

[Home](#) [About us](#) [Contact Us](#) [June 12 2019 1:29pm](#) [Login](#) [Subscribe](#)[Home](#)[HOME > MAGAZINE](#)

## Tomorrow is too far

---

Only your cousin Dozie knows who killed your brother Nonso

by [Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie](#) / January 22, 2006 / [Leave a comment](#)

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 not Grandmama. You remember the heat of that summer clearly, even now, thirteen years later, the way Grandmama's yard felt like a steamy bathroom, 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. Yellow-bellied bees buzzed around you, your brother Nonso and your cousin Dozie's heads. 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 fruit.

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 although Dozie was eleven, 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 slough of a snake on the lawn, unbroken and fine 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 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 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. It was the summer you discovered that the strongest of your emotions developed in direct proportion to one another: that your hate for your brother Nonso grew so much you felt it squeezing your nostrils while your love for your cousin Dozie ballooned and wrapped around your skin.

It was the summer you watched a mango tree crack in two near-perfect halves during a thunderstorm, the kind 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 dry season, when it could either pour all day, silver rain splashing on to the veranda where you and Nonso and Dozie sat and slapped away mosquitoes and ate roast corn, or the sun could 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 a 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 neighbours 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 the neighbour who unclasped you and Dozie's hands, made you sit down, and tried 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 right away, that he was American by birth. Grandmama was repeating your mother's words and shaking her head. Madness lurked in her eyes.

You knew Grandmama had never liked your mother, and would not like her even if she was Nigerian, even if she had not been an American. (You heard Grandmama say this some summers before to a neighbour – at least the woman gave me one grandson.) But watching Grandmama on the phone, you realised that for the first time, and for the last time, she and your mother were united, although they did not know it. You were sure your mother had the same red madness in her eyes.

When you talked to your mother, her voice echoed in a way it had never done all the years before that 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. 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 where there were no phones or radios. She did not say exactly where he was but you thought it was Peru (or maybe Cuba, you knew it was a four-letter country with Spanish-speakers) attending a Black Arts festival. Finally, she laughed a hard laugh before she told you everything would be fine and she was going to arrange for Nonso's body to be flown back, a laugh like the bark of a dog. It made you think of her normal laugh, a hohoho laugh that started deep inside her belly and did not soften as it came up and did not suit her willowy body. When she went into Nonso's room to say goodnight, 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 goodnight, darling, sleep well. She never left your room with that laugh.

After the phone call, Grandmama lay flat on the floor and rolled back and forth, like she was playing some sort of silly game, and 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 take you in her arms, then you wished she wouldn't.

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

Dozie is watching you, and you wonder if he wants to see you cry. You want to tell him that would be a bit of a stretch, crying now. At the airport, he had hugged you cautiously, said welcome, and that he didn't think you would come 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 your neighbour'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 huge afros and pierced breasts or that when she called, you always hung up while she was speaking. He did not ask about your father and you wondered if it was because he knew where your father was. The last time you heard from your father, two years ago, when he sent you a card after your graduation, he was in Mali.

You move towards the avocado tree. Dozie is still watching you and you look at him and try to remember the love that used to clog you up. There is a gentle sorrow in the lines across his forehead, a humility 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 he felt about being the

wrong grandson, the one who did not bear the Nnabuisi name.

When he called you in Virginia a month ago to tell you that Grandmama had died, you had remained silent on the phone for so long he hung up and called back, thinking the line had cut off. You were beyond surprise. You thought Grandmama had died long ago. You thought you would never hear Dozie's voice again. Ever since Dozie's mother, your Aunty Nkiru, came and took him away a day after Nonso's death, ever since your mother took you away and cut all ties with Nigeria, you had refused to think of Dozie. You had fought with yourself until you felt the sweat running down your arms. But you succeeded in not thinking about him. Until his phone call. Thirteen years.

Dozie starts to say something, startling you. Your hands are on the trunk of the avocado tree.

I was with Grandmama shortly before she died, Dozie says.

You say nothing; you are thinking that Grandmama stayed alive too long.

You know the last person Grandmama talked about before she died? Dozie asks. Nonso. Only Nonso. Yes, Nonso, after all these years.

At that moment you want to walk over and slap Dozie, kick him, dig your nails into his neck.

Instead you press your palms deep into the rough trunk. 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 laughed dismissively 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, like placing a very ripe corn against a blackboard. Your father stood away from the both of you, in his usual dashiki, milk-coloured cowries coiled round his neck. He looked as if he was not family, as if he was 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 even 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 type-written sentences. You did not want his photographs of pigeons in the park that your father said had so much promise for a child. You did not want his paintings, which were mere copies of your father's only in different colours. Or his clothes. Or his stamp collection.

Your mother brought Nonso up, finally, 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. 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.

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 hit his head on a rock 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 college, cursed the day she became infatuated with Igbo culture, cursed her sending her children to Nigeria to learn Igbo ways. Then she called your father, you heard her shouting on the phone – your mother is responsible! She could have done something 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 wondered if he, too, believed you.

Dozie's words float around in your head now: Grandmama talked about Nonso before she died, Grandmama talked only about Nonso, after all these years, only Nonso. The words make 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 goodnight visits to your room with that deep hohoho laugh. Instead she held you too gingerly while saying goodnight, spoke in whispers, and you started to avoid her kisses by faking racking coughs and convoluted sneezes.

Dozie speaks now, tells you that he is glad you came, his voice sounding far off. You want to tell him that you surprised yourself when you went out to buy an airline ticket after his call because you did not know why you were coming back and you still do not know. But instead 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, as though he ate an orange and did not wash his hands. He turns you around and looks at you and you look at him, and he tells you he wanted so many things but mostly he wanted Grandmama to let you climb a fruit tree and shake a loaded branch.

You turn away. 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-white pattern. You feel a rush of gratitude and pity and love and contempt for Dozie for not wanting more, for accepting so little. And you wonder about destiny – if Nonso was destined always to be loved more, if love on the whole is always predestined, if it is ever possible to earn love, or to obtain love that was not originally portioned out for you. It strikes you too – the illogic of missing something you never had.

That summer, thirteen years ago, was the summer of your first self-realisation. The summer you knew that something had to happen to Nonso, so that you could survive. Even at

nine 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 maimed, maybe twist his legs. You wanted to mar the perfection of his 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, shoulders touching, when you suggested Nonso climb to the top of the avocado tree. It was easy to persuade him; 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. Who do you think I made it for? As though you were not there. Sometimes she would laugh and 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 felt rather than 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 nervously 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. You don't remember if it was right then or later that you felt you had not come to the end of something, rather that you had come to the beginning.

Thirteen years is long enough to forget, long enough to choose what to remember.

**GO TO COMMENTS**



## Related articles

---



### New stories by the "Cat Person" author mingle sexual disgust and thrill

**Catherine Humble** / March 6, 2019

But overall the collection is emotionally slight

---

## SHARE WITH FRIENDS

---

---

## Comments

---

No comments yet

### PROSPECT'S FREE NEWSLETTER

The big ideas that are shaping our world—straight to your inbox.  
PLUS a free e-book and 7 articles of your choosing on the  
*Prospect* website.

Enter your Email

Sign Up

*Prospect* may process your personal information for our legitimate business purposes, to provide you with our newsletter, subscription offers and other relevant information. Click here to learn more about these purposes and how we use your data. You will be able to opt-out of further contact on the next page and in all our communications.

THIS MONTH'S MAGAZINE



Prospect is the leading magazine of ideas. Each month it is packed with the finest writing on politics, culture, economics and ideas. Subscribe today and join the debate.

SUBSCRIBE

MOST POPULAR

Read

Commented

**Why every possible Brexit outcome spells disaster for the Conservative Party**

**In scripture, we find not just religious thought and theory—but a challenge to how we read**

**After Brexit they will come for human rights—and this time the public debate must be won**

**Britain's national genius lay in moderation—now we risk losing our heads**

About this author



**Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie**

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is the author of Purple Hibiscus (4th Estate)

[More by this author](#)

More by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

**The thing around your neck**

June 20, 2004

NEXT PROSPECT EVENTS

**Prospect Book Club - Clare Carlisle**

London, 2019-09-16

[Details](#)

**Prospect Book Club - Julia Lovell**

London, 2019-07-15

[Details](#)

**James Graham in conversation with Tom Clark**

London, 2019-06-20

[Details](#)

[See more events](#)

SPONSORED FEATURES

**Lessons in leadership**

**The future of Britain's automotive industry**

**Advancing social equality**

**Liam Fox interview—A world beyond Europe**

**A forward thinking approach**



The magazine is owned and supported by the Resolution Group, as part of its not-for-profit, public interest activities.

Follow us

### Editorial

Editor: Tom Clark  
Deputy Editor: Steve Bloomfield  
Managing Editor (Arts & Books): Sameer Rahim  
Head of Digital: Stephanie Boland  
Commissioning Editor: Alex Dean  
Digital Assistant: Rebecca Liu  
Creative Director: Mike Turner  
Production Editor & Designer: Chris Tilbury  
US Writer-at-Large: Sam Tanenhaus

### Commercial

Commercial Director: Alex Stevenson  
Head of Marketing: Paul Mortimer  
Marketing & Circulation Executive: Rebecca Ricci  
Head of Events: Victoria Jackson  
Events Assistant: Nadine Prospere  
Head of Advertising Sales: Adam Kinlan 020 3372 2934  
Head of Key Accounts: Scott Smith 020 3372 2972  
Senior Account Manager: Dominic Russell 020 3372 2931

[Home](#) [Advertising](#) [Contact Us](#) [Privacy Policy](#)  
[Terms and Conditions](#) [Acceptable Use Policy](#)

© Prospect Publishing Limited

This site uses cookies to improve the user experience. By using this site, you agree that we can set and use these cookies. For more details on the cookies we use and how to manage them, see our [Privacy and Cookie Policy](#).

Okay, Thanks