

No Small Thing:
A Memoir of Uncommon Courage Through the Liberian Civil Wars
Jan C Johnson with Daniel J Mellish
SAMPLE CHAPTERS

Chapter 1

December 1975 Gbar Creek community, Owensgrove District Liberia, West Africa

The heart man hunted along this road. That's what the local children said.

Nine-year-old Daniel Mellish padded barefoot along the rutted lane on high alert. After all, the heart man killed people and cut out their hearts. He sold those hearts to the witch doctors. Daniel could only guess what *they* did with them.

From under the wide basket on his head, Daniel peered into the rainforest on either side, listening for any movement. He wished his family had never moved to Owensgrove. Or that he could at least turn back to his house. He would be safe there. But his copybook had only two blank pages left. To stay in third grade, he needed another book. He must take this produce to the market behind the Harbel Supermarket on the Firestone rubber plantation.

At this open-air market, seven miles from home, sellers put their wares on any bit of ground they could find. Daniel had come only about half way. By the time he arrived, all the best places would be taken.

He walked faster.

As he hurried along, something rustled the leaves close by. Daniel's stomach lurched. His feet pounded along the road. The rustling grew closer.

A guinea hen burst out of the undergrowth and darted across the road right in front of him. His frantic cry turned into a laugh at her tiny bald head jerking back and forth with each step.

He rebalanced his basket of eddoes and sweet potato greens and hurried on. The starchy tubers were heavy, but he wished he had more of them. The greens had small value. How much would his load bring today?

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Daniel arrived home before sunset and eased the basket from his head, letting some leftover greens drop onto the table. Not that he was tired. No, he was used to the walk between home and market. Tonight, discouragement slumped his shoulders.

His ma turned sympathetic eyes on him. "Not a good day at market?"

“No, prices were low. There were plenty others with eddoes to sell.” Daniel gave her the unsold greens and the few coins he’d earned.

Ma reached inside the waist of the lappa she’d wrapped around her middle to cover her lower half. She pulled out a pouch and placed the coins inside. “I am sorry, son, but I will have to use part of this for food.”

“Okay.” He rubbed his toes along the dirt floor.

“You understand, don’t you?” She put an arm around his shoulders. “We can find eddoes and fruit enough, but you cannot do well in school without meat or eggs. Unless I can trade, I must buy those things.”

“I know, Ma. But... for what reason Father won’t provide food, or pay for my school? If he pays school for the brothers and stepbrothers, why not for me?” Daniel scowled. “I hate him.”

“Oh... No, my son.” Ma gathered Daniel in her arms. “Let’s not think that way. Your father is living his life the way he wants, and we must respect him, my *kawusu warsor*.”

The endearment in Ma’s native Kru dialect gave him no comfort. He allowed her gentle hand to smooth his brow, but anger still stirred inside. Father was living his life—okay. But what about Daniel’s life and what *he* wanted? How could a boy keep up his schoolwork when he struggled to earn money even for a copybook and pencil, let alone the uniforms?

Ma turned his chin up until he met her smiling gaze. “Don’t worry, son. Today I found one pineapple ready to cut. Tomorrow you can take it to market. It should bring enough to buy what you need, yah.”

“Thank you, Ma.” He hugged her. “May I go visit Barnard?”

“Yes, maybe your friend can help you feel better.”

Many of the boys Daniel knew would rather play football than attend school. But as much as Daniel liked football, he wanted an education more than anything. His younger neighbor Barnard understood.

Surely Father could afford the small cost of sending Daniel to school. Why did he not notice or love him and his sisters? Small as he was, Daniel sensed that a father should look out for his whole family, even if he did have three wives and too plenty children filling the house.

Scowling again, he crossed the yard to Barnard’s house, where the boy sat on the porch reading a book. Popular music came from a transistor radio.

Barnard closed the book and jumped up, grinning. “You are welcome, Daniel. Where have you been today?”

“The market, of course.” Daniel told his friend about the guinea hen scare and his small earnings. “Father pays for the brothers’ school, but they don’t even do their work. That isn’t right, is it?”

Barnard shook his head. “It doesn’t sound fair-o. But one day you will top your brothers.”

“Maybe. If the heart man doesn’t get me.” Daniel hung his head.

“He won’t.” Barnard nudged Daniel with an elbow. “You run very fast. Now, how about a game of Ludo before dark?”

“Okay.”

Barnard set up the game board and let Daniel throw the dice first.

Chapter 2

September 1977

Daniel tugged the front edges of his short uniform trousers together until he could button the waistband. Two years ago, when he was in third grade, they reached almost to his knees. Now they left more of his thighs showing than they covered. Worse, the royal blue fabric had faded to a dusty brown.

His top half was no better. The bright yellow blouse, now the color of ivory, barely reached past the top of his shorts. How many times had Ma washed and ironed this suit? Why couldn’t he wear his regular clothes to school?

But uniforms were the rule. He sighed. At least the rain had stopped.

Copybook and pencil in hand, he walked the three miles of muddy roads through the bush to the government school. Once inside his fifth-grade classroom, he took his place on the bench at the narrow table he shared with three classmates. He was older than some of the students—children whose fathers supported them. They could afford uniforms and supplies, and never had to sit at home during the school year.

Their first teacher entered the room with a crisp, “Good morning, class.” The students greeted her, opened their copybooks, and prepared to write.

The morning went as usual. Since Daniel did not like to talk, he dreaded reciting in English. However, he enjoyed reading and didn’t have too much fuss with math.

At the noon recess, he sat in the shade with his friends. The luckier ones ate lunch. One boy passed a portion of his rice to Daniel, and he accepted it gratefully.

“Time to play-o!” one of the boys said, juggling a ball first with his head, then his knee. Daniel rose and lined up with the others to choose teams.

“Come on, Daniel! We want to sing,” a fourth-grade girl called. She and a cluster of other children beckoned him toward a fruit tree at the edge of the schoolyard.

Daniel grinned. He loved music even more than football. When it came to singing, his tongue was never slow. And he would be in the shade. “Coming!”

When he started toward the singers, the boys objected. “Don’t go with them,” one said. “You’re one of our best footballers!”

The girl ran over and took Daniel’s hand. “No, we need you to lead us!” She pulled and he followed willingly, glancing back at his friends with a shrug.

Daniel started a song. Young voices rose in the first verse. Harmonies built, one part on another, and the rich sound floated across the schoolyard. More students wandered over to join in, until Daniel stood wrapped in the music of twenty or more voices.

The children sang until the end of recess. Then everyone filed back inside. The geography teacher, Miss Logan, followed the fifth graders into their classroom. She draped a map over the chalkboard and began the lesson.

Daniel liked to hear about faraway places and imagine visiting them. But why did Miss Logan keep looking at him like that? She seemed upset, even angry. She had stared at him plenty times, ever since school began two weeks ago. And once, she’d started to say something to him but only turned away, lips pressed together in a thin line.

For what reason? Could it be his classwork?

But he always did his work with care.

What was wrong, then? Had he offended her some way?

Next morning, Daniel slid his copybook and uniform into a plastic bag and walked to school in a pouring rain. Once inside, the children quickly changed into their dry uniforms and prepared for class.

The rain went on through recess, so everyone stayed indoors. Daniel and his friends played “President,” making speeches and trying to sound like President Tolbert on the radio.

During geography class, Daniel watched Miss Logan as closely as he could without seeming disrespectful. Again, he caught unhappy looks from her. He did his best to listen and not worry, but her mood made it hard to concentrate.

When class ended, the teacher rolled up her map. But instead of leaving the room, she stood looking straight at him. “Daniel Mellish.”

His stomach clenched. Cringing inside, he stood. “Yes, Miss Logan?”

She came to him and fingered the worn hem of his sleeve. “Look at your uniform.”

He lowered his head as if to look, but shut his eyes. He should answer. Why was it so hard to speak?

Miss Logan released his sleeve. “Don’t bring this suit here again tomorrow. I don’t want to see this again.”

Shock loosened his tongue. He looked up at her. “O! What am I gonna do? I don’t have money for another uniform.” Shame burned in his face.

“I’m sorry, Daniel, but you can’t come to school dressed like this.” With that, Miss Logan left and the next teacher entered the room.

Daniel sank onto the bench, head bowed. He hurried away the minute school was over. Friends called to him, but he made no answer.

At home, he found his mother outside. She squatted beside a tub of water, rubbing a bar of handmade soap into wet clothing. “Ma, what can I do?” he asked. “Miss Logan said I can’t come back to school until I have a better uniform. How can I get one? They’re so expensive.”

Ma dried her hands and rose to put her arm around him. “That’s too bad, Daniel. But don’t give up. See, now you will have more time to earn money. Maybe you can soon go back.”

“But if Father would—“

“No, my son.” She held his shoulders and looked into his eyes. “Your father now caters to the third wife and her children. We must not expect...” She pulled him into a hug. “Oh, Daniel, you know how I want to help you go to school. I will do my best to save money and buy you a new suit. And we’ll pray for God to make a way.”

If they prayed, would God even listen? Father took the family to church and often taught them about God from the Bible. But if his own father did this and still him no attention, how could he hope that a big, faraway God loved him?

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Barnard visited Daniel a few days later. “I tell myself I’ll have to come get you, or you’ll never come outside-o. What’ve you been doing?”

“Nothing, just sitting down. I can’t go back to school.”

“O! Why not?”

“My uniform. Miss Logan say she never want to see it again.”

Barnard shrugged. “Sure. It’s the color of sand. And it would fit my little sister.”

“Thanks.”

“But sitting down won’t help. You need a new uniform.”

Daniel rolled his eyes. “I know that, yah. But they’re too dear.”

“Listen, why not ask the neighbors if you can do jobs for them? You can still make market on Saturdays.”

Daniel considered the idea. “That could help.” He grimaced. “But I’m getting behind in schoolwork.”

Barnard gripped Daniel’s shoulder. “You’re as smart as I am—well, almost. You don’t have to fall behind. You can use my schoolbooks to keep up.”

“Your school uses the same books?” When Barnard nodded, Daniel finally gave in to his friend’s positive mood. “Thanks. Maybe it will be okay.”

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Daniel crouched on the front step of his house. A few neighbors had hired him for yard work, but he could not do much during the rainy season. Even after a whole month, he had gathered little money. And Ma was saving what she could. He must ask no more of her.

Barnard came home from his school and soon crossed from next door to sit beside Daniel. “Hello, how are you?”

Daniel sighed. “I’m trying small.”

At this halfhearted reply, Barnard peered into his face. “Something wrong?”

“What’s the use?” Daniel kicked at the red mud under his feet. “By the time I earn enough for a uniform, I’ll be too old for school.”

The boys sat in silence for a while.

“You know,” Barnard said, “I think I should carry you to Miss Mildred Duncklee, the missionary. She’s a friend of Opal Poag. You know Ma Poag—the missionary who’s been helping our family.”

“Go to see Ma Poag’s friend? For what reason?”

“Because right now she is in need of a boy to work in her yard and take care of her flowers. You could do that.”

Hope flickered in Daniel’s heart. “Maybe I could.”

“I know you could!” Barnard jumped up eagerly. “And you wouldn’t have to walk all that way to market. The mission’s right there.” He pointed behind Daniel’s house.

“Okay.” Daniel told his mother about Barnard’s idea. The rain fell small now, so the boys set out for the missionary’s house, set in the middle of the large grounds.

“You need to know a few things, yah,” Barnard said on the way.

“What things?”

“Don’t expect the work to be easy. The missionary looks on everything. If she give you something to do, and you don’t do it well, she fire you.”

Daniel cringed. “She fires boys?”

“Yes—with not much notice. Three or four already this year. That’s why she needs someone now.”

“What if she fire me, too?”

“Don’t worry. I know two of the boys who used to work for her. One is lazy—he only last a week. And the other didn’t do his work the way she told him.”

“I hope I can satisfy her.” Daniel’s steps slowed.

“Sure, you’ll do fine. She’ll tell you what she want. All you do is listen and follow her exactly.” Barnard patted him on the back. “And when she yells at you, just play it low.”

By the time Barnard climbed the missionary’s front steps, Daniel lagged five paces behind. He stayed on the muddy ground, waiting.

Barnard beckoned to him. “Come on up here! Be brave.”

Trembling, Daniel climbed to the porch while Barnard knocked.



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