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# A tampered destiny

By Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

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Our father told us on a harmattan morning. Outside the dining room window, the wind was cold and dry, the whistling pine was swaying, a cock was chasing a squawking hen, the red dust was rising and our mother's spirit was dancing in its whirls. My brother Chuma and I, lips smeared with Vaseline, were playing scrabble at the dining table and listening to Celestine Ukwu on the stereo. A drop of pap, which had not been cleaned off after our breakfast of akamu and akara, had become a hard-dried smudge on the table mat. I remember the details of that morning well because this way I don't have to remember our father's exact words as he told us that he and Auntie Ife were getting married and we would all be moving with her to Lagos. Chuma and I stared at him. We were not surprised about the marriage, far from it; we had followed the courtship for six years. Our father took us to her house every Sunday for lunch. She made something she called Fruit Crumble Pie, when she piled sliced mangoes and oranges and cinnamon on a flat piece of dough and baked it until her whole house smelled edible. She collected tiny animal figurines, the ones that came in Elephant detergent cartons, and she arranged them all over her dining table; and so in addition to lecture notes and hardcover books, we had to move aside plastic blue rhinos and giraffes to make room for our plates. Her hallway was so full of potted plants it looked like a garden and sometimes, snails and caterpillars wiggled on the floor, next to the cartons of toilet soap and dried milk. She took those cartons to the Motherless Babies Home on Saturdays. Chuma and I went with her sometimes. "Hold the children as if you know them," she would say, before we went into the room full of tattered toddlers and screaming babies. Auntie Ife was perhaps our father's age and had never married, but on her shelves were photos of nephews and nieces and children of friends, with birthdays scrawled on the cardboard frames. Mine and Chuma's had been displayed shortly after we met her. We stayed with her whenever our father went away to a conference. It was on one such visit that Chuma hit me on the stomach and as I screamed, Auntie Ife came into the room, roughly pushed me towards Chuma and said, "Fight for yourself! Hit him back!" At first, I was too startled to do anything, then I hit Chuma in the stomach and he was too startled to hit back. I do not remember Chuma ever hitting me again.

We liked Auntie Ife. We liked that she wore billowy adire boubous and never tried to be our mother and always humoured the stories our father told us about our mother's spirit being in the wind, in the rainbow, in the growing grass. We liked that her hair was a natural afro and that she could argue loudly with our father, both of them professors of political science, and that her name Ifeadiogo meant "Light Has Come" and that her presence in our lives was a light about which she was entirely unselfconscious although we were of course not aware of this at the time. We liked her. And so we were not sad that she and our father were finally getting married – it was not the reason we stared silently when he told us. The reason was that we would move to Lagos. That we would leave Nsukka.

I am sitting on a New York to Lagos flight now, 22 years after that harmattan morning, and I clearly remember my confusion, an incredulous confusion, because I had never considered the possibility of life anywhere but in Nsukka. I remember the following days, slow days when the subdued sun peeked through the window louvers as we packed the books from the study, the rooms, the hallway. Our father – we called him Dada – had tried to lighten things, saying that Auntie Ife would be director-general at the federal agency for only five years, and after that we would move back to Nsukka and life would be as before. We did not believe him. We suggested that they marry but live separately until she completed her appointment. The Okekes, after all, lived farther apart. Mrs Okeke was a nurse working in America – it amuses me now to recall the stories people told about nurses making millions of dollars in America – while Prof Okeke remained at Nsukka with the children. But Dada would never have agreed to live separately. He had asked Auntie Ife many times in the past to marry him but she said no; she liked her own house and their arrangement as it was. Chuma and I knew this from eavesdropping and reading their notes. Later, we would learn that it was the new appointment that had made her propose to Dada: people coming with cartons of Rémy Martin to say congratulations, having her name on the radio and newspapers, the disorienting strangeness of it all, had shaken her into asking him to marry her and take a study leave and come with her to Lagos. Why didn't she say no to the appointment? Why did she so easily leave her life – our lives – to work for a military regime? Even as I think this, I know it is unfair. Auntie Ife's was a glorious, vigorous ambition. She had published more than Dada, was on more editorial boards, and the choice would not have been whether or not she would take the job but whether or not she would marry Dada.

I unbuckle my seatbelt to go to the bathroom and I cannot help looking at the faces of the other passengers, wondering what their stories are. While we boarded in New York, a man threatened to slap a woman because she had stuffed too much in the overhead compartment; somebody called a flight attendant a "useless woman"; another asked, "Do you know who I am? Are you insulting me?" to somebody else and I was both ashamed of them and familiar with them. I have not been among so many Nigerians in so long. In the lavatory, I notice that my urine is disconcertingly yellow, perhaps from dehydration, or perhaps from the medicine for which my husband Findley and I had to drive to Hartford, because our small-Connecticut-town doctor started to reach for a dusty book on his shelf when we mentioned "malaria prophylactic". Findley worried that I would catch malaria, even after I took the medicine. He talked about malaria as though it was something exotic and incurable, and he looked unconvinced when I told him that I had malaria all the time growing up, that malaria was so common our doctor at the University Medical Center in Nsukka gave us chloroquine no matter

what happens when we had. Doctor Igbokwe. I remember him well. He lived up-campus and usually when they had a power failure, we would still have power down-campus and he and his wife would bring their frozen meat, red and amorphous packages, to preserve in our freezer until their power came back. Doctor Igbokwe's only daughter Ifeoma, with her thick glasses, often sat with her mouth hanging open so that we children called her a moo-moo, a fool. It was she who told me that her father said that Dada and Auntie Ife fitted each other because both of them were "mad radicals". Her father must have made "radical" out to be a bad word, but I liked the expression "mad radicals"; it reminded me of how intensely Dada and Auntie Ife argued about ideas, it reminded me of how Dada would quote Nkrumah – We prefer self-government with danger to servitude in tranquillity – and how Auntie Ife would laugh when he did.

It's almost pretty, the yellow colour of my urine. It's the same custard shade as the dye my primary school art class in Nsukka made from boiled onion peels. I didn't think those peels could yield yellow but they did and we immersed pieces of calico cloth in the dye. It is strange how clearly I remember that day in art class, the oily jheri-curl hair of my teacher, the unevenly pasted student drawings on the walls. I have found, though, that when I let myself remember, only memories of Nsukka are cloudless. Lagos memories are shadowy, as though I am peering in at our lives with a piece of muslin placed over my eyes. Back in my seat, the pilot announces our descent into Lagos and I wish Findley were beside me, rubbing my palm, the way he did when I got Chuma's letter telling me that Dada was finally out of prison and was dying of liver failure. I didn't immediately decide to go home. Findley kept saying, "You have to go," but I don't think he really wanted me to go, I think he was saying what he thought he should.

I turn to the man seated beside me and say, "I am going home after 22 years" and he looks at me quizzically and says, "OK," as though he thinks it is no business of his how long I have been away.

I see Chuma, standing outside Arrivals, before he sees me and I have time to take in his posture, shoulders held up as though he is perpetually taking a deep breath. I used to imagine that our mother stood just like that, with that self-sufficient air, because all the pictures we had were of her sitting or lying down or leaning on Dada. Chuma's eyes, slightly narrowed, rest on me, this the brother I have not seen in 22 years, and I focus on the jagged scar on his forehead, much faded now, and I remember when he fell from the frangipani tree – he was nine and I was seven – the blood all over his face, his crying in crazed screams while I sucked at his blood, frenetically gulping and swallowing to make it stop coming out, until Dada pulled me off and ran with Chuma to the car.

"Welcome," Chuma says, and I think he is going to hug me but he reaches for my suitcase. The sun is bright, a different brightness, and I am startled for a minute that everyone I see is black, a change from our Connecticut town where Findley and I joke – not always comfortably – about being the sole example of Diversity. Before Chuma puts my suitcase in the trunk of his Honda Accord, I notice the Rotary Club sticker, just like it had been on Dada's car in Nsukka. Dada changed the sticker in Lagos, though. Dada changed cars in Lagos. Dada changed in Lagos. He had dry skin and used to buy *abuba eke*, fresh python fat, from the traders in Nsukka who also sold tortoises and pumice stones, and he rubbed the gel-like fat on the driest patches on his arms. But in Lagos, after he joined the new bank, he started to ooze oil. Especially in the presence of guests: thick men in flowing agbadas who wore too-strong cologne. As Dada laughed and talked with them, casually mentioning large sums of money unheard of in Nsukka – one million, five million – his face would shine, unctuous and slippery.

"So how is Findley?" Chuma asks, glancing at me. Although I expected his cold tone and should not be upset by it, I am. He reaches out to turn on the car radio and I see the plastic watch under his shirtsleeve.

"He is well." I sent Chuma a letter when I married Findley, and his reply was – *So you tell me about your marriage a month after? Well done. Anyway, wishing you as much happiness as a Black American can bring. And what sort of ridiculous name is Findley?* His letters were usually like that. I roll down the window and the smell of humidity and exhaust fumes and something stale invades the car, the same odour I noticed when we moved to Lagos. There were too many cars, too much noise, too many guests at our house – Auntie Ife's house – in the evenings. They parked on the driveway covered with gravel, a cosmetic gray, the result of the gardener spraying it with some liquid from a metal can. And our uniformed stewards whom Auntie Ife asked that we address by their last names – Okon, Okafor, Eze – would rush out to ask, "Sir? Madam? What to drink?" even before Auntie Ife and Dada came down. I used to imagine our mother looking up and frowning. Yes, looking up. Dada used to say that our mother was in heaven, but heaven was below with the ancestors, in the red earth of Nsukka, and some evenings, in the waning sunlight, he took us out and we sat near the garage and strained to hear our mother's laughter in the breeze. If Auntie Ife came, she listened with us, too, until our neighbour's chickens squawked too loudly as they scrambled up the trees. I hardly remembered our mother even then; her memory had faded like a dried flower caught between the pages of an old book. Still, I thought about her eyes following us everywhere, disapproving not of Dada's remarriage, but of our new life in Lagos, of Auntie Ife's sudden change to a government apologist, of Dada's oily taste for cigars and shiny cufflinks.

"Lagos has changed," I say to Chuma. I do not add that it is somehow duller in reality, as compared to my memory where everything was enveloped in an unpleasant gloss.

"You can't even pronounce Lagos any more."

Have I started saying it like Findley does, Lah-gos? I, who dislikes the whine of the American accent? Desperately hoping I sound flippant, I say, "Lay-gus. Lay-gus."

Chuma says nothing. A man on the radio is announcing a church crusade.

"Kachi is cooking you a huge meal," Chuma says, finally, with an accusing tone again, as if he does not think I deserve the huge meal his wife, whom I have never met, is cooking. I realise now that she must be frying beef or goat or chicken. I should have told Chuma that I am a

vegetarian when I called to let him know I was coming back. Such a minor thing, so incongruous. I'm finally coming home after 22 years, even though I did not come home when Aunty Ife left Dada, when Dada was jailed by the Failed Banks Tribunal, when Dada got sick, when you got married, even though I did not regularly keep in touch and was never willing to give anything of myself, I am finally coming home and by the way, I am a vegetarian.

I debate whether to tell him now, looking out of the window at beggars with babies tied to their backs, at children dashing around hawking newspapers and sunglasses and plastic packets of water.

"Half of those beggars are thieves," Chuma says. "Wind up or they will put their hand inside and snatch your necklace." And yet, after driving for a while, he takes his own window down and throws a note at a beggar with a face burned pink. I look at the run-down buildings we are driving past, with roofs like squashed hats, and think about our Connecticut home with its gray stone exterior that Findley loves; it blends into the quietly benevolent affluence of our town where in the summer people pick up the car-bloodied squirrels splayed on windy roads and solemnly bury them. Our friends – Findley's friends really – visit often in the summer for Findley's veggie burger barbecues. They wear sunscreen and own boats and because of me, they talk about The Third World often, with the authority they have from backpacking through Asia while in college. I like them, most of them, as unwaveringly as I love Findley, but it is mostly when they visit, when they talk about locally-grown organic food and Iraq and Pinochet, that I feel different, apart, alone, in my foreign accent, my still cringing from snow after all these years, my not being sufficiently outraged by hormones in milk.

"Dada looks like a corpse, he's bloated." Chuma says it so brutally, so plainly, that I know he is punishing me; he could have talked about the past, why I chose to be distant for so long – although I cannot think of any reasons.

"I wish I had talked to Aunty Ife after she left him. I wish I kept in touch," I say and I wonder if it has come out sounding like a mumble. I feel small. I turn and stare out of the window, although now I cannot see what we are driving past. Chuma had distanced himself from Dada – moving to Port Harcourt after university, refusing to accept any help from Dada or to participate in Dada's life – but not from Aunty Ife. She had never gone back to Nsukka, the government made things difficult for her to do so, and so instead had moved to London after she left Dada; she had sent me letters but I blackly ignored her as I ignored Dada.

"She's talking of coming back now that we have civilians." Chuma reduces the volume of the radio. "We e-mail."

The first crisis of their marriage was when Dada decided that he would join the bank. Aunty Ife thought the bank was shady, thought Dada should focus on the book he planned to write, but Dada joined anyway, perhaps because it was heady for him to see that power was people and that he was now able to touch power, to drink beer with power, to go to the polo club with power. The second crisis was when Aunty Ife decided to resign. She was achieving nothing at the corrupt agency, the Head of State was a fraud, she no longer believed our future lay in a benevolent dictatorship, he had banned the union of university academics and she wanted to go back to Nsukka and be a part of things. But Dada said he was about to be made managing director of the bank and could not go back to Nsukka. Not yet. Aunty Ife resigned anyway and Dada bought a house in Victoria Island and we moved in. The third crisis of their marriage was when Dada became an adviser to the military government – a job for which Aunty Ife said he had lobbied behind her back – and after the loud shouting match, her accusing him of not wanting to go back to Nsukka again, she began to say less and less and I began to look at her with a fierce contempt. Why did I blame her? Why was I unwilling to give Dada the full responsibility that was his? It was because she was stronger than Dada, had always been stronger, and I had expected her to remain unchanged. It was, also, because she had moved us to Lagos; a feeling I cannot shake off: that by moving us to Lagos, Aunty Ife tampered with our destiny.

"We are here," Chuma says. "This is where I live."

When I step out of the car, my heels sink into the sand. I bend and pick some brittle grains, rub them between my fingers, and I remember Chuma and I doing the same thing when we first moved to Lagos, both of us mourning the fact that the earth was not red but an ordinary bleached brown. I see the slight twist to Chuma's lips now, the way a local would sneer at an over-enthusiastic tourist.

Kachi is oval-faced, plump, and I can tell she uses bleaching creams and that she concentrates on her face, because it is disconcerting whenever she raises a hand to her face, how her brown fingers contrast with her fair face. We hug briefly in greeting. There is a flustered quality to her movements and later, when I join her in the kitchen, she drops a hand-towel, she shouts at her housegirl when making normal conversation. I look at her and feel that there is so much that has passed me by: my brother has married a woman I would never have imagined.

"Sorry our soap here is not as good as the one you Americans have," she says. "Can you manage the bathroom without a shower? I know our pillows are not like the ones in America, please manage." And she speaks in a comic American accent, as if my presence has somehow necessitated it. When she asks, "You wanna drink some war-rah?" I want to gently gather her in my arms and tell her to stop. Instead I take the glass of water that she presents on a saucer and move away to look at the photos on the living room shelf. I hope that Chuma has put up the wedding photo of Findley and me that I sent. He has not. But there is my favourite photo of our mother, leaning on Dada's shoulder, her braids hanging down her face, propping me, a baby, on her hip with one hand. Chuma is holding on to her wrapper, looking up at her as though asking that she pick him up too. The photo is grainy and grayed, but I know from my copy that she looks surprised, that her eyes are slightly widened. There is a photo of Aunty Ife and Dada on the verandah in Nsukka, sitting on cane chairs, perhaps it is the version of them that Chuma wants to remember, when Dada still had dry skin and Aunty Ife still made Fruit Crumble Pie. We never ate Fruit Crumble Pie in Lagos; instead we ate stews and soups obscenely piled with meat made by the uniformed stewards. The dinner

Kachi lays out on the squeaky table is almost as decadent as Kachidi, platters of fried meat and fried rice and fried plantains, and when I tell her I won't have any meat, she says, "What about luncheon meat? Or corned beef?" I tell her I am vegetarian and for the first time in years, I wish I wasn't, I wish I could eat the meat if only it would calm her down.

"I don't like to eat too much meat myself," she says and I pretend not to notice the disgusted surprise on Chuma's face.

Chuma speaks mostly Igbo throughout dinner, but Kachi speaks only English, sometimes with that pseudo-American accent and sometimes not, when she seems to forget. Even when I compliment the rice and say, "o *toka*," she thanks me in English.

After dinner, I sit with Chuma in the living room. The power is gone and Kachi lights a kerosene lamp and places it on the table. The flickering yellow light bathes the room in shadows. "Sorry about this, I don't know why they have taken this light now," she says, before leaving us. I wonder why she doesn't stay, perhaps she thinks Chuma and I want to be alone. A neighbour's generator starts up, a vibrating rumbling noise and I realise how happy I am, sitting here with my brother in the half-light.

"I'd like to go to Nsukka before I leave, just to see how things have changed."

There is a pause before Chuma says, "I haven't been back since I went with Aunty Ife to pack our things and formally hand over the houses to the university."

"Had things changed very much?"

"Does anything ever remain the same?" He is staring at the kerosene lamp. His face is inscrutable and I fight the fear that I may never reach him again.

"I can't forget how windy it was the day Dada told us we would move to Lagos," I say.

"Windy *kwa*? It was not windy at all. It was a still cold harmattan day," Chuma says and his tone is dismissive as if I have no idea what I am saying.

He told me once in a letter a few years ago that it is not my running away in America that he does not comprehend, but that it is my doing it alone, my not telling him. And I wish now that I had words to explain what even I do not understand. I wish I can make it easy for Chuma to see that at the start of that short holiday we took in New York, with Aunty Ife and Dada, I had no plans at all of running away. And even now, I still don't know why I bolted, why I simply left the mall and instead of going back to our hotel to get ready to return to Nigeria, I called my old friend Adaeze whose family lived in Brooklyn. I have never told Chuma that I always assumed he would join me, only that the Americans decided shortly after that to refuse entrance visas to the highly placed members of the regime and their families.

"Kachi is very nice," I say and he shrugs. I want to ask if he is happy, but most of all, I want to ask why he married her, a woman so unlike him, so unlike what we were. But then he must think Findley is unlike what we were, too. And what were we, anyway?

I do not realise I have asked this aloud until Chuma says, "What do you mean 'what were we?'"

He is looking at me oddly. It is a mix of accusation and resentment and – perhaps because I choose to see it – something softer and enduring, something that was in both our eyes as Dada drove us away from Nsukka, our hands holding the grasshoppers we had caught near the lantana bushes in our front yard. We held those grasshoppers until they died, just before we crossed the river Niger.

"Sorry, I was just thinking aloud," I say.

Chuma remains silent.

"What will I tell Dada?" I ask.

"I don't know. Just tell him you are here. He may not understand. He's been delirious."

I want to weep, I want to walk backwards until I get to that point in the past where I can re-arrange, where I can re-choreograph our fate.

"Remember how Dada didn't drink in Nsukka?" I asked. "He said drink slowed down your brain."

"He said it was Mama who told him that," Chuma replies. "He used to drink when he was a student at Ibadan, before he met her."

Mama. She died when we were so young that hearing that word is strange. I do not remember using it; I do not remember if that is even what we called her. And yet, we never felt motherless, because of the self-delusions that Dada gave us – *when the first rains come, your mother helps the grass grow* – and because of Aunty Ife.

The power comes back then, the fluorescent lamp blinking to life, flooding the living room with white light. Chuma and I sit for a long time, in silence, and I hope that he, too, is remembering.

It is anti-climactic, seeing Dada lying on white sheets, a swollen body, skin the colour of a badly wiped blackboard. There's ammonia in his brain; Chuma told me this as we walked into the hospital, and the doctors say he will go into a coma soon and will never come out of the coma.

"Dada, it's me," I say when he stirs. "It's Nkeonyelu."

"We prefer self-government with danger to servitude in tranquillity," he mumbles.

I stand for so long that one of the nurses leads me to a chair. I feel like a firm balloon that has been untied to let the air fizzle out.

"He's been saying that since he became delirious," Chuma says as he drives us back from the hospital. He must feel the emptiness too. He must know that we lost Dada when he started to ooze oil, that we will mourn him only as a formality. I wish I had not gone to that hospital.

We are driving past a bus, high and yellow like the Connecticut school buses with their flashing-red stop sign to hold back cars, to keep children safe as they cross the road carrying backpacks and a nonchalant certainty about their lives.

This bus is not a school bus, not as clean, does not have a stop sign attached to it. It is rusty, emits chokingly-thick exhaust fumes and is so full a man in a torn white singlet is hanging out of the door, holding on, this stranger with whom I feel a sudden mutuality, half of him in the bus and the other half not. Chuma turns on the radio and I reach out and cover his hand with mine; for a moment I fear he will shrug his free but he doesn't.

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