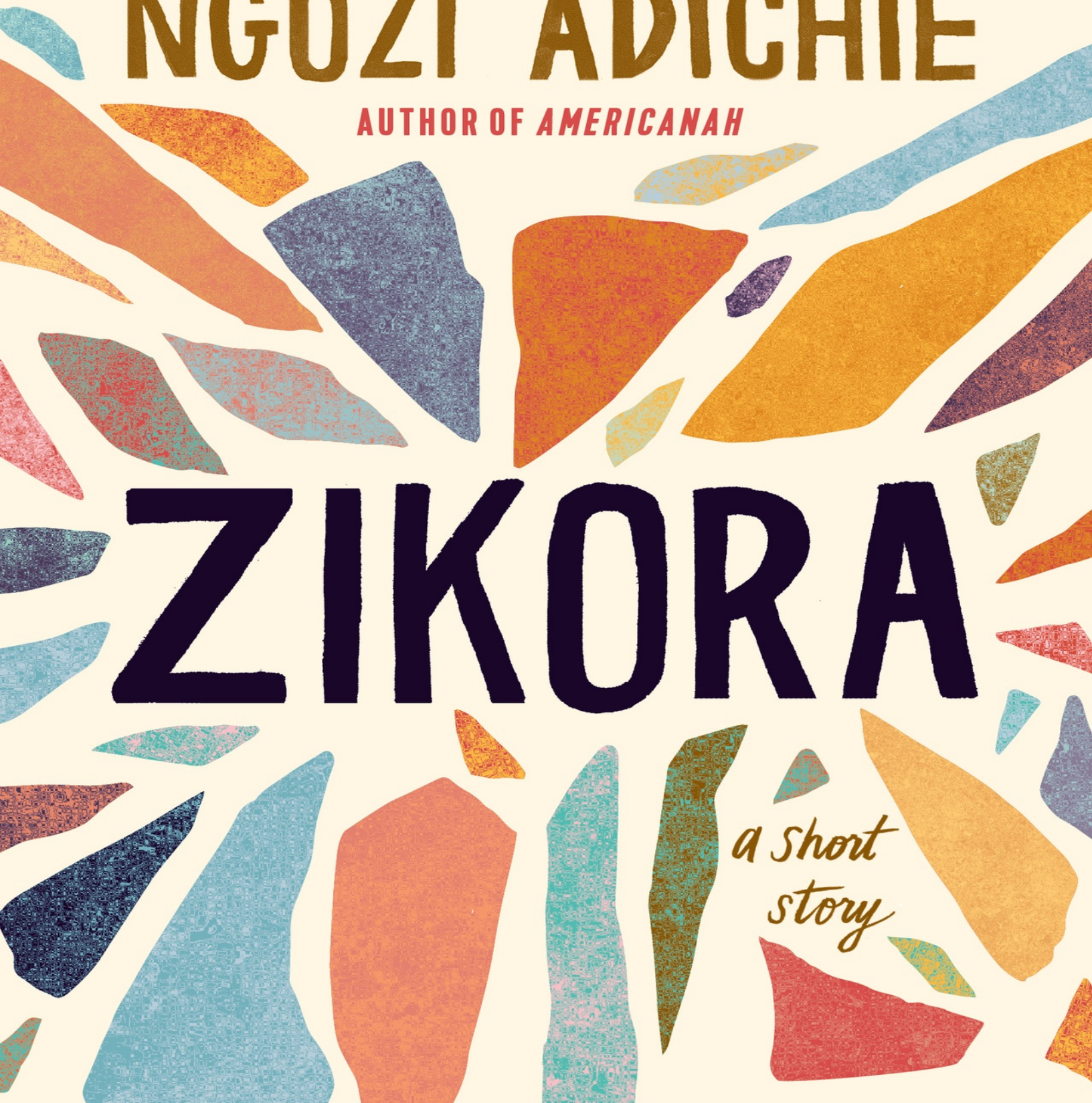
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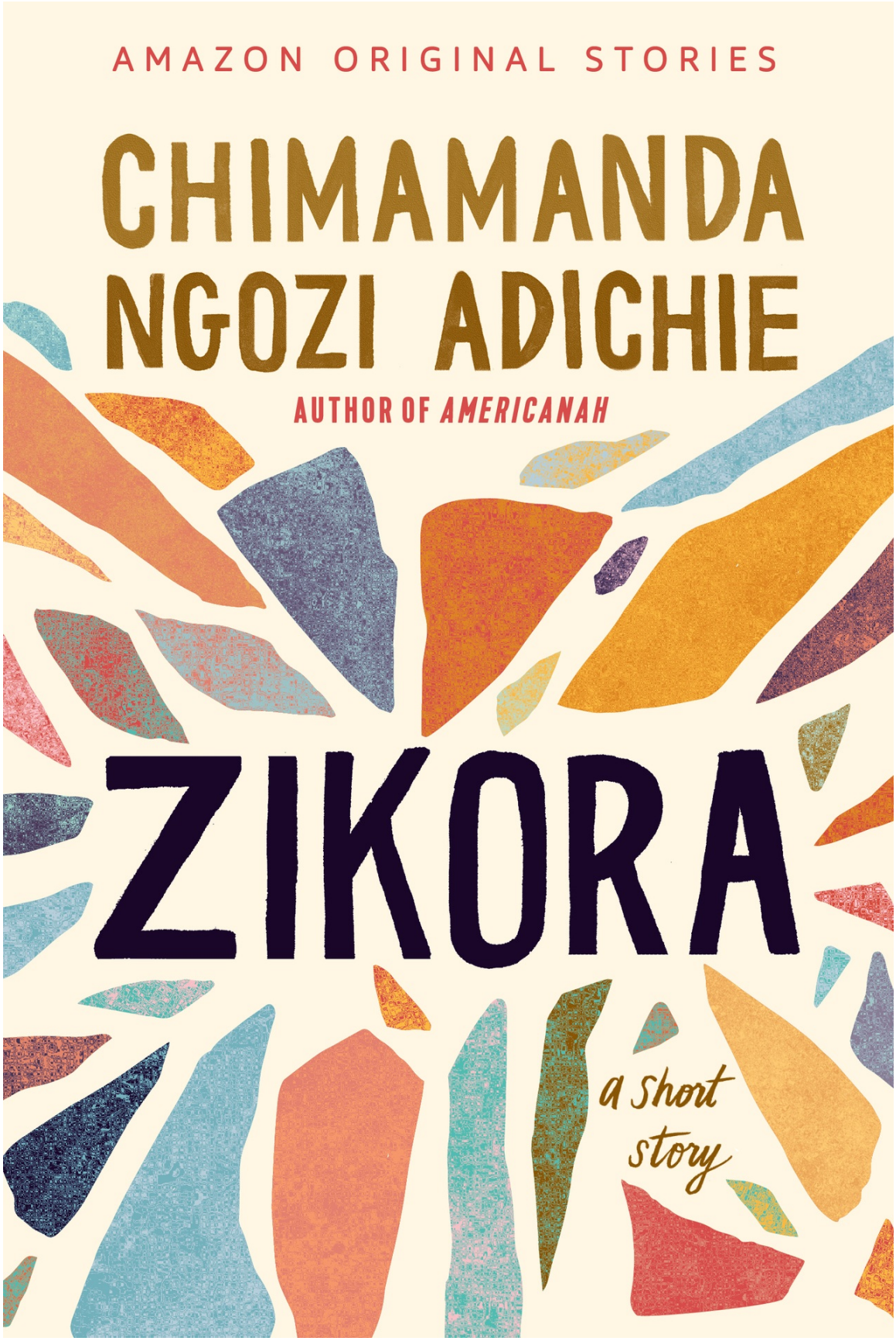
CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE

AUTHOR OF *AMERICANAH*



ZIKORA

a short story


AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES
CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE
AUTHOR OF AMERICANAH
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CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE

ZIKORA

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

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All through the night my mother sat near me but never touched me.

Once, I screamed, a short scream that lanced the air in the hospital room, and she said, “That’s how labor is,” in Igbo, and I wanted to say, “No shit,” but of course she didn’t understand colloquial Americanisms. I had prepared for pain but this was not mere pain. It was something like pain and different from pain. It sat like fire in my back, spreading to my thighs, squeezing and crushing my insides, pulling downward, spiraling. It felt like the Old Testament. A plague. A primitive wind blowing at will, evil but purposelessly so, an overcoming in my body that didn’t need to be. Hour after hour of this, and yet the nurses said I wasn’t progressing. “You’re not progressing,” the smaller nurse said as though it were my fault.

The room felt too warm and then too cold. My arms itched, my scalp itched, and malaise lay over me like a mist. I wanted nothing touching my body. I yanked off my hospital gown, the flimsy blue fabric with its effete dangling ropes that gaped open at the back as if designed to humiliate. Naked, I perched on the edge of the bed and retched. Relief was impossible; everything was impossible. I stood up, sat down, and then I got on my hands and knees, my taut belly hanging in between. The clenching in my lower body came and went, random, irregular, like mean surprises.

The bigger nurse was saying something.

I shouted at her, “I need it now!”

“You’ll get the epidural soon,” she said.

The smaller nurse needed to check me. I rolled onto my back. An invasion of fingers. She was gloved and I couldn’t see her nails, but her false eyelashes, curving from her upper lids like black feathers, made me worry that her nails were long and sharp and would pierce through the latex and puncture my uterus. I tensed up.

“Bring your feet up and let your legs fall apart,” she said.

“What?”

“Bring your feet up and let your legs fall apart.”

Let your legs fall apart.

What did that even mean? How could legs fall apart? I began to laugh. From somewhere outside myself I heard the hysteria in my laughter. The nurse looked at me with the resigned expression of a person who had seen all

the forms of madness that overtook birthing women lying on their backs with their bodies open to the world.

"You're not progressing," she said.

Then came a wave of exhaustion, a tiredness limp and bloodless. I was leaving my body. I could die. I could die here, now, today, like Chinyere died in a fancy Lagos hospital that had flat-screen TVs in the labor ward. It was her third childbirth and she was walking, chatting with the nurses, stopping to breathe through each contraction, and then midsentence, she paused and collapsed and died. She was my cousin's cousin. I had not liked her but I had mourned her.

My heart was beating fast. I'd read somewhere that maternal mortality was higher in America than anywhere else in the Western world—or was it just higher for Black women? The subject had never really interested me. I'd felt at most a faraway concern, as though it was something that happened to other people. I should have paid more attention. Now I would die in this hospital room with its rolling table and its picture of faded flowers on the wall, and become a tiny nameless dot in the data, and somebody somewhere would read a new report on maternal mortality and mildly wonder if it was Black women who died more often.

My doctor came in looking unbearably calm.

"Dr. K, something is wrong. I just know something is wrong," I said.

My body was turning on me in spasms and wrenches I had never before known, each with a dark promise of its own return. Something had to be wrong; childbirth could not be this gratuitous and cruel.

"Nothing is wrong, Zikora, it's all normal."

"I'm tired, I'm so tired," I said, in my mind the image of Chinyere pregnant and dead on a hospital floor.

"Epidural is almost here. I know it's difficult, but what you are feeling is perfectly normal."

"You don't know how it *feels* ," I said. Before today, he was the lovely Iranian doctor I'd chosen for the compassion in his eyes. Today, he was a monstrous man pontificating opaquely about things he would never experience. What was "normal"? That Nature traded in unnecessary pain? It wasn't *his* intestines being set on fire, after all.

I caught my mother's glance, that icy expression she had when I was a child and did something in public where she couldn't slap me right away as

she would have liked.

Once, I was about nine, and my father's second wife, Aunty Nwanneka, had just had a baby, my brother Ugonna ("Your *half brother* ," my mother always said). To visit the baby, my mother asked me to wear a going-out dress, red and full skirted, as though for church. Aunty Nwanneka offered us plantain and fish, the house smelled of delicious frying, and my mother said no thank you, that we had just eaten, but when I went to pee, I told Aunty Nwanneka I was hungry, and she brought me a plate, smiling, her face plump and fresh. Later, as we walked to the car, my mother slapped me. "Don't disgrace me like that again," she said calmly, and for a long time I remembered the sudden vertigo, feeling surprise rather than pain as her palm struck the back of my head.

I was disgracing her now; I was not facing labor with laced-up dignity. She wanted me to meet each rush of pain with a mute grinding of teeth, to endure pain with pride, to embrace pain, even. When I had severe cramps as a teenager, she would say, "Bear it, that is what it means to be a woman," and it was years before I knew that girls took Buscopan for period pain.

The epidural person, a pale-faced man with a reddish mustache, was saying, "I need your help to get this done, okay? I need you to be very still, okay?"

He did not inspire confidence, with his false cheer and his saying "okay?" so often. I began to wonder if he was qualified, where he had trained, whether his animation was a shield for incompetence.

"That's your mom?" he asked. "Hi, Mom! I'd like you to help us out here, okay? If you can hold her so she doesn't move . . ."

Before he finished speaking, my mother, still seated on the armchair, said, "She can manage."

The smaller nurse raised her eyebrows. It made no sense to be angry with the nurse, but I was angry with the nurse. Why did she have to make that face? Did it really surprise her? Did other mothers sit there overnight as my mother had, still as a coffin, glasses gold framed, face perfectly powdered in MAC NC45? Was she thinking that it should have been the father of my baby here with me? How dare she judge me? Was the father of *her* children in their life, what with her outlandish lashes and all? She probably had three children, each with a different father, and here she was judging me for having a cold mother instead of a husband by my side. I would write a complaint about her ridiculous lashes. The labor and delivery ward needed to have a false-eyelash

policy. I would have chosen a different hospital if my health insurance company hadn't been so difficult about things. I felt angry and I felt ugly and I welcomed both like a bitter refuge.

The epidural man would not stop talking. "As still as you can, okay? Don't flinch, okay?"

I bent over and hugged the pillow and held still. There was the cold smear of a liquid on my back and the brief prick of a needle. Tears filled my eyes; my anger began to curdle into a darkness close to grief. It really should be Kwame here with me, holding me, sitting on the chair my mother was in, finding a way to make a joke about *nutty* . In a rush I reached for my cell phone and sent him a text: **I'm in labor at East Memorial.** I held on to my phone in the delivery room, and I kept checking it, willing Kwame's reply to appear on the screen, until my doctor asked me to push.

We met at a book launch that I almost didn't go to. A woman I worked with had left the firm to write a cookbook, and she launched it downtown in a rooftop space, with someone at the microphone describing each complicated canapé served. After the author introduced us, Kwame leaned toward me and said with a casual intimacy that wasn't inappropriate, as though we already knew each other but only as good friends, "When they say something tastes nutty, do we know which nut they mean? Because a walnut tastes nothing like a cashew nut."

"I think they mean a texture, not a taste," I said, then laughed, a little too eagerly, because I hadn't expected to meet anyone and now here was a clean-looking Black man and a thrill in the air.

On our first date he said, "Looking nutty good!"

He had a boyish quality, which was not, as in some men, mere cover for immaturity; he was a grown-up who could still touch in himself the wonder and innocence of childhood. *Nutty* became our word, an adverb, an endearment, an adjective, and even when it wasn't funny, it was still ours.

On the day we broke up he said, looking me over, "Nutty dress." Neither of us knew we would break up that evening as we went to his law firm's gala, holding hands, him in a dark suit, me in an emerald dress, my hair in a bouncy twist-out, a young Black couple in Washington, DC, with glittering promise spread before us. I had never met a man like him, so attentive, so free of restlessness. He volunteered details about his life, and at first his openness confused me, because I dated men who were so guarded

they made secrets of simple things. When Kwame saw me, he let his face show its light—he didn't hide, he didn't pretend not to care too much. He said "I love you" before I did. He was supposed to be like other single, straight, successful Black men in Washington, DC: intoxicated by their own rarity, replete with romance opportunities, always holding out for the next better thing. For the first few weeks, I held my breath, waiting. He was too much what I wanted, it was too good, he would change, crack open and reveal the sinister center. But he didn't change, and soon I unfurled wholly into our life together.

I was a little older than him, but sometimes I *felt* older, as though I knew better than he how uneven life's seams could be. It puzzled me that he could not see the insincerity in people or the ill will of some friends, which was often as obvious to me as a brightly colored stain. He said jokingly that I needed to vet his friends, to protect him, a joke with the undertones of truth. "You would have probably warned me about Jamila," he said once with a laugh. Jamila, the long-term girlfriend from college and into law school, who cheated on him and left him reeling, single and celibate for years. He said he loved how I "got" him, and what was unsaid was that Jamila hadn't. He said how similar our backgrounds were, and yet it felt to me that his American childhood was more restrained, and more fraught, than my African one. He grew up with his dreams already dreamt for him. There was his Ghanaian father's immigrant intensity, and there was his African American mother from Virginia, determined to open for him some of the many doors that had been closed to her. He and his younger brother had violin lessons and went to private school in formal uniforms, and every summer, his father pasted reading lists on the refrigerator and arranged tutors on the weekends. He had barely gotten his acceptance to Cornell before his father was talking about law school. The first time he took me to Sunday lunch at his parents' house in Bethesda, I was surprised by his father's effusive warmth, his mother's deliciously sly humor. I hadn't quite expected to *enjoy* them, and to be at ease with them, but I knew, too, that their approval would have come slower had I not had the right bona fides, my Georgetown degree, my wealthy Nigerian family. We went in the summer to his mother's family reunion, and I was moved that Kwame had ordered a T-shirt for me too, with their family name printed beside an image of a multibranched tree. I watched him throw a Frisbee with the teenage boys, and I could see how much they liked and

looked up to him, this handsome older cousin, a DC lawyer with his pockets full of cool. I was sitting in the shade eating watermelon with his parents and saw the pride in the eloquence of their body language: he had turned out as they had hoped. The women relatives flirted with him and he, generously, harmlessly, paid them lavish compliments. He charmed people without trying. I felt myself sitting up straighter, as though I had won a prize I was not sure I deserved, and so needed to prove my worthiness. He was the kind of man you married, the kind people called, minutes into meeting him, "a good man." We didn't talk about marriage itself, but we talked often of the future, what we would do and wouldn't do in five years, in ten years, as though we both knew it was inevitable that we would be together.

"Water, this is why it's best to wait for the right person, and not just settle," I said over FaceTime to my cousin Mmiliaku.

I was boasting actually, a callous boast. Only days before, Mmiliaku had said, "Emmanuel still waits until I'm asleep, then he climbs on me, and of course I'm dry and I wake up in pain. Sixteen years."

She had settled. She had been living at home after university graduation, working as contract staff in telecom customer service, the kind of middling job that asked little of her and promised nothing to her. Her parents expected her home before 9:00 p.m. every day, her penniless boyfriend lived in his uncle's Boys Quarters and was looking for money to go to China and try his luck in import-export. And then came Emmanuel, older and wealthy, holding his intentions like jewels.

To marry Emmanuel was her only way into the world of adults.

I did not understand this then. I had moved to America for college, and after a few years away, the pressures of Nigerian life seemed easier to overcome. Why didn't she run off to China with the guy she loved? What did "It's time to get married" mean, anyway? Why did she have to marry at all?

She had laughed at me. "Please, I am not in America like you. Daddy will never allow me to get my own place. And Emmanuel is nice."

Nice. "I don't think that is how to describe a man you want to marry," I told her. *Nice.*

And Mmiliaku laughed some more. Mmiliaku, my cousin with the beautiful name, water of wealth, wealth's water, wealth like a river. The cousin that was like a sister, clever. Mmiliaku, who had advised me and taught me things, was now marrying a man who had asked her to stop

working because he could afford to keep her at home. They had been married only a few weeks when Emmanuel said he didn't want her best friend to visit them anymore because married women shouldn't keep single friends.

I once told Kwame the story, and he rolled his eyes in a kind of disbelieving amusement. "What, the single friend will seduce the husband, or the single friend will make the wife want to be single again?"

"Maybe both?"

"He sounds like a sad specimen," Kwame said.

I liked the description "sad specimen," because it cast Emmanuel as apart, a different species of man, and therefore completely removed from Kwame himself.

On the day we broke up, we went back to my apartment after the gala, and I told Kwame, "So I'm very late and I'm never late."

He looked confused.

"I might be pregnant." I was so certain of his delight that I made my tone playful, almost singsong. But his face didn't relax, instead it went still, as though all his features had paused, and suddenly this communicative man retreated into the cryptic.

He said, "We're at different places in our lives."

He said, "I'll take care of everything," in a voice that belonged to someone else, in words that he had heard somewhere else. *Take care of everything.* How absurd; we were both lawyers, and I earned a little more than he did.

He said, "It's a shock."

I said, "You came inside me."

He said, "I thought you let me because you had protection."

I said, "What are you talking about? You know I stopped taking the pill because it made me fat, and I assumed you knew what it meant, what it could mean."

He said, "There was miscommunication."

"Kwame," I said finally, in a plea and a prayer, looking at him, loving him. Our conversation felt juvenile; an unreal air hung over us. I wanted to say, "I'm thirty-nine and you're thirty-seven, employed and stable, I have a key to your apartment, your clothes are in my closet, and I'm not sure what conversation we should be having but it shouldn't be this one."

I wanted to rewind and redo. Have us walk into my apartment again,

laughing, me saying, Let's make margaritas, and him saying, I really want a burger; I don't know what that tiny Chilean bass thing at dinner was about. Then I saw it, the almost imperceptible shrug. A shrug. He shrugged. His response was a shrug. From the deepest vaults of his being, a shrug.

"I think I should leave. Is that okay?" he asked as though he needed my permission to abandon me. He would kill you, but he would do it courteously.

The pregnancy websites said no soft cheese, and I stopped eating all cheese. They said don't take any medicines for nausea, and so I sucked natural ginger sweets, but I always felt a mere breath away from vomiting. Day after slow day, I nursed nausea, until I no longer remembered what it felt like to be free of my biliousness. I took breaks from meetings to throw up in the toilet, and then walked back in with perfect aplomb, as though I had just gone to retouch my lipstick. At first I wore stylish loose-fitting dresses that hid my burgeoning middle, and when I couldn't hide it anymore, I stayed late every day, noisily late, and at morning meetings I made sure to note with false casualness how traffic thinned after 9:00 p.m. My colleague Donna was my closest competitor for making partner, the only woman as senior as me, and everyone knew the partners wanted a woman next. Donna was "child-free," an expression she used often; she was thin and vegan and did yoga and wore dresses cut for flat-chested women. She watched me with the eyes of a person willing you to stumble.

"Do you need anything, Zikora?" she asked often, especially when the men could hear, her eyes hard and bright.

"I don't have a debilitating illness, Donna. I'm only pregnant," I would say. I made jokes about pregnancy. *See, I can balance files on the belly!* I told her I still drank once in a while, because my mother had drunk Guinness stout throughout her pregnancy with me. It was a lie, my mother had not drunk, nor did I, but I wanted to seem, to Donna, in control, even slightly reckless, as though my pregnancy were a glamorous adventure that would certainly not affect my work.

"I figured I better have this baby, because it might be my last chance. I probably wouldn't want to keep it if it were ten years ago," I told her breezily. "It's funny how pregnancy is like body hair. We scrub and scrape our armpits and upper lip and legs because we hate to have hair there. Then we pamper and treat the hair on our heads because we love hair there. But it's all hair. It's the wanting that makes the difference."

“I can’t believe you’re saying a baby is like body hair,” Donna said.

She was being deliberate, and her lips had that downward curve of the righteous, the same curve as when she spoke of people who ate beef.

“Oh, come on, I’m not saying a child is like body hair. I’m saying our relationship with body hair is similar to our relationship with pregnancy. It could be the thing we most desperately want and also the thing we most desperately don’t want.”

Donna, lips still downward turned, changed the subject.

“Are you sleeping okay?” she asked.

“I’m sleeping really well,” I said.

In fact I barely slept, propped up on three pillows, tossing this way and that, seeking an elusive comfort, my chest aflame with heartburn, and a stubborn throbbing ache in the joints of my fingers.

Each morning, I coated concealer on the dark bags under my eyes. Most days, I caressed a bottle of Advil, longing for the translucent green pills, but knowing that I would never take them. I poured glasses of merlot and tipped them over to watch the redness trickle down my kitchen drain. It was a sweet-and-sour time, a time of exquisite paradoxes. I raged at Nature but wanted to appease Nature, to secure the safety of my pregnancy. I obeyed the rules, dutiful and seething. On weekends, I lay blankly on my couch reading Kwame’s past text messages, as the hours slid one into another. Time spent on remembering, time lost on remembering.

I lingered on the messages he had sent when he stopped at my favorite Indian restaurant to buy me pakoras. **No veg today, babes. Meat okay?** Or when he drove to the Middle Eastern place in Silver Spring to get me hummus. **They ran out of regular, just red pepper, sorry babes.** How well he knew me. It was real hummus or nothing for me, none of those flavors invented to appeal to the American obsession for variety. I read somewhere that love was about this, the nuggets of knowledge about our beloved that we so fluently hold.

“Stop reading his texts,” Mmiliaku told me on FaceTime. “You’ll start questioning everything, and wondering if any of it was even real.”

“Yes,” I said, but I didn’t question whether it was real, because I knew it was. I questioned where it had gone. How could emotions just change? Where did it go, the thing that used to be?

Each time I called, I felt newly surprised at the burr-burr-burr of his phone ringing unanswered. How could he have turned, and so quickly? I knew him well, but I could not have known him well. He was lovely, he truly

was. Silence was not his fighting tool; he was a man who talked things through. But he ignored my calls and texts, and sent back my apartment key in an envelope, the lone metal key wrapped in plain paper.

Some days I was fine and some days I was underwater, barely breathing. At my twenty-week checkup, I smiled at the moving grainy gray image on the ultrasound screen, flush with well-being, and I waved at the front-desk women as I left, but in the elevator, I burst into tears, a sudden sense of dissolving all around me. I sent Kwame a text: **I'm 20 weeks today.**

He replied three days later: **It's manipulative to send me this. You know you made a decision that excluded me. I didn't want things to end this way. I'm hurting too.**

I read it over and over; it felt like something written by somebody who was not Kwame, like an exercise from law school, an argument about case law, hard and elegant and empty. To my **Can we please at least talk?** Kwame did not respond. Ours was an ancient story, the woman wants the baby and the man doesn't want the baby and a middle ground does not exist.

What would a middle ground be? We couldn't have half a baby.

"Water, everyone at work knows I was dumped while pregnant," I told Mmiliaku. "I hate the way they look at me."

"It's all in your head," Mmiliaku said.

Maybe she was right and I was merely suffering from the paranoia of the abandoned. I cared now what people thought, and I had never cared before.

"I just want them to know I can handle it, I can do it alone," I said.

"Some of us have men and are still doing it alone," Mmiliaku said. She could have gloated. She could have asked, "Isn't this the perfect man you won by deciding not to settle?" She could have been passive aggressive, or resentful, or lectured me in that world-weary way of a woman who believed that men would be men. But she didn't, and so with the light streaming through my apartment window, I began to weep because my cousin had grace and I lacked grace. I cried and cried. I no longer had friends, all my time so focused on Kwame. I cried and cried, and even though people said crying made them feel better, it made me feel frightened and small.

I sifted through my memories, as though through debris, trying to find a

reason. Was it how I had told him? Was it because I said it so lightly, so playfully, that there was no question of how I felt? Did he know, too, as I knew, that I was pregnant even as I was telling him that I *might* be? It had never occurred to me not to have the baby, and he must have heard it in my voice. The knowledge came to him as an already-sealed box.

He said so often that we had to make decisions together, and it amused me sometimes, how seriously he meant this, even for small things like which table to select when making a restaurant reservation online. “Okay, babes?” he would ask, and wait for my nod. Was he recoiling because I had made this decision already? If he was going to have a child, of course he should have a say, but how much of a say, since the body was mine, since in creating a child, Nature demanded so much of the woman and so little of the man. I remembered taking him to visit a relative in Delaware who had come from Lagos to have her baby. She had brought her toddler, too, and a nanny, and it surprised me how quickly Kwame displaced the nanny for the length of our visit and was on his knees, slipping his palm into a puppet and wiggling his fingers, his voice tuned to a funny high pitch. I had watched the two-year-old, who was riveted and adorably giggly, and saw the father Kwame would be.

“I just don’t understand it. It’s as if an artery burst inside him and suddenly his whole body is wired differently and he is no longer the person he was,” I told Mmiliaku. “I don’t understand how we could have unprotected sex for so long and then when I get pregnant, he reacts like he never knew it could happen.”

“Zikky, have you considered that maybe he didn’t know?”

“What do you mean?”

“Men know very little about women’s bodies.”

I felt betrayed by her. I was annoyed, and wanted to tell her that not everyone was her Emmanuel, warped and stunted, raping her while she slept.

“How can you say that?” I asked.

“Seriously. Men don’t know how women’s bodies work. Remember Amaka, my friend from university? She moved to Canada some years ago. She has a blog where she interviews men anonymously. You should read it.”

Kwame thought I couldn’t get pregnant because I hadn’t explained that stopping birth control pills and not using condoms meant I could get pregnant? How ludicrous. I hung up, my dark day further darkened.

Yet I began to think about it. On the blog, I read about men who as boys were separated from the girls in sex ed class, and were never taught about the bodies of girls. They learned instead from mainstream pornography, where women were always shaved smooth and never had periods, and so they

became men who thought the contrived histrionics onscreen were How Things Were Done. The blog annoyed me, and I resisted it while also seeing its sense. It was possible that a sophisticated, well-educated man with a healthy sex life could still harbor a naivety, a shrunken knowledge, about the inner workings of female bodies. Could it be that Kwame was fuzzy about this, that it had not occurred to him that I might get pregnant, that when he said “Okay, babes” to my “I’m stopping the pill,” it was not what I thought it was?

One sleepy weekend morning in his apartment, after slow sex, and a slower brunch of eggs I made and pancakes he made, he was playing a video game with lots of noise and flashes, and I was reading the news online, and I looked up and said, “Can you believe an elected US official actually asked why women can’t hold their periods in?” I laughed, and so did he, but I remembered now his first fleeting reaction, the slightest of hesitations, as though he was holding back from saying, “You mean they can’t?”

And I thought about the night I was patting cream on my face and examining again the ugly brown-purple patch that had appeared on my cheek. “It has to be my birth control pills causing this,” I said, and there was again that small hesitation from him, a restraint, from discomfort rather than deceit. I could have been clearer when I stopped the pill, we could have talked plainly, as we talked about so much. Did I choose to assume he understood, because I didn’t want to give him the chance to say he didn’t want a child? Now I was blaming myself. I was bearing the responsibility of a full-grown man. It felt self-flagellating, as though I were looking for a reason to excuse him, but the alternative was to accept that the Kwame I knew was a lie. My head pounded and throbbed, and my vision fogged over. I worried that my stress was harming the baby, and the worry added layers to my stress. I called Mmiliaku again sobbing, saying I was scared to do it alone, I was scared to be alone, I was so secure in my relationship with Kwame that I just never considered being alone.

For a while, she let me cry.

“Zikky, it won’t be easy, but it won’t be as hard as you think. How you imagine something will be is always worse than how it actually ends up being,” she said. The easy wisdom, her emollient words slipping out so smoothly, rankled rather than soothed me. As if Mmiliaku sensed this, she asked, “Remember when I called you from Nitel?”

When I called you from Nitel.

Years had passed since that phone call, and Mmiliaku had never referred to it; we had picked up and continued as though the phone call had never

happened. She had gone to a Nitel office in central Lagos to call from a grimy public phone because she was worried that Emmanuel—who was not even home—would somehow hear our conversation if she used her cell phone. A bright winter morning in Washington, DC. I was sweeping pillows of snow from the top of my car and missed the first call as my gloved hand fumbled in my coat pocket, and then I almost didn't answer, because I thought the strange number was a telemarketer.

"Zikky," she said.

"Water!" I said. "What number is this?"

"I'm pregnant," she said.

Right away something felt off, her flat tone didn't match her news.

"Ah-ah," I said. Her fifth child was six months old.

"I should have put in the coil, but I was waiting for my stitches to heal well first, and then I had to deal with the nipple infection and then Baby's pneumonia, and I just forgot."

She was crying.

"Water, calm down."

"Amuchago m," she said. "I'm done having children."

We mostly spoke English; Igbo was for mimicking relatives and for saying painful things. When our grandmother died, Mmiliaku had called me and said, *"Mama-Nnukwu anwugo,"* with a firmness that gave no room. I had no choice but to accept the news. She sounded the same now as she said, *"Amuchago m."*

I pictured her from my last visit at Christmas, in her harried living room, little children stumbling about, the eldest just six, an endless loop of cartoons on television, and the faint smell of urine in the slightly warm air. Emmanuel traveled a lot, she said, and when he was in a bad mood, he refused to pay the oldest child's school fees. "I don't understand that," I said, and she looked at me blankly as if to say, "How do you expect *me* to understand it?" She had a nanny, but she seemed always to be laboring, distracted by tasks and things unfinished. *Why is this diaper leaking again? Let's add banana to the sweet potato puree. If he doesn't sleep now, he will be unmanageable this evening. This rash is getting worse.*

"Amuchago m," she said again.

"Water, I understand. Do you know where you'll go?"

"I'll ask Dr. Ngozi. I trust her."

"It will be okay. I'll send the money today. I wish I could be there with you."

Nigerian banks were not yet modernized, online transfers didn't exist,

and so I drove, windscreen frosted with ice, to a Western Union. I sent her the money in dollars, so she could get the best rates on the black market, and she hid it in her daughter's underwear drawer, where Emmanuel would never go, until she went to a discreet doctor's clinic.

I pushed out a baby boy. Wrinkled and silent, scaly skinned, wet black curls plastered on his head. He came out with his mouth full of shit, and the bigger nurse, chuckling, said, "Not the best first meal," while somebody swiftly took him away to suction the feces from his mouth.

Now here he was wrapped like a tidy sausage roll and placed on my chest. He was warm and so very small. I held him with stiff hands. I was suspended in a place of no feeling, waiting to feel. I could not separate this moment from the stories of this moment—years of stories and films and books about this scene, mother and child, mother meeting child, child in mother's arms. I knew how I was supposed to feel, but I did not know how I felt. It was not transcendental. There was a festering red pain between my legs. Somewhere in my consciousness, a mild triumph hovered, because it was over, finally it was over, and I had pushed out the baby. So animalistic, so violent—the push and pressure, the blood, the doctor urging me, the cranking and stretching of flesh and organ and bone. At the final push, I thought that here in this delivery room we are reduced, briefly and brutishly, to the animals we truly are.

"Beautiful boy," my mother said, smiling down at him.

To me she said, "Congratulations," and it stung of the perfunctory. I reached for my phone. There was no response from Kwame. In a surge of disbelief and desperation, I sent another message: **It's a boy.** Now that he knew it was no longer just about me, he might respond. Or appear at the hospital, holding a balloon and flowers, limp flowers from the supermarket because he wouldn't have had time to go to a florist. I felt pathetic.

"You've had a tear," my doctor said, needle in hand. Did it never end? Nature must not want humans to reproduce, otherwise birthing would be easy, even enjoyable: babies would easily slip out, and mothers would remain unmarked and whole, merely blessed by having bestowed life.

At the needle's pierce of tender raw skin, I cried out.

"Shouldn't the epidural still be working?" I asked.

My mother glanced at me with eloquent eyes. *Get yourself together and stop making noise.*

Then she looked away and asked the doctor a question. “Will it be possible to have his circumcision today?”

“Not until he has urinated,” the doctor said. “And I don’t do circumcisions. It’ll be done by another doctor.”

“And when can we expect him to urinate?” my mother asked.

“I won’t circumcise him,” I said. How could they be having a conversation while he slid needle and thread in and out of my flesh?

“Of course you will circumcise him,” my mother said coolly.

“I won’t!” I said, my voice raised, and for a moment I felt an intense desire to pass out and escape my life.

“Done,” my doctor said, still holding the needle. “It should heal nicely.”

My mother was asking about the circumcision consent forms. “Can we get them today?”

“I said I won’t circumcise him.”

“Why?” She trained her eyes on me.

“Barbarism,” I said, surprising myself, remembering a post on a pregnancy website. You Americans may circumcise, but we don’t do barbarism here in Europe. The only reason it’s tolerated at all is so we don’t get called Islamophobic.

I mostly ignored posts about baby boys because I thought I was having a girl, I sensed it, and all the mythical girl signs were there: I carried the pregnancy high, I had bad morning sickness, my skin turned greasy.

But I remembered the post because I had disagreed, bristled at it. Now it was convenient ammunition.

“Circumcision is barbaric,” I said. “Why should I cause my child pain?”

“Cause your child pain?” my mother repeated as if I was making no sense.

I checked my phone, still nothing from Kwame. I sent another text: **Your son.** I felt ragged and hopeless, high on my desperation. I had already ripped up my dignity, so I might as well scatter the pieces. I called him, and his phone rang and went to voice mail, and I called again, and again, and the fourth or fifth time, I heard a beep instead of a ringing, and I knew that he had just blocked my number. I closed my eyes. In my head, there was a queue of emotions I could not name, wanting to be tried out one after the other. A fog blanketed me, a kind of deadness. I didn’t cry; crying seemed too ordinary for this moment.

When my mother left the room, the smaller nurse gently asked, “Is it really about causing Baby pain?” I stared at her. Her eyelashes made her eyes doll-like and difficult to take seriously. “Baby won’t remember the pain. If everyone in your culture does it, you should do it too. Kids hate being different. I used to work in a pediatrician’s office and that’s one thing I learned. We don’t have kids yet, my fiancé is training to be a police officer, but I’m keeping that in mind for my kids.”

She held the circumcision consent forms in her hand for a moment before placing them on the table. Something about her manner made sobs gather at my throat. Compassion. She thought what I was feeling mattered. Had I missed it before or had she suddenly changed?

“Thank you,” I said, wanting to say sorry, too, wanting to reach out to hold her hand, even though I knew it might be a bit too much, but she had turned to leave.

“I don’t know if I want to circumcise him,” I told my doctor.

“It’s your decision. Boys live happy lives whether circumcised or not.”

It felt to me a glib thing to say.

“Are you?” I asked.

“What?”

“Are you circumcised?” I could ask him that, surely, after the shared intimacy of delivering my baby.

He smiled a small smile but did not respond. “Your mother speaks so well, she sounds almost British. I like hearing proper English. My relatives in Iran speak like that. She owns two private schools in Nigeria?”

“Yes,” I said, and wondered when she had told him that.

In the nursery procedure room, he was placed on a board under a warming light, restrained, his arms and legs strapped down. It felt sacrificial.

Afterward he fussed and cried. His tiny mouth was pinkly open. From it came a high-pitched wail. My baby boy, his skin peeling, his gums bare, and between his legs, an angry raw nub. I cradled him and hushed him and pushed my nipple into his mouth and then I, too, began to cry. Why had I done it? Why had I signed those forms, with my mother looking over my shoulder? I had caused my son unnecessary pain. My son. Those words: *my son* . He was my son. He was mine. I had given birth to him and I was responsible for him and already he knew me, moving his face blindly at my breasts. He was mine, and his tiny translucent arms lay precious against my

skin. He was mine. My son. I would die for him. I thought this with a new wonder because I knew it to be true; something that had never been true in my life now suddenly was true. I would die for him. His tiny tongue quivered as he cried his high-pitched, screeching cry. My mother took him from me and paced back and forth, holding him pressed to her chest, and soon he fell asleep.

She laid him in the glass-walled crib next to my bed.

"Mummy, I would die for him," I said, partly to make peace with her and partly because I needed to speak this miraculous momentous thing that was true.

"Thank God you managed to get pregnant at your age," she said.

"What?"

"Many women find it difficult at your age."

Why was this an appropriate response? *How* was this an appropriate response? For long moments I could not find any words to fling at her.

"I've been pregnant before, so I knew very early on," I said finally.

She said nothing. She began looking through the file the lactation nurse had left on the table.

"Thank God I was able to remove that pregnancy," I said.

Her silence bruised the air between us.

"I was so relieved," I said.

"Some things are better left unsaid." She turned away.

I wanted to wound her, but I wasn't sure why I chose this to wound her with. Now her indifference grated. Did it even matter to her? And what would matter—that I ended a pregnancy, that I got pregnant at nineteen, that she hadn't known? Only Mmiliaku knew, and I never told the boy who didn't love me, the boy I was trying to make love me when I didn't yet know that you cannot nice your way into being loved. I met him in sophomore year of college, my second year in America. A basketball player. He was very dark and very beautiful, near-comical in his self-regard, tall, his head always held high, his gait something of a trot. He often said, "I don't do commitment," with a rhythm in his voice, as though miming a rap song, but I didn't hear what he said; I heard what I wanted to hear: he hadn't done commitment *yet* . From the beginning I was of no real consequence to him. At some level I knew this, because I had to have known this, but I was also nineteen and feeding the insecurities of that age. The first time I knelt naked in front of him, he yanked a fistful of my braids, then pushed at my head so that I gagged. It was a gesture replete with unkindness. He could have done it differently, had he wanted me to do things differently, but that push was

punitive, an action whose theme was the word *bitch* . Still, I said nothing. I made myself boneless and amenable. I spent weekends willing the landline next to my bed to ring. Often it didn't. Then he would call, before midnight, to ask if I was still up, so he could visit and leave before dawn. When my grandmother died, I called him crying, and he said, "Sorry," and then in the next breath, "Has your period ended so I can stop by?" My period had not ended and so he did not stop by. I believed then that love had to feel like hunger to be true.

"The rubber came off," he said carelessly that night. He'd been drinking and I had not.

"It's so funny how you say 'rubber,'" I tittered, wishing he weren't already distracted, reaching for his clothes, eyes on his car keys. I thought nothing of it; the condom slipping off once couldn't possibly matter.

Symptoms can mean nothing if a mind is convinced, if a thing just cannot be, and so the sore nipples, the sweeping waves of fatigue, had to have other meanings until they no longer could, and I walked to Rite Aid after class and bought a pregnancy test. How swift the moment is when your life becomes a different life. I had never considered myself getting pregnant, never imagined it, and for moments after the test showed positive, I sat drowning in disbelief. I didn't know what to do; I had never thought I would need to know. I went to the health center and lied to the nurse practitioner, telling her the condom slipped off the night before. She gave me a white morning-after pill, which I swallowed with tepid water from the dispenser in the waiting room. It was too late of course, I knew, but still I did other desperate nonsensical things: I jumped up and threw myself down on the floor, violently, and it left me stunned, too jolted to try it again. I drank cans of lemon soda, dissolved sachets of fizzy liver salts in glasses of water. I disfigured a hanger in my closet and held it steely in my hand, trying to imagine what distraught women did in old films. A clutch of emotions paralyzed me, bleeding into each other, disgust-horror-fear-panic. Like slender talismans, I lined up different pregnancy tests on my sink, and each one I urinated on I willed to turn negative. They were all positive. Something was growing inside me, alien, uninvited, and it felt like an infestation.

Some kindnesses you do not ever forget. You carry them to your grave, held warmly somewhere, brought up and savored from time to time. Such was the kindness of the African American woman with short pressed hair at the Planned Parenthood clinic on Angel Street. She smiled with all of her open face, kind, matter-of-fact, and she touched my shoulder while I settled tensely on my back. She held my hand through the long minutes. "It's okay,

you'll be okay," she said. My fingers tightened around hers while cramps stabbed my lower belly. I was utterly alone, and she knew it. "Thank you," I said afterward. "Thank you." I felt light from relief, weightless, unburdened. It was done. On the bus home, I cried, looking out the window at the cars and lights of a city that knew my loneliness.

My father told jokes and laughed and charmed everyone, and broke things and walked on the shards without knowing he had broken things. He didn't call on the day my son was born; he called the day after.

"My girl!" he said to me. In the weak hospital Wi-Fi, his face froze on the screen, midsmile, and he looked for a moment like a caricature of himself, teeth bared, eyes widened.

"Daddy," I said happily. To see him, all good humor and mischief, was to remember like a brief blur my life as it once was, when I was only a daughter, not a mother.

"Congratulations, my princess! My beautiful girl!" my father said. "Where is my grandson?"

I was eight when my mother told me that my father would marry another wife, but nothing would change; we would still live in our house, but sometimes Daddy would visit her in her house, not far from ours.

"Your father will live here," my mother said with emphasis. "He will always come home to us."

She made coming home to us sound like a victory.

"But why is he marrying another wife?" I asked. "I don't want a new mummy."

"She's not your new mummy. Just your aunty."

Aunty Nwanneka. My father took me to her house, a brief visit, on our way to his tennis club. She was young, plump, skin glistening as though dipped in oil. She smiled and smiled. She slipped in and out of the parlor and each time reappeared with a new source of pleasure for me: chocolates, chin-chin, Fanta. She called me Ziko, not Zikky like everyone else, and I liked that it sounded older, that she took me seriously. I liked her. Only later did I see how, to survive, she wielded her niceness like a subtle sharp knife. In America, I began to call her my father's *other* wife, because people assumed "second wife" was the woman my father had married when he was no longer married to my mother. But with Kwame I said "second wife," because he understood. Although he had never been to Ghana, he had grown up familiar

with his father's family, with relatives from a different place.

We laughed whenever I mimicked my law school classmate, a humorless American woman, face scrubbed, asking me to "acknowledge the contradiction" of my mother. It was after my presentation on traditional Igbo property laws, and I'd used my mother's story: a woman from a wealthy family marries a man from a wealthy family, has one daughter, three miscarriages, and an emergency hysterectomy, after which her husband decides to marry again because he needs to have sons, and she agrees, and it is those sons who will inherit the family property.

"My mother is uncommon but normal," I had replied to the woman, and then corrected myself with, "Uncommon *and* normal."

"Perfect response," Kwame always said each time we laughed about that story. He had an uncle in Ghana, a government minister, who had married a second wife.

"Can't have been easy for either wife," he said when he told me the story, and I nodded, agreeing, loving him for his sensitivity.

We told and retold each other stories from our past lives, until we felt as though we had been there. I felt flooded by sadness in the brightly lit hospital room. I could not imagine being with someone else, someone who was not Kwame, who did not know me as Kwame did and did not say the things that Kwame said and did not have Kwame's easy laugh.

"He looks just like me!" my father announced when my mother placed the phone above my son's face.

"Ziko, congratulations, God has blessed us," Aunty Nwanneka said, and a slice of her face appeared above my father's on the screen. "How are you feeling?"

"Tired," I said, and sensed my mother's disapproval. She would have wanted me to tell Aunty Nwanneka that I was perfectly fine.

"Aunty, congratulations," Aunty Nwanneka said to my mother. She had always called my mother "Aunty" to show respect.

"Thank you," my mother said serenely.

"My girl, is anybody else there with you apart from Mummy?" my father asked.

"No, Daddy."

Is Kwame there? Has Kwame called? Does Kwame know? The questions he wanted to ask but didn't. My mother hadn't asked either. I

sensed her suspicion, as though I had not told the truth and there was more unsaid. How could Kwame have left me because I got pregnant—Kwame, who came to Lagos with me last Christmas for two weeks and tried to kneel when he met my father, until my father laughed and said, “No, no, we don’t do that, that’s Yoruba,” and Kwame said, “I can’t believe I didn’t do my research better.” “Do your research better” became their joke, in that blustery male way of men who felt unthreatened by each other, and the evening my father took Kwame to his club alone, it was, he joked, to do his research better. My father had liked him right away, but my mother watched him for a while before she, too, caved. On the phone I heard her say to a friend, “Zikora’s fiancé.”

My father was asking to see the baby’s face again. My mother hovered the phone above his tiny sleeping form.

“My girl, I won’t be able to make it after all, but I’ll definitely see him before he’s one month old,” my father said.

“Okay, Daddy.” I had expected it. When he said that he would come from Lagos to be there for the baby’s birth, I knew it was just one more of the many promises he made.

“I have a stubborn cold,” he said. “So it’s best not to be around a newborn.”

“Yes,” I agreed, even though I knew the cold was as good a reason as any. It could have been a business meeting or a last-minute issue at work.

My mother handed me the phone and walked to the window.

“I’ve had this cold for almost two weeks now, and it doesn’t help that this house is like a freezer,” my father said. “The air conditioner is so cold, but your aunty still wants to reduce the temperature. I’ve told her that we have to reach a compromise because we don’t have the same condition!” He was laughing, that mischievous laugh that meant he knew his joke was less than decorous. But what was the joke? I laughed a little too, because I always laughed at my father’s jokes. Then I realized it was about Aunty Nwanneka’s menopausal symptoms, her feeling hot when nobody else did. I looked at my mother, by the window, turned away, separate and apart from the conversation. My father would never have joked about *her* menopause. With my mother his jokes were smaller and safer; he was careful always to show her respect. Respect: a starched deference, a string of ashen rituals. It was my mother who sat beside my father at weddings and ceremonies; it was her

photo that appeared above the label of “wife” in the booklet his club published in his honor. Respect was her reward for acquiescing. She could have been difficult about Aunty Nwanneka, fought with my father, quarreled with his sisters, disrupted things with relatives. Instead she always bought Christmas and birthday presents for Aunty Nwanneka’s sons. She was civil, proper, restrained, running her schools, always nicely dressed, a subdued gloss in her gold-framed eyeglasses. Senior wife. My aunty Uzo, my father’s sister, said “senior wife” like a title, a thing that came with a crown.

“You are the senior wife, nothing will change that,” Aunty Uzo told my mother a few days after my father moved out of our house. My brother (my half brother) Ugonna, only in primary school, had been caught cheating on an exam. A teacher saw him sneak out a piece of paper from his pocket and shouted at him to hand it over, but instead of giving up the paper, Ugonna threw it in his mouth and swallowed. My father decided to move in with Aunty Nwanneka to set Ugonna right. “He needs to see me every morning when he wakes up. Boys can so easily go wrong, girls don’t go wrong,” he told my mother. It was a Sunday, with the slow lassitude of Sundays in the air, and we were in the living room upstairs, playing cards, as we always did after lunch, before my father left to spend the rest of the day at Aunty Nwanneka’s. I remembered that afternoon in drawn-out, static images: my father blurting out the words, eyes trained on the cards in his hand, words he must have been thinking about how to say for days, and my mother staring at him, her body so rigid and still.

Later, she stood at the top of the stairs, in my father’s way, as he tried to go downstairs. She reached out and pushed him backward, and he, surprised, tottered. “This is not what we agreed!” she shouted. She was a different person, shaken, splintered, and she held on to the railings as though she might fall. My father left anyway. The next day, his workers moved his clothes and books, his collection of tennis rackets, his study desk, to Aunty Nwanneka’s house. For weeks I spoke to my mother only in sullen monosyllables, because I thought she could have better handled it. If she had not raised her voice, if she had not pushed him, my father would not have left. For some months my parents were estranged. My father did not visit us; he sent his driver to pick me up on weekends and bring me to his tennis club, where we drank Chapmans and he told me jokes but said nothing about moving out of our house.

Slowly, things thawed, and my mother accepted that he would no longer come home to us, that we were now the family who would merely be visited. She began to hang her newest dresses in his wardrobe, which was almost

empty, a few of his unloved shirts hanging there.

I looked at my mother, standing by the window. How had I never really seen her? It was my father who destroyed, and it was my mother I blamed for the ruins left behind. My parents decided early on that I would go abroad for university, and in the evenings after school, lesson teachers came to our house to prepare me for the SATs and A levels. My father wanted me to go to America because America was the future, and my mother wanted me to go to the UK because education was more rigorous there. “I want to go to America,” I said. Had I really wanted America or did I want what my father wanted or did I not want what my mother wanted? The way she said “rigorous” had irritated me. Her addiction to dignity infuriated me, alienated me, but I always looked past why she held so stiffly to her own self-possession.

“I’ll call you tomorrow, my princess,” my father said. “Send another photo of my grandson once we hang up.”

“Okay, Daddy, I love you.”

We left the hospital in the early afternoon. My mother dressed my son in the yellow onesie I had packed, newborn-sized but still big for him, the sleeves flopping around his tiny arms. In the taxi, his car seat lodged between my mother and me, I felt a wind pull through me, emptying me out. An intense urge overcame me, to hide from my mother and my son, from myself. You don’t know how bristly sanitary pads are until you have worn postbirth pads in the hospital and then switched to sanitary pads at home. I was constipated, and on the toilet, I tried not to strain while straining still, tentative, panic in my throat, afraid I might tear my stitches. A geyser of anxiety had erupted deep inside me and I was spurting fear. I sat in the warm sitz bath, worried that I hadn’t sat for long enough, even though I set my timer for fifteen minutes. What if I got an infection? I would need medication, which would taint my breast milk and affect my son. My son. My son could not latch on to my breasts properly, always my nipple slipped out of his little hungry mouth. He wailed and wailed. His cries seared into my head and made me so jittery I wanted to smash things. My mother called a lactation nurse for a home visit, a tiny platinum-haired woman who coaxed and cooed and tried to get my son’s mouth to open and close, but he pulled back and wailed. Was it something about being back home? I had breastfed him in the hospital. The nurse gave me a plastic nipple shield, to place between my nipple and my

son's mouth, and for a brief moment he sucked in silence, and then began to cry again. I pumped my breasts with a machine that vibrated, funnels affixed to my nipples, spurts of thin liquid filling the attached bottles. The pumping was tortuously slow; my breasts recoiled from the machine and so gave up little of their milk. My son slept in a crib by my bed. At first, my mother slept in the next room, and then she pulled her mattress into my bedroom and set it by the couch. At night, she fed my son a bottle of breast milk with a slim curved nipple.

"Sleep, try and sleep," she said to me, but I couldn't sleep. I hardly slept, and I could hear in the silence of my luxury apartment the gurgle of my son's swallowing.

My tear itched badly. My appetite grew with a fury, and I ate whole loaves of bread, large portions of salmon. The sun slanting through the windows my mother opened every morning. The tinkly music from my son's crib mobile. The frequent flare of sad longing. I missed Kwame. I looked ahead and saw a future dead with the weight of his absence. I thought of getting a new number and calling him, to tell him we could make it work, that he could do as little as he wanted as a father just as long as he was there. But I was wearied of his rejection, his ignoring my texts, his blocking my number, and I felt translucent, so fragile that one more rejection would make me come fully undone.

"Why don't I call his parents? To inform them. They deserve to know," my mother suddenly said one morning as she fed my son, and I was startled that she could read my mind.

"Who?" I asked foolishly.

She looked at me evenly. "Kwame."

"No," I said. "Not yet."

My son began to cry. He was fed, his tiny belly tautly round, and yet he cried. He cried and cried.

"Some babies just cry," my mother said calmly.

What am I supposed to do with him? I thought to myself. It had only been a few days. There would be more days and weeks of this, not knowing what to do with a squalling person whose needs I feared I could never know. Only in my mother's arms did his wails taper off, briefly, before they began again. Only while asleep was he fully free of tears. My mother laid him in his crib and after a moment said, "Look how he's raised his arms!" She was

smiling, and I had never seen delight so naked on her face. My son's tiny arms were raised up, as though in salute to sleep. It made me smile too.

"I don't know what I'll do when you leave," I said.

"My visa is long stay," she said. "I'm not going anywhere yet."

"Thank you, Mummy," I said, and I began to cry. Tears were so cheap now.

How do some memories insist on themselves? I remembered the night of Aunty Nwanneka's birthday party. A big party. Canopies ringed by balloons had been set up in her compound. My mother asked me not to go. It was shortly after my father had moved out of our house, the strain between my parents still ripe and raw.

"Stay and stand by me," my mother said, and I scoffed silently, thinking she was being dramatic. *Chill out, it's not as if this is a blood feud.* I went to the party. When I came home, unsteady from the wine Mmiliaku and I had drunk straight from the bottles, our househelp let me in. My mother was in the living room reading.

"Mummy, good evening," I greeted, and she said nothing. She looked up from her book, as though to show she had heard me, and then turned away. A recurring image: my mother turning away, retreating, closing windows on herself.

My son woke up and began to cry. My mother hurried to his crib. I watched her cradle him and lower her head, as though to inhale him, touching the skin of his face with the skin of hers.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Photo © Wani Olatunde

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is the *New York Times* bestselling author of the novels *Purple Hibiscus* ; *Half of a Yellow Sun* , which won the Orange Broadband Prize for Fiction; *Americanah* , which won the National Book Critics Circle Award and was a *New York Times* , *Washington Post* , *Chicago Tribune* , and *Entertainment Weekly* Best Book of the Year; the story collection *The Thing Around Your Neck* ; and the essays *We Should All Be Feminists* and *Dear Ijeawele, or A Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions* . A recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship, she divides her time between the

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