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Books by Chibundu Onuzo

Mayowa and the Sea of Words
Mayowa and the Fire of Speech

MAYOWA and the FIRE OF SPEECH

CHIBUNDU ONUZO

Illustrated by Simone Douglas

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To Zoya, who made me a Mummy



CHAPTER ONE
The Flight to Nigeria

Mayowa Althea Howard was flying over the Sahara Desert, forty thousand feet in the air, halfway between London[1] and Lagos.[2] The Howards were on their way to Nigeria for two weeks of the summer holiday and Mayowa was brimming with excitement.

'Can we go to the beach today?' she asked Wunmi, her mother.

'Not today. It'll be too late by the time we get to Grandpa's house,' Wunmi said, patting her cheek.

'What about tomorrow then?'

'We'll see,' Wunmi said.

[1] Capital city of England. Home of Big Ben.
[2] One of the largest cities in Nigeria. Home of Fela Kuti, Wizkid and Tems.

'And suya? You told Grandpa Razak I want suya?'[3]

'Yes, I did. Even though, the way you talk, you think Nigeria is just about food.'

Mayowa blew a raspberry.

'Mum, I know you want me to learn about Nigerian culture on this trip but I already know lots,' she said impatiently. 'I know all the lyrics to Ayra Starr[4] and I wore iro and buba for World Book Day when I went as Remi from *Yoruba Girl Dancing*.'

'Nigerian culture is more than music and clothes,' Wunmi said.

'What else is it then?' Mayowa asked.

'That's what we want you to find out,' said Wunmi, squeezing Mayowa's hand.

The plane shook like a rattle and the seat-belt sign pinged on. Someone shrieked.

'It's just a bit of turbulence. People should calm down,' Mayowa said sniffily.

'I guess not everyone can be as calm as you,' Tommy, her father, answered through gritted teeth as he clutched his armrest.

The plane began to shake in earnest. It shuddered and

[3] Spicy grilled meat. To be eaten with a glass of cold water nearby.
[4] Nigerian Afropop sensation also known as 'Sabi girl'.

shivered. It bucked and rolled. It rumbled and tumbled. It was like riding a wild horse, Mayowa thought, terrifying and exhilarating.

The first scream set off many others, until the cabin sounded like a choir of drowning cats. Mayowa looked over at her father. His eyes were closed and he was struggling to breathe calmly.

'Dad, are you all right?'

'I'm fine. It'll stop soon,' he said without opening his eyes.

Finally, the plane went still but the mood in the cabin was subdued. If there was one thing Mayowa was good at, it was changing a negative mood.

A voice announced over the PA system: 'Ladies and gentlemen, the captain has turned off the *Fasten Your Seat Belt* sign. You may now use the washrooms.'

Mayowa slipped a book under her jumper and shot to her feet.

'Dad, I need the toilet.'

'What's the magic word?' Wunmi asked.

'Please,'[5] Mayowa added.

Tommy and Mayowa walked to the back of the plane

[5] 'Please' is just one of the magic words. There's also 'sorry', 'thank you' and 'fufu'.

and Mayowa slid into the restroom and locked the door. Then she withdrew her Tagalog edition of *The Wind in the Willows* from under her jumper. It was the book she had learned how to be a logosalter on.

Twelve months had passed since Mayowa Althea Howard discovered she could unleash the emotions stored in books by jumping on them with her bare feet. She was a logosalter, a rare and wonderful human being who could change the course of history with the right book at the right time.

This wasn't a history-changing moment. Choosing to logosalter now would only make the flight more enjoyable, but that was worth something, wasn't it?

A logosalter works for the greater good. That's what Grandpa Edward had taught her. She missed her grandfather, with his green beard and ready wisdom. What would Grandpa Edward do?

The plane heaved up and down. The turbulence was starting again. Through the thin walls of the toilet cubicle, she heard someone shout, 'Jesus, save us!' Above her head, the seat-belt sign pinged and lit up. She had to be quick.

I bet you I'm the first person to logosalter on a plane, she thought to herself. This was definitely one for her logbook.

She slipped off her shoes and socks, placed *The Wind in the Willows* on the floor, and leaped on it. Instantly she was balanced on a bright blue sea of emotions. Joy. Playfulness. Humour. These were some of the emotions that readers of *The Wind in the Willows* felt when they read the book.

'Joy,' Mayowa said softly and drew up this emotion through the lightning bolts on her feet.

Outside, Tommy knocked on the door.

'May, we have to get back to our seats,' her father said.

'Coming, Dad,' she said.

But Mayowa wasn't ready to leave the cubicle. She was full of joy, almost bursting with it. At any moment, she might split open like a ripe peach. She stretched out her hands. Immediately, joy pulsed in her fingertips.

Technically, she wasn't allowed to channel without Grandpa Edward's supervision, but Grandpa Edward was in Australia, tracking down her distant cousins who may or may not have the logosaltering gene. And anyway she was eleven now, a tweenager, old enough to decide when to logosalter, no matter what her parents said. They were good as far as parents went, but they weren't barrier breakers like her.

This flight needed joy. It was now or never. She eased



the joy through her fingertips. Waves of joy flowed from the back of the plane to the front. The first sign it was working was that the plane was still shaking but the sound of crying stopped.

She couldn't see the effect her channelling was having. A shadow of doubt crossed her mind. What if she overwhelmed the pilots with joy and they stopped flying the plane? She heard laughter. She'd probably done enough. She jumped off the book, tucked it under her arm and stepped out of the cubicle.

'Mayowa, you've been channelling,' Tommy said, but there was a broad smile on his face. He couldn't be angry. Not yet. Not until the joy wore off.

'I had to, Dad.' She wasn't going to apologise for doing the right thing.

'Come along then,' Tommy said, still smiling.

As they walked back to their seats, the plane was still swinging and swaying, but now people laughed and chatted, joyful despite the storm.

When she returned to her seat, Wunmi chuckled, also under the influence of Mayowa's channelling.

'May, you channelled, didn't you?'

Mayowa hung her head. Her mother could always get to her conscience.

'I'm sorry, Mum. It was for the greater good.'

Wunmi felt her way to Mayowa's face. She stroked Mayowa's forehead.

'You're worried you did the wrong thing,' Wunmi said.

'How can you tell?' Mayowa asked.

'My fingers see everything,' Wunmi said, wiggling her hand over Mayowa's face. Even though Wunmi was blind, she saw more with her fingers than most people saw with their eyes. 'Just this once, it's OK. But after this, the rule stays the same. Only when Grandpa Edward can supervise.'

'Yes, Mum.'

'I want you to feel something. Put your hand on my stomach,' Wunmi said.

Mayowa placed a hand on her mother's rounded belly. Beneath her palm, she felt her twin brothers jerking and jiving.

'They're dancing for joy,' Mayowa said with wonder.

'Breakdancing, it feels like,' said Wunmi.

When the turbulence stopped, someone burst into song. 'He's a miracle-working God,' they sang and the chorus was picked up. Passengers clapped and sang in three-part harmony, like they were all part of a choir.[6]

[6] Or a flash mob.

The seat-belt sign pinged off again and a woman with a silver Afro stood up to dance in the aisle. Other travellers and even some air hostesses joined in.

'I've never seen a channel last for so long,' Mayowa said to her mother, awed by what she had done.

'I don't think it's your channel any more. Nigerians are just joyful people,' Wunmi replied.

'So joy is part of Nigerian culture,' Mayowa said thoughtfully.

Two weeks of sun, all the jollof rice she could eat, and now joy.

Mayowa felt her curiosity awaken. She couldn't wait for the plane to land.



CHAPTER TWO
Welcome to Lagos[7]

After the plane touched down, things went smoothly at first. The Howards stepped into Lagos airport. It was very hot but Mayowa was prepared. She peeled off her jumper and was left with a lightweight T-shirt.

Next, they made their way to immigration. Their passports were stamped and they were welcomed to Nigeria.

It was at the luggage carousel that disaster struck.

'Mayowa, wait here with your mum, while I get our suitcases,' Tommy said.

He soon returned with the red suitcase that was filled with all the presents Wunmi had bought for their friends

[7] The title of a famous book by Nigerian British author Chibundu Onuzo. You can read it when you're older.