Helping your children choose books they will love

I ♥ reading

Lovereading4kids.co.uk is a book website created for parents and children to make choosing books easy and fun

Opening extract from

Ibarajo Road

Written by

Harry Allen

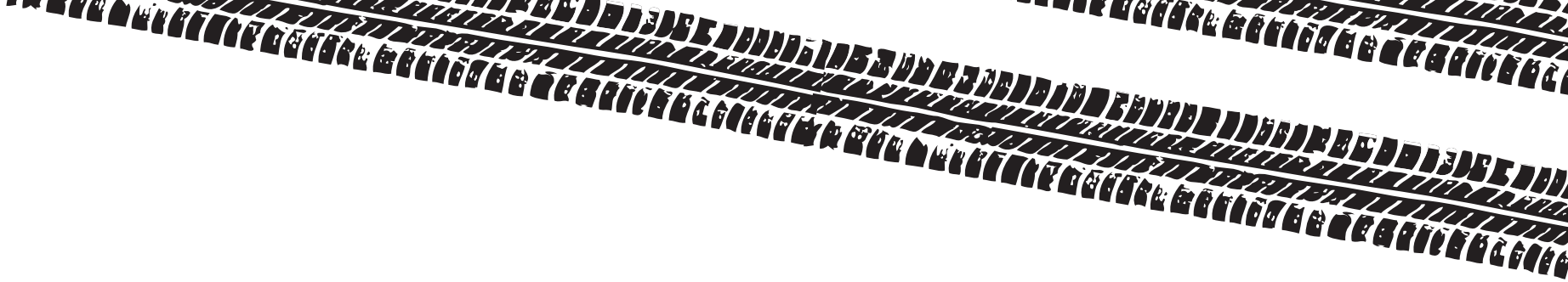
Published by

Frances Lincoln Children's Books

All Text is Copyright © of the Author and/or Illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.

Lovereading4kids.co.uk



Ibarajo Road

HARRY ALLEN

Copyright © Harry Allen 2012
The right of Harry Allen to be identified as
the author of this work has been asserted by him
in accordance with the Copyright, Designs
and Patents Act, 1988 (United Kingdom).

First published in Great Britain in 2012 by
Frances Lincoln Children's Books, 4 Torriano Mews,
Torriano Avenue, London NW5 2RZ
www.franceslincoln.com

All rights reserved

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system,
or transmitted, in any form, or by any means, electrical, mechanical,
photocopying, recording or otherwise without the prior written permission
of the publisher or a licence permitting restricted copying. In the United
Kingdom such licences are issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency,
Saffron House, 6-10 Kirby Street, London EC1N 8TS.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-84780-320-7

Set in Palatino

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY in June 2012

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

FRANCES LINCOLN
CHILDREN'S BOOKS

CHAPTER 1

It was Harmattan season: storms in the Sahara blew sand down over the country, staining the skies over the city of Ilaju a nicotine yellow. The sun, barely discernable as it sped into the sky, fought to give light to the city below.

We turned on to Ibarajo Road and the early morning chaos sucked us in. Hundreds of horns bellowed their drivers' anger and frustration as cars wove through the exhaust-filled humidity, swerving from lane to lane in an effort to get ahead. Pedestrians stumbled along the cracked and potholed pavements, the colours of their Yoruba dress greyed by the heat and dust, heads bowed against the aggression of the morning. Street traders jumped onto the road, open shirts clinging to their bodies, holding their wares above their heads and shouting prices into car windows.

A trader peered through at me as we crawled along,

his sunken eyes filled with hope as he held up a pair of jeans, 'Cheap, cheap. Good price. Five dollar.' I waved him away with a yawn and glanced at my watch – six thirty-five. Too early – after over a year, it still felt painfully early.

Hard to believe. A whole year since my father had announced we would be leaving our house in Hampshire. Leaving our home, McDonald's, shopping centres, TV and HMV, and coming here, to Sengharia. I had looked it up in the atlas and found it nestled in the corner of West Africa – a world away.

The car hit a pothole and my bag bounced off the seat next to me. Bending down, I picked it up, cramming my schoolbooks back inside, and saw the skin on my arm had begun to peel. I scratched at it for a moment, sorry that the tan would be lost, vowing to spend more time by the pool at the weekend.

'Turn up the air conditioning, will you, Samson?' My driver nodded and the added rumble helped mask some of the noise. I caught a whiff of monsoon drains and checked that the Mercedes' window was tight shut against the compost smell, sealing my cool, safe haven.

The sound of a siren burst through the car and Samson swerved to the left. My head hit the window

and Samson swore as we jarred to a halt. A police Land Rover raced towards us, its red and blue lights punching through the dawn. A policeman stood in the open topped back, one hand gripping the roof for support, the other bringing a pistol butt crashing down on to the car roofs, daring them not to move. Samson pulled us further in towards the central reservation, but the roof shook from a blow as the Land Rover shot past.

'They are crazy,' muttered Samson.

I glanced up the road. The police had left a slipstream, and cars now poured over from the other carriageway, flowing in their wake before swerving back onto the correct side. Samson pulled away, his fist on the horn, keeping right to avoid the impatient commuters.

And in the central reservation, flanked by six lanes of screaming traffic, two boys began to run.

Even from a distance and in the poor morning light I could see them clearly. They wore crisp pressed khaki shorts and starched shirts, their knee socks gleaming white against the grey concrete of the flyover. The smaller boy ran slightly behind the other, one hand gripping his satchel, the other clasping the shirt of – his friend? His brother?

The distance to the side of the road wasn't far, just three lanes of traffic. The boys must have been waiting for a break in the constant stream of cars for some time, but the grins on their faces suggested this was a game they played every morning; something to liven up the trek to school, to talk about with their friends, to joke about their daring. Looks like a laugh, I thought. Perhaps I should dare Max to do it with me. I smiled and leaned forward to watch.

They got off to a good start, and I was wondering who would make it first when, halfway across, the smaller boy stumbled. His friend turned and shouted something as a red Peugeot tore across the central reservation towards them. The smaller boy struggled to rise, but his foot caught in his satchel strap, and he only made it halfway up before stumbling back down.

Get up, I thought. Get up. . .

I think the driver saw them at the last minute. The car swerved slightly before the smaller boy, his hand reaching for the shirt of his friend, vanished between bumper and tarmac. The first boy shot into the air, a flailing collection of arms, legs and schoolbooks. He hung there for a second, the car brakes screeching, before thundering down onto the windscreen,

bouncing off the bonnet and vanishing after his friend.

Samson hit the brakes and I slammed into the back of the front seat and slid down into the foot well. I stayed there for a second, struggling with the image in my mind

'You OK?' asked Samson.

'Fine,' I managed, pulling myself up from the floor, 'Jesus, did you see. . .?' My heart pounded, the picture still floating in front of my eyes.

'Safety belt, safety belt,' ordered Samson. 'We go fast now. Bad men will come, big *wahala* for tis.'

I didn't argue and dropped back into my seat, pulling the seat belt across and locking it into place. Big *wahala*: big trouble. It was one of the sternest warnings a Sengharian could give. I'd heard Samson use it before, and, despite the air conditioning, sweat began to trickle down my face.

The Peugeot lay slightly askew across the inside and middle lanes. The shattered windscreen obscured the driver, but I could make him out still sitting there, his hands on the wheel, unable or unwilling to move. Samson put the car into gear and we inched forward, trying to find a way through the gridlock left by the accident. The car's sudden jerks threw me back and forwards.

On the other carriageways, the traffic slowed as people stared over at the scene, and gradually the flow stopped as a man in a tailored blue suit let out a yell of fury and stepped onto the road. He shouted, pointing at the Peugeot, and the noise increased as others joined him. People climbed out of their cars, fought their way through the crowd at the side of the road and began to converge on the car in a mass of anger, drawn by the man in the suit and his impassioned cries.

'Samson. . .' My voice shook.

'Don't worry, Charlie. We go now.' But there seemed to be no way through. Samson tried to edge around to the left, to squeeze through the gap between the mob around the car and the central reservation; the Mercedes lurched forward a foot before jarring to a stop. A man jumped in front of us, his arms stretched out and upwards, his open shirt flying behind him, shouting something I couldn't hear above the din of the crowd. Samson slammed his fist against the button on his door and I heard the central locking snap into place; but the man was gone, his attention turned towards the car in the road and its driver.

The man in the suit crouched by the Peugeot staring at the bodies. Then he rose to his feet, held up a fist and shouted something in Yoruba. The crowd

erupted. They forced open the door and dragged the driver out, throwing him to the ground. He knelt on the road, his eyes glazed with shock and terror, as all around the crowd grew, and the noise of their cries intensified. Standing above him, one hand gripping his head, the man in the suit began to speak. His head swirled around as he addressed the mob, his free arm slicing through the air giving form to his rage, a fervent, evangelical tone in his voice that rose above all other sounds.

'What is he saying?' I asked, the words forced out of my mouth by another jerk from the car.

'*Child-killer*,' said Samson, his voice a steel whisper.

I couldn't make out who kicked the driver first; the sole of a black shoe connected with the side of his head and he let out a howl of pain. He clasped his hands together and began speaking, pleading, his words lost. Another kick, and he turned and gripped the trouser leg of his persecutor – who moved back forcing him to follow on his knees, head bowed like a street beggar. But he was pushed away and the blows rained down.

'Stop!'

The people turned. They seemed unsure of what

to make of this new command. Their attention moved away from the driver, who fell forward onto the tarmac, his clothes torn, the marks from his beating standing white against his brown skin, and their eyes searched for the one who had interrupted them.

The speaker stepped forward, his worn trousers finishing an inch above scuffed shoes. He was short, with unbrushed grey hair, but he stared up at the man in the suit with a gaze that would have cut glass. He began to speak, his voice free of the rage of the mob. He pointed to the car, indicating the boys trapped underneath. For a moment, the man in the suit seemed to waver; his followers looked around, unsure of what to do.

Another jerk from the Mercedes and the seat belt rose up, biting into my neck, forcing my eyes away from the scene. When I turned back, the leader stood towering over the old man, spittle shooting from his mouth as he screamed at him. Leave, I thought, leave, turn away and run. But the old man stood unflinching, staring up at him like a teacher observing a wayward child, and the man's tirade weakened and then stopped.

The old man turned to the driver. He crouched on one knee trying to get up, a hand outstretched, and

the old man took a step towards him. The movement seemed to bring the suited man back to life and his fist hammered into the old man's chest, sending him stumbling backwards. This action was the sign the crowd had been waiting for, and two men moved forward to drag the interloper away. He made no attempt to struggle, but his eyes never left his attacker, who watched him go before returning his attention to his victim.

The driver's temporary reprieve was over. The man forced him to his knees with his hands behind his back. The thugs who had dragged away the old man returned carrying a tyre. The sight of the tyre seemed to whip the mob into a new frenzy and they punched the air and chanted something I didn't want to understand. The man in the suit snatched it and held it above his head, showing it off like a trophy.

People started to crowd closer, and the gap between the central reservation and the car widened. Samson seized his chance and our car surged forward, throwing me back into my seat, and we were through just as the man, his suit greying in the dust, slowly, almost gently, placed the tyre around the driver's neck.

I turned as we passed the abandoned Peugeot. A trail of blood seeped out from underneath the rear

bumper, sliding its way towards a school satchel, encircling it as if to pull it back to its owner.

I didn't look back as we sped away. I unclipped my seatbelt, leant forward, placed a shaking hand on the seat in front of me, and took several deep breaths. 'Holy shit,' I gasped.

'Charlie? You go be sick?' asked Samson as he slowed the car.

'No. But, dat *wahala* make me weak for bodi,' I replied in pidgin. I glanced up at the rear view mirror and saw Samson's eyes widen with laughter.

'Now you go learn to speak correct! Finally my lessons are paying off,' he said, his laugh reverberating around the car. '*Na Wah* for Charlie!'

I laughed with him: a pure, cleansing laugh that drove away some of the stress and fear. I slumped back into my seat and sighed. The violence of the roadside vigilantes already seemed distant and somehow unreal as we sped across the Oyo Bridge onto Ekadan Street.

From its elevated position, I gazed out over the harbour and the quays, at the ships sailing in sitting low in the water, heavy with their cargo, and at the ones sailing out empty. The sun managed to break through the dust and played on the ocean as we

neared the expat heartland of Ikoro and Mountbatten Island, and the question that had been burning in my mind now seemed safe to ask. 'Samson, was the tyre for *necklacing*?'

Samson hesitated before answering. He shifted slightly in his seat and rolled his bull-like shoulders. 'Don't you worry about necklacing, Charlie. The police dun come for sure. Dat man OK.'

I believed him. It was the easiest thing to do. The police would have arrived, I said to myself, before they doused the tyre in petrol, before they lit the match. Yet there was something hollow in Samson's reassurance, and my hands began to shake as the car cruised onto Mountbatten Island, to my friends, to school.