry anger around with you like a shield . . . You don't let any other feelings through . . . If you don't face up to your past, you will never be happy in life . . .* Was this her mum's way of trying to get back in touch with her past? Did she want to fix the broken relationship with her mother by sending her here? But if that was the case, why had she sent her here alone? And why could she still not bring herself to talk about the past?

Her grandmother made a face that was difficult to interpret.

'Is it OK, that I, erm . . . that I came here?'

Her grandmother walked to the shelves with the little pots, and reached up to bring one down. She ignored Simi's question.

'What kind of job is it that separates a mother from her child?'

'She's a pharmacist. She just got a new job in an international company and she has to go to London for the training.'

Her grandmother's forehead creased and she looked confused.

'A pharmacist is someone who—' Simi began to explain.

'I know what a pharmacist is,' her grandmother interrupted irritably. 'Even though I live out here, I am not from yesterday.'

'I'm sorry,' Simi said, feeling very embarrassed.

'It is just that I am surprised that your mother chose this work. I would not have thought . . .'

Her grandmother stopped and shook her head. Simi was not sure, but was it a brief flash of pride that she saw in her grandmother's face? She was obviously a kind of herbalist, a traditional pharmacist, so to speak.

Her grandmother took out a small cloth bag from a larger container.

'Come, we have a lot to do today,' was all she said, and slipped out to the backyard.

The first part of the yard was covered, and underneath the roof was a large wooden table with two chairs on one side. Next to it was a traditional open firewood-hearth with a three-legged pot

balanced on soot-blackened stones. A fire blazed under the pot.

The rest of the yard was swept clean and surrounded by a low wooden fence. At one end stood a huge frangipani tree that stretched its long arms across the backyard and provided shade.

Beside the tree was a small round well, and next to this a herb garden. Butterflies and bees flew about, and Simi could smell fresh thyme. Her mum loved thyme and even grew it in their tiny Lagos garden. Simi tried to imagine her mum as a little girl here, bent over the thyme and breathing in its scent. But she couldn't. She had never even seen a single picture of her mum as a child. Simi sighed and stared beyond the fence. A path ran into a thick forest one way, and the other way back towards the village.

Her grandmother had already seated herself at the table.

‘Are you hungry?’ she asked.

Simi thought for a moment – her stomach still felt queasy from the bumpy journey. She shook her head. ‘Can I use the bathroom?’

Iyanla tossed her head in the direction of a tiny

shed made of rusty metal sheets at the far corner of the courtyard. Simi opened one of two metal doors that were almost hidden behind elephant grass. The door squeaked noisily and she stared into an empty space. The floor was laid out with many small stones and there was a clothes line stretched across on which a towel hung.

This was the shower!

Well, what had she expected? Where there was no electricity, there was often no running water.

She opened the other door, already dreading what she would find. In a corner was a bucket of water and in front of her a square, wooden construction, like a wooden box. On top of it was a round, plate-sized wooden cover. This was the toilet! *Wow, how did I end up here?* she thought, trying not to think of her nice little bathroom at home with its shiny white tiles and soft grey rug.

When she came back out, her grandmother pointed for her to sit. She was leaning over a large bowl on the floor next to the table. From the brightly coloured towels and kitchen utensils she pulled out a small stone pestle and a mortar. She

put them on the table in front of Simi. Then she placed some dried leaves in the mortar from the little pot she had taken from inside the house. She added black powder from a tiny clay bowl. Then she got a small bottle containing a thick yellow liquid that looked like peanut oil and added a few drops.

‘Grind,’ she said, pushing the stone pestle towards Simi.

At first uncertain, Simi began to stir carefully with the pestle, then, getting bolder, she began to grind the leaves with more force. Back home, she loved helping her mum in the kitchen. Her mum was uncomplicated when cooking. The deep worry lines between her eyebrows were smoothed away when she was preparing ewedu soup or chopping vegetables for fried rice, and Simi always enjoyed these relaxed moments with her.

While Simi worked, her grandmother plucked a sprig from a tall bush in the garden. She removed the dark green leaves – they looked like bitter-leaf, which her mum often used to make soup – and washed them in a bowl. Then she sat down at the table with a small knife and a board.

‘What does she call you?’ she asked suddenly.

‘Sorry?’ Simi asked, confused.

‘What did your parents name you? Surely you have a name?’ Her grandmother looked at her with a raised eyebrow.

‘Simi,’ she replied. And after a moment’s hesitation, she said her full name. ‘Oluwanifesimi.’

Her grandmother nodded in satisfaction. ‘That is a good name to own. You know what it means?’

‘Yes. *God loves me.*’

Her grandmother nodded again. ‘It is good when the gods are on your side.’

Simi looked up, surprised at the use of the plural form of ‘gods’. It was the second time since she arrived. But Iyanla’s face remained unreadable, though the hardness of her face had loosened. Simi could see signs of white hair under the yellow headscarf and her grandmother’s posture was bent – she had narrow shoulders and a slightly rounded back, but she did not have a single wrinkle on her face. She wore such a peaceful expression as she chopped the herb that Simi felt bold enough to ask her the question that was at the front of her mind.

‘Grandma? Why did you and mum quarrel?’

‘Iyanla!’ her grandmother interrupted her. ‘Just call me Iyanla, “big mother”. That is what everyone calls me. It means the same thing. If you call me “Grandma”, I will feel as if I am back at the white man’s school.’ Iyanla paused briefly, then added, ‘It was not really a quarrel.’

Simi nodded, even though it was not really an answer. Maybe it was too early for that conversation. She watched Iyanla chop the leaves, the cowry shells at her wrists dancing with each movement and her quick fingers keeping the leaves in place. Simi tried to picture her as a little girl in some missionary school some sixty or seventy years ago, but couldn’t.

For a while they were quiet. But the silence was not unpleasant. It only felt surreal, like in a dream. Sitting at the edge of a huge forest in the middle of nowhere, stirring strange mixtures.

Suddenly, into the silence, came loud cries, and they were coming closer. Iyanla stopped what she was doing and raised her head.

‘We have visitors,’ she said with a sigh. ‘Visitors with problems, it seems.’ She got up and rinsed

her hands in the basin. ‘Why don’t you take a little walk, my child?’

Simi nodded, but now she was feeling worried again.

‘If you go out there, the path to the right leads towards the village.’ Iyanla pointed to the little gate in the fence. ‘Walk past the houses, then you will find a big ube tree at the other end of the village. The only one of its kind in Ajao. You can check for ripe ube and collect some. There is always a long stick beside the tree.’ She handed her a small woven basket.

Simi nodded again, but wondered if she would find the tree. She loved eating the little dark purple fruits but she had never seen an ube tree before.

‘Make sure you turn right, not left!’ Iyanla repeated, with a frown. ‘And do not be gone for too long. It will be dark in an hour and you do not want to be outside at nightfall.’

Iyanla gathered her long robe and looked irresolutely at the unfinished mixtures on the table. The voices were much louder now. They spoke very quickly in Yoruba, and it was difficult for Simi to understand.

‘I hope that this will not take too long,’ said Iyanla, heading for the house. ‘When you come back, we will eat.’

As if on second thoughts, she stopped and turned. She put her hand to her throat and pulled out a chain from underneath her dress. A beautiful greenish-blue stone in a copper setting hung from it. Iyanla placed the necklace in Simi’s hand.

‘Here, my child. This is for you,’ she said. ‘It makes an old woman very glad that your mother sent you here.’ She disappeared into the house.

‘Thank you, Iyanla,’ Simi called after her in surprise, but she was already gone.