

CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE: THE THING
AROUND YOUR NECK (2009)

GHOSTS

Today I saw Ikenna Okoro, a man I had long thought was dead. Perhaps I should have bent down, grabbed a handful of sand, and thrown it at him, in the way my people do to make sure a person is not a ghost. But I am a Western-educated man, a retired mathematics professor of seventy-one, and I am supposed to have armed myself with enough science to laugh indulgently at the ways of my people. I did not throw sand at him. I could not have done so even if I had wished to, anyway, since we met on the concrete grounds of the university Bursary.

I was there to ask about my pension, yet again. "Good day, Prof," the dried-up-looking clerk, Ugwuoke, said. "Sorry, the money has not come in."

The other clerk, whose name I have now forgotten, nodded and apologized as well, while chewing on a pink lobe of kola nut. They were used to this. I was used to this. So were the tattered men who were clustered under the flame tree, talking loudly among themselves, gesturing. The education minister has stolen the pension money, one fellow said. Another said that it was the vice chancellor who had deposited the money in

high-interest personal accounts. They cursed the vice chancellor: His penis will quench. His children will not have children. He will die of diarrhea. When I walked up to them, they greeted me and shook their heads apologetically about the situation, as if my professor-level pension were somehow more important than their messenger-level or driver-level pensions. They called me Prof, as most people do, as the hawkers sitting next to their trays under the tree did. "Prof! Prof! Come and buy good banana!"

I chatted with Vincent, who had been our driver when I was faculty dean in the eighties. "No pension for three years, Prof," he said. "This is why people retire and die."

"O *joka*," I said, although he, of course, did not need me to tell him how terrible it was.

"How is Nkiru, Prof? I trust she is well in America?" He always asks about our daughter. He often drove my wife, Ebere, and me to visit her at the College of Medicine in Enugu. I remember that when Ebere died, he came with his relatives for *mgbalu* and gave a touching, if rather long, speech about how well Ebere had treated him when he was our driver, how she gave him our daughter's old clothes for his children.

"Nkiru is well," I said.

"Please greet her for me when she calls, Prof."

"I will."

He talked for a while longer, about ours being a country that has not learned to say thank you, about the students in the hostels not paying him on time for mending their shoes. But it was his Adam's apple that held my attention; it bobbed alarmingly, as if just about to pierce the wrinkled skin of his neck and pop out. Vincent is younger than I am, perhaps in his late sixties, but he looks older. He has little hair left. I quite remember his incessant chatter while he drove me to work in those days; I

remember, too, that he was fond of reading my newspapers, a practice I did not encourage.

"Prof, won't you buy us banana? Hunger is killing us," one of the men gathered under the flame tree said. He had a familiar face. I think he was my next-door neighbor Professor Ijere's gardener. His tone had a half-teasing, half-serious quality, but I bought groundnuts and a bunch of bananas for them, although what all those men really needed was some moisturizer. Their faces and arms looked like ash. It is almost March, but the harmattan season is still very much here: the dry winds, the crackling static on my clothes, the fine dust on my eyelashes. I applied more lotion than usual today, and Vaseline on my lips, but still the dryness made my palms and face feel tight.

Ebere used to tease me about not moisturizing properly, especially in the harmattan, and sometimes after I had my morning bath, she would slowly rub her Nivea on my arms, my legs, my back. We have to take care of this lovely skin, she would say with that playful laughter of hers. She always said my complexion had been the trait that persuaded her, since I did not have any money like all those other suitors who had trooped to her flat on Elias Avenue in 1961. "Seamless," she called my complexion. I saw nothing especially distinctive in my dark umber tone, but I did come to preen a little with the passing years, with Ebere's massaging hands.

"Thank you, Prof!" the men said, and then began to mock one another about who would do the dividing.

I stood around and listened to their talk. I was aware that they spoke more respectably because I was there: carpentry was not going well, children were ill, more moneylender troubles. They laughed often. Of course they nurse resentment, as they well should, but it has somehow managed to leave their spirits whole. I often wonder whether I would be like them if I did

not have money saved from my appointments in the Federal Office of Statistics and if Nkiru did not insist on sending me dollars that I do not need. I doubt it; I would probably have hunched up like a tortoise in its shell and let my dignity be whittled away.

Finally I said goodbye to them and walked toward my car, parked near the whistling pine trees that shield the Faculty of Education from the Bursary. That was when I saw Ikenna Okoro.

He called out to me first. "James? James Nwoye, is it you?" He stood with his mouth open and I could see that his teeth are still complete. I lost one last year. I have refused to have what Nkiru calls "work" done, but I still felt rather sour at Ikenna's full set.

"Ikenna? Ikenna Okoro?" I asked in the tentative way one suggests something that cannot be: the coming to life of a man who died thirty-seven years ago.

"Yes, yes." Ikenna came closer, uncertainly. We shook hands, and then hugged briefly.

We had not been good friends, Ikenna and I; I knew him fairly well in those days only because everyone knew him fairly well. It was he who, when the new vice chancellor, a Nigerian man raised in England, announced that all lecturers must wear ties to class, had defiantly continued to wear his brightly colored tunics. It was he who mounted the podium at the Staff Club and spoke until he was hoarse, about petitioning the government, about supporting better conditions for the nonacademic staff. He was in sociology, and although many of us in the proper sciences thought that the social sciences people were empty vessels who had too much time on their hands and wrote reams of unreadable books, we saw Ikenna differently. We forgave his peremptory style and did not discard his pam-

phlets and rather admired the erudite asperity with which he blazed through issues; his fearlessness convinced us. He is still a shrunken man with froglike eyes and light skin, which has now become discolored, dotted with brown age spots. One heard of him in those days and then struggled to hide great disappointment upon seeing him, because the depth of his rhetoric somehow demanded good looks. But then, my people say that a famous animal does not always fill the hunter's basket.

"You're alive?" I asked. I was quite shaken. My family and I saw him on the day he died, July 6, 1967, the day we evacuated Nsukka in a hurry, with the sun a strange fiery red in the sky and nearby the *boom-boom-boom* of shelling as the federal soldiers advanced. We were in my Impala. The militia waved us through the campus gates and shouted that we should not worry, that the vandals—as we called the federal soldiers—would be defeated in a matter of days and we could come back. The local villagers, the same ones who would pick through lecturers' dustbins for food after the war, were walking along, hundreds of them, women with boxes on their heads and babies tied to their backs, barefoot children carrying bundles, men dragging bicycles, holding yams. I remember that Ebere was consoling our daughter, Zik, about the doll left behind in our haste, when we saw Ikenna's green Kadett. He was driving the opposite way, back onto campus. I sounded the horn and stopped. "You can't go back!" I called. But he waved and said, "I have to get some manuscripts." Or maybe he said, "I have to get some materials." I thought it rather foolhardy of him to go back in, since the shelling sounded close and our troops would drive the vandals back in a week or two anyway. But I was also full of a sense of our collective invincibility, of the justness of the Biafran cause, and so I did not think much more of it until we heard that Nsukka fell on the very day we evacuated and

the campus was occupied. The bearer of the news, a relative of Professor Ezike's, also told us that two lecturers had been killed. One of them had argued with the federal soldiers before he was shot. We did not need to be told this was Ikenna.

Ikenna laughed at my question. "I am, I am alive!" He seemed to find his own response even funnier, because he laughed again. Even his laughter, now that I think of it, seemed discolored, hollow, nothing like the aggressive sound that reverberated all over the Staff Club in those days, as he mocked people who did not agree with him.

"But we saw you," I said. "You remember? That day we evacuated?"

"Yes," he said.

"They said you did not come out."

"I did." He nodded. "I did. I left Biafra the following month."

"You left?" It is incredible that I felt, today, a brief flash of that deep disgust that came when we heard of saboteurs—we called them "sabos"—who betrayed our soldiers, our just cause, our nascent nation, in exchange for a safe passage across to Nigeria, to the salt and meat and cold water that the blockade kept from us.

"No, no, it was not like that, not what you think." Ikenna paused and I noticed that his gray shirt sagged at the shoulders. "I went abroad on a Red Cross plane. I went to Sweden." There was an uncertainty about him, a diffidence that seemed alien, very unlike the man who so easily got people to act. I remember how he organized the first rally after Biafra was declared an independent state, all of us crowded at Freedom Square while Ikenna talked and we cheered and shouted, "Happy Independence!"

"You went to Sweden?"

"Yes."

He said nothing else, and I realized that he would not tell me more, that he would not tell me just how he had left the campus alive or how he came to be on that plane; I know of the children airlifted to Gabon later in the war but certainly not of people flown out on Red Cross planes, and so early, too. The silence between us was tense.

"Have you been in Sweden since?" I asked.

"Yes. My whole family was in Orlu when they bombed it. Nobody left, so there was no reason for me to come back." He stopped to let out a harsh sound that was supposed to be laughter but sounded more like a series of coughs. "I was in touch with Dr. Anya for a while. He told me about rebuilding our campus, and I think he said you left for America after the war."

In fact, Ebere and I came back to Nsukka right after the war ended in 1970, but only for a few days. It was too much for us. Our books were in a charred pile in the front garden, under the umbrella tree. The lumps of calcified feces in the bathtub were strewn with pages of my *Mathematical Annals*, used as toilet paper, crusted smears blurring the formulas I had studied and taught. Our piano—Ebere's piano—was gone. My graduation gown, which I had worn to receive my first degree at Ibadan, had been used to wipe something and now lay with ants crawling in and out, busy and oblivious to me watching them. Our photographs were ripped, their frames broken. So we left for America and did not come back until 1976. We were assigned a different house, on Ezenweze Street, and for a long time we avoided driving along Imoke Street, because we did not want to see the old house; we later heard that the new people had cut down the umbrella tree. I told Ikenna all of this, although I said nothing about our time at Berkeley, where my black American friend Chuck Bell had arranged for my teaching appointment. Ikenna was silent for a while, and then

he said, "How is your little girl, Zik? She must be a grown woman now."

He had always insisted on paying for Zik's Fanta when we took her to the Staff Club on Family Day, because, he said, she was the prettiest of the children. I suspect it was really because we had named her after our president, and Ikenna was an early Zikist before claiming the movement was too tame and leaving.

"The war took Zik," I said in Igbo. Speaking of death in English has always had, for me, a disquieting finality.

Ikenna breathed deeply, but all he said was "*Ndo*," nothing more than "Sorry." I was relieved he did not ask how—there are not many hows anyway—and that he did not look inordinately shocked, as if war deaths are ever really accidents.

"We had another child after the war, another daughter," I said.

But Ikenna was talking in a rush. "I did what I could," he said. "I did. I left the International Red Cross. It was full of cowards who could not stand up for human beings. They backed down after that plane was shot down at Eket, as if they did not know it was exactly what Gowon wanted. But the World Council of Churches kept flying in relief through Uli. At night! I was there in Uppsala when they met. It was the biggest operation they had done since the Second World War. I organized the fund-raising. I organized the Biafran rallies all over the European capitals. You heard about the big one at Trafalgar Square? I was at the top of that. I did what I could."

I was not sure that Ikenna was speaking to me. It seemed that he was saying what he had said over and over to many people. I looked toward the flame tree. The men were still clustered there, but I could not tell whether they had finished the bananas and groundnuts. Perhaps it was then that I began

to feel submerged in hazy nostalgia, a feeling that still has not left me.

"Chris Okigbo died, not so?" Ikenna asked, and made me focus once again. For a moment, I wondered if he wanted me to deny that, to make Okigbo a ghost-come-back, too. But Okigbo died, our genius, our star, the man whose poetry moved us all, even those of us in the sciences who did not always understand it.

"Yes, the war took Okigbo."

"We lost a colossus in the making."

"True, but at least he was brave enough to fight." As soon as I said that, I was regretful. I had meant it only as a tribute to Chris Okigbo, who could have worked at one of the directorates like the rest of us university people but instead took up a gun to defend Nsukka. I did not want Ikenna to misunderstand my intention, and I wondered whether to apologize. A small dust whirl was building up across the road. The whistling pines above us swayed and the wind whipped dry leaves off the trees farther away. Perhaps because of my discomfort, I began to tell Ikenna about the day Ebere and I drove back to Nsukka after the war ended, about the landscape of ruins, the blown-out roofs, the houses riddled with holes that Ebere said were rather like Swiss cheese. When we got to the road that runs through Aguleri, Biafran soldiers stopped us and shoved a wounded soldier into our car; his blood dripped onto the backseat and, because the upholstery had a tear, soaked deep into the stuffing, mingled with the very insides of our car. A stranger's blood. I was not sure why I chose this particular story to tell Ikenna, but to make it seem worth his while I added that the metallic smell of the soldier's blood reminded me of him, Ikenna, because I had always imagined that the federal soldiers had shot him and left him to die, left his blood to stain the soil.

This is not true; I neither imagined such a thing, nor did that wounded soldier remind me of Ikenna. If he thought my story strange, he did not say so. He nodded and said, "I've heard so many stories, so many."

"How is life in Sweden?" I asked.

He shrugged. "I retired last year. I decided to come back and see." He said "see" as if it meant something more than what one did with one's eyes.

"What about your family?" I asked.

"I never remarried."

"Oh," I said.

"And how is your wife doing? Nnenna, isn't it?" Ikenna asked.

"Ebere."

"Oh, yes, of course, Ebere. Lovely woman."

"Ebere is no longer with us; it has been three years," I said in Igbo. I was surprised to see the tears that glassed Ikenna's eyes. He had forgotten her name and yet, somehow, he was capable of mourning her, or perhaps he was mourning a time immersed in possibilities. Ikenna, I have come to realize, is a man who carries with him the weight of what could have been.

"I'm so sorry," he said. "So sorry."

"It's all right," I said. "She visits."

"What?" he asked with a perplexed look, although he, of course, had heard me.

"She visits. She visits me."

"I see," Ikenna said with that pacifying tone one reserves for the mad.

"I mean, she visited America quite often; our daughter is a doctor there."

"Oh, is that right?" Ikenna asked too brightly. He looked relieved. I don't blame him. We are the educated ones, taught to

keep tightly rigid our boundaries of what is considered real. I was like him until Ebere first visited, three weeks after her funeral. Nkiru and her son had just returned to America. I was alone. When I heard the door downstairs close and open and close again, I thought nothing of it. The evening winds always did that. But there was no rustle of leaves outside my bedroom window, no *swish-swish* of the neem and cashew trees. There was *no* wind outside. Yet the door downstairs was opening and closing. In retrospect, I doubt that I was as scared as I should have been. I heard the feet on the stairs, in much the same pattern as Ebere walked, heavier on each third step. I lay still in the darkness of our room. Then I felt my bedcover pulled back, the gently massaging hands on my arms and legs and chest, the soothing creaminess of the lotion, and a pleasant drowsiness overcame me—a drowsiness that I am still unable to fight off whenever she visits. I woke up, as I still do after her visits, with my skin supple and thick with the scent of Nivea.

I often want to tell Nkiru that her mother visits weekly in the harmattan and less often during the rainy season, but if I do, she will finally have reason to come here and bundle me back with her to America and I will be forced to live a life cushioned by so much convenience that it is sterile. A life littered with what we call "opportunities." A life that is not for me. I wonder what would have happened if we had won the war back in 1967. Perhaps we would not be looking overseas for those opportunities, and I would not need to worry about our grandson who does not speak Igbo, who, the last time he visited, did not understand why he was expected to say "Good afternoon" to strangers, because in his world one has to justify simple courtesies. But who can tell? Perhaps nothing would have been different even if we had won.

"How does your daughter like America?" Ikenna asked.

"She is doing very well."

"And you said she is a doctor?"

"Yes." I felt that Ikenna deserved to be told more, or maybe that the tension of my earlier comment had not quite abated, so I said, "She lives in a small town in Connecticut, near Rhode Island. The hospital board had advertised for a doctor, and when she came they took one look at her medical degree from Nigeria and said they did not want a foreigner. But she is American-born—you see, we had her while at Berkeley, I taught there when we went to America after the war—and so they had to let her stay." I chuckled, and hoped Ikenna would laugh along with me. But he did not. He looked toward the men under the flame tree, his expression solemn.

"Ah, yes. At least it's not as bad now as it was for us. Remember what it was like schooling in *oyibo*-land in the late fifties?" he asked.

I nodded to show I remembered, although Ikenna and I could not have had the same experience as students overseas; he is an Oxford man, while I was one of those who got the United Negro College Fund scholarship to study in America.

"The Staff Club is a shell of what it used to be," Ikenna said. "I went there this morning."

"I haven't been there in so long. Even before I retired, it got to the point where I felt too old and out of place there. These greenhorns are inept. Nobody is teaching. Nobody has fresh ideas. It is university politics, politics, while students buy grades with money or their bodies."

"Is that right?"

"Oh, yes. Things have fallen. Senate meetings have become personality-cult battles. It's terrible. Remember Josephat Udeana?"

"The great dancer."

I was taken aback for a moment because it had been so long since I had thought of Josephat as he was, in those days just before the war, by far the best ballroom dancer we had on campus. "Yes, yes, he was," I said, and I felt grateful that Ikenna's memories were frozen at a time when I still thought Josephat to be a man of integrity. "Josephat was vice chancellor for six years and ran this university like his father's chicken coop. Money disappeared and then we would see new cars stamped with the names of foreign foundations that did not exist. Some people went to court, but nothing came of that. He dictated who would be promoted and who would be stagnated. In short, the man acted like a solo university council. This present vice chancellor is following him faithfully. I have not been paid my pension since I retired, you know. I'm just coming from the Bursary now."

"And why isn't anybody doing something about all this? Why?" Ikenna asked, and for the briefest moment the old Ikenna was there, in the voice, the outrage, and I was reminded again that this was an intrepid man. Perhaps he would walk over and pound his fist on a nearby tree.

"Well"—I shrugged—"many of the lecturers are changing their official dates of birth. They go to Personnel Services and bribe somebody and add five years. Nobody wants to retire."

"It is not right. Not right at all."

"It's all over the country, really, not just here." I shook my head in that slow, side-to-side way that my people have perfected when referring to things of this sort, as if to say that the situation is, sadly, ineluctable.

"Yes, standards are falling everywhere. I was just reading about fake drugs in the papers," Ikenna said, and I immediately thought it a rather convenient coincidence, his bringing up fake drugs. Selling expired medicine is the latest plague of our

country, and if Ebere had not died the way she did, I might have found this to be a normal segue in the conversation. But I was suspicious. Perhaps Ikenna had heard how Ebere had lain in hospital getting weaker and weaker, how her doctor had been puzzled that she was not recovering after her medication, how I had been distraught, how none of us knew until it was too late that the drugs were useless. Perhaps Ikenna wanted to get me to talk about all this, to exhibit a little more of the lunacy that he had already glimpsed in me.

"Fake drugs are horrible," I said gravely, determined to say nothing else. But I may have been wrong about Ikenna's plot, because he did not pursue the subject. He glanced again at the men under the flame tree and asked me, "So, what do you do these days?" He seemed curious, as if he was wondering just what kind of life I am leading here, alone, on a university campus that is now a withered skin of what it used to be, waiting for a pension that never comes. I smiled and said that I am resting. Is that not what one does on retiring? Do we not call retirement in Igbo "the resting of old age"?

Sometimes I drop by to visit my old friend Professor Maduewe. I take walks across the faded field of Freedom Square, with its border of mango trees. Or along Ikejiani Avenue, where the motorcycles speed past, students perched astride, often coming too close to one another as they avoid the potholes. In the rainy season, when I discover a new gully where the rains have eaten at the land, I feel a flush of accomplishment. I read newspapers. I eat well; my househelp, Harrison, comes five days a week and his *onugbu* soup is unparalleled. I talk to our daughter often, and when my phone goes dead every other week, I hurry to NITEL to bribe somebody to get it repaired. I unearth old, old journals in my dusty, cluttered study. I breathe in deeply the scent of the neem trees that

screen my house from Professor Ijere's—a scent that is supposed to be medicinal, although I am no longer sure what it is said to cure. I do not go to church; I stopped going after Ebere first visited, because I was no longer uncertain. It is our diffidence about the afterlife that leads us to religion. So on Sundays I sit on the verandah and watch the vultures stamp on my roof, and I imagine that they glance down in bemusement.

"Is it a good life, Daddy?" Nkiru has taken to asking lately on the phone, with that faint, vaguely troubling American accent. It is not good or bad, I tell her, it is simply mine. And that is what matters.

Another dust whirl, both of us blinking to protect our eyes, made me ask Ikenna to come back to my house with me so that we could sit down and talk properly, but he said he was on his way to Enugu, and when I asked if he would come by later, he made a vague motion with his hands that suggested assent. I know he will not come, though. I will not see him again. I watched him walk away, this dried nut of a man, and I drove home thinking of the lives we might have had and the lives we did have, all of us who went to the Staff Club in those good days before the war. I drove slowly, because of the motorcyclists who respect no rules of the road, and because my eyesight is not as good as it used to be.

I made a minor scratch as I backed my Mercedes out last week, and so I was careful parking it in the garage. It is twenty-three-years old but runs quite well. I remember how excited Nkiru was when it was shipped back from Germany, where I bought it when I went to receive the Academy of Science prize. It was the newest model. I did not know this, but her fellow teenagers did, and they all came to peer at the speedometer, to ask permission to touch the paneling on the dashboard. Now, of course, everyone drives a Mercedes; they buy them

secondhand, rearview mirrors or headlights missing, from Cotonou. Ebere used to mock them, saying our car is old but much better than all those *tuke-tuke* things people are driving with no seat belts. She still has that sense of humor. Sometimes when she visits, she tickles my testicles, her fingers running over them. She knows very well that my prostate medication has deadened things down there, and she does this only to tease me, to laugh her gently jeering laugh. At her burial, when our grandson read his poem, "Keep Laughing, Grandma," I thought the title perfect, and the childish words almost brought me to tears, despite my suspicion that Nkiru wrote most of them.

I looked around the yard as I walked indoors. Harrison does a little gardening, mostly watering in this season. The rosebushes are just stalks, but at least the hardy cherry bushes are a dusty green. I turned the TV on. It was still raining on the screen, although Dr. Otagbu's son, the bright young man who is reading electronics engineering, came last week to fix it. My satellite channels went off after the last thunderstorm, but I have not yet gone to the satellite office to find somebody to look at it. One can stay some weeks without BBC and CNN anyway, and the programs on NTA are quite good. It was NTA, some days ago, that broadcast an interview with yet another man accused of importing fake drugs—typhoid fever medicine in this case. "My drugs don't kill people," he said, helpfully, facing the camera wide-eyed, as if in an appeal to the masses. "It is only that they will not cure your illness." I turned the TV off because I could no longer bear to see the man's blubbery lips. But I was not offended, not as egregiously as I would have been if Ebere did not visit. I only hoped that he would not be let free to go off once again to China or India or wherever they go to import expired medicine that will not actually kill people, but will only make sure the illness kills them.

I wonder why it never came up, throughout the years after the war, that Ikenna Okoro did not die. True, we did sometimes hear stories of men who had been thought dead and who walked into their compounds months, even years, after January 1970; I can only imagine the quantity of sand thrown on broken men by family members suspended between disbelief and hope. But we hardly talked about the war. When we did, it was with an implacable vagueness, as if what mattered were not that we had crouched in muddy bunkers during air raids after which we buried corpses with bits of pink on their charred skin, not that we had eaten cassava peels and watched our children's bellies swell from malnutrition, but that we had survived. It was a tacit agreement among all of us, the survivors of Biafra. Even Ebere and I, who had debated our first child's name, Zik, for months, agreed very quickly on Nkiruka: what is ahead is better.

I am sitting now in my study, where I marked my students' papers and helped Nkiru with her secondary school mathematics assignments. The armchair leather is worn. The pastel paint above the bookshelves is peeling. The telephone is on my desk, on a fat phone book. Perhaps it will ring and Nkiru will tell me something about our grandson, how well he did in school today, which will make me smile even though I believe American teachers are not circumspect enough and too easily award an A. If it does not ring soon, then I will take a bath and go to bed and, in the still darkness of my room, listen for the sound of doors opening and closing.