

Prince of Nigeria

Jacob Brower

But no, she's sure. This one is *not* a scam.

Greetings, it says, from sunny Abidjan, Cote D'Ivoire! Ek'asan! I write on behalf of my client—Mr. Adebowale Okoye, deposed prince of Nigeria—who, following the violent death of his exiled father, has come into an inheritance totaling (US\$15M) FIFTEEN MILLION UNITED STATES DOLLARS. It is a large sum, which Mr. Okoye would like to put toward causes both charitable and religious. My client is a lonely man, without any family, and has prayed many nights for guidance. For your trouble, Mrs. Merlo, he offers to allocate 15% of all current and future funds to you and/or your family. Eku ori ire! Please respond ASAP, including within: 1) your routing number, so Mr. Okoye may transfer his funds into your personal account, and 2) any suggestions on how best to invest the money in your home country. Od'igba!

At eighty-three, Arlene's dexterity is not what it once was. Nor is her vision. She spends two hours each morning clicking slowly through her emails, deleting most. There are book club notices, eBay auction reminders, petitions for her digital signature. Notes from her son, his daughters. Advertisements for

pornography. Always the sad-storied people asking for money.

Lonely herself, Arlene can understand the impulse—with nothing but a computer connecting you and the world—to reach out. After all, her own son no longer visits; they remain in touch through holiday newsletters and the occasional phone call, and it has been this way for months. There was a time, not so long ago, when Dominic stopped by every weekend to watch the Yankees on her little TV, a family tradition.

"Ma," he'd said, during one of his final visits, "you really should start cleaning the place up."

She told him she would, or perhaps that she had already. Made one of her usual excuses. She told him please sit. Couldn't they just enjoy the game together?

"Just promise me." He cleared a space on the sofa. "Promise you'll start on one room, one *corner* of one room."

So of course she promised, and the Yankees lost 3-1 to Detroit, and it was a while before he bothered her about the mess again, that final time, the time he'd stopped visiting for good.

Arlene squints and rereads the email, no

longer certain. Perhaps it's fake, but how can you know? There's this fear of forever deleting something important. Of causing somebody an unknowable pain. With difficulty, she jerks the blinking cursor across the screen's blue glow. Pauses over 'reply.'

Later, in the dimly-lit kitchen, Arlene grapples with a can of Fancy Feast—Gravy Lover's Gourmet, this time—which she finally sets down, opened, on the floor's sole clear tile, next to three matching cans (untouched) and the litter box. She leans against the fridge for support, coming to an admirable decision: today she will call Dominic, for the first time in weeks. He is some kind of lawyer and will, she hopes, know how to proceed. Stealing herself, Arlene nudges the Fancy Feast cans into an even row, her stockinged foot jumping and stuttering. Timothy Whiskers hasn't been seen for days. No telling where he's gone.

Her apartment has somehow become a maze. No: a cavern. Underground, suitable for spelunking. Boxes live on top of other boxes. Still more perch upon those. There's a wet cardboard smell, mildewy and dead. The five once-spacious rooms—kitchen, living, bedroom 1 (master), bedroom 2 (Dom's, from childhood), and bathroom—have morphed into a series of Arlene-sized cavities connected

by labyrinthine and ever-narrowing cardboard corridors. "Dangerous," Dom called it. "An accident waiting to happen." A mossy film of dust carpets errant sections of visible hardwood. Stacks of old magazines—*National Geographic*, *Good Housekeeping*—thrust stalagmatically from the floor. Just endless, endless stuff. A suffocating mess, a still-growing collection. Her things. Joe's things.

But it hasn't always been this way. For more than forty years, since Arlene had moved to 18th & Irving (doorman, elevator) with her now-late husband, Joe, they'd kept 4V spotless. They took pride in it. Amazing, no, that a postal worker from the Bronx and his wife, a high school English teacher, could live in such a place? Oak floors! Laminate countertops! With a son on the way, there was no room for clutter. Arlene dusted; she swept; she Pine-Soled. Bossa nova spun on their thrift-store turntable. She'd been six months pregnant with Dominic and ready to start her family in this new, more perfect place. Dancing felt appropriate.

Now look at it, she thinks, plotting her phone call. How did it come to this?

Dominic had grown up and moved out, as kids do. He'd earned his degree from Brooklyn Law (she'd been so proud!) and passed the Bar, but then—what, eight years ago already?—Joe

suddenly passed away, his heart the predictable culprit. Arlene stayed in bed for a week, and then a month, believing he'd come back. He'd be in the kitchen one morning when she woke, brewing coffee, frying eggs. If she kept her eyes closed she could smell the bacon, could taste the sugar and the cream. She stopped leaving the apartment, except for groceries and unavoidable errands—and later, not even then. Dom, who'd never moved farther than Jersey City, had done for her what he'd thought best. The computer he bought, a nice one, was meant to cheer her up. "See, Ma, you can email with the grandkids." He showed her the screen's blue *e*. "Click here and you can play games, buy your groceries online. You can stay connected to the family, this way."

Finally she quit resisting. She didn't want to be an embarrassment. But then this, *this* had started.

The collecting.

The final time Dom had stopped by he'd brought along his daughters—seventeen-year-old Sophie and fifteen-year-old Lor—for a surprise visit. Arlene, as always, had led him to believe she'd been cleaning.

"Really, Ma?" he said, stepping over a box of mangled costume jewelry. "Weren't you donating stuff to Goodwill?"

What she was actually doing, sitting there hunched over in the half-dark, was bidding on a jungle gym for cats.

"I told you," Dom said. "I said—anything you need, however you want to do this, I'll help."

She didn't respond.

He sent the girls back to the car and struggled to close the door.

"You can't live like this! What if you fall? What if there's a fire?"

There wouldn't be a fire, she said. She wouldn't fall.

"You'll get sick! All the dust in here?"

Three minutes remained in the auction. Her bid was still highest.

"You keep saying you'll take care of things, that you'll let me know if you need help, but every time I'm here it's worse. What am I supposed to do, Ma? Stand by and let this happen? I'm your son! I can't watch you do this to yourself." He'd lowered his voice, thumbed a line through the monitor's dust. "What would *Dad* say?"

The unused refrigerator groaning against her shoulders, Arlene pictures the rotary phone—*Really?* Dominic would say: *Still?*—tucked messily under the comforter on her bed's cold side. Unsteady, she braces herself within the

door frame. Traveling from point A to point B—this is not an easy thing.

In fact, it's a five step process:

First, a literal one. Up and over a spilled-milk stack of kitchen trash and flattened boxes. A younger woman might casually step over a similar mess, but so far Arlene's ninth decade has not been kind. Strength? Flexibility? Balance? Not her strong points. Twice now she's fallen during the trip between rooms, and each time she's been lucky: the first, she'd landed softly in a mothballed heap of old sweaters; the second—scarier, this one—she'd been standing on a heavily taped box, stretching for that stupid crockpot in the hallway closet, when the damn thing (the box, not the crockpot) collapsed, spilling her and its contents across the floor. She'd escaped with a bump, decided against beef bourguignon, and learned to be more careful. No need to worry the family, to get them restarted on the popular topic of putting her in a home. *Never* going to happen.

So today she white-knuckles the door frame, testing the weight-bearing potential of a thick but unevenly fanned stack of cardboard with her toes. For a moment she wobbles, the boxes compressing beneath her weight. A few shift, but in the end they seem sturdy enough. She climbs into the living room, steadying

herself.

Second step: find a way to squeeze between the tape and cardboard rows. Arlene turns sideways, like a paper doll, and lurches through fallen stacks of forgotten books. Cookbooks, art books, phonebooks. Novels wedged two deep every which way onto the sagging shelves: spines out, spines in; vertical, horizontal. A long paused game of literary Tetris. She'd been neurotic about her library, once. The weekend they moved in, half a century ago, she made Joe clear all the books off the shelves and stack them in piles on the floor. "I want them to be in order," she said, and Joe—pouring two fingers of celebratory whiskey each—complied. Together they alphabetized the stacks before reshelving them, a lengthier process than either had expected. The first night they'd given up halfway through and, twisting and giggling between the teetering, single-letter stacks, retreated to their new bedroom, their unmade bed. They'd slept well that night, curled together. The stalagmites, the leaning towers—these came after she ran out of room. After the shelves were full, her husband gone, the alphabet long forgotten, the boxes closing in.

Arlene stops for a break mid-room, settling into the folding chair at her desk. Boxed in by the collections around her, she checks her

email. She has a bid in on a new vacuum, one of those fancy Dysons with the ball. Here too is a second email from the African lawyer, informing her of his client's intent to contact her directly. Good, she thinks: This is a reassuring sign. She makes a mental note, *Tell Dominic.*

Will he bother her again about the mess? Probably.

Behind her, between the couch and the computer, are the remains of her last ill-fated attempt to organize—cigar boxes, Tupperwares, Rubbermaids, all nestled Matryoshka-style into each other and then again into an old refrigerator box, taped shut. Containers full of containers, closing in.

Despite what Dominic seems to believe, Arlene is not completely deluded. She's aware of what a disappointment she's become. She recognizes the madness, knows enough to feel shame. But there simply comes a point, if a person's being honest with herself, when there's nothing more she can do. When it all becomes too much. She sighs, stands.

Step three. Pass the bathroom, turn off the light. No need to poke around in there.

And four. Dominic's room, no longer a memorial to his childhood. The comic books, the Batman bedspread, all of it long gone or otherwise covered with stuff. Arlene

stops here on her way past, peering in at the dust hanging on the stale air and the boxes that house the apartment's best collection: Joe's old baseball cards, a shrine to the Bronx Bombers. Somewhere in the containers live the following: a signed 1961 Maris (Topps #2); a dog-eared '48 DiMaggio, now in a case; and a 1992 Bowman Mariano Rivera (#302), a chance find during their final vacation together, the rookie card of the game's finest ever closer. (Arlene, though not especially fond of watching baseball by herself, had turned on the boxy old TV just this season to watch 'Mo' pitch his final professional inning, the card in question—along with an early Jeter—laid out on the bedspread beside her. She felt close to Joe in this way.) She's expanded the collection since Joe's passing, bidding on a few select Yankees (Mantle, Munson, Mussina) between heated auctions for geodes and pleated slacks, but lately she's taken to buying entire lots of cards: boxes and boxes, dead strangers' entire collections, teams and players mixed, values unknown. She stacks them inside the doorway, unopened, stopping now and then to check in. But not today—there's a phone call to make.

And finally, step five. The master bedroom. Phone on the bed, family photos on the dresser. The door no longer opens fully, so she has to squeeze in sideways. Here, the cleanest room

in the apartment, the hoard is limited to a few boxes of cat toys, her personal collection of women's hats, and half a dozen novels pilfered over time from the living room and left on Joe's side of the bed. Also: stacks of clothes—gifts she sometimes buys for her husband, tags still on. Late at night, surfing eBay, Arlene will spot a sport coat or necktie she knows he'll love, or a pair of loafers perfect for wearing to a show, and bid on them, always, every time. Before you judge: Arlene's not stupid, and she doesn't think she's crazy. She knows her husband's dead; if you asked her, she'd tell you as much. (You'd have to be a delivery person, of course, standing outside the cracked front door.) But can you blame her? For bringing home little gifts, things she hopes he'll love? It made him—both of them—happy once, years ago, so why can't it now?

She pushes aside an unfolded pile of just-delivered laundry (socks for him, blouses for her) and lowers herself onto the mattress.

Bites her lip. Picks up the phone to call her son.

"Ma," he says, and on that end there's the sound of maybe a door shutting. "Ma, I'm at work."

Her image of him working gets filled in by office sounds: a fax machine's eager screech,

the angry squeak of a swivel chair. "I'm sorry to bother you, Dominic. It's just a quick thing. I just wanted to ask for your advice—"

"Yeah, no. It's fine, it's fine." Muffled clicks, the syncopated frenzy of an office keyboard. The two of them haven't spoken in a few weeks, perhaps a month. They haven't seen each other in eight. "How've you been, anyway?"

The courage she worked up, the will for this conversation, begins to deflate: a slow leak. She sighs. "Are the girls well? They haven't emailed in a while—has Sophie decided on a school yet?"

"Rutgers," he says. "And they're fine." Arlene hears his chair squeak again, more typing. He's not paying attention, and she knows. She's the parent, after all. He coughs. "So what's this question you're calling about?"

And of course as soon as she asks, even as she's forming the words—an email, royal family, bank account, just wondering how best to proceed—she knows, as she always knows, what he'll say. How he'll respond. Yet another reason to treat his mother like an idiot. Secretly she thinks he loves it, this reversal of roles. She, however, does not. What was she thinking, calling him?

"A 409 scam?" he asks, not really asking. "What's the problem? Just delete it."

Well, but—

“Look, Ma. You must get, what, dozens of those emails a day, what with all the petitions and things you’re always signing or replying to, whatever. Kate! Kate—could you run and get me a cup of coffee? Cream, sugar. Thanks. Yeah, thank you.” She hears him drumming his fingers on the desk. “By the way,” he says, “could you stop forwarding those to me? I get enough email already.”

“This particular young man—” She pauses, exhales into the receiver. Brushes cat hair from her blouse with a lint roller she keeps on the nightstand. “He was so cordial, so matter of fact. He even said the prince, this Mr. Okoye, wants to—”

Across the line, Dominic sighs. He’s always sighing, a subtle insult. “Listen to me. This is just some Nigerian kid in some godforsaken internet café in the middle of nowhere, sitting around with nothing better to do, the jerkoff, than prey on lonely, gullible elderly people.” A pause here, signifying regret. “But, yeah. Sorry, Ma—there’s no prince, there never is.”

Arlene mentions something about money, about how by the time she’s gone—which, she reminds him, might be soon—there won’t be any left, any for him or her granddaughters. She’s been spending right through it, hasn’t she, and she’d like to leave something—

“Yeah, Ma, don’t worry about that.” His voice softens, or maybe it’s the connection. “We’re doing just fine over here. All I want you to worry about is having enough money left for you, not for us. Getting the apartment cleaned up, you know? Enjoying your time there, before you have to move out.” Again he coughs, and she can almost hear him wincing. “Which, I mean, is not necessarily going to happen anytime soon.”

She blows a furball off the lampshade and watches it twist and tumble, coming to a rest on a stack of folded men’s t-shirts. “But if this could be real, even just maybe, wouldn’t it be worth—”

“It isn’t real,” he says. “It’s never real, they’re never—oh, yes, right there on the desk, thanks so much—anyway, Ma, they’re never real. Never. Please just ignore it, you don’t have the money to lose. Best case scenario you’d end up on the phone with your bank for hours, sorting it out—Kate? Kate, could you bring me a coaster, please and thanks? And Ma, it’s not just that you could lose everything, all dad’s savings—” And mine, she thinks. Thirty-three years teaching! “—but these scams, the people who operate them—these are criminals, mind you—there are actual, documented cases of people going to Africa, I don’t know why exactly, missionary work or whatever, to give

money in person. And I kid you not, there are documented cases of these people getting abducted when they step off the plane, held for ransom. Big money, too, considering.”

Arlene stands with some effort, holding onto the nightstand. She scuffs over to the dresser, dusts off an old family picture (Joe smiling, little Dominic looking off camera). “I didn’t raise you to be so dismissive, did I? Of other peoples’ troubles?” There’s a stray baseball card wedged into the back of the picture’s frame, the edges frayed, going round. “You can’t possibly *know* that this particular email is a scam. How could you know that? This Mr. Okoye, his lawyer—they could be real.”

He doesn’t respond, so she finishes her thought: “Why do you always turn your back on other people?”

“Just delete it, all right?”

And to Dominic the conversation is over, Arlene can tell. It’s in his voice—he’s tired of all the arguing and ready to give up. (What Arlene *can’t* tell is this: that he’s only given up because after trying so hard, for such a long time, he feels completely ignored anyway; he thinks she doesn’t respect his opinion, that she’ll never believe anything except what she’s decided on for herself in the first place, true or not, and he’s felt this way for a long time—that

it doesn’t matter what he says or does. Repeated frustration has taught him nothing on his part can ever make any difference. He’s capable only of hurting her, he fears, whether he says something sincere and loving—the truth of which she’ll just deny anyway—or something spiteful that he’ll later regret. And the worst part? That she doesn’t realize hurting her is the last thing Dominic wants, even as he feels himself doing it again and again, conversation after conversation, never knowing what else to say. That, after all this, she still can’t believe he loves her.)

“You know, Dominic,” she says, wishing to end the conversation on her own terms. “It’s been a long time, and I could really use a vacation.”

He says nothing, just spins noisily in his chair. For years, ever since she started collecting, he’s been trying to get her out of the apartment. For her sake, sure, but also (she figures) so he can hire a moving company, bring them into 4V, and haul away a few dumpsters. She knows he thinks this would be in her best interest, and it probably would be—but not in the sudden, brutal way he’d go about it. It’s not just about her getting out and seeing real people sometimes, or cleaning up enough for Dom, Sandy, and the girls to visit. It’s become something more than that, something

undefinable. But anyway, a vacation—that’s something he’ll support.

She continues: “Just—I don’t have many years left to travel, and it might be nice—”

To get outside, see the sights. To leave the apartment.

He takes a definitive sip of his coffee. “Where, exactly, were you thinking of going?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” she says. “Your dad and I drove around the country years ago, you know—saw the Redwoods, went to Europe, even Jamaica, a few years after you were born—you stayed with Aunt Rae, remember?—so it’s not as if I haven’t traveled.” She pauses here, preparing for the kill. “But one place I’ve never been, that I’ve always wanted to see, is Af—”

“OK, Ma, let me stop you right there.” His chosen voice is meant to indicate, of course, that she’s not being funny. “Listen to me: fly to Nigeria, get yourself abducted. Whatever.”

More coffee, like he’s taking a pull:

“But do *not* expect me to pay your ransom.”

You think your pain and your heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world, but then you walk outside. Not even: then you read. A novel, an email. A silly human interest story in your local paper. Arlene can’t understand how more people don’t notice this, or—if they do—how they remain so

unaffected by it. Everywhere she looks, people are suffering. And then there are other people, with warm coats and expensive-looking shoes, who walk the street with their eyes always pointed down. Lying about what change they have, or not carrying money at all just to avoid the discomfort they feel fibbing to homeless people in order to keep hold of their quarters. The things that torment her the most? Not her own life, her own losses. No, what keeps Arlene up most nights, passing her time in front of the glowing screen and bidding, heavy-hearted, on stuff she doesn’t need, is everything that connects her with everyone else, with every single person who has ever lived.

Take, for instance, this Mr. Okoye. Her feelings here are complicated: it’s not as though Arlene hasn’t, in her eight years using a computer, deleted hundreds—maybe thousands—of junk emails and scams that found their way into her inbox. Still, though, there on the table: a print-out of his most recent correspondence, received yesterday morning.

Hello, it says. My name is Adebowale Okoye. I hope I am not incorrect in thinking my lawyer, our mutual friend Barrister Thomas Dah, has contacted you previously regarding a possible financial partnership and my (US\$15 MIL) FIFTEEN MILLION

DOLLAR inheritance? Please forgive me these unconventional communications, but I hoped to reach you directly, in thanks for both your time and consideration. Your assistance in these matters does not go unappreciated. Hungry orphans will sing praises to your name in our native tongue, and my lonely heart feels full knowing my father smiles down on us. I await your reply, hoping someday to meet you! God's blessing!

She wants to reply. Expedia sits open on her computer, searching flights. Something about this email feels different from other scams, or perhaps it's something about her that's changed. The intimacy of it astounds her. The feeling that maybe, however unlikely, her keen sense of empathy has led to her selection for this humanitarian task, one person chosen from an entire planet. That she can finally help someone else, thereby helping herself. OK, she thinks. What's so wrong with that? Why can't a lonely old woman feel good about wanting to help someone, so long as she's actually helping?

In the two afternoons since the phone call with Dominic, the kitchen's collection of uneaten Fancy Feasts has grown into a row of five identical cans. Everything around them has gone fishy. There's no sign anywhere of Timothy Whiskers. Which is worrying, no? It's not as though he could have gone anywhere—

she never opens the front door more than a sliver. If she kept the apartment cleaner this wouldn't be a problem, so she blames herself. Just as she's always blamed herself for everything.

And this: there's an unpleasant smell in the bathroom, coming from behind a fallen stack of heavy boxes. Arlene will not look in there. She's been going with her eyes closed.

You learned to see past the mess, to forget about it and get through the daily rituals of survival. Eat, sleep, evacuate waste. It's when someone stops by—Dominic, a delivery person, whoever—hell, it's even when she thinks about someone stopping by, about an old friend or even a casual acquaintance seeing the place, that she feels ashamed. She plucks the printed email from the card table, reads it. Despite her shame there's the sense that if she doesn't hold onto each item, and by extension each memory, no one else will. You can't trust anyone to know what's important. The picture frames, the baseball cards—they'll be thrown away, and with them something cherished will fade, will die. And so living here's become a matter of avoidance, of averting her gaze.

It'll never get cleaned up, she knows. Not while she's alive. Dom's right—she *will* die here, having always been a disappointment. Her son, her granddaughters, Joe: she will

never stop letting them down.

But she could leave today. There is this man, in Nigeria, who wishes to meet. She could pack her bags, take a cab to LaGuardia, and go. And why not? What's stopping her?

Tonight, she thinks, preparing for a trip to the bathroom: Tonight I'll put my affairs in order. Outside autumn's early sunset is a beautiful orangey-pink, chemical, peeking through slivers of open air between buildings. Leaning against the hard-won cat jungle gym, Arlene can't see it. Her window's long been blacked out by stacked boxes, but she remembers the view. She used to stand there looking out through the aquarium glass and making up stories for people she saw across Irving. Students, shoppers. There, a couple heading out for a romantic dinner—candlelit, she'd always imagine, with a bottle of wine. There, a panicked man running for the subway. Late for his son's soccer game, perhaps, or for his daughter's dance recital. Each time she told herself a different story, but no matter whom she saw, or what the occasion, she'd always get the same eerie, bristled feeling that even though she was the one looking out into the city, someone, somewhere, was always looking back.

"I too am lonely," she types, single-fingered, settling back into the chair. "Your

story is moving, and I was touched by your wish to meet in person—"

Today's is a colder, brighter sun. By the time they find her, fingernails rimmed with dirt, the temperature will have climbed to a balmy seventy-five, but it's early morning now and brisk. The neighborhood's only just coming to life. Shops are opening; cars are becoming unparked. Trailing a wheeled suitcase clumsily behind her, Arlene stops to breathe in an unfamiliar Manhattan. Her luggage bumps to a halt. She breathes deeply. Even the city air feels crisp, unstale—this is something she's missed. No mildew, no settling dust!

A little yipping terrier, leashed to a streetlight, ties itself into an impossible knot. Stopping to help, she lets it sniff suspiciously at her lumpy suitcase while she untwists the leash. She scratches behind its ears. Today is her first step forward, or so she's been telling herself. She's surprised by this sudden turnaround, punctuated by the morning spent outdoors—her first in over a year. She almost can't believe she's actually outside, that she actually came down the elevator and waved goodbye to the doorman, dragging along her cat-stuffed suitcase. A cleaner apartment—this could be a real thing.

Arlene waves hello to an older couple

getting coffee from a food cart, and they smile politely back. Rejuvenated, she continues walking.

Fenced-in Gramercy Park, two blocks north, is the closest outdoor space. There's a London feel: little bushes tightly pruned, gravel pathways marking off sections of manicured lawn green enough to golf from. She hopes, but is unsure, that it'll be empty at this hour. You actually need a key to open the gate—it's New York City's only private park, the last of its kind, open to neighborhood residents who pay an annual fee, which Arlene does not. Her apartment is close enough, just barely, but when Dom was little they'd preferred parks with baseball diamonds and jungle gyms, places where kids could play. He and Joe tossed the football, ran bases. But today she's chosen Gramercy for her first errand because of its proximity; any farther would be too long a walk, and she only has enough cash for the one taxi. Hunched over her cane, inching down the sidewalk, she wheels her bag behind her. If you're old enough, if you look frail—well, you can get where you'd like to go.

She follows a man into the park, thanking him for holding the gate.

In a quiet corner, under a gnarled old dirt-circled tree, clear across the park from the man, she sets down her suitcase. She watches him

for a long, tense moment until she's sure he's too distracted to notice her. (If he saw, how on earth to explain?) Once she's finished here, Arlene tells herself, once everything at home is dealt with, she can get a cab to the airport and the fresh start she's needed.

The luggage is lumpy, unbalanced. No amount of silent cursing helps it lie flat. Unzipping the main compartment, she lifts the body out. She's not quite strong enough, and it takes a few stops and restarts. Fur sheds in curls all over her jacket. Pick up, drop. Pick up, drop. After a week trapped beneath a fallen box in the moldy, closed-off bathroom, Timothy Whiskers is mangy and stinks. A rotting smell, a much worse version of very wet leaves. His cold, dead weight flops around as she struggles with it, pushing him with her shoulder toward a clear spot on the lawn. High in the tree, warblers flit around and look down at her with what feels like scorn.

She's forgotten a shovel—if only she'd even thought to bring a spoon. Instead she digs with her hands, cold soil caking her fingernails. Arlene feels she *has* to do this. Step one. A symbolic gesture, an act of good faith. A first cleaning and a way to honor her friend. This will show Dominic! She curses her slowness. Soon there will be more people in the park, and someone will see. She digs and digs.

If the average human life, like Arlene's, is simply a long series of decisions being made, then hers has come down to just one: bury this body, or give up entirely. If she can do this, she can show Dominic—she can head to the airport, board a flight to Nigeria, and maybe save the apartment. If not, then what? Then Dominic won't ever see how hard she's tried and their relationship might never heal. She might never again be a part of her granddaughters' lives. Success here, she thinks, scratching at the ground, will prove it's not too late.

Hours later, when they find her, she's still clawing at the dirt. The best anyone can tell, she's given up digging a deep enough hole, has gone ahead and pushed the body into the shallow divet she managed, and is trying her best to cover the spot with dirt. Everyone agrees: she's a sad sight for sure.

But it's fine, it's OK, because after that her days get better. After they find her sprawled out on the grass, sobbing—*I can't do it, I can't, I can't*—after the police are called, after Dominic's come in from Jersey City, frantic, after the sun's fully up, everyone's shadow shifted from left to right, after the last plane for Nigeria's long departed, one seat empty, after the families with kids begin to hurry by—*Don't stare, Tommy, don't be rude*—after the madly chirping birds quit diving at her

and return to their trees, after the body's been wrestled from her arms and disposed of (who knows where), her only friend in the whole world, Arlene still kneeling there in the grass, Dominic telling her everything will be all right, her apartment still and silent a few blocks away, after he's promised he'll clean the whole place himself—she doesn't have to worry about anything—and she's begged him, her own son, for mercy, for understanding, to spare her stuff, her things, Joe's things, after she's cried and drooled and blown her nose into a policeman's sleeve, trying to convince him she's fine, she's not crazy, she just wants to go back to her apartment, after they pack up the essentials, the computer pinging with new emails, and send her to the home, after she gets used to the routine, the precooked meals and bingo games and nurse on call and the cleaning lady, after her memory goes, after Dominic stops visiting on weekends and ordering them Chinese, which they eat together in silence, after she can't even remember if he's visited or not because her life's been wiped clean and replaced with a new, confusing, fuzzy version, after the nurses bring her a bookshelf and a computer that she rarely turns on, after she forgets how to even play bingo, after she forgets what year it is, after a heart attack and a stroke, blood thinners and opiates, and still the emails

from Mr. Okoye, after she meets and forgets a whole series of doctors, after Sophie and Lor's faces mean nothing to her, even when they visit—Soph always in her Rutgers hoody, Lor sipping very strong tea—it's a few years later, after all that, the emails less frequent now but still coming, when she finally wakes up one morning, once again certain it's Joe who's sleeping beside her. He's snoring, and she will never forget the sound.