



ABC and 123

Anna Hibiscus lives in Africa. Amazing Africa. She lives in a big white house in a big busy city with her whole entire family.

But Anna Hibiscus is not in the city now. She is on holiday with Grandmother and Grandfather and her big girl cousins, Joy and Clarity and Common Sense. They are visiting the village where Grandmother and Grandfather were born.

Anna Hibiscus loves the village. She plays with her village friends all day long. But Anna Hibiscus has to work as well! There is too much work in the village for the mothers and fathers to do alone. The children have to help too!

Every single day Anna Hibiscus and her village friends take the goats to graze in the hot bush. While they are watching over the goats they play and laugh. And they learn too! The village children are teaching



Anna Hibiscus new songs and new games
and how to fire a catapult well-well.

And Anna Hibiscus is teaching the village
children ABC and 1,2,3. Anna Hibiscus loves
to teach her friends. But now her friends are
asking her questions that she cannot answer!

“What is 46 plus 92?” Tosin shouts.

“What is 23 minus 16?” Tolu shouts.

“What is the spelling of ‘anthill’?”

Beni shouts.



“Grandfather, what is 46 plus 92?” asked Anna Hibiscus when she was back in their compound.

“Grandmother, what is 23 minus 16?” asked Anna Hibiscus.

“Clarity, what is the spelling of ‘anthill’?” asked Anna Hibiscus.

“Ummm,” mumbled Grandfather, writing the numbers on the ground.

“Seven,” said Grandmother.

“Oh, Anna Hibiscus,” sighed Clarity. “Why are you asking these questions every-every night?”

“Is it your homework?” asked Grandmother.

“Is it too difficult for you?” asked Grandfather.



“I thought you only had spellings to learn,” said Clarity.

“It is not homework,” Anna Hibiscus said. “It is my friends, Tosin, Tolu and Beni! They are only small but they are asking me such difficult questions.”

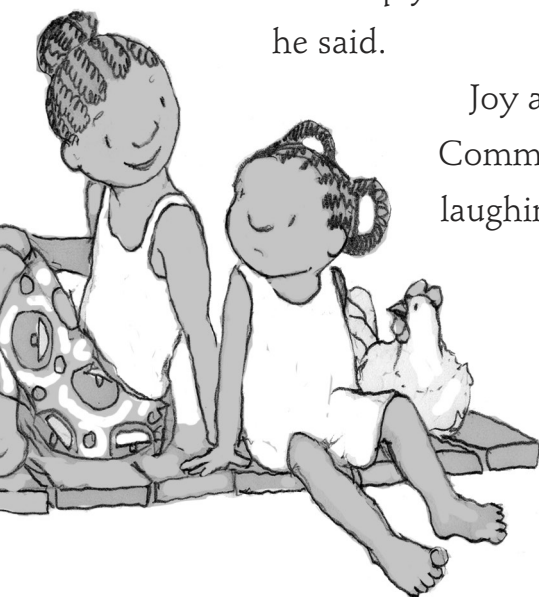
The big girl cousins burst out laughing.

“The pupils are too clever for the teacher!” said Clarity.

Anna Hibiscus frowned. Grandfather tried not to smile.

“Tomorrow your cousins can go and help you teach your friends,” he said.

Joy and Clarity and Common Sense stopped laughing.



Every single day the big girl cousins went to the river to wash clothes. All the other big boys and girls in the village went too. They had a lot of fun there.

But the very next day, instead of going to the river, the big girl cousins had to go to the hot-hot bush with Anna Hibiscus, the small children and the smelly goats.

“How do you spell ‘crocodile’?” shouted Tosin.

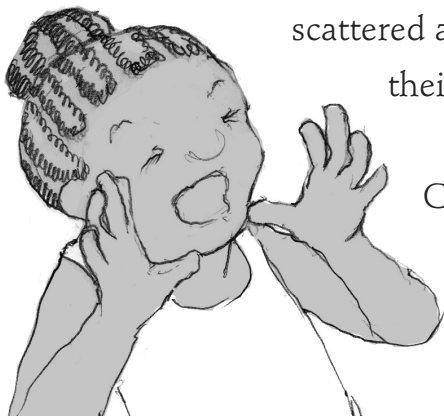
“How do you spell ‘snake’?” shouted Tolu.

“How do you take a big number from a small number?” shouted Beni. “It is not possible!”

Joy and Clarity groaned. Common Sense eyed the village children. Some were quite big. Others were quite small. They were

scattered all around, shouting out their questions.

“Silence!” yelled Common Sense.



Everybody looked at her.

“Stand together with your age mates!”
Common Sense shouted. “With those born
in the same year as you.”

The village children started moving around.

“If you were born in the year the river
flooded the fields, come and stand next to
me,” Common Sense said.

“Stand with Clarity if you were born in
the year the chief’s roof caught fire,” she
continued.

“If you were born in the year that the wild
pigs trampled the fields, then come here!”
Joy called.

“I will teach you big ones,” Common Sense
said to the children standing next to her.

“I will teach you,” Clarity said to her
group of medium-sized children.

“And I am your teacher.” Joy smiled at the
smallest children.

Anna Hibiscus frowned. This was

too much like school! Any minute now Common Sense was probably going to make them sit down and be quiet.

“Sit down!” shouted Common Sense.

“And be quiet! If you have a question put up your hand.”

“Come on, Anna!” called Clarity. “You are in my class.”

Anna Hibiscus shook her head. Everybody in Clarity’s group was smaller than she was!

“Don’t cause trouble, Anna!” shouted Common Sense. “Do as you are told.”

Anna Hibiscus did as she was told. But she was annoyed. Anna Hibiscus complained when they got back to their compound.

“They made me sit with small children!”

“What is this?” asked Grandmother.

“We didn’t!” said Joy. “I was teaching the little ones. Anna was with Clarity.”

“They were still smaller than me!” said Anna.

“Maybe smaller,” said Clarity, “but not younger.”

“They were all born the year the chief’s roof caught fire,” said Common Sense.
“The same year as Anna Hibiscus.”

Anna Hibiscus opened her mouth to argue. But Grandmother spoke first. “I remember it so well,” she said. “It was hot that year. The rains were late. Your mother was waiting and waiting for you to be born, Anna Hibiscus. And the day you came, the rains came too. It was wonderful! Wonderful!”

Grandfather joined in. “The very day you were born, the chief’s roof caught fire.

His whole palace would have burned down but the rains started at that very moment. The very moment you were born, Anna Hibiscus.



That is why your name is Anna Hibiscus Iyanu."

"Iyanu means 'Miracle'."

Grandmother smiled.

Anna Hibiscus was amazed. Grandmother and Grandfather had given her a lot to think about. She had never heard about the day she was born, or about the rain, or the chief's fire!



It was only when they had finished eating that Anna Hibiscus remembered what had been troubling her.



"But if Tosin and Tolu and Beni are my own age, then why are they all so much smaller than me?" she asked.

Grandmother sighed. She shook her head. "Time to wash the bowls," she said.

“Ore mi, no,” said Grandfather. “We must answer Anna’s question. We cannot avoid the truth.”

“Even when it stings like a scorpion?” asked Grandmother.

“It is better to face the scorpion prepared than be stung unawares,” Grandfather said.

He looked at Anna Hibiscus.

“You are a lucky girl, Anna Hibiscus,” he said. “You eat breakfast and lunch and dinner every single day.”

“Yes, Grandfather,” said Anna Hibiscus.

“Well, that is the reason that you and your classmates in the city are so big and strong,” said Grandmother. “Simple as that. Now let us wash the bowls.”



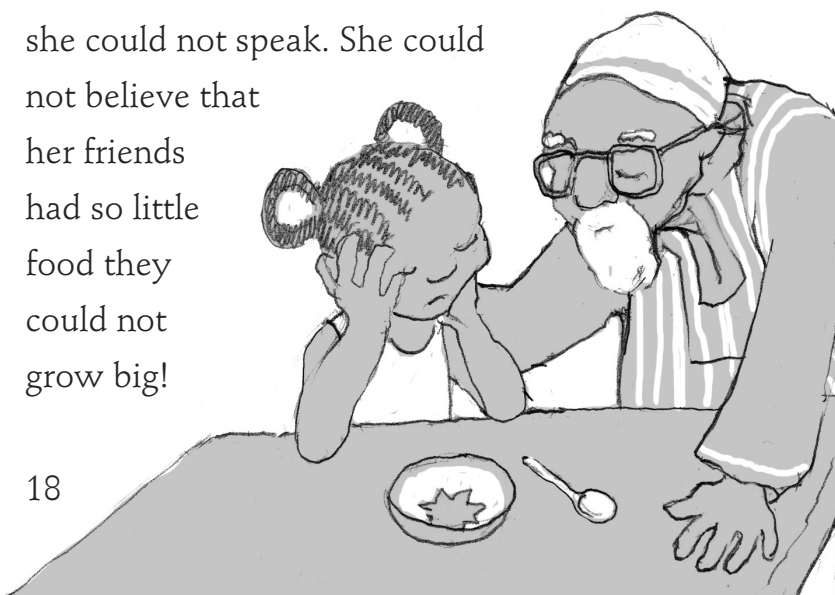
Anna Hibiscus looked at Grandmother. Then she looked at Grandfather. She still did not understand.

Grandfather looked sad. "Here in the village, people are poor," he said. "They eat only once a day. Sometimes not even that."

"You are bigger than the children here because you can eat whenever you are hungry," continued Grandmother, "and they cannot."

"Your friends do not have enough food to grow as big and tall as you, Anna Hibiscus," added Clarity.

Anna Hibiscus was so shocked she could not speak. She could not believe that her friends had so little food they could not grow big!



Anna Hibiscus started to cry.

Grandmother and Grandfather looked sadly at Anna Hibiscus. The big girl cousins put their arms around her.

“Crying is not going to help your friends,” said Common Sense kindly.

“But how can I help them?” Anna Hibiscus sobbed.

“You cannot,” said Clarity sadly. “We have not got enough food to feed them all.”

“You can help them by being their friend,” said Joy.

“That won’t help!” said Anna Hibiscus.

When it was time to say goodnight, Anna Hibiscus would not speak.

“What’s wrong, Anna?” asked Grandmother.

“My friends are hungry and I cannot help them,” Anna Hibiscus said.

“Are you sure you can’t help?” asked Grandmother.



Anna Hibiscus nodded. "We have not got enough food to feed them all," she said.

Grandmother took Anna Hibiscus's face between her hands. She looked into Anna Hibiscus's eyes.

"We may not have enough food to feed them but you can still help them," Grandmother said. "Anything is possible, Anna Hibiscus. Anything at all."

But Anna Hibiscus only cried.

All that day, and the next day, and the next day, Anna Hibiscus stayed in the compound. When she heard her friends calling her she hid in the house.

"Has Anna Hibiscus gone home?" the village children asked Grandfather on the first day.



“Is Anna Hibiscus sick?” the village children asked Grandmother on the second day.

“Does Anna Hibiscus not like us any more?” the village children asked the big girl cousins on the third day.

Grandmother shook her head. Grandfather shook his head. The big girl cousins shrugged their shoulders. They could not answer for Anna Hibiscus, but they could speak to her.

“Anna Hibiscus,” Joy said gently, “your friends think that you don’t like them any more.”

“If you don’t play with them,” said Common Sense, “they will think they did something wrong.”

“It is not their fault that they are hungry,” said Clarity. “And it is not your fault that you are not, Anna.”

Anna Hibiscus said nothing. But Anna Hibiscus listened.

The very next day Anna Hibiscus went to herd goats with the village children. But Anna Hibiscus did not smile. She did not laugh. She did not play.

The village children looked sadly at Anna Hibiscus. For so many days she had not come out of her compound. And now she had a face as long as a donkey's. What was wrong?



The children walked slowly through the bush. None of them wanted to laugh or joke or play.

They came to the place where they always stopped to rest. There were big

rocks to climb on. And trees to give shade.
The goats spread out to eat the dry grass.

“Teach us, Anna!” begged Beni.

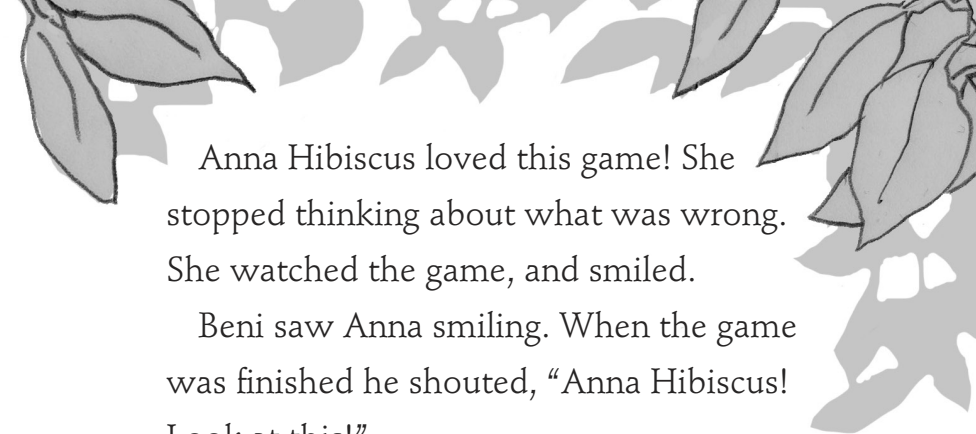
Anna Hibiscus pressed her lips together
and shook her head. What use was ABC and
1,2,3 to children who were hungry?

Slowly Tosin started to clap her hands
and stamp her feet. All of the girls watched.
Faster and faster she clapped and stamped.

It was a rhythm that made
Anna Hibiscus
want to dance!

Suddenly Tosin
stopped. Now
it was the other
girls’ turn. It was
their turn to copy
exactly what
Tosin had done.
If not, they were
out of the game.





Anna Hibiscus loved this game! She stopped thinking about what was wrong. She watched the game, and smiled.

Beni saw Anna smiling. When the game was finished he shouted, “Anna Hibiscus! Look at this!”

Beni aimed his catapult at a guava high in a tree. As the guava fell, Tolu caught it. She brought it to Anna Hibiscus. Everybody knew that guavas were Anna Hibiscus’s favourite fruit.

Anna Hibiscus smiled.
Beni held out his catapult.

“You try,” he said.

Anna shook her head.


“Come on!” begged Tosin.

“Come on!” begged Tolu.

“Come on!” begged Beni.

Slowly Anna Hibiscus took the catapult. She aimed at another big guava in the tree. But Anna Hibiscus missed the tree





completely. The tiny stone hit a goat busy chewing a bush. The goat stopped chewing and turned around to look at Anna Hibiscus.

"Baaaaaaa!" the goat reproached Anna Hibiscus.

Beni covered his mouth to stop from laughing. But the other children laughed. And Anna Hibiscus laughed too!

Anna Hibiscus laughed so hard she had to hold on to a tree so that she did not fall down.

The children tried to stop laughing but the goat said *"Baaaaaaa!"* again and glared at Anna Hibiscus.

The children laughed until they had to hold on to their stomachs.

"Anna Hibiscus," they gasped, "that goat is not going to forget you."

Then Beni said, "Nobody is going to forget you, Anna Hibiscus."

“No,” agreed Tosin. “None of us will forget you. When you are with us, I am so busy laughing that I forget that my baby sister is so heavy.”

“And when I am busy remembering ABC, then I forget how hot the bush is!” said Beni. “And how hungry I am.”

“And how my mother is always shouting and shouting at me,” said Tolu.

“Instead,” said Tosin, “I think how clever I am. So clever that I am going to be a lawyer.”

“I will have a big farm,” said Beni. “When I can read I will learn all about new irrigation methods. My farm will feed many people. We will never be hungry again.”

Beni smiled at Tosin.

“And nobody will take the farm away from me, because my good friend Tosin will be my lawyer,” he said.

“I want to become a teacher,” said Tolu. “But you will have to keep teaching us,



Anna Hibiscus, or it will never happen.”

Anna Hibiscus stared at her friends. She could not believe her ears. She had been helping. She had been helping them all along!

“OK,” Anna said. “Le’s go! Who can remember their A to Z?”

“A to Z?” laughed Tosin. “I can remember how to spell ‘opportunity’!”

“Na-wa-oh!” said Anna Hibiscus, laughing.

Grandmother had been right. Anything was possible. Anything at all.

