CONTENTS

Introduction vii

Part 1: Something So White 1

Part 2: The Other Side of Suffering 23

Part 3: Is This Desire? 61

Part 4: Absolute Zero 94

Part 5: Homegoing 114

Part 6: Garden of Eden 129

Epilogue 136

Endnotes 141

About the Author 145

INTRODUCTION

I remember only shouting, as though, with Nigerian gatherings, there never exists—never has and never will—any quiet. Cacophony attends house-cleaning, clamor seasons food prep. Every time cousins visited, I would hear my mother before I would see her. “Wake up, the Udehs are coming.” “Wake up, the Nwachukus are coming.” “Wake up, now! The Nwankwos are coming.” And I would peel my cheek from my pillow, maybe brush my teeth and shower, maybe not, put on some sweats, and proceed to try as much as possible this early in the morning not to be useless.

Grease sizzles and pops. Mom is frying her plantains. The vacuum roars over carpet and growls when thrust under couches and tables. When I was younger, my siblings would amble around the house, completing their assigned tasks: sweeping and vacuuming the stairs, taking out the trash, wiping down the tables,

rearranging furniture, bringing high-backed chairs out of the dining room to the living room. And later, setting up the speaker Mom had bought so that, when my cousin Nnamdi arrived, he could connect his Spotify and play Afrobeat for us and older Nigerian songs for the elders.

The first arrivals key up the noise as soon as they cross the threshold. By evening, the house is filled with lovely dissonance: the kids downstairs on my brother's Xbox, the grownups in the living room with their plates, arguing Nigerian politics beneath family portraits hung on the wall. A poster of Barack Obama in 2008 hangs above someone's head. With his arms folded, he levels a toothy grin over the assemblage, as though to say "this, too, is America."

We weren't the white heartland voters he fought so hard to win, we highly educated African immigrants and their over-educated progeny. It was assumed we would vote for him. Sure, he was Black. But he was also a double Ivy.

Eight years later, cousins have gathered for Thanksgiving. We've traded hosting duties every year with the Udehs, cousins in the Nigerian sense; or, rather, the immigrant sense. Anyone who was a close enough friend of my parents was an Uncle or an Aunt, their children

my cousins, some of whom I didn't discover I did not share blood with until I was well into my 20s. In the '70s and '80s, the first of us arrived from Nigeria on student visas and set up a landing pad in the Northeast. Some settled in New York while others recreated as much of the homeland as they could in Massachusetts and, later, Connecticut, managing that immigrant duality of maintaining cultural memory and simultaneously accumulating the Promised Land's habits and customs. My father, questing after jobs and more education, was friends with Uncle Steve. Through him, he met my mother. In a few years, I, the first of four, would be born.

Nowhere was this immigrant duality more evident than at Thanksgiving, where gari and pepper soup sat in bowls alongside stuffing. Where jollof rice and fried rice and fried plantains surrounded the large turkey into which the designated "man of the house" was obligated to make the first cut. My father's death, just as I hovered on the cliff's edge of childhood, pushed me past adolescence and into the faux adulthood occupied by children who bear responsibilities ill-suited for their thin shoulders. From too early an age, I held the knife.

My mother's accent would thicken when family was near, especially after the arrival of my cousin Nnamdi, who, after coming to the US for college, earned his PhD

at 23, then made a home for himself on the West Coast working in biomedical consulting. He ate the food Mom loved and loved to cook. He spoke in her idioms. He understood her Igbo and tossed it back to her, two tennis pros exchanging volleys and delighting in it. Envy was inevitable. I was jealous of their closeness, that he held so much of my mother's country in him, the intensity with which their tuning forks vibrated when they were in proximity. Mom laughed so loudly when they talked.

By 2016, my mother had assimilated as much as she was going to. She watched episodes of *Criminal Minds* before bed, then as US politics grew more visibly virulent and coarse, MSNBC, where she found what she considered reasoned analysis and considered outrage. Her English was near-impeccable, though her pronunciation of certain words betrayed foreign origins. I was never embarrassed when she said *embarASS*.

We had been following the election and its interminable leadup closely. Conversations between Mom and her four adult kids held a frankness and sophistication I could never imagine in the families of my friends. Among ourselves, we could speak caustically of the lower-class white Americans so eager to ride the Ford F-150s of white supremacy into their own extinction. I

was so proud of her, this woman who castigated those whites who needed access to affordable healthcare the most and who so gleefully cheered for the man who unabashedly pledged to take it away from them, this woman who saw early on the power and hypocrisy of white evangelicals and perceived in them an influence that eluded most cable-news talking heads, this woman who saw in Donald J. Trump the endpoint of the race resentment that had been boiling in Americans since well before the passage of the Civil Rights Act.

By now, we had all finished college and brought home with us what we had learned, in class and outside of it. And I could exchange volleys with Mom. They weren't arguments, they were affirmations. She would say, regarding lower-class whites, "we are taking medicine for their headache," and I would laugh. My envy of cousin Nnamdi vanished.

Thanksgiving of 2016, the house obstreperous with three and a half families of Nigerians and an assortment of Mom's American friends, bore none of the pall I imagined in those households shocked into sorrow by Hillary Clinton's defeat. We knew what had happened, we expected it, and we expected those who had sown the seeds of their own destruction to quickly sink into buyer's remorse.

The conversation moved to American politics. I ran from wherever I had been in the house to the kitchen like a wrestler tagged into the fight, vaulting over the ropes to land a titanic elbow drop.

A few Uncles were present. Something was amiss. Their posture wasn't triumphalist, their shoulders were hunched defensively, their elbows at their sides while they gestured with their hands. And Mom and Aunty Liz were shouting while my younger sisters watched.

"I think you are being too hard on this Trump," Uncle Steve said. "I mean, let's see how it goes."

Before he could finish, Mom and Aunty Liz tag-teamed him with questions he was never meant to answer: "And what he has said about Mexicans?" "So you approve of the Muslim ban?" "Ah, so let him take away healthcare so people can die, then?" "He is a disgusting man, he does not even know where Syria is, and you approve?"

Then my youngest sister: "You didn't vote for him, did you?"

Uncle Steve's pause cratered the floor beneath us.

"But what about her emails?" Uncle Kenny chimed in. "You cannot trust a woman like that. She would have been under investigation."

Once Mom and Aunty Liz recovered their breath, the shouting reached a fever pitch.

My cousin Nnamdi lobbed his own grenades. "You talk of investigation when this man is as corrupt, if not more, than any Naija politician. You think, just because he has not mentioned you, that he will not come for you?"

"This is the worst thing to happen to gay rights," my youngest sister lamented. "People are going to die, Uncle. How could you?"

We laughed at my Uncles, but the hurt in my sister's voice was unmistakable. It hummed beneath each word.

We all felt betrayed. We were not a clan of hoodwinked white Americans. We weren't vengeful racists rejoicing in the advent of our mendacious messiah. We were immigrants and their children. Amid the bludgeoning my Uncles endured, Nnamdi, smirking, said, "See? You should not have paid for us to go to such good schools." They were doing well. They worked in insurance and finance. They were solidly upper-middle class. They lived in multi-story houses in West Hartford. They were darker than me. And yet.

Among the epiphanies that attended this revelation was the fact that we were separate. Not I from my uncles, but us from African Americans. Looking at the

vote totals afterwards, I noted with worry and confusion the small percentage of Blacks, mostly Black males, who had voted for the Republican. Why? Maybe because the myth of the self-made multi-millionaire figured so prominently in rap lyrics. But my Uncles detested rap and sneered whenever their American-born children blasted it in their cars. Maybe it was the bluster, the masculine posturing, the way he bulldozed through competition and juggernauted through opposition. But they were too smart and savvy to be fooled by that, weren't they? Maybe it was because they truly didn't trust the Democratic candidate to advocate for their interests. Maybe they saw in the attacks on her character some element of truth, that she was too cunning a political operator, that she changed positions too often, even when her switch was from "wrong" to "right." But surely they saw her qualifications. Maybe it was because the conservative misogyny they took with them from the Old Country had not been eroded by siring daughters and wishing them professional success.

Or maybe they believed themselves insulated. They believed their children insulated. When he vilified Black Americans, surely Trump didn't mean us who had contributed so much in taxes to American greatness, us who had graduated from august educational