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Opening extract from

Angel Boy

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Chapter One



He was definitely going to do it. Only a week of the school holiday gone and the rest of it stretching into the distance like an empty sea that would take forever to cross. Thirty-five days to go, eight hundred and forty hours: and how sad was it to be longing for the start of term?

Life was on heavy time for Leonard Boameh. Nana was no fun, sweeping his feet off with her broom, elbowing him away from her hot pots, reaching her long fingers at him for yesterday's shirt off his back, too busy for a tickle these days – all the while singing the same old hymns in her

high church voice: *What a friend we have in Jesus…!* Well, a friend like Jesus could do Leonard a favour right now – by turning up for a game of something. Any friend would have been fun, but Leonard's house was too far from Blessed Wisdom Primary for him to invite his school mates, and the Cantonment District Elementary School kids who lived nearby didn't want to know him.

So he was going to do it. He'd made up his mind.

His dad was great. When his dad was home they kicked a ball around outside, and argued about Manchester United and Accra Hearts of Oak in the Ghana Premiership, and looked over each other's shoulders at the news from the *Graphic Sports*. They jaunted out in the car and brought back pizza and McDonalds, they squeezed together in an armchair and watched the English football beamed up from South Africa, and they had sessions on the internet. But his dad wasn't home that much, and Nana was no

substitute. Even if Leonard could get her outside, she couldn't head a ball, she never dived for a low shot when she was in goal, and the internet made her flap her hands at the computer and go rattling on about the superiority of books.

So he had to do it, he just had to.

He'd tried to get himself out of the place another way, but he couldn't. He'd had a go at persuading his dad to let him go to work with him. But his dad worked out of the Nile Hotel and didn't want him around. No, he would have liked him around, he said, but it wasn't appropriate.

What *was* appropriate was for his dad to polish his car and clean the cracked windscreen and vacuum the red dust off the floor mats – and then most days he'd be doing a job for one of the hotel clients. He'd take them into town, to Makola Market, or to the National Cultural Centre, or the Nkruma Museum; or, with his overnight holdall in the boot, he'd take them off on a trip. Without warning to Nana, except for

a message from his mobile, he'd go up-country to the Mole National Park, or to the weaving sheds where Kente cloth was made, or along the coast to the slave forts. But even if there was a spare seat in the car, Leonard couldn't sit in it – the clients wouldn't want it, his dad said.

And his dad would be away for days. Leonard would get his nightly phone call, and be told to be good for Nana, night-night, God bless. But Leonard didn't think Nana was good for *him*. She was getting to be a really old person.

So he was definitely going to make his break, just for a few hours. And today was the day.

When he'd washed to Nana's satisfaction, he put on his second-best school shirt, the redness slightly faded by the pummel of Nana's tub. It was a careful choice, because he could wear it with his shorts and still look serious, with the holy cross on the pocket badge giving off a look of piety. At school all the boys had to wear shorts, and Leonard's dad insisted that he wear them in the holidays, too. 'Relish your childhood!' he'd say.

'Kids grow up too fast!' Of course, Nana went along with that, and Leonard had no mother to appeal to – she had died when he was born.

He emptied his wooden pot of the ten thousand-*cedie* notes he'd saved, and tucked them in his pocket. He put a bottle of water and some fruit into his school slipper-bag and pulled the drawstring tight. It was ten o'clock and at this hour the minibuses everyone called *tro-tros* wouldn't be too full of people going to work. And, not wanting to tell any lies to Nana, he drifted out to the yard as if he was going to play a game – and slipped out through the gate at the side.

Leonard Boameh was away on his own day trip.

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He walked through the back alleys to Nsawam Road, the best place in Accra to find a tro-tro. They stopped wherever you stood waving at

them, with a driver's mate hanging out shouting for business and taking the money. Everyone shifted up along the seats to let new people in, mostly going into the town – but tro-tros went up-country and east and west, too – it all depended which roadside you stood on. They were cheaper than state-run buses, and the railways were hopeless.

But Leonard had got it wrong. Crowds of people were standing waiting for tro-tros on Nsawam Road. It was a busy day for Makola Market. Women and boys were still walking there, bowls balanced on their heads with fruit and iced water and stacked-up toilet rolls. The sight of the iced water reminded Leonard how hot and sweaty he felt, and wearing shorts suddenly didn't seem a bad idea at all.

Head held high, balancing his secret, he walked with the people going to market as far as the Cathedral roundabout and turned right on to Castle Road – where, although the tro-tros were fewer and further between, there were fewer

people, too. And he didn't mind where he went, so long as it was away from Cantonment District for a few hours.

'You want towards Cape Coast, Elmina?' a tro-tro mate shouted at him, as a dusty minibus swerved into the kerb.

'How long does it take?' Leonard asked.

The mate cracked his fingers as if his arm was a whip. 'All the way – two hours, about.'

'How much?'

'Tell you when we get there. Come on, *abarima*!' He held the door open, and people moved along. The tro-tro was half-full, with a white backpacking couple as well as local people. Leonard knew that the more people there were in the bus, the cheaper the fare: but time was important, too. He had to get back by tea-time. He was sure he could afford about four hours away, though – so he got in.

As he settled on the hot seat, he planned his day. He'd be there and back well before the telephone call from his dad that evening. His dad

was up-country until Friday, and although Leonard knew Nana would scold him, he wouldn't have to see his dad's disappointed look down the phone. And wouldn't his teacher approve of him going to Elmina?

Elmina was one of the places where the Europeans had built their forts for imprisoning slaves before they were shipped off in shackles to be sold in America. Children studied it in school, and if Leonard could say that he had seen with his own eyes 'the Door of No Return', then he would definitely get house points for putting his holidays to good use. He could take a quick look at the place while the driver and the mate got their dinner, and come back in the same tro-tro.

So his adventure would be useful, as well as getting him out of Accra for the day.



He settled into his seat and enjoyed the breeze

through the open window as the tro-tro picked up speed on the coast road heading west. The other Africans in the tro-tro sounded as if they were going to Elmina to see their families, but the backpackers next to Leonard had a guide book between them. They were holidaymakers, the same as him, so Leonard offered them water from the bottle in his bag.

And, having made friends with them, Leonard told them a made-up tale about going to Elmina for holiday homework – doing what he hadn't done to Nana, telling lies... But going off on an adventure called for a little bending of the truth, didn't it?