

SUYI DAVIES OKUNGBOWA

CHOKE

Choke

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illustration by

XIA GORDON

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International Friends offers foreign students the opportunity to bond with local hosts and develop a mutual appreciation for one another's cultures. Are you an international student? Apply today to be matched to a host!

Afonso Santos Ribeiro de Souza worships free food. *Tastes better when your bank account doesn't change,* he says. Hard to disagree when you're an international grad student hanging by the thread of a full-ride scholarship. But you are committed to a Friday night indoors. There are reruns of *Leverage* to be watched, an early grocery run in the morning, student papers to grade in exchange for a barely living wage.

Also, your ancestors have whispered that you will choke.

Afonso is persuasive, though. His canny ability to venture into snakes-and-ladders situations and emerge with free food is unrivaled. Like that one time he posed as a Turning Point ambassador just because he heard their tostadas were fire. So when he drops by your basement apartment and, for the umpteenth time, asks that you tag along on his first visit with the family assigned to him by the International Friends program, your resolve wavers. For one, it beats going out for drinks with the near-adolescent colleagues in your program. All they do is spend the night scouting potential partners for a weekend genital meet-and-greet while you sit and drink and count stars.

You dress casually, in trusted Chucks, shorts and T-shirt. Afonso goes with his usual beachside charm of white shirt with too many buttons left open at the chest. He tops this off with a straw hat tilted sideways. A walking P. Diddy cliché, yes, but also a complete departure from the stodgy scholars and academic gossip you're used to engaging with all day. Perhaps this change of scenery could help more than you know.

Even though your ancestors have warned that you will choke.

Afonso opts for walking, as the address is only a few blocks from campus. The usual Friday crowd fills the streets: pre-gamed frat boys riding in truck headed to tiki lounges, yelling mating calls; sorority girls in MINI Coopers and

Lululemon returning the favor; late dog walkers demonstrating their displeasure at this cross-border conversation; dirtbike clubs showing off logoed jackets and impromptu wheelies in the weekly seven p.m. parade. You and Afonso cross into the quieter residential streets and muse about privilege, how going to university in your respective Nigeria and Brazil meant keeping one's head squarely on one's shoulders. You are thankful your night will be much quieter—forming connections around a family dinner table, like the cultured adults that you are. Talk moves to the expected menu for the night. Afonso reads aloud the lengthy invitation email, which, among other things, mentions what to expect on the dinner table: tamales, Hopi corn stew, Hatch chiles. Mouthwatering.

The house, when you arrive, is more conspicuous than you had expected. Apparently, it used to be a church, back when this town was still a part of Mexico. The Spanish architecture and Infant of Prague statues, both of which you recognize from your Catholic upbringing, are huge tells. When you go past the motion-sensored outdoor lights, the statues come to life, casting slant shadows, like sentries over something poached.

The gate swings open into a large compound containing multiple buildings. The door at the top of the steps is open, ushering you in. From inside: the smell of good food, laughter, a cat meowing. Afonso beams. There is joy here.

You have forgotten your ancestors' whisper that you will choke.

★ ★ ★

Ancestors, like many words in this tongue, is a deficient descriptor for those who whisper in your ear. For all you know, some are as old as time itself, and some as recent as Grandpa Oli who died only a few months ago. It doesn't matter who they consist of, though, because they all murmur in one voice. Or *voices*, since it's kind of a chorus, whispers packed full with sibilants.

It's hard to tell the warnings from the statements. Perhaps in a way, they are all warnings. After all, your forebears only speak when they sense trouble ahead. Or perhaps *discomfort*, since none of the warnings you've ignored so far have resulted in anything notable.

Rather, if these voices from the Great Across have taught you anything, it's language. Each whisper a doorway to other doorways, each word pregnant with as many meanings as a centipede has legs. Sometimes, you can't even put together an English equivalent for the expressions they employ. Those you manage to parse often turn out to be false flags, the voices as fallible in death as

they were in real life.

How does one talk to ghosts? You don't. Rather, you come to an unspoken agreement: unparseable whispers will go unanswered, and they'll just have to suck it up and deal.

> *At International Friends, our aim is a simple yet important one: bring people together to participate in sharing cultures, interests, and life experiences.*

The dining room is dead center past the foyer. Its decor is rustic, surfaces possessed by wood grain. Ceramic plates with Victorian art lean on shelf tops and fresh candles are in candelabras, unlit. Beneath this decor is a dining table with twelve chairs and four people, the source of the laughter.

At its head sits Donny Paxton, writer of long emails, teller of jokes. His big beard is graying blond, like his hair. Judging by her highlights, the girl next to him must be Charlotte Paxton, the daughter on study break from Japan—another long email tidbit. The two guests are a white girl and an Asian boy, possibly internationals assigned here like Afonso.

Donny looks up as you enter, a broad, welcoming smile plastered all over his face. He's the very definition of nicety.

"Ah!" He claps his hands. "You must be Afonso?" He turns his gaze to you after Afonso nods. "And you are?"

"Oh no, I'm not signed up. I'm Afonso's neighbor."

"Ah, a friend!" Donny seems to bear more excitement than is due. "Well, all are welcome." He points to us each after we sit. "And look at that—we have someone from every continent here!"

Choke, say the whispers.

You make light talk. Asian boy is Tao, here from China, Engineering. Harriett, his friend, is an MFA candidate in visual art, here from England. Charlotte asks Tao about the differences between Japanese and Chinese cultures, which Tao tries to unpack delicately. Afonso and Harriett hit it off over a shared love of football and a discussion of which Premier League teams they support. This leaves you alone with Donny, who does little else but smile.

Thankfully, a woman comes in then, punctures the scene. *Alessia*, you remember from the email, along with something about her having Italian heritage and loving homemade meals and fresh fruit. She has clouded, tired eyes, but her smile is just as broad as her husband's. Wisps of dark hair fly unbridled

across her face. She greets you all cheerily and places large dishes on the table. You find yourself unconsciously leaning forward, noting the dishes, concerned about any small components that could easily lodge in your airway. Sure, you're not going to let the voices ruin a promising night of free food, but you're not going to go in blindly, either.

More guests arrive, take their seats, and introduce themselves. Livia, a freshman from El Salvador with an undeclared major. Moises, a Mexican master's student from Juárez. Obaid, a Pakistani undergrad in Harry Potter glasses. Samiya, a Bangladeshi PhD student.

It takes a moment to realize an eleventh person has materialized at the table. Between the flurry of new guests and Alessia piling more dishes onto the table, you have not seen him slip into place, stealthy, silent. He might have gone unnoticed, too, if not for the cat that has leapt onto his lap, meowing in response to his slow and deliberate stroking.

This must be the fourth Paxton, Joshua, whom the email said has just completed high school. You watch him regard each guest at the table with interest, studying the motion of their lips, the blink of their eyes, the cut of their jaws, the shade of their skin, the movement of their hair. He makes this assessment in half moments, while each guest is engrossed in their newfound comradeship of United-States-as-Strange-Land. Not a single one of them notices him.

He turns to you.

Sometimes, in lieu of speaking, the ancestors will prod. A single, quick jab to the ribs. A flick in the chest, a one-beat panic attack. A prick somewhere between temple and brain. In the most dire of circumstances, a fleeting vision, like déjà-vu but not really.

A rib jab is enough of a message this time. These kinds you do not often ignore. *Stay away from the creepy kid, got it.*

But this is not the message, you will soon gather, as Alessia places the last dish on the table and nods at her husband. Donny clears his throat loud enough to get the attention of the table, puts on his signature broad smile, clasps both hands together, and announces:

"Let us pray."

★ ★ ★

Earlier, when you typed the address into Maps, the location was listed as *La*

Hacienda de Mar: International Faith, Freedom, and Culture Center.

"*De* Mar? asked Afonso. "Are you sure?" He grabbed the phone, then chuckled after reading. "Ah, I see. Probably wanted to name it *The Sea Estate* or *Estate of the Sea,* but that's *La Hacienda del Mar. De Mar* is what happens when you're bad at Translate."

But the website was adamant: *de Mar.* Photos of the property littered the homepage: a massive compound with two buildings adjacent to the main house, marked as a library and a small event center. Alongside is its storied history as a plantation, church, orphanage, halfway house, and now Paxton property. Photos from recent events featured a rainbow of students conversing, drinks and finger food in hand, red-eyed from the old point-and-shoot.

Everything you've witnessed so far adds up now. Even the mailers you spotted in the foyer make sense. A stack of them, all in the same garish colors, all military generals in typeface, all screaming: *Thank You for Contributing to the Destiny of Our Great Land! Victory Is in Sight! We Shall Win Back All Who Have Lost Their Way!*

> *Become a local International Friends host and learn about other countries and cultures, engage with interesting students, help new international students acclimatize to American culture, have fun!*

No three words will make you congeal faster than *Let us pray.*

Your Nigerian parents, fierce Catholics and true children of the freshly postcolonial sixties, once said that the voices in your head must be God speaking to you. The alternative was Satan, of course, and there was no place for the devil in their house.

You agreed with them. Had to be some kind of god, if they could whisper from the Great Across. But how to tell your parents that the long-haired dude from the oil painting hanging over the altar at St. Patrick's definitely wasn't the one speaking in the tongues you could hear? Not if you wanted to avoid yet another night spent in deliverance sessions with men in long white robes and striking stoles pouring salty water over your forehead, or in candlelit rooms with a self-professed exorcist spinning and spinning and spinning, demented.

You played the game until adult independence beckoned. And when you finally cut them off, the stranglehold around your neck was lifted. You could finally breathe. A doorway, once shut, opened up, and out poured your ancestors, freewheeling.

But your body has not forgotten. Each time someone insists *Let us pray,* without asking if you want to partake, your body remembers.

★ ★ ★

The prayer is short, but you do not recall the words. Your ancestors, no strangers to this duress, offer a response path akin to theirs: *freeze, feign, forget.* Your body follows suit, wanders through on autopilot.

Dinner begins soon after, and you lose yourself in the table's discussion of the small college city. Many here appreciate its colorful sunsets and the valleys that ensure one can see the mountains from every neighborhood. Tao and Harriett—ten bucks says they're fucking—love the desertscape and plan to do a lot of hiking. Moises thinks the tacos are too expensive. Obaid thinks the locals tan too much. Samiya and Livia like the Indian place with the All-You-Can-Eat Tuesdays. No one enjoys the dryness.

"Awesome that you remember all our names, Donny," says Afonso, reaching for a dish. "Were you a teacher in a past life?"

Donny chuckles heartily. "Not a teacher, no. Minister. Before that, military, so I've always met people from all over the world. And listen, you learn a thing or two when you gotta deal with this many foreign names. For our international community here, we use one of my little tricks, don't we, Charlie?"

"English versions," says Charlotte.

"Take Moises, for instance." Donny points to him. "I just think: Moses." He points to each guest. "Samiya is Sam, Obaid is Bobby. For you, I just think of the Afonsos of Portugal. Strong rulers who took Christianity places. Brazilians would know—you're beneficiaries!"

Afonso is too busy with his meal to respond, so despite my attempts to remain outside this conversation, Donny's gaze eventually settles on me.

"I think you're the only person here whose name I don't know," he says.

Choke.

You swallow. "My name is Kédiké."

Reality flickers like a failing neon tube. Something nestles within that millisecond—a sound like flowing water, though you can't be sure. Too suddenly, you're back at the table, everyone still trying to wrap their tongue around your name. Alessia, intermittently contributing to the conversation from the side table where she's tossing salads, says: "Do you go by a nickname?" She digs at the bowl with wooden spoons and flips with practiced ease. "Like Kay, or

something?”

“Maybe what you need is an honorary American name,” says Charlotte, enthusiastic. “Name exchanges are great for cultural appreciation—you know the Indians used to do it with missionaries and soldiers? Anyway, my honorary Japanese name is Eiko. Means *prosperous* or something like that. I gave my friends American names, too: Kayleigh, Brooklyn, Chad. They *love* it.” She angles her head. “Maybe later you can give us African names?”

Another flicker, this time a half second, the crack wide enough to fit several images: white sheets; the sickly gray of a spider’s web; bloodred; fingernails scraping wood.

★ ★ ★

Memory, they say, is a fragile thing. A collage of reimaginations and replacements; finicky, untrustworthy. Thankfully, you do not have that problem. When you opened the door to your ancestors, you also unlocked that portion of the human mind otherwise difficult to reach. The door behind the door. The one where memories go to hibernate, sometimes forever.

This is where you go now, to retrieve what you have registered without paying witness, what has filtered into your ears while you observed Victorian plates.

“The Bahamas is so dope.” This is Charlotte’s voice. “Going there on a cruise ship with my friends? Best thing. Sure, we mostly built shelters and evangelized, but we still had fun, and *still* won the award for most natives converted. Best summer ever.”

> *“Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.”*
> *—1 John 4:1, English Standard Version*

The ancestors’ next intervention is a prick to the temple. You have, once again, been carried away by the camaraderie of shared foreignness and studentship; by the way tamales taste like moi-moi from back home; by the heat-and-sweet of the Hatch chile; by the promise of sugary dessert, now that the main course is over. And in the moments when you have failed to keep watch, Donny has reached downward, pulled out a thick book, and opened it to a bookmarked page.

“As we wait,” he announces, that nice, warm smile never leaving, “may I interest you all in a passage?”

Freeze.

Donny reads, and the words fly by, missed bullets. Something about First John and testing spirits and false prophets, all forgotten as soon as they’re spoken. But Donny has more in the tank. He wants to know what the table thinks about the message. Like the discussions you facilitate with your undergrads, he goes around the table, person by person, so that all must respond through gritted teeth, knowing that this pathway has been pried open by good food and nicety. Charlotte aids those who stumble over their words, a knife through butter. Silent Joshua does not contribute.

When it reaches your turn, you do what your ancestors do best: *feign.*

“Can I use the bathroom?”

Alessia points you in the direction of a small door adjoining the dining room. You slip inside the cubiclelike washroom and take quick breaths, then wash your hands, humming “Happy Birthday” to ensure you get to all the crevices. Your thoughts wander, and soon, you will find yourself doing what your ancestors have always done: *forget.*

When you return, the dining room has gone cold, silent. The lights feel dimmed, the warmth flattened, shadows leaning forward.

A twelfth person has taken a seat.

★ ★ ★

Walk backward, past the third search result for *La Hacienda de Mar.* There, a fifth Paxton. Elijah sports a gray hoodie and a full beard, hair dark like Alessia’s but coiffed to the side like an affable neighborhood barista’s. He wears the Hollywood smile Donny and Charlotte have so perfected. He shouldn’t be smiling, though. This is a mugshot.

Walk back some more. Stop there, at the side shot that shows the blood running down his head. Read the accompanying news report, and let your brain isolate the phrases that matter. Like: *hit over the head with a baseball bat by a freshman.* Like: *planted Coyote boots in the middle of her chest.* Like: *she had called him a fascist psychotic monster.* Like: *he had called her an LGBTQ slut.* Like: *using a megaphone, he made proclamations such as, “You deserve rape for those shorts,” and “Repent, for the kingdom of God is nigh.”*

Now, walk forward, into the photo of him handcuffed and led away. Drink in

the charges (“aggravated assault”), the bail terms (“ten thousand dollars”) and preliminary punishment (“banned from all campuses of learning in a fifty-mile radius”). Drink, so you may be filled with wisdom. Drink, child, but do not drown.

Activities can range from holiday celebrations, trips, and outings to everyday events like sharing meals. The most important thing is not the choice of activity, but the bonding experience.

Elijah introduces himself to the table with a broad smile. Everyone but the Paxtons respond. Joshua is the only Paxton who speaks, and for the first time, too.

“You weren’t supposed to be here,” he says.

“That so?” Elijah chuckles, then reaches out a hand and ruffles his brother’s hair playfully. “But here I am anyway.” He smiles at his father, mother, sister, all of whom have resorted to start-stop movements, as if eluding a perched bird. “We’re gonna have fun, aren’t we?”

Goosebumps sprout, histories in your skin standing erect. You know, instantly, that something has tilted. Like every guest at this table, you are anchored by this centripetal force, stuck waiting for violence—first blunt, now sharpened—to show its blade.

Elijah slips into the role Donny once occupied, wrenching control of the table with practiced ease. *Tell me about yourselves,* his comportment says. *I just want to get to know you!* And yet you feel the room shrink and dim. Alessia lays out the dessert, a mango compote with strawberry mascarpone. The shadows grow longer, sharper. She announces the dish in a near-whisper, as if her tongue —like every silent Paxton’s—has been snatched by Elijah, stripped of its couching, exposed to the elements. The compote and mascarpone look and smell good, but you see them for what they truly are: forbidden fruit upon which you will choke.

“Now, now, son,” Donny interrupts in a contained timbre. “Careful not to smother our guests.”

Elijah smiles like Donny. Broad and warm and nice and razor sharp.

“Dad,” he says. “*Come on.* It’s what we do.”

The world flickers, and the last light in the room is snuffed out. Your ancestors, tired of waiting, step forward.

Every guest at the table is a faceless two-dimensional darkness, bodies

draped over furniture and cutlery, trapped in the plane of shadows. They speak but are unheard; scream but are stifled by a form too shallow to hold all their selves. The only bodily parts spared are their fingers, fleshy ends clinging to the flattened shadows at the table. With these they call for attention, scratching at the wood, pulling splinters, drawing blood.

But the sound of water drowns them out.

Each Paxton is a white robe wearing a stole, like the men from your exorcisms. Sticky gray tendrils, borne of each utterance, each interaction, connect the whites to every guest, bonding all in a close-knit web. Water so saline you can taste it pours from the depths of each Paxton to the dining room floor, enveloping the slant shadow-selves. Alessia's ejections happen, like her words, in drips, slipping down the sides of her mouth. Charlotte and Donny, Hollywood smiles still intact, spout huge bucketfuls. But no one gushes into the fast-rising lake like Elijah, from whom water pours out of every orifice: eager, hungry, restless.

Young Joshua is the only Paxton left untouched. He is still stroking the cat. But rather than the vacant expression he has presented all evening, his face is warped by fear as he watches the water rise. His eyes turn, slowly, and find you, realizing you have joined him in this separate reality.

"Help," he whispers, choking. "Help me."

The flesh-fingered shadows scratch the table, echoing his words in wood. *HELP. HELP ME.*

> *Student-host relationships officially come to a close after the first academic year, but lifelong bonds with hosts are often formed.*

For the first time tonight, you will act with alacrity. You will rise and make for the door, feigning a hurt belly, mumbling a quick "good night" over your shoulder. Confused responses will chase after you, but that there is Sodom and Gomorrah, and you are not Lot's wife. You will not look back. Not until you hustle through the foyer, down the steps, past the gates, and into the street, where you will finally take your first full gulps of cold night air.

Fingers numb, you will text Afonso: *Get out now.* Another, because you know he'll need it: *Forget the food!* Another, because someone has to: *Take everyone with you.*

Once home, you will return to a trusted friend, the web search, and open the

first doorway by looking up the word your ancestors have whispered all night. One by one, the doorways beyond will appear, and you will step through each, savor the sounds, elasticity, and endless possibilities. Only then will you realize how shackled by this foreign tongue you have become, failing to look beyond singular meaning. You will understand now that the sibilant whispers of your ancestors have always been prisms, light with rainbows ensconced within if you listen just right. You will listen now, and hear the other words contained in the spectrum, each one a crack, a new understanding of the acute warning they have delivered all this time.

Choke. Stifle. Smother.

Suffocate. Strangle.

Drown.

About the Author

Suyi Davies Okungbowa is a Nigerian author of fantasy, science fiction and general speculative work. His latest novel is *Son of the Storm*, first in the epic fantasy trilogy, *The Nameless Republic*. His debut godpunk fantasy novel *David Mogo, Godhunter* (Abaddon, 2019), won the 2020 Nommo Ilube Award for Best Speculative Novel by an African. His shorter works have appeared in various periodicals and anthologies and have been nominated for various awards. He earned his MFA in Creative Writing at the University of Arizona, and currently teaches at the University of Ottawa. You can sign up for email updates here.

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