

# Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie was born in Nigeria. She is the author of two novels, *Purple Hibiscus*, which won the Commonwealth Writers Prize and the Hurston/Wright Legacy Award, and *Half of a Yellow Sun*, which was nominated for the National Book Critics Circle Award and won the 2007 Orange Prize. Chimamanda's fiction has been published in *Granta* and *The New Yorker*. She was a 2005/2006 Hodder fellow at Princeton University and holds a master's degree in African Studies from Yale University.



## “CHINASA”

By Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

I think it happened in January. I think it was January because the soil was parched and the dry Harmattan winds had coated my skin and the house and the trees with yellow dust. But I'm not sure. I know it was in 1968 but it could have been December or February; I was never sure of dates during the war. I am sure, though, that it happened in the morning – the sun was still pleasant, the kind that they say forms vitamin D on the skin. When I heard the sounds – Boom! Boom! – I was sitting on the verandah of the house I shared with two families, re-reading my worn copy of Camara Laye's *THE AFRICAN CHILD*. The owner of the house was a man who had known my father before the war and, when I arrived after my hometown fell, carrying my battered suitcase, and with nowhere else to go, he gave me a room for free because he said my father had been very good to him. The other women in the house gossiped about me, that I used to go to the room of the house owner at night, that it was the reason I did not pay rent. I was with one of those gossiping women outside that morning. She was sitting on the cracked stone steps, nursing her baby. I watched her for a while, her breast looked like a limp orange that had been sucked of all its juices and I wondered if the baby was getting anything at all.

When we heard the booming, she immediately gathered her baby up and ran into the house to fetch her other children. Boom! It was like the rumblings of thunder, the kind that spread itself across the sky, the kind that heralded a thunderstorm. For a moment I stood there and imagined that it was really the thunder. I imagined that I was back in my father's house before the war, in the yard, under the cashew tree,



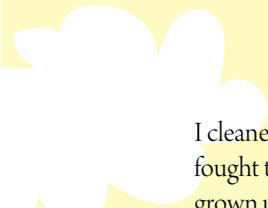
waiting for the rain. My father's yard was full of fruit trees that I liked to climb even though my father teased me and said it was not proper for a young woman, that maybe some of the men who wanted to bring him wine would change their minds when they heard I behaved like a boy. But my father never made me stop. They say he spoiled me, that I was his favorite and even now some of our relatives say the reason I am still unmarried is because of my father.

Anyway, on that Harmattan morning, the sound grew louder. The women were running out with their children. I wanted to run with them, but my legs would not move. It was not the first time I had heard the sounds, of course, this was two years into the war and my parents had already died in a refugee camp in Uke and my aunt had died in Okija and my grandparents and cousins had died in Abagana when Nkwo market was bombed, a bombing that also blew off the roof of my father's house and one that I barely survived. So, by that morning, that dusty Harmattan morning, I had heard the sounds before.

Boom! I felt a slight quiver on the ground I was standing on. Still, I could not get myself to run. The sound was so loud it made my head throb and I felt as if somebody was blowing hot custard into my ears. Then I saw huge holes explode on the ground next to me. I saw smoke and flying bits of wood and glass and metal. I saw dust rise. I don't remember much else. Something inside me was so tired that for a few minutes, I wished that the bombs had brought me rest. I don't know the details of what I did – if I sat down, if I ducked into the farm, if I slumped to the ground. But when the bombing finally stopped, I walked down the street to the crowd gathered around the wounded, and found myself drawn to a body on the ground. A girl, perhaps fifteen years old. Her arms were a mass of bloody flesh. It was the wrong time for humor but looking at her with mangled arms, she looked like a caterpillar. Why did I take that girl into my room? I don't know. There had been many bombings before that – we were in Umuahia and we got the most bombing because we were the capital. And even though I helped to clean the wounded, I had never taken anyone into my room. But I took this girl into my room. Her name was Chinasa.



I nursed Chinasa for weeks. The owner of the house made her crutches from old wood and even the gossiping women brought her small gifts of ukpaka or roast yam. She was thin, small for her age, as most children were during the war, but she had a way of looking at you straight in the eye, in a forthright but not impolite way, that made her seem much older than she was. She pretended she was not in pain when



I cleaned her wounds with home made gin, but I saw the tears in her eyes and I, too, fought tears because this girl on the cusp of womanhood had, because of the war, grown up too quickly. She thanked me often, too often. She said she could not wait to be well enough to help me with the cooking and cleaning. In the evenings, after I had fed her some pap, I would sit next to her and read to her. Her arms were still and bandaged but she had the most expressive face and in the flickering naked light of the kerosene lamp, she would laugh, smile, sneer, as I read to her. I had lost many of my things, running from town to town, but I had always brought some of my books and reading those books to her brought me a new kind of joy because I saw them freshly, through Chinasa's eyes. She began to ask questions, to challenge what some of the characters did in the stories. She asked questions about the war. She asked me questions about myself.

I told her about my parents who had been determined that I would be educated, and who had sent me to a Teachers Training College. I told her how much I had enjoyed my job as a teacher in Enugu before the war started and how sad I was when our school was closed down to become a refugee camp. She looked at me with a great intensity as I spoke. Later, as she was teaching me how to play nchokolo one evening, asking me to move some stones between boxes drawn on the ground, she asked whether I might teach her how to read. I was startled. It did not occur to me that she could not read. Now that I think of it, I should not have been so presumptuous. Her personal story was familiar: her parents were farmers from Agulu who had scraped to send her two brothers to the mission school but kept her at home. Perhaps it was her brightness, her alertness, the great intelligence about the way she watched everything, that had made me forget the reality of where she came from.

We began lessons that night. She knew the alphabet because she had looked at some of her brother's books, and I was not surprised by how quickly she learned, how hard she worked. By the time we heard, some months later, the rumor that our generals were about to surrender, Chinasa was reading to me from her favorite book THE AFRICAN CHILD.



On the day the war ended, Chinasa and I joined the gossipy women and other neighbors down the street. We cried and sang and laughed and danced. For those women crying, theirs were tears of exhaustion and uncertainty and relief. As were mine. But, also, I was crying because I wanted to take Chinasa back with me to my home, or whatever remained of my home in Enugu; I wanted her to become

the daughter I would never have, to share my life now emptied of loved ones. But she hugged me and refused. She wanted to go and find which of her relatives had survived. I gave her my address in Enugu and the name of the school where I hoped to go back to my teaching. I gave her much of the little money I had. "I will come and see you soon," she said. She was looking at me with tearful gratitude, and I held her close to me and felt a keen sense of future sadness. She would find her relatives and her life would intervene in this well-meant promise. I knew that she would not come back.



It is now 2008 and yesterday morning, a morning not dissimilar to that one forty years ago, I opened the Guardian newspaper in the living room of my house in Enugu. I had just returned from my morning walk – my friends say that my daily walk is the reason I do not look like a woman in her seventies – and was filled with the optimism that comes with the briskness, the raised heartbeat of walking. I had followed the recent national news about the government appointing new ministers, but only vaguely because after watching this country careen from one inept leadership to another, I no longer find much to be passionate about. I opened the paper to read that an education minister had been appointed, a woman, and she had just given her first interview. I was mildly pleased: we needed more women in government and Nigerians had seen how well the last female minister did in the ministry of finance. Then the face of the new minister, in a black and white photograph that took up half a page, struck me as familiar. I stared at it and before I read the name, I knew it was Chinasa. The cheeks had filled out, of course, and the face had lost the awkwardness of youth but little else had changed.

I read the interview quickly, my hands a little shaky. She had been sent abroad shortly after the war, with one of the many international agencies that helped young people who had been affected by war. She had been awarded many scholarships. She was married with three children. She was a professor of literature. My hands began to shake furiously when I read about the beginning of her love for books: 'I had a fairy godmother during the war,' was all that she said.

I looked at her face for a long time, imagining the life she has had, playing with the idea of contacting her, realizing that I had never before in my life felt quite so proud, before I closed the newspaper and put it away.

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