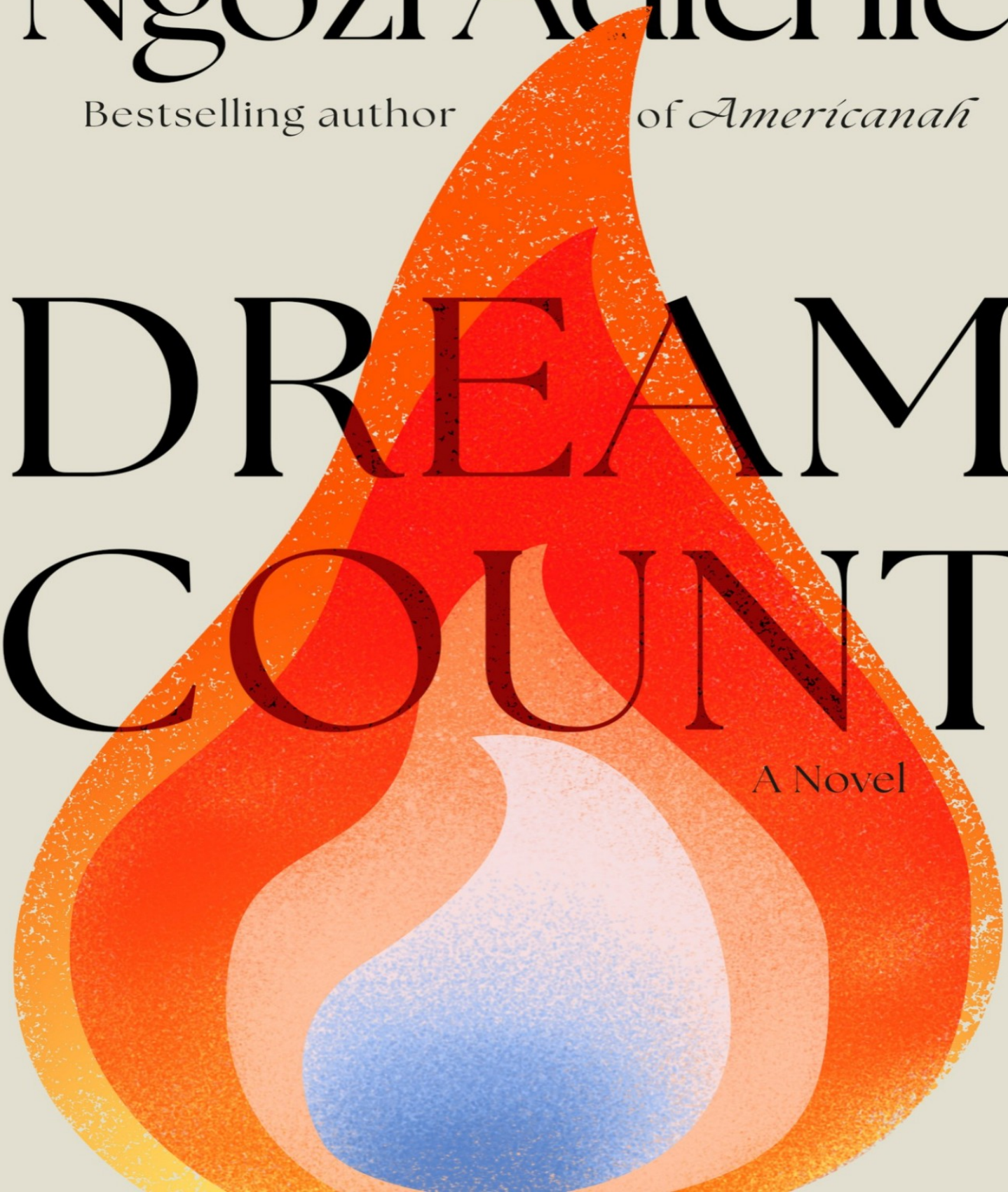
Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Bestselling author of *Americanah*

DREAM COUNT

A Novel



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DREAM COUNT

A NOVEL

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

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In memory of my beautiful, beloved mother,

Grace Ifeoma Adichie (née Odigwe)

NOVEMBER 29, 1942–MARCH 1, 2021

Uwa m uwa ozo, i ga-abu nne m

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 spiraling 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 D.C., 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 color 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 passcode 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 tires 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 gray 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 vitamin 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 watercolors, 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 neighbor 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 gray 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 gray 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?

—

TO LOOK BACK at the past was to be flooded by regret. I don't know which came first—whether I began to nurse regrets and then Googled the men in my past, or whether Googling the men in my past left me swamped with regrets. I thought of all the beginnings, and the lightness of being that comes with beginnings. I grieved the time lost in hoping that whatever I had would turn to wonder. I grieved what I did not even know to be true, that there was someone out there who had passed me by, who might not just have loved me but truly known me.

There was a Korean boy in a music class I took in freshman year, so long ago, my first year in America when everything was still new. Introduction to Music. The small White professor was enthusiastic, fast-talking, and the stream of her American English, with a strong regional accent, was so strange, like an unending burring sound, that I often felt lost. One day I looked across at the student next to me, to see if he had caught her last words, and on his page were not letters I recognized but delicate images, made of the briefest, most elusive of lines. I stared, fascinated by the beautiful calligraphy of Korean, impressed that he could write such a thing and make meaning of it. In my memory, this is how I first noticed him, but

our memories lie. How did I know it was Korean, since I didn't know the difference between Japanese and Chinese and Korean? I don't know how I knew but I did, and I knew, too, that if he was writing in Korean, then he must have come from Korea; he was not an American, we were similar, and so his days, like mine, must be owned by loneliness. I willed his attention but did nothing to attract it. He was handsome, stocky and solid, his hair cut to a spiky shortness that felt to me like a marvelous defiance. He always walked into class with his face lowered, as if shy or preoccupied, shrugging his backpack to the floor before he sat down. I imagined us holding hands and sitting on the lawn where American students ate their sandwiches in the sun. We would be like those students who took trips to the beach in a car, coming back to park in front of the dorm, tipsy, carefree, dripping sand and salt water. Each Wednesday and Friday before music class, I planned to write my phone number on a piece of paper; it felt daring and exciting, something people did in films, people who knew how things were done. For weeks I sat next to him in class, his nearness an electric pulse in the air, but I didn't write the number until the week before finals. I added, *Do you want to meet later?* Then I tore it up, and as we settled in for our exam, I wrote just my name and number on the back of a café receipt. I never gave it to him. I handed in my blue book and walked away. I never saw him again, my handsome spiky-haired Korean. I scanned classes and hallways throughout the next semester, and once or twice I saw an Asian with angular features, and I looked until I saw that it wasn't him. Perhaps he went back to Korea. Might we be together now, my Korean and I, with a child or two children, visiting Seoul and Lagos, and living in New York City? I don't like New York City. Its air has a tart edge; its anonymity singes. It makes me feel unmoored, like a pebble rattling in a large indifferent gourd. I lived there for a year, just after college, in a one-bedroom on 42nd and Lex, after convincing my father that aspiring writers needed to live in New York. What was it about the city that brought the urge to hide, so that I spent days cowering in my apartment, ordering delivery, and avoiding eye contact with the pleasant doorman. When I gave up on trying to write a novel, I got a job

in advertising and moved away, never wanting to return. Yet New York City often featured in my imagined lives, maybe because it is the city that is supposed to feature in imagined lives. Paris featured too, another city I do not care for. Paris wears its badge of specialness too heavily, and therefore gracelessly; Paris assumes it will charm you merely because it is charming. And Black Parisians look gray, as if the cordial contempt that France reserves for Black French people had formed ash on their skin. This description of Black Parisians came from a man I thought I loved for three years of my life. No, a man I loved for three years; but after it ended, I wished I had not loved him. Darnell. His name was Darnell.

"They look gray and washed out. The French treat their Black folk like shit, but if you're African American, you kind of get a pass," he said.

He told me a story of stepping out of a train in Paris, where uniformed men swooped in and began to ask only the Black people for their papers—*Les papiers! Les papiers!* A quick glance at his blue American passport and they waved him by, and he looked back to see four Black Frenchmen humiliated and huddled by the pillar of the train station while other French people walked unconcernedly by. I wanted Darnell to say he was moved or heartbroken or angered by this, but he said it was the reification of the subjective neo-racial paradigm. Or something like that.

Two

We met at a birthday dinner. My friend LaShawn said people called him the Denzel Washington of academia and his art history classes had long waiting lists, and starry students stalked his office hours. He didn't look like Denzel, but of course Denzel was just a metaphor for men like him, men of coiled beauty. I looked at him and gravity loosened and slipped. The pull I felt was immediate, consuming, elemental, every granular part of me suddenly rushing toward him. In that moment, something was not so much lost as surrendered. He was dark and dark-browed. A few times our eyes met

and held, but he glanced away and then barely paid attention to me. There was a nonchalant slouch in his manner, in how he wore his power; he knew he didn't have to try too hard, with the world yielding so easily to his light. When he spoke, everyone at the table seemed rapt as if they were sitting at his feet, waiting for crumbs of extraordinary insight to fall their way.

"He opposed civil rights and supported apartheid in South Africa, and I'm supposed to mourn him?" he said, very slowly, as if he felt his listeners should have known better than to even bring up the subject. "We've forgotten his 'states' rights' campaign speech? I'm not even talking about his disastrous war on drugs. Man, Reaganomics destroyed us."

I had never heard the word "Reaganomics" before, and for years afterwards, whenever I heard it, an emotion both wistful and bittersweet consumed me. Dinner was over and everyone was saying goodbye, and still he made no move. I wished I was brave enough, like Omelogor, to make the move myself, but I didn't know how to be that kind of woman with men, the one who initiated things. Finally, he asked for my number, not eagerly, but as if he could do with it or not, and yet I felt triumphant.

I have never lied in my life as often as I lied to Darnell. I lied to please him, to be the person he wanted me to be, and sometimes I lied to wrest wretched scraps of reassurance from him. *I'm sick,* I would write, to force a reply, after days of sending him unanswered texts. Sometimes he replied right away, and other times he waited a day or two. *Feel better,* was all he would write; not a question that opened the door for more, not *How are you feeling now?* or *What's going on?* My days passed as emptiness until I saw him again. My phone lay always beside me on my desk, never on silent, for fear I might miss his call. When it beeped with a text message, I snatched it up and felt annoyed with whoever had texted, as if by texting they had taken up the space meant for him. His silences astonished me; how could my force of feeling not cause in him a similar obsession? I imagined him looking through boxes of papers in the bowels of the library, sneezing from the dust, and not thinking of me, while my every moment was mined in thoughts of him. I was trying again to write a novel and already failing again, but in his