

## Excerpt from *When The Morning Comes*

### Chapter One

I do not know which was more seductive, the bottle of Nyquil or the bottle of Restoril. The light of the bedside lamp threw warm highlights on the emerald decanter and caressed the shaft of the orange pill-bottle. Both were advertised to induce sleep and in that moment there was nothing I wanted more. I was very tired. Every muscle in my body had surrendered to a thin, burning exhaustion, an exhaustion that began somewhere deep in my spirit and radiated outward into my body in pulses that ebbed and flowed more and more severely, more and more achingly until I had become stoic, because my only other option was crying, and I had already cried. I had howled and gnashed my teeth and pressed my pleas to God into the flesh of my hands, and I was tired of even this now. So calmly—very calmly—I poured a number of white Restoril pills out onto the wooden nightstand. My cheeks were wet with tears, but I did not make a sound.

I started with the bottle of Nyquil. It was three quarters full. I drank it quickly like a shot of alcohol, guzzling the thick green liquid. The taste was acrid and I sucked my tongue to remove the slimy film that it had left in the back of my mouth. I then took a Restoril pill into my hand and weighed it. I popped it into my mouth and swallowed it with a gulp of water from a glass I had procured from the kitchen. I took another pill, and another pill, and another. After some time, during which I sat silently on the edge of my mother's bed crying again—this time softly—the combination made me drunk. My skin was awash with the tinglings that come before numbness, as if my body was already beginning to shut down. First my skin, I thought, then my brain, then my heart. And that was what I wanted, to be numb, to sleep a sleep that was deeper than REM and more lasting than one night. I was broken and splintered like an old ship wrecked by the tide and quickly sinking, shaken with the force of waves. The fear of hell could not stop me and neither could the promise of salvation.

Sorry I am such a bad person. I love you all very much. I am sorry if I hurt you. Joi. I wrote onto a lineless index card in pencil. I still have the note tucked away neatly in a manila file folder alongside other documents that chronicled the wreck of my first graduate school summer—a square red paisley journal that my mother bought me from the dollar store. Multiple worn and folded mood observation logs scribbled desperately by my mother in blue pen onto sheets of computer paper. A turquoise handout on “Fifteen Styles of Distorted Thinking.” Paradise Valley Hospital emergency room discharge instructions. Mapquest directions to the office of a psychiatrist, Dr. Jimenez, and co-pay receipts. An email from my best friend, Yasmin, to my mother saying that she was too traumatized to speak to me. And there is more of course—the folder bulges with paper.

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I could say it all started with my fiancé, Akpan. We separated when I was twenty-four, a week before December 5th, 2005, the date scheduled for our wedding. I was working at the University of California, San Diego for the campus tutoring center called OASIS, and he had just graduated from the same university, where I also was an alumna. I had graduated a year before him. He had studied Mechanical Engineering. I had studied Literature and Creative Writing. We were as opposite in interests as opposite could be. He was Nigerian. We had visited his family in Nigeria in July; he had proposed to me in the Paris airport. When we returned stateside he'd begun the struggle of finding an engineering job, through which I stood by him and supported him. But our relationship began to deteriorate with him jobless and me working full time. I paid for our dates. All of them. And when his apartment complex converted to condos, I was the one he moved in with. Rent free and bills paid. And after a long day's work, I was the one who cooked and cleaned. And when I grew tired, he grew indignant that I would ask for him to pay me back, considering the state he was in. Then, one day in August, after going away for two weeks with the Army Reserves—he was a second lieutenant—he decided that he was going to save himself until we were married and moved out. I did not know where he lived or who he lived with or what his schedule was, only that he'd gotten a job at Sears. And after months of me crying and him yelling, he forced me to make the final decision on our relationship the way a poker player forces another to show his hand.

"Are you breaking up with me?" He asked over the phone with the coldness of ice. Blubbering, I broke, "Yes," throwing my cards down and pushing away from the table.

After three years together, Akpan walked out of San Diego, California and all the way to Houston, Texas where he settled into a NASA job and a shiny new life, leaving me to explain to everyone at home after the Christmas holiday what had happened, including his sisters who contacted me from Nigeria.

Needless to say, I was changed by the experience, more changed than I or anyone else would know. I limped through it all, carrying the battered and bruised pieces of me through work, a brief relationship rebound, and onto the steps of North Carolina State University's English department where I was accepted to the MFA Fiction program. I had applied through the pain and taken the GRE three days after Akpan had come to collect all of his belongings from my apartment. Single-minded in my determination, I had applied to seven schools all over the US from Austin to Boston. Graduate school was the kite to which all of my hopes and dreams were tethered. It would lift me up from a secretarial job that I disliked and from the heartache that Akpan had given. It busied my mind and blew the subject of my failed engagement from people's lips, replacing it with cheers and best wishes.

And when I arrived to graduate school, my heart swollen with anticipation, I found that it wasn't at all what I had expected. I hated North Carolina State University. I grew frustrated that the professors didn't understand me and neither could I identify with any of my classmates. I was the only Black student in the program and was reminded of it daily. There was Dr. Leventhal who taught the American Romantic Period who asked one day in a discussion of Thoreau if the class would protest if the Black students—which only

included myself and another woman—were dragged out by the police since it didn't affect the White students directly. There was Dr. Novak who taught Creative Writing who related the need to critique science fiction just like any other type of writing to the need to critique a Black student who has bad grammar just like any other student. The Negro was en vogue in my fellow classmates' stories and mine was the only voice to critique their misguided and troubling portrayals of blackness. Further, being Californian made it difficult for me to connect with the other North Carolinian Black students that I met around campus. I was an outsider in multiple ways. So, tension boiled in me and daily I went home crying after classes, obsessively mulling over the snide comments or ignorant slips that had escaped some classmates' mouths. I finally blew my top one day in workshop, screaming at a White classmate who had sought to defend a classmate of ours whose story had been literally littered every other line with the word nigger. I couldn't take it anymore.

My moods began to see-saw violently. By the time my first year was done, I had grown afraid to get excited about anything, because after every flight of elation there was a horrible low. "That's bipolar!" shouted the counselor I went to see at North Carolina State, her afrocentric robes flowing from her lap to the floor like water. I was immediately disgusted with her, her lack of tact, her tasteless insinuation. I just looked at her and didn't say anything, knowing already that I would not be back to see her again. That was the last time I sought help from anyone at North Carolina State.

But when my mother said it, I had to see for myself just what this word bipolar meant. "Your father thinks you might be bipolar," my mother told softly me over the phone after one of my particularly bad crying spells.

"What does that mean?" I asked, this time more curious than offended because the words had come from someone that I loved. That night I looked up the word on Wikipedia and for the first time I acknowledged that I might be sick.

I made it through the technical garble and understood that Bipolar Disorder was marked by unusual highs and lows called mania and depression. And most interestingly I learned that if I was bipolar—which I still wasn't convinced—I was certainly in good company. Bipolar Disorder was associated with artists. Beethoven, Ernest Hemingway and Vincent van Gogh were all suspected to be bipolar.

I rolled the information around in my head for weeks. With some effort my mother convinced me to see her therapist when I came home, and I couldn't wait to get home. I was ready to quit school the way I quit everything else when the situation became too adverse—my first full time job at the Jackie Robinson YMCA, my year studying abroad in Spain, my college internship with Channel Ten news.

I packed my bags and headed back to San Diego questioning whether I could take another year of hell in North Carolina. I'd learned that hell was the absence of an understanding ear or an identifying nod, the absence of soul.

I could not wait until I got back home to San Diego. Once there, I quickly got a job at the university again, this time for Temp Services at the Eleanor Roosevelt College Provost's Office. I reconnected with Daniel Chan, a former coworker that I had a crush on from OASIS, as well as many other old friends and colleagues who were as horrified as I was about my experiences in graduate school. My friends, they were as diverse in ethnicity as

the United Nations. And with friends on all sides and family in my corner, I was no longer alone. My life took a turn and everything looked bright again. My symptoms had vanished and the thought of me being bipolar fell by the wayside. I was just happy to be home.

Under the duress of my first year in graduate school, I had lost thirty-five pounds, which put me at the same weight I had been as an undergraduate at UCSD, two hundred and fifteen pounds. Now, I liked what I saw in people's eyes when they looked at me—appreciation, admiration. Men's eyes lingered on the side of my behind; women's eyes squinted at the edges of my smile. My self-esteem soared like a helium balloon and with it rose my carnality. After a year of being away from home, San Diego met a new me, thinner, happier and accomplished.

And as I sat with a belly full of sleeping pills and Nyquil, I didn't remember any of this. I did not remember those things that one would think should be remembered—how I'd come to be in this place of desperation and loneliness. My life did not play across my mind like a movie trailer. I did not think of my family. Instead I sat alone, exhausted and contemplating the rest that lay so teasingly beyond my grasp. With each pill, I had hurled myself at that rest, and would have it any way I could. Selfishly, I would embrace it until it gave me peace, until it took away my pain. And as the numbness took over my body I was finally—with all finality—able to let go.