

**ONE
CHANGE
DANCE**

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CHAPTER 1

WHEN YOUR POT OF LUCK IS EMPTY

Jomi loved picking up abandoned things. Things people threw away, calling them useless.

Nothing is ever truly useless was his favourite thing to say, when he found something lying about.

Every single thing had a use somewhere inside of it, even if it might not be obvious at first sight. Anyone who was good at fixing things, like Jomi, knew that.

Jomi's favourite place in the world was the scrap hill outside the village. It was a hill of treasures. The first time the truck came to offload scrap at the back of the village, all the grown-ups turned into angry bees, buzzing about the mound of scrap until late into the night. The next day they went to complain at the town council. But no one listened to them. No one listens to poor people.

And so, the trucks kept coming. And Jomi didn't mind because he began discovering all sorts of gems between the scraps. People crinkled their noses when they saw the cracked phones, broken strollers, rattling keyboards, ruptured TV screens, scrunched-up cans and plastic bottles. They didn't see what Jomi saw. The copper wires, magnets, wheel bearings, switches, DC motors, batteries and thousands of other goodies. All ready to be fixed and shined up and used to build something new.

And the treasure hill was right outside their house. Jomi didn't even need to cross valleys or climb mountains or sail away on a ship like a pirate to find the treasures.

He'd sewn extra-large and extra-strong pockets that went all the way down to his knees so he could fill them up with lots of amazing stuff. Stuff people had abandoned.

Sometimes it was tough. Fixing things, or making new things out of them. Like this tin car he'd built with a little sail in front and a fan motor behind to make it drive faster.

'Come on!' Tinuke cried, her long braids dancing. 'Show us what you can do.' His cousin was his biggest ally.

Jomi screwed the rubber wheel back on. This car was his best yet. Or would be, if it didn't keep crashing.

He joined back the wires to the rusty battery he'd found at the scrap hill. The car staggered forward but this time it settled into a slow, smooth drive.

'Ha!' Tinuke cried and quickly popped the little iron lady she'd built into the car. The lady fit in perfectly and rattled along with the car, until it hit the leg of the table on the veranda and both crashed upside down.

'Did you see how she drove the car?'

Jomi gave her a high five.

'I told you, you need little iron people for your cars and luckily for you, you have me to supply you with them!'

Jomi picked up the car and set it right. He smiled at the mention of luck. He'd learnt a new word at school today that was even better than luck. And it had made him excited, his whole body gripped by a vibrating energy all afternoon. It was this really long, weird word that had curled off their tongues strangely and made them laugh as they repeated it in English class.

Serendipity.

Mr Bola had said it was a very special kind of luck. Ordinary luck was what happened while you were trying very hard to do or find something and you got lucky. Just like searching for scrap on a hill. But serendipity was the special luck that happened when you weren't expecting it. When you weren't doing anything to find it and just got lucky out of the blue.

Jomi had immediately thought of his mum when he heard this. He remembered her bright, dreamy eyes filled with excitement. *Don't look too hard, Jomi, she would say. Don't even let life know what you are after. Just go about your business and then suddenly life will surprise you.* How he would have loved to tell her this word, serendipity. It was made for her.

The car began moving again. He was so absorbed in watching it jerk and rattle across the dusty veranda that he didn't hear the steps approaching. Suddenly a shadow loomed over them.

Jomi froze.

'Welcome Mummy,' Tinuke said, quickly jumping up and helping her mother remove the large basin she was carrying on her head. Jomi

gulped down his shock and scanned the front yard frantically for the broom he'd dropped somewhere.

His aunt stretched her back and shook out her arms to loosen her muscles after carrying the heavy basin all the way back from the market. And all the while, her eyes were on him, slowly eating him up.

He managed to find his voice. 'Welcome Auntie Patience,' he mumbled.

Her scowl eased and her twisted eyebrows straightened. He wondered if he might just get lucky this time. But unfortunately, his car chose that moment to bump into Auntie Patience's foot.

She looked at it, bent down slowly and picked the car up along with his instruments, which lay scattered at her feet. Jomi's muscles went limp. She inspected the car briefly, shook her head and then she squeezed it. The thin metal broke with a mournful creak that cut through his tightly wound-up insides.

'But Mummy,' Tinuke cried as she watched the iron lady clatter to the ground and lose her head.

'Get inside,' Auntie Patience barked at her. Then she grabbed Jomi's ear and pulled him forward. He yelped.

‘How many times have I told you to stop playing around with this rubbish, when there are things to be done in the house? Have you washed the clothes I put out?’

‘Yes, yes Aunty,’ Jomi cried, tears squeezing out of the corners of his eyes.

She let go of his ear. ‘And why did you not sweep the yard like I said?’

‘I was just about to,’ he mumbled, rubbing his ear.

‘Get along with it. I am tired of feeding you and not getting anything back for it. You will work for your keep in this house and make yourself useful! Have you heard?’

He stared at the dusty red ground beneath his bare feet and nodded.

‘Now, fetch me a bucket of water from the well, for my shower, and then sweep the yard!’

Jomi stumbled towards the well at the back of the house, his heart feeling like it had swapped position with his stomach. But it wasn’t because of the wicked throb in his earlobe. It was because of what Aunty Patience still held in her hand. He glanced back and watched her grip his pliers and scissors tightly as she walked into the house.



CHAPTER 2

WHEN YOUR HEAD DOESN'T QUITE FIT ON YOUR SHOULDERS

When Jomi's mother left, everyone said she would never return. Especially Aunty Patience, who was the wife of his mum's older brother. 'She is lazy!' Aunty Patience had said, hissing loudly, her lips twisting in disgust. 'Too proud to do honest farm work like the rest of us!'

Everyone agreed his mum's ori never fitted quite right on her shoulders. It was always looking this way and that or dreaming away high up in the clouds, too far away and too big to fit well on her slim shoulders.

But Jomi knew better. His mum had told him the story of Ayanmo, which means destiny. Ayanmo determines all human lives. Before their births, the lifeless bodies of humans are sent to the keeper of the ori, to choose their heads. Each person chooses

their head, the most important part of their body. It is a heavy, life-defining choice after which they are sent to the stream of forgetfulness out of which they are born. If a person chooses a good ori, then they are one of the lucky ones who will have a good destiny. If a person chooses a bad ori, then they'd end up poor like Jomi and his mum.

But Jomi's mum had sworn to him that her ori was not a bad one. She said her destiny was just sleeping and she had to go in search of her, to poke her and wake her up.

Jomi knew she would never abandon him because she'd told him that on the night she'd left.

He remembered the smells and sounds of that night clearly. The busy chatter of hawkers and passengers at the bus stop, the scent of his mum's cocoa-butter hair cream which had made her freshly braided hair shine, making her look even younger than she already was. The glow in her eyes and the sound of her warm, excited voice as she spoke.

'Jomi,' she had said. 'You know why I gave you your name, Oluwajomiloju?'

He had nodded eagerly.

‘Because you are the first surprise that life had in store for me when I was only fifteen. You were my biggest and only surprise yet.’ She had laid an arm around his shoulders and pulled him closer, not minding that his face creased and dirtied her Sunday dress which she’d put on for the journey.

He’d snuggled deeper into her embrace and listened to her heart beat fast along with her words.

‘There has to be more to life than what we have here,’ she had said, whispering. ‘I know I have a bigger purpose. I’m like one of those scraps on your scrap hill.’

Jomi had looked at her in surprise and she’d grinned and nodded her head vigorously, her braids forming wavy shadows on her face in the dim light.

‘Lying around there on a scrap hill, each part is useless. But when shined up and put together with the right piece, the scrap becomes useful and those wonderful toy cars that you build emerge. That is how it will be for me. Do you understand what I am trying to say?’

He had nodded and she’d squeezed his hand.

‘I knew you would be the only one to believe me,’ she had whispered, then kissed the top of his

head. Her warm breath had smelt of lemon and ginger and he had inhaled all of it.

‘As soon as I have put together enough money and found a place for us, I will come and get you from your uncle and aunty. I promise.’

And then swinging the small nylon bag of her few belongings on to her shoulder, she’d squeezed into the rickety bus that was brimming with travellers, bags, sacks, cartons and loud squawking chickens in big baskets. The bus that would take her to Lagos, the city of dreams. Dreams that floated around every corner. You just had to snatch one for yourself.

Ducking her head beneath sweaty armpits, tall headties and bulging bags, she had disappeared and was gone.

Jomi had remained behind, standing in the middle of the empty bus stop, until the sound of the coughing bus engine and the trail of black smoke had disappeared.

CHAPTER 3

WHEN AN ENTIRE FOREST DISAPPEARS IN ONE DAY

'Our forest o! They are taking down the forest!'
The screams came from all ends of the village.

Jomi and Tinuke dropped their forks of fried plantain and eggs at the very same time. Uncle Babatunde jumped up with a grunt and stormed past them. A second later, they were running out of the house and after him.

The bulldozers worked mechanically and relentlessly like a locust invasion on a cornfield. From a distance they almost looked like toy cars driving over little farms and hills, felling trees, crumbling cocoa pods and smashing green pineapples to pulp as if they were nothing.

Even the villagers, their eyes wide and bulging, mouths hanging open, fists pumping in vain, looked unreal – like little iron people.

It was on this day of the bulldozers that Jomi finally understood why his mum had left.

Even though his memories of her were now like crumbs on a plate – so few that it was difficult to say what meal had been eaten – Jomi still believed in her. Even though she'd never written, like she had promised, he trusted her and held on to his little crumbs of memories. But it was the day their world was turned upside down by the bulldozers and the villagers were scattered about like weevils out of a sack of old beans that he'd really understood.

The truth was that, here in this village, they were nothing. They were poor and unimportant, like wriggling worms in the hands of a playful child.

Jomi spent the day watching the bulldozers, fascinated in a bellyaching kind of way. The mighty machines climbed over bushes, mounds of earth and even hills as if they were just having an evening stroll. One tree after the other fell as easily as elephant grass sliced down by a sharp cutlass. From morning till late afternoon, he watched, hypnotized. He could not help himself. Wheels and motors were the most exciting things in the world. And anyway, it was better watching the destruction site than