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Chicken in the Box

SOO CHRISTIANSEN

Wfuna struggled with the E-Z open top of the cardboard box that contained his dinner. Inside the box was an envelope of waxed paper, which he opened with somewhat less difficulty than the box. Inside the envelope were fine brown crumbs. He looked at the front of the box again, where a red cartoon chicken danced. Why were there only crumbs in the box? Where was the promised chicken? Another trick. Nothing in this country was what it appeared to be, and every time he tried to establish a foothold he found himself on shifting sand. A chicken on a box should mean a chicken *in* the box, but all he found were crumbs. Depressed and hungry, he decided to drop in on his brother and sister-in-law. Maybe she had made something to eat.

His sister-in-law Julie kissed him hello when she opened the door, but a small line between her eyebrows told him she was not glad to see him, although her mouth smiled. The apartment smelled of fried egg and cigarette smoke. Wfuna's brother Pierre sat mesmerized in front of a very large television set, a hectic array of colors strobing across his bland face. Wfuna sat down next to him, awash in flickering colors now, too. Pierre asked him how he was doing, his eyes never leaving the images on the screen. A woman in a tiny sequined garment made her mouth a great cherry O for the camera, bent over and smiled. The white of her teeth hurt the retinas of his eyes. Wfuna told Pierre about the chicken on the box but not in the box and Pierre looked at him for the first time since he had entered the room, then tilted his head back to laugh. Julie asked what was so funny, and when Pierre told her she looked at him seriously but her eyes were laughing. She explained to him that the crumbs were only for cooking a chicken, which had to be bought separately. She asked him if he was hungry and made him some eggs.

As he ate, the three of them watched "Star Search," a program that showed how Americans can sing and dance their way to stardom on television. The women were all very thin, with breasts like globes and heads that were too big for their bodies. The men were made up of rectangles—chins, chests and teeth—their hair an unmoving square atop their quadrilateral heads. Every time a man walked onto the stage,

Julie said he was a homosexual; Pierre agreed. Ten men appeared on the show; there were ten homosexuals. Wfuna began to feel angry. These men, despite their somewhat odd geometrical proportions, looked normal to him. What if someone thought he was a homosexual? How could you tell? He wanted to appear on "Star Search," but not if people would think he was homosexual. He had finished his eggs and "Star Search" was over. Julie was on the telephone in the other room; he could hear her strident laugh. Perhaps she was telling someone about the chicken not in the box or that her brother-in-law was a homosexual. Pierre was in a trance, living inside a Bud Lite commercial in which more big-headed women cavorted in bikinis while rectangular men sucked clouds of foam off cans of beer that sweated with cold. Wfuna smacked Pierre lightly on the thigh as he got up to leave. Pierre's mouth smiled vaguely in his direction, his eyes glowed from the light of the television. Julie was still in the other room, laughing. Wfuna closed the door behind him, reluctant to go home but afraid of his brother's eyes, his sister-in-law's judgment.

As he walked, he wondered how he had ended up in such a country as this. America was a land of contradictions, a place where mirrors gave back someone else's reflection, ugly was beautiful, thin was fat. All the women he had ever met in New York City complained that they were fat, yet all of them were too thin, with no behinds and arms like starving children's. His sister-in-law had grown even thinner in the year he had been here, and no wonder, since the only thing she could cook was eggs and these she did not eat herself. She grazed on salads and cereals like a small hoofed animal, smoked cigarettes and drank Diet Coke. He had tasted Diet Coke one time and it had burned his mouth, leaving behind a taste of scorched metal. But Julie said she was fat, and every day of the week she went to her job teaching aerobics, her wizened legs encased in a shiny metallic material evocative of the taste of Diet Coke, and came home looking haggard. She encouraged Wfuna to come to the gym sometime to meet women, but he was afraid they would look like her so he never went.

America. Pierre had made it seem so appealing when he called Wfuna in Switzerland last year. Wfuna had been living there as a political refugee in a room in a boarding house with other refugees from his country. Everyone's door was always open, the women cooking familiar food on hotplates, the sound of his native language and the pulse of his native music welcoming him home every day. The Swiss hated them, hated everyone in fact, but their mouths did not smile to entrap him. In New York, people smiled, then closed their doors. They put pictures of chickens on boxes containing crumbs. Pierre had told

him he could be a star in America, a fashion model like he had always dreamed with his tall, thin body and face as pretty as a girl's. Wfuna studied the pictures in magazines of men modeling clothes, envisioning himself on the shiny pages, smiling and holding his arm out to a woman with cerise lips and eyes that wanted. But he was too black. The men they called black in the magazines were like coffee with a heavy dose of cream, and to achieve this effect he knew of a cream to lighten his dark coffee skin.

The Africans he lived with in Switzerland revered America, worshipping the images in magazines and on television. They, too, saw that black in America was almost white, and while they could not afford the kind of surgery that was molding Michael Jackson, a very rich American, into a tiny-nosed, thin-lipped, long-haired white man from a dark, broad-featured, bush-haired man, they could miraculously transform their skin. So it was that Nzei, an enterprising woman with abundant buttocks who bustled continuously about, began to sell pots of a magic skin-lightening cream. Wfuna applied it daily to his face and arms, and over several weeks' time noticed his skin beginning to pale. The other African men who tried it were equally pleased with the results, although everyone agreed he looked the best because of his fine features, and Nzei could barely keep up with the increasing demand.

Wfuna began to feel more confident of himself, especially around white people, and, while he was generally very shy, more women noticed him. He pretended not to see, but posed for them, leaning back against the seat of a bus and showing his profile, walking with a practiced long-legged grace, one hand on a hip and the other swinging freely. He was Mr. GQ, the Ebony man, more handsome than any man in America. Except he was not in America.

Pierre was in America, in New York City. He called every week to tell Wfuna how big everything was, how modern, how amazing. He did not say how lonely he was for the company of other Africans or how black Americans scorned him, but spoke of glamour and easy fame. He told Wfuna to buy a round-trip ticket to Mexico City so the authorities would think he was returning. There he could take a bus to Laredo and walk across the Rio Grande to America, then board another bus to New York. It was easy, Pierre said: he had done it, their friend Mbake had done it, and hundreds of others had done it. Wfuna bought the ticket.

Everything went according to plan. At Mexico City, he found the bus to Laredo. The bus was slow and stank of exhaust fumes and the unwashed bodies of his fellow travellers, many of whom carried large brown-paper bundles, chickens and small goats. As the bus lumbered tiredly up green hills and across dry plains, Wfuna felt as if he had

returned to Africa, only the sounds were different. The harsh clatter of Spanish did not soothe him as did his native tongue; the Mexican music reminded him of a circus and did not entice him to swing his hips or stamp his feet. His head ached, his throat was raw, and his heart pounded with fear. What if he got arrested? What if he got sent back to the country he had fled and publicly rejected? He would surely be scooped up at the airport, tortured in the most evil ways imaginable and left to die in the searing African sun, while the President for Life grew fat on the misery of his people.

By the time the bus reached Laredo, it was dark and Wfuna had been travelling for 30 hours. He felt as if he had been skinned alive and dried by the dusty wind that swept across Mexico. The riches of New York City seemed further away than ever.

A Mexican boy approached him, dressed only in a thin pair of clay-colored pants rolled up to the knee.

"Eenglish?" he asked. "You espeak Eenglish?"

Wfuna nodded, although fatigue had chased his grade-school English lessons from his mind. Somehow, through gestures and much nodding of the head, the boy was paid \$100 in American currency (luckily, Pierre had warned him to exchange his Swiss francs into dollars before he left) to lead him across the river. This famous river was wide but not deep. The boy indicated that it was up to his waist, and mimed taking off his clothes and putting them atop his head with his suitcase. Clad in his underwear, Wfuna followed the boy into the dark, slow-moving water, America on the other side. America! He looked up and saw armed guards on a bridge just overhead, stopping cars and checking papers. Around him, hundreds of shadows moved, but the guards seemed to take no notice. They must have seen the people in the river, but they busied themselves with the cars and papers on the bridge, ignoring the wading masses below. Anxiously holding his belongings on his head, Wfuna waited for a bullet to rip through his exposed rib cage, taking careful steps over the rocks in the river. Finally he reached the other side. The boy pointed to a red, white and blue sign that said GREYHOUND and told him "bus." This was the bus to New York City.

Already it was so easy in America! The clerk barely glanced at him when he said "New York," gave him the ticket he paid for, and pointed him to the bus he was to board. This bus was much cleaner than the Mexican bus and there were no chickens or goats or annoying music. He took a seat by the window and fell promptly into a deep sleep after the bus had roared out of the station. He dreamed he was King, a regal white man on a throne encrusted with jewels. His subjects came before him: the Mexican boy offering him a fat, healthy goat; Nzei bending low

in a bright cloth tightly wrapped around her round buttocks, strewing the magic skin-lightening cream across the crimson carpet at his feet; his brother Pierre, fiercely ebony, leading a beautiful, nude white woman by a chain attached to her narrow waist. He began to laugh, and his own laughter woke him up.

It was still night, and the other passengers slept. The bus rolled along the smooth, black road, nothing else visible for miles around. A sign loomed in the headlights of the bus glaring brightly at its surface: PARIS, 10 MILES. Did he come all this way to end up in Paris? How could he be back in Europe? His pulse quickened as he imagined having to travel all the way back to Mexico, destined to travel in a transcontinental circle for the rest of his days. Surely he was in Purgatory. The bus pulled into a station and the lights came on. Sleepy faces blinked, packages rustled, and people moved off the bus.

"Paris?" he asked a dark-skinned woman dragging a small child by the hand.

Seeing the panicked look in his eyes, she opened her mouth wide and guffawed, startling the person in the aisle in front of her. "Paris, TEXAS, honey, this is Paris, TEXAS."

It had been a long, long ride to New York City, the longest ride in his life, but since he had been in New York he felt like he was still riding, still confused by the signs along the way. Nothing matched, nothing made sense, and he was still not a famous model. He cleaned a restaurant during the day and walked the streets at night when he was too lonesome to watch TV. His favorite show was called "Three's Company," about a man who lives with two women as roommates. At 7:00 he would turn on his TV and wait for the cheery theme song to play, "There's a knock on the door, dee dee dee dee dee..." then laugh along with the prompting of the laughtrack as the madcap adventures of the trio unfolded. In America, the TV shows had people to help you laugh, even if you did not understand all the words, or laugh for you if you were too tired. Some days he hummed the theme song to himself as he pushed the greasy mop around the kitchen floor of the restaurant, waiting for 7 o'clock. He was the only African at the restaurant, though not the only black man. The cook was black, an enormous man with arms as thick and knotted with muscle as the branches of a great old tree, his face shining with oil and sweat over the steaming pots he tended. When Wfuna first met J.T., he extended his arm to clasp the cook's huge hand in his own and received a great shock. "Pleased to meet you," J.T. said in a voice as high-pitched and coy as a young girl's. J.T.'s lips pursed and his eyes rolled upwards, away from Wfuna's face. The cook's hand rested passively in his, and Wfuna

pulled his hand away in disgust. How could a girl be hiding in this huge man's body? One of the Puerto Ricans who worked in the kitchen saw the exchange and laughed, a gold tooth glinting in the side of his mouth. Wfuna grabbed his mop and cleaned silently for the rest of the day, sure every time he heard someone talking in Spanish or laughing that it was about him.

He learned to watch for homosexuals in New York, several times wandering by accident into their exclusive territory. A certain wooded area in Central Park where men lurked behind trees, their hungry eyes burning into him until he felt the heat and looked for its source, meeting the eyes and turning quickly away. Being followed. Streets in Greenwich Village where men sashayed saucily past store windows, arm in arm and giggling like schoolgirls. The ones alone, searching his eyes, which he averted. His model's walk became a hunched scurry, his lovely face a scowling mask. He wanted a girl, a woman, with soft breasts and sleek arms, inner thighs warm and welcoming. Nothing hard. No charades. A real woman.

Women in New York were elusive and deceiving. Black women stared at him frankly in the subways and on the streets, but the few he had approached mocked his accent and said words he did not understand but knew were insulting. He once took a white girl out to dinner and she talked the entire time, not eating her food, telling him a long, confusing tale about her father and her therapist and how fat she was. Seeing her misery, he reached out to touch her arm and offer some comfort, but she shrank away as if his hand were on fire and coldly told him she did not want to have sex with him. He was not asking her for sex; while he wanted sex, he did not want it especially from her, but from a willing, warm female. There had to be at least one in this city of millions. Hundreds came into the restaurant, but they looked right through him on the occasions his cleaning tasks took him into the dining area. One of the waitresses, Celine, was nice to him and even seemed interested, but she was dumpy, slightly knock-kneed, and her lower lip hung down, giving her a hangdog look. J.T. would catch his eye when Celine was spending a lot of unnecessary time in the kitchen and wink suggestively, sometimes passing his long, bright pink tongue wetly over his top lip. Working in the restaurant, Wfuna despaired of ever finding a beautiful American woman, stuck in the limbo of choosing either a giant gay black man or a dowdy white woman.

He knew the importance of learning English if he was to do anything in America, so Wfuna tried absorbing as much as he could. By now he understood most of the jokes the canned laughter chuckled at on "Three's Company"; he knew when J.T. was making a homosexual

reference, not just by the lascivious wiggle of his eyebrows; and the newspapers unfolded their former mysteries before his inquisitive eye. He happened across an advertisement one day that seemed to address him specifically:

WANTED: MODELS

Male, female, no exp. nec.

Make up to \$1200/day!

There was an address listed below. On his next day off, he went there.

His skin was very light now, or at least on his face, hands and forearms, although when he took off his shirt his torso looked as though chocolate had been spilled over it, his arms ghostly two-toned appendages. The skin-lightening cream was too expensive to use on his whole body, though, and the world only saw his face and arms. Wfuna had processed his hair as well, a few limp curls like overcooked pasta adorning the crown of his head. Sporting his finest Italian pleated pants, leather blouson and narrow-toed white patent leather shoes, he was ready to apply for a modeling job.

The address was in the west 20's, a part of the city that reminded Wfuna of old black-and-white movies about New York. The streets were narrow here, and fire escapes climbed the grit-encrusted building fronts like abandoned machinery. He had some difficulty finding the number he was looking for, and when he finally located it had to hunt for the small legend below a pocked button marked "Sophisti-Kay Modeling Agency." A scratchy, staccato voice buzzed him in, and he had to trudge up four steep, dark flights of stairs to the agency's office. He was sweating now, the leather top sticking unpleasantly to his skin and making him itch. A man sat behind a large wooden desk, hands folded expectantly on the empty surface. He nodded to the chair and Wfuna sat down, propped forward on his knees, his sticky back away from the chair. The man was squat, toad-like in a broken-down swivel chair. A greasy strand of mildew-colored hair was smeared to his shiny scalp like putty; a huge square diamond glinted on his pinkie finger, which was missing the first joint. Afraid to look at the deformed finger, Wfuna cast his gaze about the room for something to fix on. The walls were busy with pictures, pictures of American girls, girls with hair like wild yellow grasses and breasts as big and round as planets. He could almost hear Julie criticizing them in their overblown wanton beauty, but pushed the thought away as he forced a smile at the man.

The man looked at him in frank appraisal. He did not ask his name. "Stand up," he commanded. Wfuna stood. "Hm. Turn around, slowly." The words came out in a seductive hum.

Wfuna turned, feeling his buttocks clench involuntarily. Why did the man want to see him from behind?

"Hmmm. OK, you look pretty good. Can you take off that shirt?"

"Why do you want me to take off my shirt?" Wfuna bristled, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Hey, hey, don't get testy now. You want to model, you got to take your clothes off."

"I thought you model with clothes on. Modeling is clothes."

Leaning his body back into the chair, the toad man squinted over the desk at Wfuna, his fat upper lip lifting on one side. "You don't take your clothes off for me, you don't get a modeling job, it's as simple as that."

"Then I don't model, also simple." Head upright with indignation, Wfuna stalked to the door, not looking back.

"Fuckin' coconut," he heard the man mutter as the door closed behind him.

When he hit the street again, Wfuna walked. He walked blindly at first, anger coursing through the muscles of his legs as he pushed off from the pavement, battering his heels with a vengeful stride. He stepped past the prone bodies of broken men, black men mostly, men who resided in doorways and subsisted on the mean scraps of white man's waste. America, land of opportunity. Land of sour milk and rancid honey, where dreams became nightmares and immigrants with stars in their eyes found themselves looking into the greedy maw of a cruel machine that chewed them up and spit them out by the thousands. Who started the myth? he wondered, and why was it perpetuated? Nobody had told him, not even Pierre, that the loneliness here was also a form of starvation, a mirage of happiness always out of reach. His pace slowed, his fists unclenched, his brow unknotted as fatigue diluted his anger. His insteps throbbed against the constricting toes of his shoes. At least he had shoes, he thought, unlike the people he saw whose bare feet were blackened with grime and swollen into shapes like burnt loaves of bread, the ripe stench of purulent sores assaulting him as he passed. Nonetheless, he would have given anything to walk now without shoes, his feet free as they were in Africa when he was a child, dust sifting through his naked toes. Looking down at the pavement as he walked, he saw a minefield of broken glass, gray lumps of chewed gum, the butt of a partially eaten hot dog, the fluorescent orange spatter of a spilled drink, all coated with a rime of what looked like coal dust, and felt a kind of gratitude for the protective covering of his tight shoes.

The gloom between the buildings began to deepen as night fell. In Africa, the sun blazed into an enormous orange ball which slipped abruptly over the horizon, leaving the world a sightless black until the

moon rose; in Switzerland, the sky was always gray, night being a darker gray than the day; in New York, you had to peer up through the dark canyon of tall buildings to see if the wedge of sky overhead was light or dark. Streetlights came on.

Wfuna had been walking for some time. The air carried the marshy smell of the river, so he knew he was close to the water. The buildings were shorter here, wider and made of red brick. The unmistakable smell of blood mingled with the scent of fresh water fish dying in the river; the birth of night was upon him. CASTANELLI MEAT PACKING CO., said a sign on one of the low brick buildings. He was alone in the streets; the sound of his burning heels echoed in the emptiness.

A woman materialized before him. He hadn't seen where she had issued from, nor had her tread sounded, although she wore a pair of spike-heeled scarlet pumps. Her hair, pure jet and wavy, fell about her naked bronze shoulders. She was tall, almost as tall as Wfuna in her heels, with a proud carriage, the tops of her breasts spilling over the tight confines of her dress, a high, firm ass that winked—yes, actually winked!—at him. He longed to run his hands, his tongue, along the butternut smoothness of her throat, her lovely shoulders.

"Hello," she said in a husky voice, "are you lost?"

"Uh, yes, miss, I know I am near the river, but I do not know where I am."

"Where would you like to go?"

"I was just walking."

"Come," she said, taking hold of his leather-clad arm with an elaborately manicured but surprisingly strong hand, and he walked with her, deeply inhaling her perfume mingled with the dank blood and river smells. The streetlights waged a weak battle with the encroaching darkness, shadows licking like flames against the fronts of the buildings.

"Here," she murmured, pulling him to her in a doorway as dark as a cave.

Like a man dying of thirst, he greedily drank her lips, her tongue, her hot breath, twining his arms around her, slipping his hands to her breasts, her waist, her mesmerizing ass.

"Yes, baby," she crooned, reaching for his belt buckle, smoothly unzipping his pants, taking out his aching penis and stroking it just the way he liked it. "Ooh, honey, you sure are lovely."

"You are so beautiful, I think you are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen," he whispered, lifting the tight skirt of her dress over her smooth, stockinged thighs. Reaching urgently upwards, searching for the tight coils of her damp pubic hair, the sweet release to be found there, he encountered the pulsating hardness of a prick straining to be

