

What It Means When A Man Falls From The Sky

by

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It means twenty-four hour news coverage. It means politicians doing damage control; activists egging on protests. It means Francisco Furcal's granddaughter at a press conference defending her family legacy.

“My grandfather's formula is sound. Math is constant and absolute. Any problems that arise are the fault of those who miscalculate it.”

Bad move, lady. This could only put everyone on the defensive, trotting out their transcripts and test results and every other thing that proved their genius. Nneoma tried to think of where she'd put her own documents after the move, but that led to thinking of where she'd moved from, which led to thinking of whom she left behind.

Best not to venture there. Best instead to concentrate on the shaky footage captured by a security camera. The motion-activated device had caught the last fifty feet of the man's fall, the windmill panic of flailing arms, the spread of his body on the ground. The newscast then jumped to the Mathematicians who had discovered the equation for flight. They were being ambushed at parties, while picking up their children in their sleek black cars, on their vacations, giving a glimpse of luxury that was foreign to the majority of the viewing public, who must have enjoyed the embarrassed faces and defensive outbursts from well-fed mouths that knew nothing of rations.

By blaming the Mathematicians instead of the Formula, Martina Furcal and The Center created a maelstrom around these supposedly infallible scientists and protected her family's legacy. And their money. Maybe not such a bad move after all.

Nneoma flipped through the channels, listening closely. If the rumor that Furcal's Formula was beginning to unravel around the edges gained any traction, it would eventually trickle down to the 2,400 Mathematicians like her who worked the globe and made their living calculating and subtracting emotions, drawing them from living bodies like poison from a wound.

She was one of the fifty-seven registered Mathematicians who specialized in calculating grief, down from the fifty-nine of last year. Alvin Claspell, the Australian, had committed suicide after, if the stories were to be believed, going mad and trying to eat himself. This work wasn't for everyone. And of course Kioni Mutahi had simply disappeared, leaving New Kenya with only one grief worker.

There were six grief workers in the Biafra-Britannia Alliance, where Nneoma now lived, the largest concentration of grief workers in any province to serve the largest concentration of the grieving. Well, the largest concentration that could pay.

It was the same footage over and over. Nneoma offed the unit. The brouhaha would last only as long as the flight guys took to wise up and blame the fallen man for miscalculating. "Cover your ass," as the North American saying went, though there wasn't much of that continent left to speak it.

A message dinged on the phone console and Nneoma hurried to press it, eager, then embarrassed at her eagerness, then further embarrassed when it wasn't even Kioni, just her assistant reminding her of the lecture she was to give at the school. She deleted it—of course she

remembered—and became annoyed. She thought, again, of getting rid of the young woman. But sometimes you needed an assistant, such as when your girlfriend ends your relationship with the same polite coolness that she initiated it, leaving you to pack and relocate three years' worth of shit in one week. Assistants came in handy then. But that was eight weeks ago and Nneoma was over it. Really, she was.

She gathered her papers and rang the car, which pulled up to the glass doors almost immediately. Amadi was timely like that, always been, even when she was a child. Her mother used to say that she could call Amadi on her way down the stairs and open the door to find him waiting. Mama was gone now and her father, who'd become undone, never left the house. Amadi had run Father's errands until Nneoma moved back from New Kenya, when her father had gifted him to her, like a basket of fine cheese. She'd accepted the driver as what she knew he was, a peace offering. And though it would never be the same between them, she called her father every other Sunday.

She directed Amadi to go to the store first. They drove through the wide streets of Enugu and passed a playground full of sweaty egg-white children. It wasn't that Nneoma had a problem with the Britons per se, but some of her father had rubbed off on her. At his harshest Father would call them refugees rather than allies and he'd long been unwelcome in polite company.

“They come here with no country of their own and try to take over everything and don't contribute anything,” he'd often said.

That wasn't entirely true.

When the floods started swallowing the British Isles, they'd reached out to Biafra, a plea for help that was answered. Terms were drawn, equitable exchanges of services contracted. But while one hand reached out for help, the other wielded a knife. Once here, the Britons had

insisted on their own lands and their own separate government. A compromise, aided by the British threat to deploy biological weapons, resulted in the Biafra-Britannia Alliance. Shared lands, shared governments, shared grievances. Her father had only been a boy when it happened, but held bitterly to the idea of Biafran independence, an independence his parents had died for in the late 2030s. He wasn't alone, but most people knew to keep their disagreements to themselves, especially if their daughter was a Mathematician, a profession that came with its own set of troubles. And better a mutually beneficial, if unwanted, alliance than what the French had done in Senegal, the Americans in Mexico.

As Amadi drove, he kept the rearview mirror partially trained on her, looking for an opening to start a chat that would no doubt lead to him saying that maybe they could swing by her father's place later, just for a moment, just to say hello. Nneoma avoided eye contact. She couldn't see her father, not for a quick hello, not today, not ever.

They pulled up to Shoprite and Nneoma hopped out. Her stomach grumbled and she loaded more fruit in her basket than she could eat in a week and cut the bread queue to the chagrin of the waiting customers. The man at the counter recognized her and handed over the usual selection of rolls and the crusty baguette she would eat with a twinge of guilt. The French didn't get money directly, but she still couldn't stop feeling as if she funded the idea of them. Ignoring the people staring at her, wondering who she might be (a diplomat? a Minister's girlfriend?), she walked the edges of the store, looping towards the checkout lane.

Then she felt him.

Nneoma slowed and picked up a small box of detergent, feigning interest in the instructions to track him from the corner of her eye. He was well-dressed, but not overly so. He looked at her confused, not sure why he was so drawn to her. Nneoma could feel the sadness

rolling off him and she knew if she focused she'd be able to see his grief, clear as a splinter. She would see the source of it, its architecture, and the way it anchored to him. And she would be able to remove it.

It started when she was fourteen, in math class. She'd always been good at it, but had no designs on being a Mathematician. No one did. It wasn't a profession you chose or aspired to; you could either do it or you couldn't. That day, the teacher had showed them a long string of Furcal's Formula, purchased from the Center like a strain of a virus. To most of the other students, it was an impenetrable series of numbers and symbols, but to Nneoma it was as simple as the alphabet. Seeing the Formula unlocked something in her and from then on she could see a person's sadness as plainly as the clothes he wore.

The Center paid for the rest of her schooling, paid off the little debt her family had and bought them a new house. They trained her to hone her talents and go beyond merely seeing a person's grief till she knew how to remove it as well. She'd been doing it for so long she could exorcise the deepest of traumas for even the most resistant of patients. Then her mother died.

The man in the store stood there looking at her and Nneoma used his confusion to walk away. The grieving were often drawn to her, an inadvertent magnetic thing. It made her sheltered life blessed and necessary. The Center was very understanding and helped contracted Mathematicians screen their clients. No one was ever forced to do anything they didn't want to. Nneoma worked almost exclusively with parents who'd lost a child, wealthy couples who'd thought death couldn't touch them, till it did. When the Center partnered with governments to work with their distressed populations, the job was voluntary and most Mathematicians donated a few hours a week. Unlike Kioni, who worked with those people full time, and unlike Nneoma, who didn't work with them at all. *Mother Kioni*, Nneoma had called her, first with affection, then

with increasing malice when it all turned ugly. The man in the tidy suit and good shoes was along the lines of her preferred clientele and he could very well become a client of hers in the future, but not today, not like this.

At checkout, the boy who scanned and bagged her groceries had a name tag that read “Martin,” which may or may not have been his name. The Britons preferred their service workers with names they could pronounce, and most companies obliged them. The tattoo on his wrist indicated his citizenship—an original Biafran—and his class, third. No doubt he lived outside of the city and was tracked the minute he crossed the electronic threshold till he finished his shift and left. He was luckier than most.

At the car, she checked her personal phone, the number only her father, her assistant, and Kioni knew. Still no message. They hadn’t spoken since she’d moved out. She had to know Nneoma worried, in spite of how they’d left things. None of their mutual New Kenyan contacts knew where to find her and Kioni’s phone went unanswered. Maybe this was what it took for Kioni to exorcise her.

On the way to the school, Nneoma finished off two apples and a roll and flipped through her notes. She had done many such presentations, which were less about presenting and more about identifying potential Mathematicians, who had a way of feeling each other out. She ran a finger along the Formula, still mesmerized by it after all this time. She’d brought fifty-seven lines of it, though she would only need a few to test the students.

When things began to fall apart, the world cracked open by earthquakes and long dormant volcanoes stretched, yawned and bellowed, the churches (mosques, temples) fell, not just the physical buildings shaken to dust by tremors, but the institutions as well. Into the vacuum stepped Francisco Furcal, a Chilean Mathematician who discovered a formula that explained the

universe. It, like the universe, was infinite and the idea that the formula had no end and, perhaps, by extension, humanity had no end, was exactly what the world had needed.

Over decades, people began to experiment with this infinite formula, and in the process discovered equations that coincided with the anatomy of the human body, making work like hers possible. A computer at the Center ran the Formula 24/7, testing its infiniteness. There were thousands and thousands of lines. People used to be able to tour the South African branch and watch the endless symbols race across a screen ticker-style. Then the Center closed to the public, and the rumors started that Furcal's Formula was wrong, not infinite, that the logic of it faltered millions and millions of permutations down the line, past anything a human could calculate in her lifetime.

They were just that, rumors, but then a man fell from the sky.

As they neared the school, they could see a few protesters with gleaming electronic placards. The angry red of angry men. Amadi slowed.

“Madam?”

“Keep going, there are only ten.”

But the number could triple by the time she was ready to leave. How did they always know where she'd be?

The car was waved through the school's outer gate, then the inner gate where Amadi's ID was checked, then double checked. When the guard decided that Amadi wasn't credentialed enough to wait within the inner gate, Nneoma stepped in. Her driver, her rules. The guard conceded as she'd known he would and Amadi parked the car under a covered spot out of the sun. Nneoma was greeted by Nkem Ozechi, the headmaster, a small, neat woman whose hands reminded her of Kioni's. She had a smug air about her and walked with a gait that was entirely

too pleased with itself. She spoke to Nneoma as though they'd known each other for years. On a different day, Nneoma might have been charmed, interested, but she just wanted the session to be over with so she could go home.

The class was filled with bored faces, most around thirteen or fourteen (had she ever looked so young?) with few caring or understanding what she did, too untouched by tragedy to understand her necessity. But schools like these, which gathered the best and brightest several nations had to offer (according to Nkem Ozechi), paid the Center handsomely to have people like her speak and it was the easiest money she earned.

“How many of you can look at someone and know that they are sad?”

The whole class raised their hands.

“How many of you can tell someone is sad even if they are not crying?”

Most hands stayed up.

“How many of you can look at a person who is sad, know why they are sad and fix it?”

All hands lowered. She had their attention now as she explained what she did.

The talk lasted fifteen minutes before she brought it to a close.

“Some Mathematicians remove pain, some of us deal in negative emotions, but we all fix the equation of a person. The bravest”—she winked—“have tried their head at using the Formula to make the human body defy gravity, for physical endeavors, like flight.”

The class giggled, the fallen man fresh in their minds.

“Furcal's Formula means that one day the smartest people can access the very fabric of the universe.”

They applauded politely.

The headmaster stepped from the corner to moderate questions. The first were predictable and stupid. “Can you make people fall in love?” No. “Can you make someone become invisible?” No. Nkem Ozechi might have been embarrassed to know that their questions were no different from the children in the lower schools. Then (again predictably) someone posed a non-question.

“What you are doing is wrong.” From a reed-thin boy with large teeth. Despite his thinness there was softness to him, a pampered look.

Nneoma put her hand up to stop Nkem Ozechi from interrupting. She could handle this. “Explain.”

“Well, my dad says what you people do is wrong, that you shouldn’t be stopping a person from feeling natural hardships. That’s what it means to be human.”

Someone in the back started to clap until Nneoma again raised her hand for silence. She studied the boy and noted on his wrist his father’s occupation (lawyer), his class (first). She’d argued down many a person like his father, people who’d lived easy lives, who’d had moderate but manageable difficulties then dared to compare their meager hardship with unfathomable woes.

“Your father and those people protesting outside have no concept of what real pain is. As far as I’m concerned their feelings on this matter are invalid. I would never ask a person who hasn’t tasted a dish whether it needs more salt.”

The boy sat with his arms crossed, pouting. She hadn’t changed his mind, you never could with people like that, but she’d shut him up.

In the quiet that followed another hand raised. *Not her*, Nneoma thought, *not her*. She’d been trying to ignore the girl since she walked into the classroom. She didn’t need to look at her

wrist to know that the girl was Senegalese, and had been affected by the Elimination. It was etched all over her, this sorrow.

“So you can make it go away?” They could have been the only two people in the room.

“Yes, I can.” And to kill the dawning hope, “But it is a highly regulated and very expensive process. Most of my clients are heavily subsidized by their governments, but even then.” And in case any hope remained, “You have to be a citizen.”

The girl lowered her eyes to her lap, fighting tears. As though to mock her, she was flanked by a map on the wall, the entire globe splayed out as it had been seventy years ago and as it was now. Most of what had been North America was covered in water and a sea had replaced Europe. Russia was a soaked grave. The only continents unclaimed in whole or in part by the sea were Australia and what was now the United Countries but had once been Africa. The Elimination began after a moment of relative peace, after the French had won the trust of their hosts. The Senegalese newspapers that issued warnings were dismissed as conspiracy rags, rabble-rousers inventing trouble. But then the camps, the raids, and the mysterious illness that wiped out millions. Then the cabinet members murdered in their beds. And the girl had survived it. To be here, at a school like this on one of the rare scholarships they offered to displaced children, the girl must have lived through the unthinkable. The weight of her mourning was too much and Nneoma left the room, followed by Nkem Ozechi who clicked hurriedly behind her.

“Maybe some of them will be Mathematicians, like you.”

Nneoma needed to gather herself. She saw the sign for the ladies room and stepped inside, swinging the door in Nkem Ozechi’s face. None of those children would ever be Mathematicians; the room was as bare of genius as a pool of fish.

She checked the stalls to make sure she was alone and bent forward to take deep breaths. She rarely worked with refugees, *true* refugees, for this reason. The complexity of their suffering always took something from her. The only time she'd felt anything as strongly was after her mother had passed and her father was in full lament, listing to the side of ruin. How could Nneoma tell him that she couldn't even look at him without being broken by it? He would never understand. The day she'd tried to work on him, to eat her father's grief, she finally understood why it was forbidden to work on close family members. Their grief was your own and you could never get out of your head long enough to calculate it. The attempt had ended with them both sobbing, holding each other in comfort and worry, till her father had gotten so angry at the futility of it, the uselessness of her talents this one particular moment and had said words he could not take back.

The bathroom door creaked open. Nneoma knew who it was. The girl couldn't help but to seek her out. They stared at each other a while, the girl uncertain, till Nneoma held out her arms and the girl walked into them. Nneoma saw the sadness in her eyes and began to plot the results of it on an axis. At one point the girl's mother shredded by gunfire. Her brother taken in the night by a gang of thugs. Her father falling to the synthesized virus that attacked all the melanin in his skin till his body was an open sore. And other smaller hurts, hunger so deep she'd swallowed fistfuls of mud. Hiding from the men who'd turned on her after her father died. Sneaking into her old neighborhood to see the crisp new houses filled with the more fortunate of the French evacuees, those who hadn't been left behind to drown, and their children chased her away with rocks like she was a dog. Nneoma looked at every last suffering, traced the edges, weighed the mass. And then she took it.

No one had really been able to explain what happened then, why one person could take another person's grief. Mathematical theories abounded based on how humans were, in the plainest sense, a bulk of atoms held together by positives and negatives, an equation all their own, a type of cellular math. A theologian might call it a miracle, a kiss of grace from God's own mouth. Philosophers opined that it was actually the patient who gave up their sadness. But in that room it simply meant that a girl had an unbearable burden and then she did not.

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The ride back home was silent, Amadi sensing her disquiet and resisting the casual detour he'd make past the junction that led to her father's house whenever they ventured to this side of town. At home, Nneoma went straight to bed, taking two of the pills that would let her sleep for twelve hours. After that she would be as close to normal as she could be. The girl's memories would lessen in rawness, becoming like a story she'd read in a book once. The girl would feel the same way. When Nneoma fell asleep, it was deep, black, dreamless thing with no light.

The next morning, she turned on the unit to see much of the same coverage as the day before except now the fallen man's widow had jumped into the fray, calling for a full audit of the Center's records and of Furcal's Formula. Nneoma snorted. It was the sort of thing that sounded right enough to win public support, but the truth was that the only experts who knew enough to audit anything all worked for the Center and it would take them decades to pore over it. More likely this was a ploy for a payoff, which the woman would get. The Furcals could afford it.

Nneoma told herself she wouldn't check her messages again for at least another hour and prepared for her daily run. A quick peek revealed that there wasn't anything waiting anyway. She keyed the code into the gate to lock it behind her, stretched, and launched.

The run cleared the last vestiges of yesterday's ghosts. She would call Claudine today to see how serious this whole falling thing was. There'd only be so much the PR rep could legally say, but dinner and a few drinks might loosen her tongue. Nneoma lengthened her stride the last mile home taking care to ease into it. The last time she'd burst into a sprint, she pulled a muscle and the pain eater assigned to her was a grim man with a nonexistent bedside manner. She'd felt his disapproval as he worked on her. No doubt he thought his talents wasted in her cozy sector and tolerated this rotation till he could get back to the camps. Nneoma disliked Mathematicians like him and they disliked ones like her. It was a miracle she and Kioni had lasted as long as they did.

As she cleared the corner around her compound, she saw a small crowd gathered at her gate. *Protesters?* she wondered in shock before she registered the familiar faces of her neighbors. When she neared, a man she recognized but could not name caught her by the shoulders.

"We called medical right away. She was banging on your gate and screaming. She is your friend, no? I've seen her with you before." He looked very sorry and suddenly Nneoma didn't want to know who was there to see her and why.

It was just a beggar. The woman wore no shoes and her toes were wounds. How on earth had she been able to bypass city security? Nneoma scrambled back when the woman reached out for her but was arrested by her fingers, delicate and spindly, like insect legs.

Those hands had once stroked her body. She had once kissed those palms and drawn those fingers into her mouth. She would recognize them anywhere.

"Kioni?"

"Nneoma we have to go, we have to go now." She was frantic and kept looking behind her.

Every bare inch of her skin was scratched or bitten or cut in some way. Her usually neat coil of dreadlocks were half missing, her scalp raw and puckered like someone had yanked them out. The smell that rolled from her was all sewage.

“Oh my god, Kioni, oh my god.”

Kioni grabbed her wrists and wouldn't surrender them. “We have to go!”

Nneoma tried to talk around the horrified pit in her stomach. “Who did this to you? Where do we have to go?”

Kioni shook her head and sank to her knees. Nneoma tried to free one of her hands and, when she couldn't, pressed and held the metal insert under her palm that would alert security at the Center. They would know what to do.

From her current angle, Nneoma could see more of the damage on the other woman, more scratches, more bites on her arms concentrated below the elbow. And then something nagged and nagged at her till she remembered the Australian and the stories of him trying to eat himself.

“Kioni who did this?” Nneoma repeated, though her suspicion was beginning to clot into certainty and she feared the answer.

Kioni continued shaking her head and pressed her lips together like a child refusing to confess a lie.

Their fight had started when Nneoma had done the unthinkable, violating every boundary of their relationship (and a handful of Center rules) and asked Kioni to work on her father. Kioni, who volunteered herself to the displaced Senegalese and Algerians and Burkinababes and even the evacuees, anyone in dire need of a grief worker, was the last person she should have asked for such a thing. Nneoma had called her sanctimonious and Kioni had called her a spoiled rich

girl who thought her pain was more important than it actually was. And then Kioni had asked her to leave.

Now she needed to get Kioni to the Center and get her help. Whatever was happening had to be fixed. She remembered again the Australian who had killed himself.

“They just come and they come and they come.”

Nneoma crouched down to hear Kioni better. Most of her neighbors had moved beyond hearing distance, chased away by the smell. “Who comes?” she asked, trying to keep Kioni with her. Aid must be on their way.

“All of them, can’t you see?”

She began to see what was happening to her former girlfriend.

How many people had Kioni worked with over the last decade, five thousand? Ten? Ten thousand traumas in her psyche, squeezing past each other, vying for the attention of their host. What would happen if you couldn’t forget, if every emotion from every person whose grief you’d eaten came back up? It could happen if something went wrong with the formula millions and millions of permutations down the line. A thousand falling men landing on you.

Nneoma tried to retreat, to close her eyes and unsee, but she couldn’t. Instinct took over and she raced to calculate it all. The breadth of it was so vast, *too* vast. It was just her and Kioni together, their burden excessive, even for two.

The last clear thought she would ever have was of her father, how crimson his burden had been when she’d tried to shoulder it, and how very pale it all seemed now.