

PART ONE

The Present, 2014

Udodi, the Chorus

When Komosu, the beloved,
Wife of the great god Chukwu
Went into his ime obi and opened that door they say
she shouldn't have
Komosu was struck dead by light –

Oke odachi dalu, uwa welu waa
And the world came into being
Chukwu cried to lose his heart, his right hand, his breath

Idemili the divine, the strong, daughter of Chukwu and
Komosu,
Worthy offspring of gods,
Consoled with the bag
Chukwu slung around her neck to heal the world
Of the ills that escaped from akpa afi
Hidden in that room that should have stayed closed

And so the world came
And so evil came
And so beauty came

And so life is . . .

Nani

I fear the man who is my husband.

The mattress heaves every time I turn, unable to sleep. The darkness outside is absolute, as if someone has upended a bottle of ink. A blackness that swallows up light. The room is cool and quiet. Sleep should come easy, swift in its suddenness, but I am fiddling with my phone, knowing that even though my mother can help me now, I will not call her. Too much has happened. If only I could call Doda. When I think of Doda, my father, this is the memory that comes to the fore: Doda sitting at the edge of his bed, my two sisters and me huddled joyfully together in it, his voice washing over us as he tells us a folktale. He smells of Lux soap and Marlboros. In this memory I am nearly eight. Ugo is six. Udodi is twelve. It is the first day of the long vacation and we are already predictably bored. Our mother is somewhere in the house but it is Doda that we seek out. It was always Doda. It was with him that I felt the safest. Even now, when he's no longer here, I will not go to Mother.

I also remember Uncle Ade, Doda's friend, visiting. It is the Friday that Udodi won her school's spelling bee competition and Mother's voice is girlish and happy as

she announces this to the guest. 'My daughter is the smartest girl in her school! She's going to be a lawyer!'

'Too much book is not good for girls ooo,' Uncle Ade says with a little laugh.

'There's nothing like too much book,' Doda says. 'My children will have as much education as there is to be had!'

'You want your daughters to school themselves out of marriage? Who too much book help?' Uncle Ade asks, his voice moist with the laughter that is already spilling out.

'Marriage isn't more important than education,' Doda says, and Uncle Ade bursts into full, raucous laughter now.

'Let me hear you say that again when your three girls are old maids!'

'God forbid,' Mother says. 'My girls will marry and marry well!'

'It wouldn't matter to me if they never did. Their Aunt Erika's perfectly happy without a husband,' Doda says to Mother, pinching my cheek playfully. I am ten years old. Too young to be thinking about marriage. Old enough for the conversation to make me uncomfortable. But I knew then as I know now that Doda meant it. If he were alive, Ephraim would never have happened.

I did not like Uncle Ade. Mother used to say that he carried himself with the smugness of a man with many sons.

'Why?' Udodi asked once. 'What's the big deal about sons?'

'There are people still . . .' Mother said, and paused to remind Aunt Erika, our maid, to freeze some of the guavas she had plucked from the back yard that afternoon. 'There

are people who think sons are more important than daughters. Thank God your Doda isn't like that. Not the sort to kick his wife out for giving him only girls!

Three girls. Udodi was the beginning, I was the middle, Ugo the conclusion. 'You are my short story,' Doda said all the time. The perfect short story. But perfection never lasts, a sleight of hand and everything splinters, your whole life is upended. And then one day you are in someone else's house wondering whether you will ever see your own three children again. My heart's tightness chokes out the rest of my thoughts.

The Past

Udodi, the Chorus

K'anyi tinyelu isi n'Uke n'Uga, anyi na-ayo ka isi kaa ahu.

As we enter this world we beg of the gods: may our heads achieve maturity.

Imagine this: three girls. A father. A mother. The house smells of loving. And living.

Smells of good-timing and a knowing that life is sweet. Until it doesn't. A collision of two worlds. Below, a distant thunder that throws up an explosion. That begins to rock the world above. Torpedoing the house. The three girls. The father. The mother. Starting with this: at school in America. Homesickness is malaria coating my tongue. Gritty dryness in my eyes. Bitterness on my tongue has been there since my finals began and the countdown to the holidays and therefore to Enugu started. Homesickness is crossing out the days on a calendar until the reunion: Father, Mother, three sisters together at last.

'But first *Friends*, yeah?' Bethany, roommate, asks.

'Yeah!' Back to the sylphlike Bethany, witness to my American life. Nights stretched by Vivarin to fit in studies. Who knew one pill could pack so much caffeine?

The universe aligned itself to my favour. The final

episode of *Friends* (Fuck! Yeah!) on NBC hours after my final paper, a party on Sunday, a Zambian student whose parties are legendary, a few days cavorting around Atlanta without the burden of exams and school. Glorious shopping for my sisters, fulfilling wishes of a pair of shoes, a tank top at a time. No one returns empty-handed. And that long flight to Lagos, and then home to Number 47 where I staked my claim the day we moved in, not even ten yet, held my two sisters by the hand and apparently announced, 'My house!'

Imagine this: lying in the back yard of Number 47, stretched out on blankets, looking ragingly magnificent like the wealthy on vacation. Once, I showed Bethany photos of Ugo and Nani leaning on the gate. Doda and Mother lounging at home, the chandelier above them, delicate, like pearls hanging.

'This is Africa?' Bethany asked. 'Are your folks like, what, royalty? Your house is like fuck! A fucking mansion!' Bethany, from Dallas, Georgia.

'America so big, city names are replicated?' I asked.

'America so lacking in imagination?' I asked.

'Fuck off, Yudo' – Bethany, who never gets my name right.

'It's *OOHDOUGH*, Bethany, not *Yudo*!'

'You should call her *Batanie*,' Nani to me when I complained. Mispronounce her name too!

Nani, who doodled all over a classmate's exercise book. Elementary 5. Her best friend, Mbanugo, said her room, of which she was proud, was the size of his closet. The next day at school Nani smuggled out Mbanugo's maths exercise book, hid in the bathroom and went to work: circles and mad swirls where neatness had reigned, chaos

where once peace had been, and got him in trouble with Mrs Ifeacho, the teacher. Nani told me. She told me everything. I knew her better than everyone else who thought her Nani the Quiet. Nani the Patron Saint of the Amenable. Nani to be covered in cotton wool and kept safe. Doda and Mother did not know when Nani ran away from home to punish them for missing her dance recital. She was eleven and deeply hurt. She got as far as the front gate and turned back, binning the soggy sandwiches she had made.

‘I didn’t know where to run to, Udo!’ Of course she did not. Three girls raised in a city but not street smart. Nani, hard at the edges, hardness so well concealed in the soft folds of her body she forgot sometimes that it belonged to her. Ife anyi na-ayo bu ka isi kaa ahu . . .

Nani

On a Sunday morning, a week before Udodi was expected, the phone rang at three a.m. Nobody called before dawn unless it was bad news. If it was happy news, they would wait for a respectable time before calling. People, it seemed, could keep a lid on good news but sad news bubbled impatiently and demanded immediate release. Udodi, six hours behind in Atlanta, knew to time her calls well. She would call in the middle of the day, or in the evening when everyone was home. So when the phone rang, drilling its way into my dream, I knew it was bad news. The insistent ringing woke up the whole house and somehow all four of us – Ugo, Doda, Mother and I – left our beds and made for the sitting room where the phone was, opening and shutting our doors almost in sync as if we had rehearsed it, rubbing our eyes into various stages of wakefulness. We all must have reached the phone at the same time but it was Mother whose hand reached out and picked it up. I muttered a prayer under my breath, warding off whatever bad news was trying to find its way into the house.

‘Hello? Hello?’ Mother sounded agitated, as if ready to quarrel with whomever was calling. ‘Who’s this? What? Who are you? Tell me. Who are you? Eh? Who?’

Mother's tone was similar to the one she used when she got the bill for the disco lights Ugo and I had ordered just the day before. *What's this nonsense? Did you girls buy out an entire store? Tell me.* We had spent the weeks leading up to Udodi's return planning a surprise welcome home party. We missed Udodi. Her leaving tilted something in the balance of our world and Ugo and I could not wait to have her back for the holidays. I gathered stories for her which I couldn't share with Ugo or our parents: the boy in my class, Ebubedike, whom I had kissed and asked to be my boyfriend. How I took flowers and cake from the house to him. It was only to Udodi I could confess that Ebubedike and I were already planning on attending the same university in the US, on marrying after graduation and on having two children. I had invited him to the party.

Father – whom we all called Doda because, for some reason, that was what Udodi had called him from the moment she could speak – and Mother had agreed to let us have whatever we wanted. A proper DJ, not the police band that played at our Christmas party, belting out one old people's tune after another. There would be canopies wearing necklaces of disco lights in the front yard; tables with gold-coloured tablecloths; long buffet tables with meat and fish and rice and spring rolls; jugs of orange juice and apple juice and Chapman. And in the back yard, a bouncy castle and a popcorn machine. 'This bash will be the talk of the estate,' Ugo told everyone she invited. 'Make sure you don't miss it ooo!'

I did not have to wait for my mother to scream and shout for Doda, flinging the phone away from her, 'Come and take the phone, I don't know what this person is

saying about our daughter,' to know that Udodi had died. But it was I who got to the phone before him. Listening, yet completely unable to process what the voice at the other end was saying. Comprehension would come later when I replayed it in my head. Udodi's roommate had called with the impossible news of her death. She was American, this roommate, and had not prepared our parents for the shock the way people did when they brought news of a calamity as huge, as irreversible, as death. She had not asked for friends to sit with the deceased's parents. She had not broken the news to them in thoughtful, padded, manageable chunks. She had not asked if they were fine, had not said that Udodi was 'not very well'. She had just, wham!, given it to them and then repeated the same news to whomever was on the phone: 'I'm sorry Udodi died in a car crash tonight.' Sorry! Like she could have done anything to help it. I gave the phone to Doda, who had been standing beside me all along.

'Hello? Yes.'

He was not shouting. He had his civil servant voice. Polite. Low. Calm. Even under pressure, he never cracked.

'Yes. This is he. I am her father.' Then he kept repeating 'Are you sure? Are you sure?' into the phone, as if he were talking to a child uncertain of their facts. And then he said 'Well . . . well . . . Thanks for letting us know' in a firm voice like he was closing a business deal. But his shoulders sagged as if someone had dropped a huge, invisible weight on them, suddenly and without warning.

When he hung up, his motions slow and careful, Mother shouted, 'What are you thanking her for? What? Thank you for what, eh? What does she know?'

Mother would not take Bethany's word for it. She asked Doda to call the consulate in Atlanta. Mr Aliyu, the vice-consul, was their friend. If anything had happened to Udodi, Mr Aliyu would know. The embassy would be closed, Doda said. 'So call him at home,' Mother said. She stood beside Doda as he dialled. 'Put it on speaker,' she ordered.

The vice-consul picked up almost immediately, as if he was sitting by the phone.

'We heard something,' Doda said. 'Udo's roommate called with some disturbing news.'

Mr Aliyu let out a growl. He was so sorry. The girl should never have called. There are procedures but he wanted them to hear of Udodi's death from someone they knew, in person. He'd been trying to get a mutual friend of theirs who lived in Enugu to come and deliver the news. He was sorry. He was still apologising when Mother's *Nooo* drowned out his voice. And then she was a hurricane whirling in the sitting room, destroying vases and picture frames and upturning side tables and pushing our father, until she wound down and threw herself on the floor and began to wail, shouting, 'I am finished! I am finished! Take my life now. I am finished! Uwa m agwugo!' She pounded the floor. 'What am I still doing alive? Take me, God. Take me, God, and bring Udodi back!'

Dead. Deader. Deadest. I thought of the game we played as children, Udodi, Ugo and me. Three of us lying as still as could be in the middle of the parlour. Whoever stirred first was dead. The longest to stay still was deadest. Our resurrection was always sure and swift. I wanted this to be a game.

The maid, Mmeri, whom Udodi, Ugo and I called Auntie because she was older than we were, also came out of her room and threw herself on the floor, shouting out too that her life was finished, repeating the words as if she were a parrot. Mother stopped rolling and shouting so that all we heard was Auntie's voice, 'I am finished. Take me now. Take me! Uwa m agwugo.'

Mother screamed at Auntie to get up and go back to her room. 'Udodi a buro nwa gi! How dare you say your life is finished? What do you know about losing a child? Is she yours? How dare you?'

Auntie scrambled up and, still sobbing, only this time less loudly than before, wiping her eyes with the sleeves of her blouse, made her way back to her room, picking her way as if she could no longer see and the floor was landmined. If Auntie had had the courage, she would have told Mother that, yes, Udodi was her daughter too, as were Ugo and me. Auntie had known us since we were little. She had come to live with us when Udodi was ten years old. I was almost six. Ugo was four. She had seen us grow, and in a way she considered us if not her own children – she could not have been older than fifteen when she joined our family – then her little sisters. Her grief at Udodi's death, regardless of what Mother said, was real. Mother and Doda were always out working, so Auntie had spent more time with us than either of our parents did. She could have reminded Mother that when Udodi's first period came she had gone to Auntie because she, Mother, was not home. Auntie had given her her first sanitary towel. But Auntie did not say any of these things.

When we were kids vacations had been for long trips and local outings. Udodi, Ugo and I with matching

hairstyles piled into Doda's 504 station wagon, coolboxes with drinks and food in the back of the car, Mother beside Doda in front. Once, when I was ten, we drove all the way from Enugu to Calabar, to Obudu Cattle Ranch, but the holiday was ruined because I became sick almost as soon as we arrived, and Doda said nobody could have fun with me in a clinic. Ugo had been upset with me, as if I had deliberately chosen to ruin a vacation that I too had been looking forward to. I had felt the beginning of a fever in the morning before we left but I was worried that if I told, Doda and Mother would cancel the trip. And so in the car, even though all I wanted to do was close my eyes and give in to the illness and have my parents fuss over me, I opened my mouth and sang along every time Mother raised a song. And I tried to eat when, two hours into the trip, Doda stopped so we could have the lunch of rice and chicken Auntie had packed for us. But four hours was long, and by the time we arrived at the resort my body could no longer hide my illness. Lying in the clinic, I had not felt sorry for myself. I had been sorry, rather, for spoiling the vacation for everyone else. When I tried to apologise to the family Doda told me, 'It's not your fault you got ill.' Mother said, 'Child, you really must stop saying you're sorry for things that you cannot help. Concentrate on getting well.'

Doda and Mother didn't see Udodi's corpse, prevented by a tradition that says a child that precedes a parent in death has sinned against the earth. Doda suggested sending a family member to handle Udodi's cremation and bring back the ashes. Mother scoffed at the idea. Did Doda really think his brothers were up to the task? Let Euka do it, Mother said. Auntie Euka was Mother's best friend

and Udodi's godmother. 'Closer than a sister' was how Mother described her. Besides, Aunt Euka was an American citizen. She wouldn't have to navigate the hoops the American embassy made Nigerians jump through before granting them visas.

'Let her go and bring back our Udo,' Mother said.

Aunt Euka worked for herself, she could take the time off. No, she didn't mind going, she was honoured to have been asked. It was no trouble, no trouble at all. 'In and out, just like that,' she said, snapping her fingers. She was happy to be helping out in some form.

On the Friday after Udodi died Aunt Euka returned from Atlanta. She, who did not care for tradition, had pictures of Udodi's corpse in case my parents changed their mind.

'She was so beautiful,' she told us, her voice breaking.

The accident hadn't ruined Udodi's body even though it had mangled her car. The damage was mostly inside. Internal bleeding. They suspected Udodi had fallen asleep and veered off the road into a tree. The ashes wouldn't be ready for another week or so but Aunt Euka had to return to Nigeria to take care of some urgent business. She was lucky, she said, to have such a quick turnaround: Udodi cremated within days of her death. The crematorium could have Udodi's remains solidified into Parting Stones, 'a collection of smooth pebbles you could keep around the house'. Mother and Doda didn't have to decide now but it was something to think about. Or they could have the ashes turned into a diamond. People did that these days. Mother told Aunt Euka to stop, she didn't want to hear any more. She wanted her daughter back. Not her ashes. Not some stones.

‘Please take the booklet with you,’ Mother said.

On the same day Aunty Erika had returned with a catalogue from a funeral home of urns, keepsakes and jewellery, a gaily decorated truck arrived at the house loaded with the canopies and the tables we had ordered for the party Ugo and I had so meticulously planned in a different lifetime.

Mother saw it first and ran out barefoot, yelling ‘Go away! Puo! Puo!’

Doda, Ugo and I ran to drag Mother inside but all our grief combined piled onto Mother and it pulled her down, and so we huddled in the middle of the courtyard, the sun flogging us with its merciless heat, sobbing into each other’s arms while Aunty made sure the driver was paid the balance we still owed so that he could leave.

Udodi’s death was the beginning of the raging storm but at that moment we thought that the worst had already happened, and that life would now treat us with more kindness.