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

TOMORROW IS TOO FAR

It was the last summer you spent in Nigeria, the summer before your parents' divorce, before your mother swore you would never again set foot in Nigeria to see your father's family, especially Grandmama. You remember the heat of that summer clearly, even now, eighteen years later—the way Grandmama's yard felt moistly warm, a yard with so many trees that the telephone wire was tangled in leaves and different branches touched one another and sometimes mangoes appeared on cashew trees and guavas on mango trees. The thick mat of decaying leaves was soggy under your bare feet. In the afternoons, yellow-bellied bees buzzed around your head and your brother Nonso's and cousin Dozie's heads, and in the evenings Grandmama let only your brother Nonso climb the trees to shake a loaded branch, although you were a better climber than he was. Fruits would rain down, avocados and cashews and guavas, and you and your cousin Dozie would fill old buckets with them.

It was the summer Grandmama taught Nonso how to pluck the coconuts. The coconut trees were hard to climb, so limb-free and tall, and Grandmama gave Nonso a long stick and

showed him how to nudge the padded pods down. She didn't show you, because she said girls never plucked coconuts. Grandmama cracked the coconuts against a stone, carefully, so the watery milk stayed in the lower piece, a jagged cup. Everybody got a sip of the wind-cooled milk, even the children from down the street who came to play, and Grandmama presided over the sipping ritual to make sure Nonso went first.

It was the summer you asked Grandmama why Nonso sipped first even though Dozie was thirteen, a year older than Nonso, and Grandmama said Nonso was her son's only son, the one who would carry on the Nnabuisi name, while Dozie was only a *nwadiana,* her daughter's son. It was the summer you found the molt of a snake on the lawn, unbroken and sheer like see-through stockings, and Grandmama told you the snake was called the *echi eteka,* "Tomorrow Is Too Far." One bite, she said, and it's over in ten minutes.

It was *not* the summer you fell in love with your cousin Dozie because that happened a few summers before, when he was ten and you were seven and you both wiggled into the tiny space behind Grandmama's garage and he tried to fit what you both called his "banana" into what you both called your "tomato" but neither of you was sure which was the right hole. It was, however, the summer you got lice, and you and your cousin Dozie dug through your thick hair to find the tiny black insects and squash them against your fingernails and laugh at the tart sound of their blood-filled bellies bursting; the summer that your hate for your brother Nonso grew so much you felt it squeezing your nostrils and your love for your cousin Dozie ballooned and wrapped around your skin.

It was the summer you watched a mango tree crack into two

near-perfect halves during a thunderstorm, when the lightning cut fiery lines through the sky.

It was the summer Nonso died.

Grandmama did not call it summer. Nobody did in Nigeria. It was August, nestled between the rainy season and the harmattan season. It could pour all day, silver rain splashing onto the verandah where you and Nonso and Dozie slapped away mosquitoes and ate roast corn; or the sun would be blinding and you would float in the water tank Grandmama had sawed in half, a makeshift pool. The day Nonso died was mild; there was drizzle in the morning, lukewarm sun in the afternoon, and, in the evening, Nonso's death. Grandmama screamed at him—at his limp body—saying *i laputago m,* that he had betrayed her, asking him who would carry on the Nnabuisi name now, who would protect the family lineage.

The neighbors came over when they heard her. It was the woman from the house across the road—the one whose dog rummaged in Grandmama's dustbin in the mornings—who coaxed the American phone number from your numb lips and called your mother. It was also that neighbor who unclasped your and Dozie's hands, made you sit down, and gave you some water. The neighbor tried, too, to hold you close so you would not hear Grandmama as she talked to your mother on the phone, but you slid away from the woman, closer to the phone. Grandmama and your mother were focused on Nonso's body, rather than his death. Your mother was insisting that Nonso's body be flown back to America right away and Grandmama was repeating your mother's words and shaking her head. Madness lurked in her eyes.

You knew Grandmama had never liked your mother. (You had heard Grandmama say this some summers before to her friend—That black American woman has tied up my son and put him in her pocket.) But watching Grandmama on the phone, you understood that she and your mother were united. You were sure your mother had the same red madness in her eyes.

When you talked to your mother, her voice echoed over the line in a way it had never done all the years before when you and Nonso spent summers with Grandmama. Are you all right? she kept asking you. Are you all right? She sounded fearful, as though she suspected that you *were* all right, despite Nonso's death. You played with the phone wire and said little. She said she would send word to your father, although he was somewhere in the woods attending a Black Arts festival where there were no phones or radios. Finally she sobbed a harsh sob, a sob like the bark of a dog, before she told you everything would be fine and she was going to arrange for Nonso's body to be flown back. It made you think of her laugh, a *ho-ho-ho* laugh that started deep inside her belly and did not soften as it came up and did not suit her willowy body at all. When she went into Nonso's room to say good night, she always came out laughing that laugh. Most times, you pressed your palms to your ears to keep the sound out, and kept your palms pressed to your ears even when she came into your room to say Good night, darling, sleep well. She never left your room with that laugh.

After the phone call, Grandmama lay stretched out with her back on the floor, eyes unblinking, rolling from side to side, as though she were playing some sort of silly game. She said it was wrong to fly Nonso's body back to America, that his spirit would always hover here. He belonged to this hard earth that had failed to absorb the shock of his fall. He belonged to the

trees here, one of which had let go of him. You sat and watched her and at first you wished she would get up and take you in her arms, then you wished she wouldn't.

It has been eighteen years and the trees in Grandmama's yard look unchanged; they still reach out and hug one another, still cast shadows over the yard. But everything else seems smaller: the house, the garden at the back, the water tank copper-colored from rust. Even Grandmama's grave in the backyard looks tiny, and you imagine her body being crumpled to fit a small coffin. The grave is covered with a thin coat of cement; the soil around it is freshly dug and you stand next to it and picture it in ten years' time, untended, tangled weeds covering the cement, choking the grave.

Dozie is watching you. At the airport, he had hugged you cautiously, said welcome and what a surprise that you came back, and you stared at his face for a long time in the busy, shuffling lounge until he looked away, his eyes brown and sad like those of your friend's poodle. You didn't need that look, though, to know that the secret of how Nonso died was safe with Dozie, had always been safe with Dozie. As he drove to Grandmama's house, he asked about your mother and you told him that your mother lived in California now; you did not mention that it was in a commune among people with shaved heads and pierced breasts or that when she called, you always hung up while she was still speaking.

You move toward the avocado tree. Dozie is still watching you and you look at him and try to remember the love that clogged you up so fully that summer you were ten, that made you hold on tight to Dozie's hand the afternoon after Nonso died, when Dozie's mother, your aunty Mgbechibelije, came to

take him away. There is a gentle sorrow in the lines across his forehead, a melancholy in the way he stands with his arms by his sides. You suddenly wonder if he longed, too, like you did. You never knew what was beneath his quiet smile, beneath the times he would sit so still that the fruit flies perched on his arms, beneath the pictures he gave you and the birds he kept in a cardboard cage, petting them until they died. You wonder what, if anything, he felt about being the wrong grandson, the one who did not bear the Nnabuisi name.

You reach out to touch the trunk of the avocado tree; just as Dozie starts to say something, startling you because you think he is going to bring up Nonso's death, but he tells you that he never imagined that you would come back to say goodbye to Grandmama because he knew how much you hated her. That word—"hate"—hangs in the air between you both like an accusation. You want to say that when he called you in New York, the first time you were hearing his voice in eighteen years, to tell you that Grandmama had died—I thought you would want to know, were his words—you leaned on your office desk, your legs turning molten, a lifetime of silence collapsing, and it was not Grandmama you thought of, it was Nonso, and it was him, Dozie, and it was the avocado tree and it was that humid summer in the amoral kingdom of your childhood and it was all the things you had not allowed yourself to think about, that you had flattened to a thin sheet and tucked away.

But instead you say nothing and press your palms deep into the rough trunk of the tree. The pain soothes you. You remember eating the avocados; you liked yours with salt and Nonso didn't like his with salt and Grandmama always clucked and said you did not know what was good when you said the unsalted avocado nauseated you.

. . .

At Nonso's funeral in a cold cemetery in Virginia with tombstones jutting out obscenely, your mother was in faded black from head to toe, even a veil, and it made her cinnamon skin glow. Your father stood away from both of you, in his usual dashiki, milk-colored cowries coiled round his neck. He looked as if he were not family, as if he were one of the guests who sniffled loudly and later asked your mother in hushed tones exactly how Nonso had died, exactly how he had fallen from one of the trees he had climbed since he was a toddler.

Your mother said nothing to them, all those people who asked questions. She said nothing to you, either, about Nonso, not even when she cleaned up his room and packed his things. She did not ask if you wanted to keep anything, and you were relieved. You did not want to have any of his books with his handwriting that your mother said was neater than typewritten sentences. You did not want his photographs of pigeons in the park that your father said showed so much promise for a child. You did not want his paintings, which were mere copies of your father's only in different colors. Or his clothes. Or his stamp collection.

Your mother brought Nonso up, finally, three months after his funeral, when she told you about the divorce. She said the divorce was not about Nonso, that she and your father had long been growing apart. (Your father was in Zanzibar then; he had left right after Nonso's funeral.) Then your mother asked: How did Nonso die?

You still wonder how those words tumbled out of your mouth. You still do not recognize the clear-eyed child that you were. Maybe it was because of the way she said the divorce was not about Nonso—as though Nonso was the only one capable

of being a reason, as though you were not in the running. Or maybe it was simply that you felt the burning desire that you still feel sometimes, the need to smooth out wrinkles, to flatten things you find too bumpy. You told your mother, with your tone suitably reluctant, that Grandmama had asked Nonso to climb to the highest branch of the avocado tree to show her how much of a man he was. Then she frightened him—it was a joke, you assured your mother—by telling him that there was a snake, the *echi eteka,* on the branch close to him. She asked him not to move. Of course he moved and slipped off the branch, and when he landed, the sound was like many fruits falling at the same time. A dull, final plop. Grandmama stood there and stared at him and then started to shout at him about how he was the only son, how he had betrayed the lineage by dying, how the ancestors would be displeased. He was breathing, you told your mother. He was breathing when he fell but Grandmama just stood there and shouted at his broken body until he died.

Your mother started to scream. And you wondered if people screamed in that crazed way when they had just chosen to reject truth. She knew well enough that Nonso had hit his head on a stone and died on the spot—she had seen his body, his cracked head. But she chose to believe Nonso was alive after he fell. She cried, howled, and cursed the day she set eyes on your father at the first exhibition of his work. Then she called him, you heard her shouting on the phone: Your mother is responsible! She panicked him and made him fall! She could have done something afterwards but instead she stood there like the stupid fetish African woman that she is and let him die!

Your father talked to you afterwards, and said he understood how hard it was for you but you had to be careful what you said so that you didn't cause more hurt. And you thought about

his words—Be careful what you say—and wondered if he knew you were lying.

That summer, eighteen years ago, was the summer of your first self-realization. The summer you knew that something had to happen to Nonso, so that you could survive. Even at ten you knew that some people can take up too much space by simply being, that by existing, some people can stifle others. The idea of scaring Nonso with the *echi eteka* was yours alone. But you explained it to Dozie, that you both needed Nonso to get hurt—maybe maim him, maybe twist his legs. You wanted to mar the perfection of his lithe body, to make him less lovable, less able to do all that he did. Less able to take up your space. Dozie said nothing and instead drew a picture of you with your eyes in the shape of stars.

Grandmama was inside cooking and Dozie was standing silently close to you, your shoulders touching, when you suggested Nonso climb to the top of the avocado tree. It was easy to get him to; you only had to remind him that you were the better climber. And you really were the better climber, you could scale a tree, any tree, in seconds—you were better at the things that did not need to be taught, the things that Grandmama could not teach him. You asked him to go first, to see if he could get to the topmost branch of the avocado before you followed. The branches were weak, and Nonso was heavier than you. Heavy from all the food Grandmama made him eat. Eat a little more, she would say often. Who do you think I made it for? As though you were not there. Sometimes she would pat your back and say in Igbo, It's good you are learning, *nne,* this is how you will take care of your husband one day.

Nonso climbed the tree. Higher and higher. You waited till

he was nearly at the top, till his legs hesitated before inching farther up. You waited for that short moment when he was between motions. An open moment, a moment you saw the blueness of everything, of life itself—the pure azure of one of your father's paintings, of opportunity, of a sky washed clean by a morning shower. Then you screamed. "A snake! It's the *echi eteka*! A snake!" You were not sure whether to say that the snake was on a branch close to him, or sliding up the trunk. But it didn't matter because, in those few seconds, Nonso looked down at you and let go, his foot slipping, his arms freeing themselves. Or maybe the tree simply shrugged Nonso off.

You don't remember now how long you stayed looking at Nonso before you went in to call Grandmama, Dozie all the time silent beside you.

Dozie's word—"hate"—floats around in your head now. Hate. Hate. Hate. The word makes it difficult to breathe, the same way it was difficult to breathe when you waited, those months after Nonso died, for your mother to notice that you had a voice pure like water and legs like elastic bands, for your mother to end her good-night visits to your room with that deep *ho-ho-ho* laugh. Instead she held you too gingerly while saying good night, always speaking in whispers, and you started to avoid her kisses by faking coughs and sneezes. Year after year as she moved you from state to state, lighting red candles in her bedroom, banning all talk of Nigeria or of Grandmama, refusing to let you see your father, she never again laughed that laugh.

Dozie speaks now, tells you that he began to dream of Nonso a few years ago, dreams in which Nonso is older and taller than him, and you hear fruit fall from a tree nearby and you ask him

without turning around, What did you want, that summer, what did you want?

You do not know when Dozie moves, when he stands behind you, so close that you smell the citrus on him, perhaps he peeled an orange and did not wash his hands afterwards. He turns you around and looks at you and you look at him and there are fine lines on his forehead and a new harshness in his eyes. He tells you it did not occur to him to want because what mattered was what you wanted. There is a long silence while you watch the column of black ants making its way up the trunk, each ant carrying a bit of white fluff, creating a black-and-white pattern. He asks you if you dreamed the way he did and you say no, your eyes avoiding his, and he turns away from you. You want to tell him about the pain in your chest and the emptiness in your ears and the roiling air after his phone call, about the doors flung open, about the flattened things that popped out, but he is walking away. And you are weeping, standing alone under the avocado tree.