NOTES ON GRIEF

CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHE
Also by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Dear Ijeawele, or a Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions
We Should All Be Feminists
Americanah
The Thing Around Your Neck
Half of a Yellow Sun
Purple Hibiscus
In memoriam:
James Nwoye Adichie,
1932–2020
From England, my brother set up the Zoom calls every Sunday, our boisterous lockdown ritual: two siblings joining from Lagos, three of us from the United States, and my parents, sometimes echoing and crackly, from Abba, our ancestral hometown in south-eastern Nigeria. On 7 June, there was my father, only his forehead on the screen, as usual, because he never quite knew how to hold his phone during video calls. ‘Move your phone a bit, Daddy,’ one of us would say. My father was teasing my brother Okey about a new nickname, then he was saying he hadn’t had dinner because they’d had a late lunch, then he was talking about the billionaire from the next...
town who wanted to claim our village’s ancestral land. He felt a bit unwell, had been sleeping poorly, but we were not to worry. On 8 June, Okey went to Abba to see him and said he looked tired. On 9 June, I kept our chat brief, so that he could rest. He laughed quietly when I did my playful imitation of a relative. ‘Ka chi fo,’ he said. Good night. His last words to me. On 10 June, he was gone. My brother Chuks called to tell me, and I came undone.
My four-year-old daughter says I scared her. She gets down on her knees to demonstrate, her small clenched fist rising and falling, and her mimicry makes me see myself as I was: utterly unravelling, screaming and pounding the floor. The news is like a vicious uprooting. I am yanked away from the world I have known since childhood. And I am resistant: my father read the newspaper that afternoon, he joked with Okey about shaving before his appointment with the kidney specialist in Onitsha the next day, he discussed his hospital test results on the phone with my sister Ijeoma, who is a doctor – and so how can this be? But there he is. Okey is holding a phone over my
father’s face, and my father looks asleep, his face relaxed, beautiful in repose. Our Zoom call is beyond surreal, all of us weeping and weeping and weeping, in different parts of the world, looking in disbelief at the father we adore now lying still on a hospital bed. It happened a few minutes before midnight, Nigerian time, with Okey by his side and Chuks on speakerphone. I stare and stare at my father. My breathing is difficult. Is this what shock means, that the air turns to glue? My sister Uche says she has just told a family friend by text, and I almost scream, ‘No! Don’t tell anyone, because if we tell people, then it becomes true.’ My husband is saying, ‘Breathe slowly, drink some of this water.’ My housecoat, my lockdown staple, is lying crumpled on the floor. Later my brother Kene will jokingly say, ‘You better not get any shocking news in public, since you react to shock by tearing off your clothes.’
Grief is a cruel kind of education. You learn how ungentle mourning can be, how full of anger. You learn how glib condolences can feel. You learn how much grief is about language, the failure of language and the grasping for language. Why are my sides so sore and achy? It’s from crying, I’m told. I did not know that we cry with our muscles. The pain is not surprising, but its physicality is: my tongue unbearably bitter, as though I ate a loathed meal and forgot to clean my teeth; on my chest, a heavy, awful weight; and inside my body, a sensation of eternal dissolving. My heart – my actual physical heart, nothing figurative here – is running away from me, has become its own sepa-
rate thing, beating too fast, its rhythms at odds with mine. This is an affliction not merely of the spirit but of the body, of aches and lagging strength. Flesh, muscles, organs are all compromised. No physical position is comfortable. For weeks, my stomach is in turmoil, tense and tight with foreboding, the ever-present certainty that somebody else will die, that more will be lost. One morning, Okey calls me a little earlier than usual and I think, *Just tell me, tell me immediately, who has died now. Is it Mummy?*
In my American home, I like to have National Public Radio on as background noise, and whenever my father was staying he would turn it off if nobody was there listening to it.

‘I just thought about how Daddy was always turning off the radio and I was always turning it back on. He probably thought it was wasteful in some way,’ I tell Okey.

‘Like he always wanted to turn off the generator too early in Abba. I’d so happily let him now if he’ll just come back,’ Okey says, and we laugh.

‘And I will start to wake up early and I’ll start to eat garri and I’ll go to Mass every Sunday,’ I say, and we laugh.
I retell the story of my parents visiting me in my graduate-student apartment at Yale, when I say, ‘Daddy, will you have some pomegranate juice?’ and he says, ‘No, thank you, whatever that is.’

Pomegranate juice became a standing joke. All those standing jokes we had, frequently told and retold, my father’s expression one minute utterly deadpan and, the next, wide open with delighted laughter. Another revelation: how much laughter is a part of grief. Laughter is tightly braided into our family argot, and now we laugh remembering my father, but somewhere in the background there is a haze of disbelief. The laughter trails off. The laughter becomes tears and becomes sadness and becomes rage. I am unprepared for my wretched, roaring rage. In the face of this inferno that is sorrow, I am callow and unformed. But how can it be that in the morning he is joking and talking, and at night he is gone forever? It was so fast, too fast. It was not supposed to happen like this, not like a malicious surprise, not during a pandemic that has shut down the world.
Throughout the lockdown, my father and I talked about how strange it all was, how scary, and he told me often not to worry about my doctor husband. ‘You actually drink warm water, Daddy?’ I asked one day, surprised, laughing at him, after he said, with sheepish humour, that he’d read somewhere that drinking warm water might prevent coronavirus. He laughed at himself and told me warm water was harmless, after all. It was not like the nonsense that went around during the Ebola scare, when people were bathing in saline before dawn. To my ‘How are you, Daddy?’ he would always respond, ‘Enwerom nsogbu chacha.’ I have no problems at all. I’m perfectly fine. And he really was. Until he wasn’t.