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# DREAM COUNT

A NOVEL

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# Chiamaka

## ONE

I have always longed to be known, truly known, by another human being. Sometimes we live for years with yearnings that we cannot name. Until a crack appears in the sky and widens and reveals us to ourselves, as the pandemic did, because it was during lockdown that I began to sift through my life and give names to things long unnamed. I vowed at first to make the most of this collective sequestering: if I had no choice but to stay indoors, then I would oil my thinning edges every day, drink eight tall glasses of water, jog on the treadmill, sleep long, luxurious hours, and pat rich serums on my skin. I would write new travel pieces from old unused notes, and if lockdown lasted long enough, I might finally have the heft I needed for a book. But only days in, and I was spiralling inside a bottomless well. Words and warnings swirled and spun, and I felt as if all human progress was swiftly reversing to an ancient stage of confusion that should by now have been extinct. Don't touch your face; wash your hands; don't go outside; spray disinfectant; wash your hands; don't go outside; don't touch your face. Did washing my face count as touching? I always used a face towel, but one morning my palm grazed my cheek and I froze, the tap water still running. It couldn't matter, surely, since I never even stepped outside, but what did 'don't touch your face' and 'wash your hands' mean when nobody knew how this had started, when it would end, or what even it was? I woke up daily assailed by anxiety, my heart stirring itself into a race, without my

permission, and sometimes I pressed my palm to my chest and held it there. I was alone in my house in Maryland, in suburban silence, the eerie roads bordered by trees that themselves seemed stilled by the quiet. No cars drove past. I looked out and saw a herd of deer striding across the clearing of my front yard. About ten deer, or maybe fifteen, nothing like the lone deer I would see from time to time chewing shyly in the grass. I felt frightened of them, their unusual boldness, as though my world was about to be overrun not just by deer, but by other lurking creatures I could not imagine. Sometimes I barely ate, wandering into the pantry to nibble on crackers, and other times I dug out forgotten bags of frozen vegetables and cooked spicy beans that reminded me of childhood. The formless days bled into one another and I had the sensation of time turning inward. My joints throbbed, and the muscles of my back, and the sides of my neck, as if my body knew too well that we are not made to live like this. I did not write because I could not write. I never turned on my treadmill. On Zoom calls, everyone echoed, reaching but not touching, the distance between us all further hollowed out.

MY BEST FRIEND, Zikora, nearby in DC, called one afternoon and said she was at Walmart buying toilet paper.

'You went out!' I said, almost shouting.

'I'm double-masked and I'm wearing gloves,' she said. 'The police are here organizing the line for toilet paper – can you imagine?' Zikora switched to Igbo and continued, 'People are shouting at each other. I'm really afraid someone will soon pull a gun. This White man in front of me is suspect; he came in a massive truck and he's wearing a red hat.'

We never spoke pure Igbo–English words always littered our sentences – but Zikora had vigilantly shed all English in case strangers overheard, and now she sounded contrived, like a bad TV drama about precolonial times. *A man riding a big land boat and wearing a hat the colour of blood.* I began to laugh and she began to laugh, and I felt briefly released, restored.

'Honestly, Zikor, you shouldn't have gone out.'

'But we need toilet paper.'

'I think it's finally time for us to start washing our bums,' I said, and in the next moment Zikora and I chorused, 'You are not clean!'

I had told the story so many times over the years, about Abdul, our gateman in Enugu – willowy Abdul in his long jellabiya, walking one evening to the latrine in the back, holding his plastic kettle of water, and then turning to calmly tell me, 'You Christians use tissue after toilet. You are not clean.'

ON OUR FAMILY ZOOM CALL, I said, 'The greatest crime you can commit in America today is to disrupt the long lines of people waiting to buy toilet paper in supermarkets. The police are now very busy guarding toilet-paper lines all across the country.'

I hoped everyone would laugh – we used to laugh so much – but only my father did. My twin brothers were on the cusp of yet another argument.

My mother said, 'I've never understood why Americans call it paper. Toilet paper. It sounds rough. Why not toilet tissue or toilet roll?'

We spoke on Zoom every other day – my parents in Enugu, my brother Afam in Lagos, and his twin, Bunachi, in London. Each call was like an overcast day, bleak and burdened with the latest bad news.

My parents talked of death, of the dying and the dead, and my brothers were brazenly barbed with each other, no longer bothering to shield my parents from their hostility. It was as if we could no longer be ourselves because the world was not itself. We talked about the rising numbers of Nigerian cases, changing day by day, state by state, in a macabre competition. Lagos had the most for now, and then Cross River was next. Afam sent us a video of an ambulance in his estate, screaming its way down his street, and captioned it 'one down'. Bunachi said doctors in the UK wouldn't be getting any protective gowns soon, because the people who made them in China were dead. I always joined the call last, and I pretended I had been on other calls with editors, when in fact I was just staring at my phone, bracing myself to click 'Join'. My parents had returned to Nigeria from Paris

just before lockdown and my mother often said, 'Imagine if we had been stranded in Europe. This thing is killing our age-mates there like flies.'

'Imagine the disaster if we had Europe's death rates,' my father said.

'God is saving Nigeria; there is no other explanation,' Afam said.

'There's magic,' Bunachi said waspishly. Then he added, 'Europe is just honest at recording coronavirus deaths.'

'No, no, no,' my father said. 'If we had high death rates, we wouldn't be able to hide it. We're too disorganized; we're not China.'

'Jesus, Mary and Joseph. All these numbers are people, people,' my mother said, her face turned away, watching TV.

'I took a spoon to an ATM this morning,' Afam said.

'A spoon?' my mother asked, fully frontal again.

'I just didn't want to touch that machine, so I pressed in my pass-code with the spoon and then threw the spoon away,' Afam said.

'You didn't wear gloves?' my mother asked.

'I did, but who knows if coronavirus can pass through gloves?' Afam said.

'The virus dies in seconds on solid surfaces. You just wasted a spoon,' Bunachi said, all-knowing as ever. A few days before, he had declared that ventilators were not the right treatment for coronavirus. He was an accountant.

'But you should not have gone out in the first place, Afam,' my father said. 'What are you doing with cash, anyway? You people stocked up well.'

'I need cash. Lagos is very tense,' Afam said.

'Tense how?' Bunachi asked, and Afam ignored him until my father asked, 'What do you mean by tense?'

'Mobs are gathering at estates all over The Island, asking for money and food. You know many people earn their living day-to-day; they don't have anything to fall back on. All these hawkers on the road. I saw a video where somebody in a mob was saying they don't want lockdown, that it's the rich who go abroad and catch coronavirus, and since they washed our clothes and pumped our car tyres

before lockdown, we should now feed them. To be fair, there's a kind of logic to it.'

'There's no logic to it. They're just criminals,' Bunachi said.

'They're hungry,' Afam said. 'I even walked to the ATM. I heard that if you dare drive out in an expensive car, they chase you with sticks.'

He lived in an estate of hulking houses where visitors needed unique passcodes at the electronic entrance gates. The next day, he said the mob had beaten the guards, and were banging at the gates, trying to deactivate the security system.

'They've started a fire just by the entrance,' he said. 'I've never seen our WhatsApp group so active. We're all contributing money, trying to work out how best to get it to them.'

'Do you still think they are harmless?' Bunachi taunted.

'I never said they were harmless. I said they were hungry,' Afam said.

On his screen, we saw grey smoke rising into the evening sky. He looked fragile and untested, standing there by a tall potted plant in his marble balcony. The plant was so verdant, leaves so lushly full, that it startled me to remember when life was ordinary and my brother master of his days, running his businesses, a young Lagos Big Man with power in his pockets. Now he was standing there while his wife barricaded their two children in the kitchen because the kitchen had the sturdiest door. He was trying to look unafraid, which only made him look afraid, and I thought how breakable we all are, and how easily we forget how breakable we are. A loud bang split the air, and I jumped, unsure for a moment whether it had come from Afam's screen or from outside my window.

'Did you hear that?' Afam said. 'Some kind of explosion at the gate.'

'It's nothing serious,' my father said. 'They must have thrown a can of insecticide into the fire.'

'Afam, go inside and lock all the doors,' my mother said.

To change the subject, I said high-dose vitamin C was sold out everywhere online. Bunachi, of course, knew it all and said vita-

min C didn't prevent the virus, and he would send us the recipe for an infusion made with fresh basil, which we should inhale daily.

'Nobody has fresh basil,' Afam snapped.

Bunachi began to recite the latest statistics on deaths by country and I said, 'My battery is dying', and hung up. I sent Afam a text, ending with a line of red heart emojis: *Hang in there, bro, you'll all be fine.*

MY COUSIN OMELOGOR said nothing of the sort was happening in Abuja, Abuja was milder than Lagos, as always, it was like a Lagos bleached by sun, nutrients leaking away.

'People are dying and people are having birthday parties,' she said.

'What?'

'The president's chief of staff died yesterday of coronavirus and this morning Ejiro invited me to her birthday party. I told her that if I want to risk death, I will choose a better way than her birthday party.'

It jarred to hear Omelogor say 'died' and 'death'; she rarely spoke of symptoms or numbers of the dead. She talked of resealing cartons of Indomie noodles with strong Sellotape before leaving them at the gate of a motherless baby's home; or of the surge, since lockdown, of web traffic on her website, For Men Only, more unique visitors from more countries, many asking her to make a video and finally reveal herself. 'It almost feels intimate, asking me to make a video,' Omelogor said with laughter in her voice. Of all the people I loved, Omelogor was the most like herself still, undefeated by this communal unknown; she always looked awake and showered and alive with plans. 'Chia, this thing will pass. Human beings have survived many plagues throughout history,' she said often, sensing my sagging spirits, and her tone bolstered me, even though 'plague' reminded me, for some reason, of blood leeches.

'Don't call it a plague,' I said.

Sometimes we didn't talk, propping our phones on a book, or a mug, sharing our silences and our background sounds. Only with

Omelogor was silence tolerable. On Zoom calls with friends, quiet felt like failure, and so I talked and talked, thinking how quickly we adapt, or pretend to adapt, to a life reduced to screen and sound. Zikora said she liked working from home, in her bed, because she could hear Chidera's high-pitched crying from the living room, and the low tones of her mother's soothing voice. Chidera was crying so much, asking to go to the playground, that she had finally let him watch cartoons for the first time in his life, and he had looked scared when the first show started, but now he sat, hypnotized, in front of the TV and wailed when her mother turned it off. LaShawn, in Philadelphia, was making sourdough bread and leaving plates of fried chicken on the landing for her mother, who was quarantined upstairs because they weren't taking chances. Hlonipha, in Johannesburg, said she had unplugged her Wi-Fi and was painting watercolours, but they made her sad because they seemed too watery, too faded. Lavanya, in London, was always drinking red wine, raising the bottle to her screen as she refilled her glass. Her neighbour had died of coronavirus, an old lady who lived alone with her dog, and nobody had taken the dog, and she could hear it barking and it broke her heart, but she didn't know if dogs got coronavirus too.

Soon the Zoom calls became a *mélange* of hallucinatory images. At the end of each call, I felt lonelier than before, not because the call had ended but that it had been made at all. To talk was to remember all that was lost. I longed to hear another person breathing close by. I dreamed of hugging my mother in the anteroom of our home in Enugu, and I woke up surprised because I had not consciously thought of hugging her. I wished I was not alone. If only Kadiatou had agreed to bring Binta and quarantine with me. But I understood her wanting to be in her apartment, even as I worried so much about her. A few days before lockdown, she had said, 'I wait in my apartment.' Wait. We really were all waiting. Lockdown was an unknown waiting for an unknown end, and Kadiatou's was heightened by untamed pain. I called her daily, and when she didn't pick up, I called Binta to make sure she was fine. We spoke on WhatsApp video because she didn't have Zoom. 'How are you, Kadi?' I would ask, and she would respond, 'We are okay, we thank God.' Sometimes

she said, 'Miss Chia, don't worry about me', her voice quiet, unwilling to make a fuss. And yet only weeks before, that same voice, raised in panic, was shouting on the phone, 'He will send people to kill me! He will send people to kill me!' She had refused therapy, shaking her head, saying, 'I cannot talk to stranger, I cannot talk to stranger.' All she wanted was for the trial to be over, but court cases were suspended now, and I worried that, stuck in lockdown's limbo, she might succumb to darkness.

'How will I get a job again after this? How will I get a job again?' she asked me, and she sounded so despondent that I wanted to weep.

'You can open your restaurant after the trial is over, Kadi,' I said.

'Nobody will go to restaurant again after corona,' she said flatly.

On one call, a flash of aggression from Kadiatou startled me. 'Don't send money again, Miss Chia. You give me enough already.' She had never spoken in that tone to me before. Hushed tension settled across distance, between screens.

'Okay, Kadi,' I said, finally. She hung up without saying goodbye, and I waited a few days before calling her again. Whenever I asked Binta, 'How is your mom doing?' her reply was the same: 'She cries at night.'

*Nobody will go to restaurant again.* I could not imagine this new isolated existence, where people no longer went out to eat, because I needed to believe that the world could still be an enchanted place again.

**THE SILENCE OUTSIDE** frightened me. The news frightened me. I read of old men and old women dying alone, as if unloved, while the people who loved them stood weeping behind glass screens. On television, I saw bodies carried out like stiff mannequins wrapped in white, and I mourned the loss of strangers. I scoured Twitter for coronavirus hashtags, and on Google Translate I pasted the tweets of Italian doctors who seemed to know what they were talking about. Which wasn't much, because in the end, everybody knew so little, all feeling their way in the dark. Each new symptom I learned about, I imagined that I had, and the symptoms kept changing – every day

a new surprise, from face rashes to foot sores, like a freewheeling apocalypse with no sign of an end. An itch in my toe or a hoarse morning throat and I would panic, and tell myself, 'Breathe, breathe', mimicking the meditation apps that I never took seriously before.

Often I felt a dull torpor numbing its way through me, and then sometimes the rising heat of restlessness. Zoom calls became strained with the effort of good cheer, especially the group calls with friends in which everyone brandished a glass of wine. I began to avoid them, and to avoid our family calls. I ignored even Omelogor's calls, and nobody was closer to me than Omelogor, but talking to her became an effort because talking at all was an effort. I lay in bed and did nothing, and I felt bad for doing nothing, but still I did nothing. I sent texts to friends to say I was writing, and because I was lying, I gave too many details, instead of keeping the messages short. To lessen my sense of doom, I decided to stop following the news. I ignored the Internet and television and read Agatha Christie mysteries, gladly escaping into their genteel improbability. Then the news swallowed me whole again. I drank ginger in warm water and added lemon juice from a fissured old bottle sitting in the back of my fridge, and from my spice cabinet, cayenne pepper and garlic and ground turmeric, until the mixture made me nauseous. Every morning, I was hesitant to rise, because to get out of bed was to approach again the possibility of sorrow.

In this new suspended life, I one day found a grey hair on my head. It appeared overnight, near my temple, tightly coiled, and in the bathroom mirror I first thought it was a piece of lint. A single grey hair with a slight sheen to it. I unfurled it to its full length, let it go, and then unfurled it again. I didn't pull it out. I thought: I'm growing old. I'm growing old and the world has changed and I have never been truly known. A rush of raw melancholy brought tears to my eyes. This is all there is, this fragile breathing in and out. Where have all the years gone, and have I made the most of life? But what is the final measure for making the most of life, and how would I know if I have?

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