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THE CHALLENGES OF NAVIGATING FEMINISM IN NIGERIA: A CASE FOR THIRD
SPACE FEMINISM

PEARL OSIBU

102 Pages

This project features two parts: a critical portion discussing the feminism landscape in Nigeria, and a creative portion—a work of fiction titled “Glued together”. This abstract only concerns the critical aspect of the work, to which the creative part will only be tangentially related.

In Nigeria, the largest country in Africa sited in the Sub-Saharan hemisphere, the very mention of the word, feminism is anathema. There is a lot of resentment towards, and pushback against the very idea. This lack of trust can be linked to certain voiced concerns that feminism is some “white man’s invention from the west” to disarticulate African culture and tradition; and in extreme cases, poised to “inspire our women to hate men, forget themselves and turn them all into lesbians.” These are all sentiments that are freely and frequently expressed in face to face and online engagements. The word and its objectives have been so demonized that even women who clearly hold feminist ideals and principles are loathe to associate with them.

But in the work towards positioning feminism as the ideal towards and egalitarian society, it is necessary that the term as well as the ideas behind the concept be accepted and normalized. And in order for this to happen, it is important to understand what has led to this antagonism.

This is a phenomenon I have been intrigued by and have sought to understand why there seems to be a lack of coherence between the word, and what it really represents. Almost all men and women who decry the term claim to, however, believe in the concept of equality and human rights. It therefore appears that it is the word and/or what it has come to connote that is problematic and perhaps not so much the concept of gender equality, at least to the extent that it is acceptable in a unique society such as Nigeria.

But what does gender equality mean in a multicultural and multiethnic nation like Nigeria? And what is it about the framing of feminism that makes it so disagreeable within the existing cultural context? How does mainstream feminism and its goals, objectives and dictates fare within other more traditional cultural landscapes?

This research attempts to do the following: 1) Articulate the challenges of the realization of women's rights in relation to the concept of cultural relativism in Nigeria. In doing this, I will examine the meaning of culture, how it functions and lends itself to misconstruction within a traditional hierarchy and patriarchy that intervenes in the realization of women's rights. 2) Visualize how the idea of third space can be engaged in the feminism discourse by first deconstructing what is even referred to as culture; and then reframing culture and the corresponding expectations. This could be a gateway to breaking out of the restrictions of culturally imposed colonial structures and restrictions, and as a result, broaden the scope of feminism in Nigeria without it leading to an assumed or perceived loss of culture.

KEYWORDS: feminism; third space; mainstream; culture; gender

THE CHALLENGES OF NAVIGATING FEMINISM IN NIGERIA: A CASE FOR THIRD
SPACE FEMINISM

PEARL OSIBU

A Thesis Submitted in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

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THE CHALLENGES OF NAVIGATING FEMINISM IN NIGERIA: A CASE FOR THIRD
SPACE FEMINISM

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P.O.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Nigeria is a deeply patriarchal society. As global conversation around gender equality as a whole and feminism as a specific movement has been on the rise, Nigeria has been notorious for its lack of interest, low adoption and in most cases outright rejection of the notion. To put it colloquially, the introduction of feminism to the socio-cultural space has been an epic fail and at the moment, a brief foray into social media spaces, especially twitter, will confirm that anyone subscribing to the label of feminist is inadvertently setting themselves up for scorn and ridicule, derision, hate and in some cases, harm. There are a myriad of negative connotations attributed to the label, most along the lines of accusations of misandrism. In this paper, I will try to distil why and how this situation came to be and what may be a probable approach to recentering the conversation.

In the discourse around feminism in Nigeria, two kinds of feminisms are identified; mainstream feminism, and then what can broadly be referred to as cultural-relativist feminism. While both feminisms are critical of discrimination of any kind based on gender identity and are in agreement about human rights, their criticisms and intervention styles take two diametrically opposed positions and strategies, leading to a conflict between them and a general state of unease regarding the discourse. While the former is a feminism that embraces equity wholeheartedly without recourse to how these ideals could affect anything but the rights of women, the latter is interested in upholding women's rights to the extent possible within existing social and societal structures. Different names have been coined for this second: Motherism, Stiwanism, African womanism and so on. (I will not include Afropolitan or Afrofuturist feminism here because that strand is concerned with connecting African women on the continent with their counterparts in the diaspora.) What all these forms and several others have in common is the goal of creating a

space of difference within which feminism can exist, in which there are clear cultural, behavioral, legal and structural differences. Looking at the two, it appears that the problem with the former, mainstream feminism, is that it is (and has always been) insufficient to carry along an entire block of women who were and are at completely difference spheres with relation to (the position and needs of) white women and any other women who are in better placed positions. In discussing this inefficiency, Kendall states;

As debates over last names, body hair, and the best way to be a CEO have taken center stage in the discourse surrounding modern feminism, it is not difficult to see why some would be questioning the legitimacy of a women's movement that serves only the narrow interests of middle- and upper-class white women. While problems facing marginalized women have only increased in intensity, somehow food security, education, and health care—beyond the most basic of reproductive needs—are rarely touted as feminist issues. It is past time to make the conversation a nuanced, inclusive, and intersectional one that reflects the concerns of all women, not just a privileged few. (15)

And yet somehow, in the feminism zeitgeist, this wholly unfit-to-purpose mainstream feminism is the version that has been introduced to the Nigerian social space and forced upon unsuspecting and largely uneducated (on the subject) people. And so, while cultural-relativist feminism is doing too little to tackle the issue, mainstream feminism is doing a lot but apparently in the wrong direction.

Feminism in Nigeria started to become an element to be reckoned with in the mid 2000s. One could say it coincided with the proliferation of social media and the latter's ability to shrink distance and connect different peoples, effectively rendering the world into a global village for

good or for bad. Prior to this, there had always been women's movements, and some too small or fractured to be correctly identified as a movement—more like interest groups—the oldest and largest of which was the National Council of Women's Societies (NCWS), founded in 1958. But it could not be effective as a feminist tool because it stated in its manifesto that it was at home with the protection of culture and tradition as well as the supremacy of men and went to great lengths to reassure stakeholders that it would not rock the boat and was only interested in the uplifting of women. "This movement is 'at home' with the protection of our culture and tradition as well as the supremacy of men. It essentially accepts what the tradition has been and what religion sanctions" (Madunagu 666). In 1983 a new group was inaugurated, Women in Nigeria (WIN), which most agree to have been the first organization that could be ascribed the term, feminist. They, to put it colloquially, understood the assignment: to intervene in issues that affected women through research, advocacy and empowerment. They focused mostly on grassroots women and women in less developed parts of the country as well as those in impoverished demographics without access to the most basic of necessities. They found ways to engage with men and try to make them stakeholders as it was central to their belief that equality would be impossible to achieve without the cooperation of men. Like the NCWS before them, they focused less on tactics that brought women in direct opposition to men and instead worked with the belief that the only way to equality was by empowering and platforming as many women as possible.

In retrospect, this was probably a naïve assumption to make, as it essentially created an illusion of power for women that was still reliant on and at the mercy of men to bequeath and withdraw. And then came the African feminist forum in 2006 with the Nigerian wing, Nigerian Feminist Forum (NFF). There was clearly a shift in tone. This was probably the first time the

title, feminist, was written on a placard and staked in the ground without apology or regard to men and the existing patriarchal systems. It aligned itself with the established global feminist movements. They can be credited with scaling right over all reservations of previous organization straight into the minefield of challenging the patriarchy, the focus being on African women's labor rights, including egalitarian governance, fair and equal remuneration, and maternity policies. While it was a relief that the hotfooting around men and the status quo was over, it can be argued that their activities, coinciding with the proliferation of social media, caused an almost overnight change in the status of the conversation around feminism, which perhaps Nigerians were unprepared for, culturally, legally, financially and intellectually. It bears mentioning that Nigeria is a very religious society, and the two main religions practiced, Christianity and Islamism, are both decidedly against gender equality.

Taking all of the above into consideration and seeing the current state of feminism, it appears to be a good time to evaluate how feminism is being promoted and practiced and how it can be redefined in a way that is inclusive. Which brings us to the third space.

In discussing this concept and the transformative power of the third space, Licona describes it as a concept that can be understood as a location or a practice. They state that “as a location, third space has the potential to be a space of shared understanding and meaning-making. Through a third-space consciousness, then dualities are transcended to reveal fertile and reproductive spaces where subjects put perspectives, lived experiences, and rhetorical performances into play” (105).

Many African societies—of which Nigerian is one—believe that the promotion of gender equality interferes with local culture; the conclusion then reached is that gender equality should not be promoted as an ideal for ethical reasons. Women are therefore left with a kind of catch-22

situation where they have to choose either their rights or their culture, as the two are invariably adjudged to be mutually exclusive. But what if that were not the case? And it can be proven that historically, in fact, African culture was designed in a way that was far more equal than what is currently being practiced today and that reuniting with and reclaiming some of those ways of life may mean a greater acceptance of a more gender equal framework that existed before colonization. One of the things this research does is analyze the debate on culture and gender equality with an aim to challenging the existing stereotypes in Nigerian cultures, while also looking for points of intersection, perhaps reaching for a culture in which culture is not completely at odds with gender equality.

CHAPTER II: CULTURE, GENDER & POWER

How Cultures Define Gender Roles

Culture: there is no term or concept used more frequently to defend continued practices of gender inequality and express anti-feminist sentiments. Whenever arguments have been exhausted on the basis of human rights, the ultimate fallback position is “this is not our culture.” So, what *is* this culture?

“Most anthropologists would define culture as the shared set of (implicit and explicit) values, ideas, concepts, and rules of behavior that allow a social group to function and perpetuate itself” (Hudelson 345). Taken at face value, this definition appears to suggest that culture is a set of unchanging and unchangeable ideas that are responsible for the proper functioning of any society. Another such oversimplified definition is that culture refers to “a society or any group in which a significant number of people live and think in the same ways” (Collins English Dictionary). “It is a macro concept, which also incorporates religion as one of its aspects” (Raday 663), and if there is one thing that should be known about religion, it is the unchanging nature of its dogmas and precepts. And so, using the definitions above, culture is used to determine or dictate what attitudes, traits and other characteristics are appropriate for women or men and also what the relationships between the genders should be. Culture is therefore paramount in shaping how daily life is lived in the family, as well as in the broader community and at the workplace. (Note: For the purpose of this project, gender here will be limited to the two binary groups which are commonly culturally recognized in African society).

When limited to the above definitions, the function of culture in the division of labor according to gender is apparent. In nearly all communities in Nigeria there is a clear delineation

of duties along gender lines both in the household and in the wider community and sometimes there can be an overlap (e.g., the female staff expected to serve at board meetings, make coffee etc., for their male colleagues). Cultural relativists like West and Zimmerman state that adult members of society see the differences in gender as fundamental and enduring, which supports the divisions of labor into gender roles. (128).

However, typical definitions of culture ignore the fact that culture, as a term and concept, has and does evolve. Culture may be a “way of life” or “learned behavior,” but an alternate concept of culture also exists, in which it is a codified system, that when unpacked, comes to define social conduct. As such, Hudelson, in discussing organizational culture, continues: “Rather than simply the presence or absence of a particular attribute, culture is understood as the dynamic and evolving socially constructed reality that exists in the minds of social group members” (345). Or, as Geertz would have it:

One is to imagine that culture is a self-contained "superorganic" reality with forces and purposes of its own; that is, to reify it. Another is to claim that it consists in the brute pattern of behavioral events we observe in fact to occur in some identifiable community or other; that is, to reduce it. But though both these confusions still exist, and doubtless will be always with us, the main source of theoretical muddlement in contemporary anthropology is a view which developed in reaction to them and is right now very widely held—namely, that, to quote Ward Goodenough, perhaps its leading proponent, “culture [is located] in the minds and hearts of men.” (11)

Here too is Williams:

Culture is ordinary that is the first fact. Every human society has its own shape, its own purposes, its own meanings. Every human society expresses these in institutions and in arts and learning. The making of a society is the finding of common meanings and directions, and its growth is an active debate and amendments under the pressures of experience, contact and discovery writing themselves into the land. The growing society is there, yet it is also made and remade in every individual mind. (93)

And again:

Cultures are never homogenous and are shaped by people's actions and struggles over meaning. Culture is the way that people make sense of their world, both as individuals and as part of larger collectives. Cultures have always been subject to change—both internal and external. From this perspective, respect for cultural differences exists simultaneously with the belief that cultural practices and beliefs can and do change over time. (United Nations)

Once it is understood that culture is flexible in this way, nonsense is made of the argument against feminism and other aspects of progressiveness on the basis of culture as though it were some immovable thing that, once established, cannot change, and not as something dynamic that changes with the perceptions and allowances of the practitioners. And citing culture as an excuse to commit injustices and acts of subjugation shows clearly that it is only but a weapon that can be and often is wielded by the strongest in order to keep the weaker members of society in continued subjection; and that the excuse that a change being sought is “not cultural” is more an unwillingness, rather than an inability, to change.

It goes without saying that culture affects the rights of women. And keeping women from their rights is a decision based on power, and culture is used to maintain this power imbalance. The next thing to consider are the factors that define culture; determine how it evolves; what is considered unchangeable; and what is allowed to change, to what extent, and why, in order to maintain this hold on power of men over women.

There are several components of Nigerian life that exert influence on what is regarded as culture and tradition. The two most important are bedmates of colonial rule and influence: Religion and Capitalism.

Religion:

The way religion influences culture can be easily seen from its influence on old systems of law and worship, on dressing and morality, on governments and policies, and it permeates every aspect of Nigerian life. Abdullah states, “The reality is that in many cases, culture and religion are not so distinct, with cultural practices becoming ‘religionized’ and religious ideas becoming part of the culture” (102). But if asked, it would probably not occur to anyone to say religion in Nigeria was a culture in and of itself or at least an inextricable part. But it is easy to see how the way individuals relate to one another is defined through the lens of religion. This cultural aspect is perhaps the strongest contender with what is vaguely called “our culture” in the tensions around gender equality and feminism.

In Nigeria, religious beliefs, identities and practices are very public social markers and animate everyday behaviors and interactions. From social events to workplace meetings, the demonstration of a belief in a divine being that determines fortunes and outcomes as well as apportioning rewards and punishments is highly visible across the country. Religious organizations also

play a vital role in Nigeria, often providing social services, financial support and the means for social mobility to adherents. Many religious organizations in Nigeria fill a critical gap in service provision left by the general failings of state governance and poor funding of public institutions at federal, subnational and local levels. (Hoffman)

Observing the stranglehold that religion has in Nigeria makes it immediately apparent the ways in which it has come to usurp the spaces and roles formerly reserved for cultural artefacts, practices and memes (e.g., the policing of behavior, morals and the ethical framework of communities, systems of justice, punishment and reward, traditional religious rituals and observances [e.g., naming ceremonies becoming dedication or baptism], and the power of legitimization [e.g. marriage]). The overtake is so complete that, for instance, a Christian couple who have performed their traditional wedding ceremony are not considered to be truly married (and may not even consummate the marriage) until they have performed the corresponding church wedding ceremony. These things have appropriated the role of ancient culture to mere token and myth. It is no stretch of the imagination to see how, accordingly, the influence of religion spreads in held ideas, one of the most toxic being the discrimination of women as endorsed by both religions (practiced by over 97% of the total population). It is hard to argue with a person who tells you that, according to their belief system, a man is Lord over a woman.

Commerce/Capitalism:

Colonization revolutionized the sociopolitical economy of Africa, bringing with it an irreversible change to the cultural landscape. “Pre-colonialism, the Nigerian economical system was totally traditional and self-sufficient. The economic system was based on trade by barter and

gave little or no room for capital accumulation. The system was redistributive and based on a communal ownership system.” (Amzat and Olutayo 241).

Colonialism brought with it the balkanization and amalgamation of Africa, breaking up and merging several unrelated and disparate groups of people, and considerations for history, culture and traditions were merely an inconvenience. This is how the system of welfarism, in which tribes took care of each other, was abruptly disarticulated into new systems of politics that linked political identity to the ethnic. “Colonization and capitalism have helped to corrode the traditional structures of social and economic life in Nigeria. Traditional African societies functioned on the basis of age grades or kingship groups with each age grade or kinship group having specific responsibilities to the community as a whole” (Oluwajuyemi 5).

With these changes brought on by the agents of capitalism came the monetization of the economy with new currency systems, enforced labor and taxation. The nation’s independence in 1960, which purportedly abandoned the colonial masters, simply brought a new system of dictators and class divisions that had never before been seen. It is easy to see how, with the dual forces of these pressures, cultures changed and continue to change to adapt to these new systems that control power structures and have pushed women and other marginalized groups to the bottom. This persists till this day. Together, these forces, both merged by and subsumed into old traditions and customs, form what is considered “the culture” today, and ergo the cultural landscape.

The Intersection of Culture and Gender Relations

I have discussed previously how in Nigeria, roles both at home and in the workplace and wider society are divided based on socially constructed gender determinism. Feminists argue that this pattern of difference based on gender is a human rights issue, as it spills into the construct of

the systems of injustice. A study by Amnesty International listed several instances of human rights abuses; but they are gender specific, from workplace discrimination to sexual and gender violence and a myriad of others. Counterarguments can be made against this practice of diluting specific gender based issues under the broad term of human rights. As Adichie puts it,

Feminism is, of course, part of human rights in general—but to choose to use the vague expression human rights is to deny the specific and particular problem of gender. It would be a way of pretending that it was not women who have, for centuries, been excluded. It would be a way of denying that the problem of gender targets women. That the problem was not about being human, but specifically about being a female human. For centuries, the world divided human beings into two groups and then proceeded to exclude and oppress one group. It is only fair that the solution to the problem acknowledge that. (TEDx Talks)

According to the UN Briefing Notes on Gender, rapid social changes experienced by people around the world, the way societies are being restructured and reformatted economically in recent decades as a result of globalization and its attendants (migration, economic dislocation, loss of livelihood and armed conflicts), people have responded by invoking and attempting to reassert traditional power relations in order to garner a sense of stability, leading to an intensification of the tensions between cultural rights and women's human rights (2).

But some argue that cultural rights are linked to the protection of women's rights (United Nations). And they are not entirely wrong.

Among many cultural and religious traditions, women have primary responsibility for transmitting cultural and spiritual knowledge and practices, and group identity in general, to succeeding generations. Because culture exists through, and is

generated by, the lived experiences of people, women's role in transmitting culture also situates them as creators and custodians of culture. For this reason, people across a diverse range of communities view women's adherence to and promulgation of cultural norms as integral to cultural survival. (UN Briefing Notes on Gender 1-2).

But then, perhaps deliberately or as a way to retain control on women, this very role of women in creating, upholding and transmitting culture can serve as a basis for protecting and enhancing women's status within their families and communities. Still referencing the same article (UN Briefing Notes on Gender 2), the research finds that women are given important roles such as spiritual guides, midwives, healers, and political leaders. It becomes apparent therefore that women's cultural practices are important not only for the spiritual health of their communities, but also for their communities' overall well-being. On the economic front, women are the primary providers of food, water, and healthcare for their families. Their roles and responsibilities are usually tied to the functioning of the household. Women fulfill these roles in culturally specific ways, highlighting the relationship between women's gender-based human rights, cultural rights, and economic and social rights. In these ways, women are made to understand that their worth is tied to their culturally specific undertakings and usefulness. And thus there is a clear relationship between the subjugation of women, the use of women in maintaining the same culture that is used to subjugate them, and the maintaining of an entrenched patriarchal system that keeps men in power over women. There are many such cultural practices that are inundated with gender-specific or gender-related forms of abuse that were not recognized as typical human rights abuses in the past.

Cultural Power and Human Rights Abuse

There are many instances in which the patriarchy uses certain tools of culture to hold women in subjugation.

Such discrimination under discourse are legion; they include inter-alia; legalized wife battery; or chastisement; wife inheritance; harmful widowhood practices; payment and refund of bride-price; marginalization of women's right in the event of dissolution of customary law marriages; female disinheritance; female gender mutilation; female trafficking; and son-preference syndrome and polygamous nature of customary law marriages, etc." (Umejiaku and Ifemeje 18).

The following are some instances of cultural practices wielded against women that constitute human right abuses and that keep women subjugated:

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM): Female circumcision, a practice still carried out in nearly every part of Nigeria was, and in some instances is still viewed as a rite of honor for females entering womanhood. According to Okeke et al, as a result of its large population, Nigeria boasts the highest absolute number of female genital mutilation cases in the world, making up a fourth of the estimated 115–130 million genitally mutilated women in the world (1). However, it should be noted that with hard work, there has been a progressive reduction in this particular tradition, as it has been proven to be dangerous, and somehow, culture came into a rare agreement with human rights, seeing to a much better outlook in this respect. The same cannot be said of many other practices.

Inheritance: In most parts of Nigeria, women have no cultural rights to land and landed resources. "Under Igbo Customary Law, only male children inherit their late father's property on his death to the exclusion of the females and widow. The first son inherits his late father's estate

and could devolve to his siblings, at his discretion. Where there is no son, the deceased's eldest brother or male relative inherits. Where the deceased is a polygamist and has many sons from several wives, the eldest sons of each of the wives may take part in sharing of the estate ” (*Nwaebuni*). As can be seen, there is a deliberate and determined effort to ensure that women do not inherit property at all costs.

Under Igbo native law and custom, the eldest son steps into his father's shoes as “Okpara” or “Diokpa” upon the father's demise. This system is made explicit in *Ngwo v Onyejena* 46 where the Court of Appeal held that when a father dies, his property is inherited by the eldest son who holds it in trust for other children.

Usually, the children referred to here are the surviving sons. Daughters have no right to inherit from their deceased father. Where the deceased is not survived by a son, his estate is inherited by surviving brothers of full blood of his father (*Izzi and Fab-Eme* 6).

The logic that underscores this is that women will invariably marry and will lose family-held property to the family of her husband in much the same way as she loses her maiden name.

There is no recourse for women who never marry or marry and get divorced. She is no better off if she becomes widowed. It seems therefore that the only option for care women have under this system of inequity is to marry and stay married. There is no accounting for the number of women who have found themselves in unwholesome marriages as a result of a system like this.

Discrimination against Widows: The plight of the Nigerian widow is a pitiable one indeed.

There are a number of toxic practices targeted at widows. This can be linked to the fact that Nigeria is a very superstitious society and as such, in many instances when a man dies before the wife, she is automatically the first suspect in his death. Whether or not this suspicion is real bears

scrutiny. A cynical person can be forgiven for arguing that this suspicion could be a mere pretext by the deceased man's relatives to justify throwing her and her children out in order to make a grab for his property. In any case, many widows are subjected to horrors. "For instance, some Igbo customs demand widows to drink the water used to bathe the corpse of their deceased husbands" (Umejiaku and Ifemeje 20). The passage in the text continues with a discussion on other elements of the widows' rites, which include them shaving off their hair, sitting and sleeping on the bare floor throughout the mourning period, and many other performative mourning rituals. There are also instances of forced imprisonment, (the widow is remanded to the home and not allowed to visit or trade and in some cases even to bathe at all throughout as a mark of respect for her deceased husband. If she makes a living by trade, she could be severely impoverished by the end of this process which often goes on for weeks. Umejiaku and Ifemeje describe these harmful and illegal practices as an infraction of the widow's right to dignity of human person; the restriction of the widow's movement a breach of her right to movement; and they draw the conclusion that the entire process is a serious infraction of the widow's right to freedom from discrimination. Another obnoxious practice identified is this: "Sexual relations with family members, brothers-in-law, father-in-law to 'cleanses' the widow of evil spirits. This ritual cleansing is the most taboo of all subjects. Its purpose is to sever the links between the living and the dead" (Refugees). It bears mentioning that men are not subjected to any of the above; rather, they are encouraged to marry as quickly as they wish, while women (widows) are most times required to remain unmarried for, preferably, the rest of their lives. There are also cultures that bequeath her by law to one of her late husband's male relatives.

Legislating of female bodies (dress, sexuality etc.): Nigeria, as with most patriarchal societies, has a long history of control of women's bodies, including what they may or may not wear. Here is an example of a circular posted to the University of Lagos a few years ago:

Example of such dresses are transparent clothing, spaghetti tops, tubes and skirts and dresses with slits above the knees fall in this category. iii. Outfits such as knickers and mini-skirts, dresses, which are not at least, knee length. iv. Inappropriate outfits, e.g., party-wear, beach wear and bathroom slippers should not be worn to lectures. v. Outfits such as T-shirts, skirts and jeans, which carry obscene and subliminal messages. vi. Trousers such as hip-riders and low waist jeans. Lecturers and administrators have also been empowered to exclude students from academic activities if they are not properly dressed (Unini).

And it does not end with college students but extends to even state and federal government ministries and parastatals as well as the police force and the military. There are too many instances to count of women who are mocked, stripped naked or punished in such a manner for daring to dress in ways that re deemed inappropriate.

In Anambra State women are not only forbidden to wear trousers but also to pay a fine of fifty thousand Naira (\$318) if they dare violate this law and will also be banished from the community. Those who thought it's a joke had to get convinced by first a young female member of the National Youth Service Corps has (NYSC) that got stripped naked because she wore her uniform which happened to be a trouser, a uniform she doesn't have anything to do with since they are given by NYSC, and by more than 10 women who paid the fine because they wore trousers. (Kiarie and Aurore).

(Sex) Slavery and Lack of Bodily Autonomy: Although this is generally recognized as a violation of an individual's fundamental human rights, in Nigeria it is a rather common practice. Parents give their daughter in marriage in exchange for money and is not typically perceived as an instance of slavery. Sometimes a husband marries his wife without her full and willing (as in, not coerced) adult consent. It is common for men to "correct," that is, beat up their wives, much like children, for disobedience, if he's suffered some misfortune—or for any reason. He could confine her to their home, forbid her to work for pay or appropriates her wages. In some cultures (for instance among the Tiv ethnic group in Benue State), a husband can offer his wife for sexual services to a guest as a show of hospitality; doctors routinely ask permission of the husbands to perform atrocities on women during childbirth such as putting in an extra stitch, hysterectomies, etc. Husbands get to dictate how the bodies of their women are used both to satisfy him sexually and in whether or not she has children as well as the number, deny her birth control, abortion etc. The Nigerian legal system still does not recognize spousal rape. "The provisions of Section 282(2) of the Penal Code clearly provides that: 'Sexual intercourse by a man with his own wife is not rape, if she has attained puberty'" (Adekunle). Things are even more dire in the Northern parts of Nigeria that operate under Sharia.

"Under the Sharia Penal Code, which is more of a regional legislation that has been domesticated by some Islam-dominated States such as Bauchi, Kebbi, Jigawa, Yobe, Borno, Sokoto, Zamfara and Kano, the concept of marital rape has been undoubtedly exiled into oblivion. For instance, by virtue of Section 128(2) of the Sharia Penal Code Law, 'Sexual intercourse by a man with his wife is not rape'" (Adekunle).

The Sharia Penal Code allows for marriage of minors and children—as young as even 11, hence the scrapping of the caveat about attaining puberty. There is a major epidemic of VVF (Vesicovaginal Fistula) as a direct result.

There are some instances in which women are made to believe that they have the autonomy and are making the decisions with regard to their own subjugation. An example is in southern Nigeria among the Efiks and Ibibio, who practice a (thankfully dying) tradition called *Nkugho*—a fattening room for women. Here, women, in order to (as it is rationalized) make better wives and child-bearers, are taught all about pleasing men, running the home and family affairs and the economy, all with an aim towards relieving the load of the men. A typical family construction in this setup would have the woman in charge of all the affairs of the family and ownership of property. And while this could be interpreted as progressive, it is a tensile power, because her freedom and power are always at the behest of the man and the community. Part of this culture and a conclusion of this rite is an act of genital mutilation—typically clitoridectomy—also in service of men, as this is somehow tied to enhancement of sexual pleasure for the man, as well as a belief that this makes women less promiscuous. And yet, these manifestations of slavery may not be recognized as violations of human rights in many cultures. In all of these cultures and societies where these practices are commonplace, these acts are regarded as normal, appropriate behavior, as, according to the culture, the woman belongs to the man. Below on the next point I will discuss this system/phenomenon of ownership.

Bride Price: This is a specific example of a divisive cultural practice that has come under attack in the wake of modern feminism and is a core bone of contention in feminism discourse in Nigeria, as it is considered the taproot of the problem of male (perceived) ownership of women.

According to Egbue N.G (*qtd* in Umejiaku and Ifemeje), “Violence against women constitutes a highly damaging dimension of the dehumanization of women on the basis of culture. This still remains common practice in the localities studied, either as means of maintaining masculinity and male superiority, or of keeping female spouses in check” (20). They further note “this violence, according to Egbue, has been linked with the payment of bride price by the male spouses, it is believed that this gives most men the false impression of powers of ownership over their wives. Consequently, most women are often regarded and treated as property of their husbands and can be physically beaten up by them as a form of correction.” (20). Bride price is a prevalent culture in many parts of Africa; the groom and his family pay an amount of money and/or material property to the family of the bride. This is a practice that has been accepted for as long as can be remembered. It has come to be understood to form the basis upon which a woman may qualify (as it were, quantify) her value to the man who married her and stake her status as a wife. It is generally assumed that if nothing has been “paid on her head” then the husband “took her for free,” which makes assumptions about her value. Not only does this practice undermine the agency and autonomy of women, it furthers the notion that women are made specifically to be in service of men. It is common to hear a man who has many daughters being hailed as “wealthy,” the insinuation being that he will profit much when he marries his daughters off.

While this practice has been romanticized to the extent that a woman whose husband does not fulfil this function is assumed to not have been “married properly” and can be ridiculed by members of her society, the feminist argument that it begs is;

If a man must pay anything to marry a woman, it becomes difficult to achieve a gender-equal marital relationship. In the heat of misunderstandings between

spouses, it's usually a major reason why men utter a thing like: "I paid your bride price, you have to obey me...." What this statement unmasks is the unspoken perception of women as chattel—as personal property. Thus, the practice of bride price legitimizes the power of men to treat their wives as acquired objects (Solomon).

This example has been used to portray one aspect of culture that puts modern feminists in direct conflict with cultural relativists. While the western feminist would insist that the culture be scrapped wholly, the cultural relativists would sue for some kind of negotiation where perhaps the amounts demanded were reduced, or as has become popular, returned after being presented, deeming the payment simply symbolic. But the question is, do these compromises help? If the gesture of payment is symbolic, what is it supposed to symbolize? To underscore the transactional and ownership connotations of this practice, once a man no longer wants the women, he is allowed by tradition to request the money back from his in-laws, much like you return goods from a store that you no longer want, the tradition stated in the native law to be a sort of refund policy.

And so, as can be deduced from the examples above, there is direct correlation between the payment of bride price and perception of women as owned property.

CHAPTER III: THE PROBLEM OF FEMINISM IN NIGERIA

I started out with an exposition about how badly feminism has been received and its snail-pace rate of adoption in Nigeria. Having given a background on how gender issues are culturally entrenched, we can move on to examining how feminism cannot, to all intents and purposes, be a one-size-fits all—not anywhere in the world, and especially not in a multicultural and multiethnic society such as Nigeria.

But Nigeria has been a patriarchy for as long as anybody alive now can remember. This is a condition so systemic and deeply entrenched that the mere agitations of feminism would never resolve the deep rot, especially not when one takes into consideration the interconnectedness of culture, government and religion. There are simply no structures in place to support any type of brazen attempt to topple the existing patriarchy. All that this leaves room for is a parallel system of negotiations and maneuvers. There is no impetus to demand change based on legislature. It is difficult to get laws and policies that support women's causes to pass because men hold most of the positions of policy formulation.

It is therefore no surprise that every attempt at adopting western-style mainstream feminisms has failed. In their eagerness to push feminist agendas, the early purveyors of the idea imported the westernized version and tried to infuse it into a society that was unable to support it. And as expected, pushback was instantaneous. It is with this in mind that cultural relativists have since been working on promoting more mindful approaches that incorporate men and their support into the feminism agenda: the notion that feminism—along with any other venture that seeks to empower women—cannot be successful without men's cooperation. Feminism in the west may be concerned with breaking glass ceilings, but what is a realistic approach in Nigeria? Where is the society, and what is it prepared for that can be supported by existing structures?

Issues of western feminism in many cases seem like an indulgence to the average woman in Nigeria who cannot inherit family-owned property, does not have ownership of her own body, does not have protection from gender-based violence and is dealing with what seems like inconsequential issues like cooking for her husband and family as a duty.

Feminism in Nigeria finds itself caught between western feminism and the more cultural relativist forms of feminism, which prefers a system of negotiations. On one hand, western feminism just does not fit, and on the other, cultural relativist feminism does not fulfil the ideals of equality in that it still depends on men for “allowance/permission” to function, and therefore still feeds into the patriarchy framework. Neither of the above options have worked for a number of reasons. The criticism that (modern) Nigerian feminists seek to impose a completely alien concept into a volatile system is valid and the complete breakdown of negotiations and failure of the ideal can be attributed in large parts to this bullheaded approach. Even the work of prominent creators of culture have left a lot to be desired in their interventions around feminism. There is a failure of true engagement with the intricacies of the Nigerian context and the psycho-economic realities of the people. Take Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, prominent writer, scholar and thinker, who is much criticized for her interventions around feminism. She is doing very important work; but like many, there is a failure either of engagement or of tone. She is the most notable voice around feminism on the Nigerian scene, but her work does not appear to engage with feminism in Nigeria in a way that contends with the realities on ground, recognizing the cultural, religious and social implications. In her famous feminist manifesto, there are suggestions and enjoinders such as being a full person; asking for help; women raising children with their partners; rejection of likeability, and so on. (Adichie). The text is much lauded and quoted, but how exactly does it help the Nigerian woman navigate day to day life in Nigeria? It becomes immediately apparent

that most of the feminists writing feminism for Nigerians live in the diaspora and have probably lost touch with the realities on ground.

The media presents a different sort of problem, leaning more towards African feminism, which essentially encourages women to accept the status quo and try to make little life-saving changes within the system without actually attempting to upset the system in any way. Watching a typical Nigerian show or movie that has been tagged as “progressive” would leave one scratching their heads, because it essentially comes down to women accommodating men and celebrating small wins.

It is in the wake of these tensions between the two that we make the case for the third space.

CHAPTER IV: NEGOTIATING FEMINISM IN NIGERIA; THE CASE FOR THE THIRD SPACE

Having noted the reasons for the tensions in the adoption of feminism in Nigeria, a case can be made for a third space. “The title *The Third Space* is taken from the work of the influential cultural and post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha; it refers to the interstices between colliding cultures, a liminal space ‘which gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation.’ In this ‘in-between’ space, new cultural identities are formed, reformed, and constantly in a state of becoming” (Campos-Pons).

In every discussion around feminism, there is always the male/female binary represented as dichotomous. What no one is talking about is how these colonial representations of Nigerian societies is the problem. Historically, Nigerian society was not viewed in the way it has come to be structured post-colonialism. There were not strict binaries in the sense that we have them now. Even in urban legend and myths, gods were known to take up male or female bodies in which they walked the earth—they were gender-fluid. Gay and trans people, and crossdressers all lived free and safe in society. Women were autonomous beings, not owned by men. But at the advent of colonialism and all that came with it, including religious morality that disintegrated African culture and sexuality, these new definitions have come to become the norm.

“It is difficult for many people to accept that racial discrimination and antagonism, which is such a pervasive phenomenon in the world today, has not been a permanent historical feature of humanity. In fact, the very notion of “race” and the ideology and practice of racism is a relatively modern concept” (Garikai). In the article cited here, Garikai discusses and outlines how empowered the African woman was before colonialism. She gives very specific instances of how pre-capitalist matriarchal civilizations in Africa placed women in very powerful and

decision-making positions, enjoying the same legal and economic rights as men. In these times, women were able to manage, and dispose of, private property; they had access to land, portable goods, and servants. An excavation of tombs and cemeteries would reveal how much wealth women possessed. Before colonialism, African women were largely equal to men, playing a significant part in productive labor; producing and processing food, and wielding power and influence in domestic, political, cultural, economic, religious and social spheres. As women were so important to production, there were no systemic inequalities. But then came colonial (mis)rule, at which point black women began to suffer discrimination and disempowerment: title deeds made men the sole owners of land, with women losing access and control and becoming economically dependent on men, which then led to a rise in domestic patriarchy, bolstered by colonial institutions, of which western religion is one. Colonialism also reduced the perceived importance of women's contribution to agriculture, because while women were mostly involved in food production for the household, men's attention shifted to the more lucrative male-dominated cash crop cultivation for the international markets, overshadowing the role and contribution of women. Colonialism brought with it Christianity, which has intrinsic in its doctrine a subordination of women, taking away the leading roles they had in indigenous African religion. Colonialism/Christianity brought also the monogamous nuclear family, shoving aside the polygamous family structure, and along with this—and in fact as its sole purpose—patrilineality, the design to pass on private property in the form of inheritance from one generation of men to the next. And so, under this system, the woman became more or less a domestic slave. There was also the introduction of wage labor that had many men migrate to urban areas, with women having to stay back and run the homestead. It did not help that the

colonial authorities used men as tax collectors from women (with whips and batons), which entrenched the idea of male superiority and dominance in the psyche of native peoples.

From the foregoing, therefore, there is a clear not just correlation but causation relationship of colonialism to gender inequality in Nigeria.

And this is why a discussion of third space is so important. “Third-space understanding allows for the extension of the idea of (b)orderlands beyond the geographic location of our homelands to our psychic and cultural understandings, as well as to our racial, ethnic, class, sexual, gender, and even psycho-social understandings of our complexities” (Licona 113). To expand: “‘Borderlands’ is a key term today in the analysis of liminal spaces and practices of transgression in the interconnected local and the global contexts, especially in Third World, transnational, and women of color feminism” (“Borderlands, A Feminist Concept”).

Borderlands represents a transformative third space for feminism. Rather than try to define what kind of feminism is adopted or practiced in Nigeria, the third space presents an opportunity for a flexible type of feminism that morphs and flows and aligns with the totality of the psyche of Nigerians as well as the lived experiences which includes an integration to the cultural history of Nigeria. This theory that there is a metaphorical space existing outside of the labels, terms, and indicators of language and ideology just may be the answer.

There is an opportunity here; the combined efforts of “back to the roots” projects such as the Black pride and Afropolitan movements are seeing many Africans, Nigerians included, starting to have serious conversations around reclamation of our cultural identities. But it need not stop at pride in rocking natural hair or wearing Ankara fabric or lauding African skin and features and accents and languages. This movement can and needs to extend to a recall to our historical cultural structures—a queerer society that saw women as equal to men. In the Third

Space, Nigerian women can become a hybrid of all ideas—a unique, ever-evolving body that cannot be completely defined by pre-existing labels. A third space is a space that confounds, befuddles and evades the patriarchy.

CONCLUSION

In the introduction to this paper, I stated that there is a mistrust of feminism in Nigeria. For most, the term feminism has come to mean a movement that is “anti-male, anti-culture, and anti-religion” (Nkealah 1). I would, in closing, like to submit that third space feminism can be the answer and a means of returning to pre-colonial culture, (re)connecting with our originally more liberal history.

My creative work will illustrate how prevalent gender inequality is today in Nigeria both in overt and subtle forms, and the contemporary anti-feminist subjugation of women. But it will also look forward to a reinstatement of that liberal history which is the backbone statement of this thesis.

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CREATIVE SECTION: “GLUED TOGETHER”

Vignette I

Her mum’s voice droned on and on. But Ganong had stopped listening. All she knew, she was going to win this day. She was hungry, had not slept well and was not in an obliging mood. She stared stonily at her mum, and then at Obi. Her mum stared back, the look challenging. As for Obi, he hung his head, hunched his shoulders and studied his hands. She hated this about him, how he never picked a side. Just allowed himself get swept up in whatever decision won. Or rather, whosoever’s will surpassed the other’s.

But her mum seemed to have lost patience with them. “Well, don’t just stare at me. Get up and start getting ready. We have to have this house in tiptop shape.” Her voice was a nervous shriek, belying the commanding tone she was trying to insert into the words.

She rose, declaring the conversation over, and then, when both Ganong and her brother remained seated, she started to tap a foot with impatience, glaring down at them.

Ganong looked at Obi again, who this time hazarded a brief peek at her, and then was back to studying his hands, particularly his chewed-out nails. He had the driest hands and dirtiest nails on any person she had ever seen, the skin of his palms so chapped it hurt just to look at them. It didn’t help that he spent whole evenings digging for worms and crickets, and then when he was forced to wash his hands, he would not moisturize them. When no one was there to make him wash them, he simply brushed the dirt off on his pants, which was more washing for Ganong to do. She couldn’t wait for him to grow up and start doing his own washing. Or maybe she should say she couldn’t wait for her mum to let him grow up.

She reached out and smacked his hands and he dropped them in his lap but hung his head still.

Her mum looked at them, getting upset. “Did you two hear me?”

Silence.

“I said get up and start preparing. We are cooking Abak with ayan ekpang. You know that it takes time and he’s coming around one. I told you people to stop sleeping until ten but do you listen to anything I say? No. I have been at prayer meeting since six, thinking that by the time I’m back you would have swept the compound and started making breakfast. Well, there’s no time for breakfast anymore. You are going to stay hungry until we finish cooking. And you know we always eat after our visitors, so that means when he...”

He! Who was this he, this man who was going to sweep into their lives and replace her dad. What kind of man was he that dared to think he could even attempt to fill shoes so large his feet would surely swim in them like hers did when she was five and used to try on aunty Beatrice’s high heeled shoes whenever she visited. Her dad was perfect. He was kind. He was the best. He gave them piggyback, sometimes one at a time and sometimes both at once. He never raised his voice. He ate whatever mum put before him with a smile, even when mum’s cooking was abysmal, which it often was. Abysmal. She liked that word. It was a word that was synonymous with very bad, awful, dreadful, atrocious, disgraceful, lamentable, laughable, substandard, inadequate, unsatisfactory, pathetic, lousy, the pits-

“Ganong!”

Ganong looked up sharply.

“Mm?”

“Did you hear what your brother said?”

Had he spoken? She looked at him.

Obi’s voice was a croak. “I said there was nothing for breakfast”

Sure, that would get his attention—food. Ganong glared at him. That was his cue to speak? *That* is what bothered him most about *all this*?

Her mum smiled a disconcerting smile, and Ganong wondered what about there not being food that was so amusing. When she spoke, her voice was triumphant, like she was announcing that she was going to buy them Christmas clothes twice a year this year.

“You see- you see those words you just said? Today is the very last day your mouth will form those exact words ever again.” She finished off with a look like she’d just handed them a trophy.

Then she sobered, and her voice grew quiet. Even her face lost its beam and grew mournful. This was something Ganong has always admired in her mum. How she was able to switch faces in moments. It always confused her and she had seen that confusion reflected in the faces of other people. The woman in the market selling vegetables had frowned in surprise when her customer who was just yelling at her for raising the price of her fresh Ugwu suddenly started begging and telling her how her children were starving. The woman looked utterly unnerved and seemed unaware that she was handing her mum the leaves and taking the money without even checking. She had seen her like this too with her dad.

Her mum cleared her throat. “I don’t want you to see this as...” She trailed off, then recovered. “Well, you know what I mean. The business has not been doing well. Obi, weren’t you sent home from school just yesterday for school fees?”

Obi nods. And Ganong sighs, feeling guilty. She had only been thinking of herself. Her mum always called her selfish, and maybe she was right. She was on a Petroleum Trust Fund scholarship and her parents had never had to worry about her school fees. Her *parents*, she thought, and swallowed past a lump.

“Ganong! You have nothing to say?”

Ganong’s toes found each other and hugged and dug themselves into the worn carpet.

She dropped her head, and her words came out muffled.

“I don’t like it still.”

Testily. “You don’t like what?”

“Daddy—”

“Your daddy is not here!”

“I know!” She had not meant to yell back and was taken aback by the fierceness of her sudden flare of upset. Her chest started shaking and now she was fighting tears. She did not want to cry. She hated crying in front of her mum. She always just mocked her. But the tears spilled over.

They were all silent for a long moment, as Ganong wiped furiously at her eyes and cheeks. Obi snuck out a hand and tried to pat her thigh. But Ganong flung his hand off. Then her mum heaved a sigh. She put a hand briefly on Ganong’s shoulder, and Ganong looked up quickly, unused to affection from her. But she, as though catching herself in a weakness, snatched her hand back and straightened.

“I am doing this. Before anybody annoys me, think about how this is for you. You think this is what I want? You think I... They haven’t paid us for six months. We are going on strike. Today it is breakfast. Tomorrow you won’t have any food at all. And then what?”

Ganong wondered why they kept going on strike, the university lecturers. It never worked. They would go on strike for a few weeks or months. The government said there was simply no money and the lecturers had no right to make these demands. The adults seemed to be divided on whether or not the lecturers were within their rights to demand better pay or if they

owed a duty to the students to continue teaching no matter what. She always listened in as her dad and his friends argued the point. Her mum never joined in those discussions, and it was hard to tell if it was because she was not allowed or because she didn't want to. Ganong always thought that in her mum's shoes, she would have joined. Her mum was the lecturer. She was the one, of all of them, most directly affected by the poor and infrequent pay. If it had not been for her dad's job, where would they be? In the end, the lecturers invariably always returned to work after the students had managed to lose months of schooling. Sometimes up to a year. Ganong dreaded the idea of growing up and having to go to university. At least now she got to go to school five days a week. But who knew? Maybe when she started at university she would become like Eche down the street who had held a machete to his father's throat last week because his father asked him to wash his car. Some people said it was because he had joined a cult at the university, but others said it was the frustration of being home for seven months straight. Ganong dreaded the idea of being on an endless holiday. In this house with her mum! That shrill voice in her ears all day long. And being forced to take care of Obi.

But she still had years before she had to think of that. Five years, precisely. She was just in Junior Secondary 1 and perhaps by the time she got to university, things would be better. There was a general election coming up. MKO Abiola was running against Bashir Tofa for president and everybody knew Abiola was going to win and things would be better for the country as a whole. That was what her dad said. He knew these things and was always right. In fact, he was so sure of it that he had promised to buy Ganong a bicycle when the results were announced. And they would kill a whole chicken, something that only happened during Christmas and easter, and make peppersoup, and then perhaps make pounded yam with white soup like they always did the morning after Christmas with the giblets—the neck, the intestines,

gizzard, heart, even the head. Ganong believed him because she heard all the things MKO Abiola said in his speeches that always came on after the 9 o'clock news, followed by the SDP campaign jingle which the whole family sang along with. It seemed like all Nigeria's woes were listed in the jingle and Abiola was the savior who would rescue them from all of it. She did not even know what his opponent Tofa looked like and did not care. She didn't know if now her mum would remember her dad's promise and buy her the bicycle or cook the peppersoup when Abiola won.

Ganong jerked as she felt an arm around her shoulders and looked up. Her mum was looking tenderly at her, and then wiping her face with the edge of her wrapper. She had not even realized that she was crying. The musty smell of kernel oil and camphor emanating from the wrapper was strangely comforting and she allowed herself be held. Strangely, her mum looked to be fighting tears too, and Obi stared at them. He had not cried since dad left them, and his eyes were dry now.

Ganong allowed herself enjoy this rare comfort, then she stiffened, pulled herself out of her mum's arms and stood abruptly. This was better than when her mother was the one who withdrew comfort. As happened very often. That always left her feeling bereft, like someone yanked off her wrapper as she slept and cold air from the fan overhead brought chills to the surface of her skin.

"I am going to sweep the compound," She announced to no one.

But a quick upward glance before she strode away showed a mixture of anger and regret on her mum's face. She knew what would happen next behind her back. That Obi would stand and shuffle to her mum and put his head against her thighs which was as far as he could reach, being short for a nine year old. He would allow himself to be petted like the neighbor's dog,

Whiskey. Obi liked to play favorites. He knew that *her* parent was gone and he still had his. She had been her father's daughter. Daddy's girl. He had betrayed her. Left her here with these two. Well, good luck to her brother, she thought viciously and scraped her feet along the floor as she went, knowing that that usually set her mother off and wanting badly to set her off. She would sweep, clean the house with little help from Obi who was always more of a nuisance, and help her mum cook, but she would be as unpleasant as possible. That much she could do.

This was going to be a horrible day. Any day with her mum was a horrible day.

The day wore on and got worse. They sat in the living room, fresh and shiny. Their shoes were polished, their faces powdered and their hair slicked back with so much pomade Ganong was sure she was going to have to wash it off before bed or her purple satin pillowcase would be a mess and her face would keep sliding off her pillow.

Her mum had made them shower after all the cooking and iron their Sunday clothes. Hers was a burnt orange mid-length skirt with tiny pleats that swished as she walked paired with a pale orange blouse that had orange and white flower appliques tacked on with puffy sleeves. Obi wore a dark green shirt and black trousers held up by suspenders. His hair was cropped close this scalp at the back and higher by a little to the front, the look finished off with a line on the left. Ganong had taken him to the barber two streets away yesterday, the expensive one, not their usual one that had a shack down their own street. So this was why! She thought it was ridiculous. Such a fuss. It all made her angrier.

Her mum had also had her climb on a stool and root around in the top of the wardrobe for the special dishes they brought out only at Christmas and Easter to send food to their neighbors—specifically the special porcelain set. She had learned early that the fastest way of knowing how much her parents esteemed a neighbor was by which dishes were reserved for whom. This was also an indicator how much they liked them. The Andems at the end of the street who her parents had a cordial relationship with and they went to the same church were wealthy—old money, dad had called them, and they received their Christmas and Easter rice and chicken stew in these stainless steel dishes that were nice and shiny but not the best they had. Eche’s parents were rich too as his father owned a filling station and it looked like there was always cash lying around that their two teenage sons could take and spend on whatever they wanted. But they got served in some old wooden bowls with scratches all over. Her Dad always muttered that they were ill-mannered and had raised ill-manner children. There were the ones their parents did not like much but wanted to curry favor with, the Bettehs at the other end of the street. He was the Dean of faculty where mum taught and she wanted a raise. He hadn’t helped but instead misinterpreted the gesture as a bid for friendship and adopted the Ete family as new friends. And for months they got invited to the Bettehs’ for dinner several times a month. Her dad said it was because they were nasty and nobody else wanted them. But once it became clear that her mum was not getting that raise, her dad said it was time to stop pretending and they stopped accepting the dinner invitations. Which Ganong thought was a shame, because even though Mrs. Betteh never smiled and was very strict on table manners with her and Obi, the food was always plentiful and very tasty. Her dad had to deny this whenever her mum asked, although he could not hide a belch and grunt of satisfaction after each meal over there which he quickly

covered over the glare of both wives. The Bettehs had no children, and Ganong's mum had had something to say about that.

“I mean, can you imagine those dour, cheerless people with little ones? They never smile. Their house is like a fortress. And those dogs they keep and allow to roam inside the house could eat a baby!” She would shudder and conclude with “God knows whom he blesses with children and from whom he withholds”.

Ganong had thought of the heavily pregnant madwoman who roamed the major road on her way to school, chased school children with a stick and ate from a dumpster on their way to school. But she never argued against her mum's certitude.

Then there was the Asiyambi family. Professor, whom they all called Prof was her dad's best friend and they spent nearly every evening seated out on the balcony drinking beer and discussing the general state of the country by dissecting the news of the day. They even had a routine; they each bought a different one of the two major newspapers between them, and then analyzed every newspaper heading, various topics and events, even reading out quotes and then arguing the points. Their arguments encompassed even who had the best reportage. Her dad liked National Concord but Prof sneered at this because he said the facts could not be balanced in a newspaper owned by a man who was angling to become the president, and that all recent reportage had been mere smear campaigns against the opposition party and its candidate. He favored National Tribune which her dad scoffed at, claiming that it only cared about the Yoruba people and their struggles and not much else. Ganong knew nothing about any of this, but she loved to sit on the cold cement floor to the side at her dad's feet, only getting up from time to time to run to the fridge and bring them more beer and eventually dinner when it was ready. Her mum glared every single time Ganong came to announce that she was here to collect her dad's

food, muttering under her breath that it would be nice if Prof stayed home and ate his own wife's cooking. Once she ventured to actually put this into words, asking Prof sweetly if he wouldn't rather eat his own wife's cooking. Perhaps he could even invite his friend, her husband over to theirs as she was sure his wife would also welcome an opportunity to feed her husband's best friend and must be jealous that only she was having that privilege. And then twisted the knife further by asking if Prof's wife's cooking was that bad that he avoided it. There was a tense silence and her dad looked angry, but also as if he was wondering how to intervene. His eyes darted to and from the warring parties, perhaps wondering if he even should, or perhaps wait to see who bested whom in the fight that was sure to ensue in seconds. But Prof laughed, a huge guffaw which he reserved for whenever he'd bested her dad in one of their arguments, patted his belly which remained every bit as flat as it had been before the heavy meal of eba and egusi soup cooked with hot leaf.

“Clara, a beggar has no choice. And you know that I am a poor man. It is hard for me to turn away wonderful food in my house almost every day to come here and eat Egusi with palm oil and water quarreling inside and salt like I scooped water from the Atlantic ocean and drank it, eh? But it is a sacrifice that I willingly make for my family so that they can eat my share and have more to eat.”

Dad, who had been embarrassed for his friend at the barb had to cover an unbidden chuckle and her mum glared at him, indicating that he had a lot of apologizing to do later, but he also pointed out to her mum that she had attacked Prof first.

Ganong didn't think that this year, with her dad no longer here, Prof's family would be getting their Christmas food served in the special serving set. This one was a family of fragile iridescent porcelain bowls in three varying sizes with intricate flower patterns and pinkish

engraving on all sides and on the top of the lid. Ganong had been surprised when, the first Christmas after the Asiyanbi's moved in, her dad had told her mum that their food was to be sent to them in those dishes. Her mum had demurred; first she claimed that they had only known the family for only three months and not that well. Then she had a slew of anecdotes, the acid shrouded in a concerned voice: their five children were dirty and unruly and could not be trusted to use and return the dishes safely; and for people that were so poor, why did they have so many children? Then, that they needed to continue to reserve the dishes for a family that was truly deserving, which meant wealthy, nice and also useful in the sense that they could be used to raise the family's social or financial status in some way. She continued; she had heard that the piece of land adjacent to theirs was being developed by a white man that worked in one of the oil companies, she wasn't sure which one, maybe Mobil. Or Shell. That was oil money. And a white man and his family of friends of the family! Then, that Prof's wife was rude to her and didn't greet her whenever they met at the kiosk on their street to buy provisions. That the professor was not even a real professor. This was how Ganong found out that Prof was a nickname he'd been bequeathed in secondary school because, while he wasn't the smartest in class, he could take apart anything and put it back together again. He had accepted the title and carried it to this day. Her dad told her that Prof enjoyed the varying reactions he got whenever he first introduced himself, but then explained what he actually did or was. Which was a car mechanic. And, her mum continued with her list of Prof's deficiencies and how he and his family were undeserving of the special porcelain set. Prof was poor! Not 'our class', and she saw no reason for her dad's friendship with the man which she tolerated but he was now taking too far. So, she had concluded, she saw no use in them wasting their best dishes on them.

It was the first time Ganong had seen her dad lose his temper. He had countered all her other points with a levity that infuriated her mum. The Asiyانبis had a right to as many children as they wanted. Yes, the children were unruly, but wasn't that because the parents spent all day at work trying to provide for them? And they were no more unruly than her own overindulged son, Obi, which her mum had taken umbrage at, having her favorite child compared to one of those gross people, as she referred to them. Ganong was sure she would not have minded *her* being compared to them.

But this final point got to her dad. He clenched his fists as he stood over her mum, and she had shrunk back in fear, although her dad had never hit her. He called her mum a snob, and then reminded her who she was when he married her. Prof's family's circumstances were no different than her own with her father's. Except that in her father's case he had drunk, gambled and squandered his family money which he had frittered away on women and other vices, plunging her mum and her sisters into poverty, and leaving him to care for Grandma, mum's mother, after marrying her. He had not rescued her so that could become a snob to less fortunate people.. At least Prof was an honest hardworking man who cared enough about his family to abase himself on a daily basis on their account. What had her profligate father done apart from keep them in desperate want in his lifetime and leave them with a horde of illegitimate children showing up and their door to claim an inheritance that did not exist and a host of creditors taking what little they did have left? Ganong had never heard any of this and as she heard her Mum's mortified gasp, saw how still she went with embarrassment, her gaze flickering to Ganong and a mute appeal to her dad to stop talking, she felt almost bad for her. *Almost*. Her mum herself always quoted that saying "if you can't stand the heat, don't be in the kitchen". She had been saying mean things to her dad about his friend for weeks, but now she had actually said it to his

face and it was time. But nothing changed the fact that this was uncharacteristic of her dad, and her mum had started to cry and ran off to their bedroom.

Her dad had turned to her.

“I’m sorry you had to hear that.” Then after a beat, “I will apologize to your mother”.

Later that night as Ganong went to use the bathroom before falling asleep, she heard low voices and tiptoed to stand by her parent’s room, gluing a cheek to the door frame. She heard her Dad soothing her mum in quiet tones, with a lot of *shh shhs*, as if she were a baby. And her mum sniffing and talking back, her voice more like a whine. Ganong knew that after this, her mum would have her way with the porcelain dishes. Her dad could never say no to her after he had apologized and then they went to bed, and especially on nights when their voices died out and the bed springs started squeaking and their breaths got heavy and then finally her dad made a loud sound she did not understand. Sometimes it sounded like he was in pain, but not really pain. This was how mum got her way.

The next morning, the day before Christmas when Ganong and Obi climbed up to bring down the dishes, they had brought out the usual ones, including the long plastic trays that she and Obi would eat from. Christmas day was the one day they were allowed to eat however much they wanted, and Obi especially was usually unable to move thereafter and once, two years before, had had to be rushed to the hospital for overeating, which brought their Christmas day to a sober and abrupt conclusion.

They’d washed the dishes and laid them face down on the sink draining board. Later they would bring out towels also reserved for this and wipe the dishes clean so there was no speck or smear. Then move them ever so carefully to the dining table to await filling the next day after all the cooking was done.

They had just finished and settled down to watch television when her dad walked in from work. He worked as an accountant in one of the oldest banks and was a wizard with numbers. Or so he himself liked to say. Ganong always laughed when he had to catch himself because he hadn't realized he was doing all her math homework for her. He asked them not to rise and disrupt their favorite show, *Storytime*, and after confirming that her mum was taking a nap, he excused himself to the kitchen to serve himself his lunch which he knew would be kept warm in a faded maroon food flask. Ganong heard him open the flask with a click and pour first the soup into a ceramic soup plate, and then she knew he would unwrap the eba from its cellophane wrap and drop it in the larger plate, and then he emerged from the kitchen and settled at the table to eat.

He ate his eba and ogbono soup for a while, tackling the goat meat noisily when he got to the bones. Ganong and Obi giggled at the sucking and crackling noises he was making, some of it for their benefit. He never let any marrow escape. He claimed it was the most nutritious part of the meat.

And then what they both always waited for.

“Does anybody want-”

They did not let him finish. In seconds they had bounded to their feet to his side where he already had little pieces of meat very carefully and evenly divided.

“Okay, who will choose first?”

“Me.”

“But you picked last time”

“Yes, and so? Am I not your senior?”

Obi looked like he wanted to cry at this. Her dad nudged him.

“Look, my young friend. Both pieces are exactly the same size.”

“But daddy, it’s not fair. She always gets to choose first”

Her dad seemed to be deliberating over this for a long minute. She watched him, knew he was only pretending to be thinking and that his mind was already made. Then he sighed as if he had just made up his mind. He looked at her.

“He is right, G-Baby. In all things we must practice equity and fairness. That is how we know we are humans and not animals. And that is how our world does not become a jungle.”

“Dad, humans *are* animals”. Ganong made her tone sound bored and as she expected, her dad burst out laughing. She loved these little exchanges between them that excluded everyone else. It always made her mum look cross-eyed at them. Ganong did not care. Her dad knew how to make her feel like the only thing that mattered in the whole world. Except for when her mum cried, and dad apologized, and her mum then did whatever she did to him in the bed to make him make that sound and then she got what she wanted.

Obi snatched up one of the pieces of meat, but then he quickly dropped it and snatched up another piece.

Ganong smacked his hand. “Did you even wash those hands? I saw you scratching your buttocks earlier.”

Her dad suppressed a chuckle. “Don’t hit your brother.” And to Obi, “My young friend, decisiveness in decision making is one of the best qualities a man can have. Now choose.” Obi squinted at both pieces which, however she looked were exactly the same size, and Ganong rolled her eyes. He finally allowed a finger hover over the second piece, but he picked up the first, stuck in his mouth and started to chew immediately. Ganong was no longer sure that she wanted the meat, which she was sure was what Obi had been banking on when he touched both

pieces. He liked to do things like that. As though reading her mind, her dad picked up the second piece and fed directly into Ganong's mouth.

And for that, she would let Obi pick every single time.

When they had washed the dishes, her dad settled down with them on the rug and they continued to watch *Storytime*. Her Mum wandered in and her dad smiled up at her.

"Hello sweetheart."

"I thought I heard your voice. You're back early."

Her dad chuckled. "I know my manager is a slave driver but not even he would expect me to work all day on the eve of Christmas."

Her mum looked like she had forgotten for a moment.

"Oh, that's true". Then she looked at Ganong and Obi. "You two, not because I was sleeping you people have forgotten what to do. You know you are supposed to bring out the plates that-"

"Done, Mum". She was smug.

Then her dad cleared his throat. He always cleared his throat when he wanted to say something he had to say but didn't really want to, and Ganong looked at him. Her mum stopped on her way to the kitchen and her entire body seemed to still, almost like she knew what he was going to say and was getting braced for it. But her dad wore a mild smile and his voice was even milder when he spoke.

"About that, honey. I guess the children did not know to bring out the plates we're going to be taking Prof and his family food in."

There was a long silence that seemed empty but also full of sound that no one was making. Ganong was truly surprised. Never had her dad come back to a subject that was closed

by her mum's tears and had been sealed shut with his late night apologies and whatever it was that followed.

Her mum stuttered, "what?"

"The special plates. We talked about it yesterday."

"Yes. But...But you said you were sorry-"

"For what I said to you, yes. I should never have brought up your dad and said the things I said. I *am* sorry for that."

"So what are you saying?"

It was her dad who now looked surprised.

"It doesn't change anything. We are taking food to my friend, Prof, and his family in those plates."

His voice rang with a finality that Ganong recognized and knew that her mum must too. Ganong looked at her mum in dread but also eager anticipation. Her dad never challenged her like this, and *never* after the issue had presumably been resolved. Her mum looked unsure what to say or do as she stared at him; this was not a battlefield she had ever waged war in and she looked how she must be feeling; utterly unequipped. There was a long silence as they stared at each other; she glaring in shock, him brows raised like he had been clear and didn't understand what her confusion was. Ganong looked from one to the other, enjoying her mum's discomfort but also somehow afraid of her dad. He seemed, in this moment, like a different person. Not the potbellied man with full cheeks that bounced her on his knee. This was the face of the man he had told them about that had reported his superior at work when he had caught him embezzling bank funds and gotten the man fired.

Finally her mum spoke, her voice hoarse. "I am not doing it."

“Why?”

“You cannot force me. Those plates are mine. They were-”

“Given to you by my mother.”

Her mum stared at him. Something like fear crossed her face. But then her jaws clenched like she had ground her teeth. Then her lips seamed shut. And stayed shut for the rest of the day and the next, which was Christmas day, parting stiffly only to give instructions that could not be conveyed with a glare or hiss.

Her dad had carried on, seeming oblivious. He did everything he usually did on Christmas mornings; kill the two chickens they had been fattening for weeks and butcher them into parts after the children had plucked the feathers in hot water, help blow up and string balloons in the living room, dust every surface with a rag and then polish the wooden ones with a special occasion spray. He also went out to buy ice blocks from the cold room two streets away and filled a huge drum with soft drinks and beers and then loaded it all with ice. NEPA could not be trusted to keep the lights on, even on Christmas day, and no one took that risk. Mr. Okeke often boasted that he sold more ice between Christmas and new year than he sold for six other months put together.

Not even the most anticipated moment of Christmas day broke her mum’s silent revolt. Normally, the children spent the months before Christmas eagerly anticipating their wardrobe change. Christmas was the one time of year they received seriously expensive clothes called Ready-made. These were clothes that were obviously not locally sourced and had frills and

ribbons and were made with silks or satin, taffeta, tulle and balled up by layers of stiff pleated net in girl's dresses, and unique materials like denim or chinos with fun polo shirts or T-shirts that said 'what if', suspenders and woven jute belts for boys. It was the closest they came to looking like the children in the fairytale books and TV Shows and movies they consumed by the dozens. By the time Christmas was a few weeks away, the anticipation would have reached a feverish pitch. They would be unable to sleep, she and Obi wondering all day long what color and style their clothes would be, what color the accessories that usually accompanied these—shoes, socks, toy wristwatches and sunglasses, and for girls hair bonnets, ribbons that looked like candy or dice, Alice bands, ruffles, clasps and so on. When it was a few days to Christmas the anticipation had them so firmly in thrall it seeped into their dreams, sometimes having nightmarish effects. Once Ganong had dreamt that she got a dress of the flimsiest ombre algae and mint green gossamer that she had not even had to raise her arms for it to slide on—or rather—glide or flow over her frame in a graceful drape. Music started to play and she started to sway, but soon found she was unable to breath. She looked down and saw that the dress had taken on a strange form. First it looked like she was wrapped in thick, cold multicolored iridescent car tires, but then the tires moved around her, tightened, and then a snake snaked its head from under the folds of the dress to stare her in the eyes. Now she realized the entire dress was now a snake with coils and coils around her. She blinked into its eyes wonderingly, first forgetting to scream. To be afraid. The snake struck her arm and bit, and finally she screamed and woke up to see her classmates staring at her and giggling, and her class teacher putting down her name for people to be punished for sleeping in class. She'd looked left, and just as she'd suspected, the snake bite was actually Ifeanyi poking her with the sharpened end of his pencil.

Normally her parents would wait until the very last moment, after they were bathed and dressed and allowed to spray their adult perfumes, and only then would they be presented with their Christmas clothes. They were never disappointed. But that year, her mum's silence had made it difficult to be excited about their clothes, and although Ganong got a dress with a cloth buckle and three tiered skirt that had just come into fashion, the clothes were thrust at them by her mum, and she and Obi had had to say thank you to their parents separately as her mum refused to be in the same room with her dad. Their mum had not even responded to their thank yous. Just continued with her cooking.

But when she and Obi took the food to the Asiyambi's later, holding the basket with the fragile bowls so carefully between them, the reaction they had gotten made it all okay.

Prof had opened the door, dressed in black shorts and a torn used-to-be-white singlet, his feet bare. He always looked properly dressed when he came to their house and Ganong did not recognize him immediately. On seeing them standing there in their smart new Christmas clothes and equally shiny smiles holding between them a basket of food laid over with an embroidered napkin, his eyes widened and he invited them inside, shouting for his wife.

Ganong and Obi walked in, and the first thing she noticed was how different their house looked from this. Nothing looked like Christmas here, apart from a thin wreath that looked handmade and ran along the wall facing the front door, made with green foil. The room was dark and the furniture was not just slightly worn like theirs but actually torn and shredded, and one of the two armchairs had an entire cushion missing, exposing the spring section covered by a thin muslin cloth which was stained with what could only be palm oil. The rest of the room was not much better, with shoes littered everywhere and none seeming to have its pair, clothes hanging off the backs of chairs and a few old toy cars, trains and dolls on the floor. The rug itself was

ripped and shredding in places and what used to be a green color was now a sort of green-brown algae and completely eaten into the latex backing in parts like someone had stood there digging their heel in until it became a black shiny spot. The walls looked like they had once been a lime green color, but age, sun, dampness and children made this a distant memory. The paint was peeled and chipped, and a thin layer of mold decorated the bottom of the wall. The parts that were left were liberally graffitied by what was obviously the effort of their children with handprints, different color pencils and marker writings and illustrations, chalk and even some black oil paint where someone had tried to paint a tree which ended up like a helpless wraith bent to the wind. Close to the ceiling, spiders formed their own tapestry of cobwebs. Ganong did not know what it felt like to live in a house like this. From the outside it looked small, one of those two room houses, but they had five children.

Prof's wife came in, wiping her hands on the wrapper she had around her slim waist. Ganong looked at her, finding it hard to believe she had had five children. Her hips swayed as if they were a different entity from her body. Her skin was very dark but looked polished with a thin film of ash on her hands and clothes that must come from the firewood she must be cooking with in the back. She smelled of it. Ganong knew the smell because Grandma smelled like that all the time when they went to the village. But she was beautiful. Her hair was untextured by chemicals and she had woven it in the styled called shuku where all the plaits met in the middle, right at the top of her head. She had very deep dimples that seemed to puncture from one cheek straight through to the other when she smiled, and she smiled all the time. This must be why her mum hated her, Ganong thought and almost giggled. Her mum was a witch and must surely not liked a person who had so little and smiled so much. Ganong had seen her a few times on their street, but never this close. As she smiled, her eyes glowed and sort of squinted at the same time,

as if she was wondering about Ganong and Obi, what they were doing in her home, but also welcoming them. Ganong decided she liked the woman, especially when she reached out and pulled both she and Obi into an embrace where she nearly suffocated on the smoke fumes. Obi struggled out of the hug and Prof's wife laughed. She had an unselfconscious air about her which Ganong was not used to as her mum always thought about everything and how it looked to others. She could hear the voices of children as they talked and laughed and generally carried on in unabated fashion in the backyard, clearly helping their mum with the cooking. It sounded like freedom. She felt a sudden pang. Her cousins, Freya and Mbakara had moved with their Australian mum to her home when their dad married a second wife, and since then she had not had anyone to do sleepovers and play with. She caught herself wondering if her mum would ever let her play with Prof's oldest daughter, one of a pair of twins the same age as her. But it was a foolish hope to nurse.

While they were squashed in the hug, Prof rescued the basket, and tested its weight. He placed it carefully on their dining table after clearing a space of paper, tattered funny-looking stuffed toys and even some clothes. Her mum would hate it here. That is if she ever ventured to step foot here.

She felt more than saw a shadow fall and looked towards the door that led to the back of the house. A boy of about eight and a girl of about six stood hugging the half open door, the taller head directly above the shorter child's, only their faces and upper bodies visible. Their eyes were huge as she caught them, their faces grimy, but when they saw her looking at them, they gasped and ran away, giggling. Tayo and Temi, if she remembered correctly from hearing Prof talk about his children. They were the third and fourth.

Prof gingerly lifted the napkin, his eyes narrowing at the obviously expensive dishes. Mrs. Asiyambi ran a finger over the intricate carving, then snatched it back. She looked awed, like she had never touched something like that before. Prof opened first the bowl filled with steaming white rice garnished with diced carrots, and then the one with stew, groundnut oil and thyme floating to the top, huge chunks of fried chicken making the bowl barely sufficient. That was all her dad's doing and had not helped to improve her mum's dour mood. A mixture of savory aromas filled the small space—the nutty fragrance of the roasted peanut oil complicated by the herby headiness of the spices; curry, thyme, nutmeg. Fried chicken contributed its own special earthy flavor. Ganong wondered how disappointed they would be when they found that the taste did not match the smell. The basket also contained six bottles of chilled soft drinks and one bottle of beer. Prof and his wife looked at each other, clearly astounded. The look between them grew long, like they were having a conversation by telepathy. When Prof hung out at their house and jabbered with her dad, he was raucous. Now when Prof spoke, his voice was husky with a quiet solemnity, clearing his throat a few times, his hand trembling slightly on the rim of the larger bowl.

“Please thank your parents for us. Tell them...” he seemed unable to continue, overcome with emotion, and his wife covered his hand with both of hers, her nails grimy like Obi's.

“Tell them that we are very thankful. And that we will send them some food too when we finish cooking.”

They'd nodded and returned home to continue their errands to the other families on their list. Those other families hardly even said thank you but waited for Ganong and Obi to deliver their meal, and as they received the food they brought them, they thrust their own offering into their hands. Her mum said it very was rude. Why couldn't they send their own children to deliver

food to them? If everyone sat around waiting to receive food from their neighbor before using their neighbors child to deliver theirs, why, no one would ever give anyone else food and that is how traditions die. People not doing what they are meant to do.

An hour later, they were done with their food delivery and were about to settle down to feast when there was a knock at the back door that led directly into the kitchen. Ganong opened the door, and saw a pair of identical twins standing there wearing identical grins. They were David and Davina, and although they had never met before, Ganong knew them from their dad's description and had spotted them on the street several times, her face plastered to the back window of the car on her way from school as they walked home from their school. They looked tidier than Ganong had ever seen them. Even their patched worn clothes looked clean if rumpled. Davina's was a flowery T-shirt tucked into the waist of a green pinafore with large pockets and her twin's a pair of dirty-brown jeans and a black shirt, the sleeves going past his wrist. She smiled at them, disconcerted as they thrust a sack at her—the kind her mum used to go to the market.

“My mummy said we should bring you Christmas food,” Davina said.

David seemed unable to meet her eyes.

She took the sack, nodded at them with a nervous smile. She became very much aware of her own clothes; the dress a sequined royal blue velvet bodice studded with stones around the neckline which tapered into the waist was cinched with a white velvet lined belt, and then flared into a layered skirt made of soft royal blue tulle, each of the three tiers trimmed with the same white velvet and held stiff by horsehair in the underside so that it bounced as she walked. The whole effect ended at her knees. Her new shoes, black patent leather had a T-strap and low platform. She wore white knee high socks, the tops turned down with frilly lace. She also

realized how starkly different their homes, hers large, new, clean and festive with the sounds of music in the background, the family's Christmas tree making soft chimes and the laughter and chatter of the adults, her parent's friends behind her. She considered how different their lives must be and wondered if the twins were thinking the same thing. Ganong felt like apologizing but was not sure what she had done.

To break the awkward silence and cover her thoughts she looked into the sack in her hands. Inside the sack, piled one on top of the other, were their very own dishes. Ganong looked up at the twins, perplexed, but as she considered the weight, she realized the dishes could not be empty and she placed the sack on the kitchen counter. The twins remained just outside the door and watched as she took the dishes out, one after the other. The smaller one came out first and on opening it, her nostrils were assaulted by the best smelling Egusi soup she had ever perceived. Rich palm oil floated on top and the Egusi underneath was a mass of the pale yellow lumps her mother kept trying but was never able to achieve, hers always a soupy consistency, however long she fried her Egusi. And she was too proud to ask her friends for directions. She saw the chunks of fried goat meat sitting in the soup and had a brief pang, as she wondered how much this would have cost them. Although Prof had said that Christmas season was like Christmas (he'd laughed loudly at his own wit) at the workshop, what with everybody bringing in their cars to get tuned up for the annual pilgrimage to their villages, so many he had money to spare this time of year.

Next Ganong lifted the lid off the second bowl. In it were three huge balls of the smoothest pounded yam, wrapped in transparent cellophane. Ganong's mouth watered so suddenly she was surprised as she knew she wasn't hungry. Perhaps it was vicarious joy for her dad, knowing how excited this would make him. Her dad liked nothing better than pounded yam, but like lumpy Egusi, it fell far below her mum's skill set. Whenever her dad fantasized about

food, it was invariably pounded yam. He had once joked that if he was facing the firing squad and had to pick his last meal, it would be pounded yam, no question about it. Her mum was passing by behind them and remarked that in that case he had better not commit any crimes that would land him on death row. And here now, these people had offered the one thing that would elevate her dad's Christmas from "not a bad day" to "what an excellent day!". Her mum tried her best with the food on special occasions, but as Grandma always said, cooking is like rolling your tongue. You either can or you can't. Ganong looked forward more to their neighbors' food than anything her mother cooked, and she was sure her mum could read it on her face every Christmas as she struggled to chew and swallow her cooking, all the while waiting for when her mum would give the go-ahead for them to fall on the neighbors' offerings.

"Who was at the door?"

Her mum's voice behind her made her jump. Her eyes darted quickly to the back door that still stood ajar. But the twins were no longer there, as if they had just vanished. She turned around, feeling guilty and not knowing why. Was her excitement at this food evident on her face? She tried to feign a casual air and shrugged as she replied.

"Oh, just Prof's children. They returned our plates."

"And what is that?"

Her mum walked around her and looked at the food.

"What *is* this?"

"They sent us food."

Her mum stared at the food, expressionless. Then looked at Ganong. Ganong held her breath, trying desperately to read her mum's face.

"Put it in the dustbin."

Ganong stared. Swallowed. No, she could not be asking her to...

“Mummy, should we not show it to daddy? He always says thank you to the neighbors for-”

“Of course *he* would like it. Dustbin. Now!”

Her mum walked away. Ganong heaved a sigh. She would wait and then find a way to tell her dad. Maybe she would pretend to just casually mention that Davina looked nice in her dress, then her dad would ask her where she saw Davina, and she would tell him oh, when she brought back our plates, and then she would mention the food-

“Well? What are you waiting for?”

Her mum had stopped at the door that led to the living room and was waiting. They stared at each other, Ganong hoping that her face communicated her desperation, but also hoping it didn't. If she wanted something, her mum would most likely not want her to have it. The more she wanted it, the less like she was to get it. She decided to try again.

“Mum, I think we should at least tell dad. He may want to-”

Her mum pressed a hand to her temple as though Ganong herself was the very embodiment of a migraine.

“Please, between your father and you and life in general, I have had a time of it and don't need you to argue with me. So please, do as I say and put that mess in the dustbin.”

A stare-off ensued. One Ganong knew she would not win. When Ofonime had told her after school one day that she did not want to be friends with her anymore because the new girl, Nana, gave her sweets at breaktime and Ganong didn't, she'd thought she knew misery. But what she felt in this moment, as she tipped both plates into the dustbin felt like her actual heart crumbling.

That was when she knew that she hated her mother.

Poor Prof and his wife!

Well, now, her dad was gone and Prof was banned from the house, so that was that. This man, whoever he was, was coming and he was going to be served with the special plates. And there was nothing she could do about it.

Ganong thought now that that was all in the past. Including a time when she could call someone else poor. She didn't know if she could call anyone poor anymore, now that they too were poor. She knew that the reason she, her mum and brother still had a roof over their heads and were still living in this neighborhood was because her dad had built this house. It wasn't massive or anything really special; a small, three bedroom with two bathrooms, oversized living room with a narrow section that acted as a dining section, and a kitchen. It had never been painted and eventually it looked like it didn't need to ever be painted. The dull grey plaster coating on the walls had become its own aesthetic. At least that was what Aunty Beatrice said. Her mum had had her dad construct an outdoor kitchen, preferring to cook with firewood sometimes, which amused her dad. She said it was faster. It also made a huge mess, the heavy cast iron pots that were mounted on a tripod so liberally coated afterwards with soot that it left Ganong's nails with black stripes of coal deep under her fingernails for days. She looked down at her fingernails and cursed this man who was coming.

Ganong glanced at Obi and caught him staring at her. He quickly looked away. He had avoided her all day, always managing to be doing another task that was as far from whatever she

was doing as possible. He chose to sweep inside the house when she was sweeping outside, and when she came inside to dust he decided to go and wash the dishes. No one hated washing dishes more than Obi. What was he afraid of, Ganong wondered? That she would convince him that they should work together to convince their mum not to do this? They always worked together, especially after dad; teamed up against her, as her mum put it. So what was different today?

Ganong suspected she knew. Ever since her dad and things being so hard, Obi had had to do without so many nice things. Just like her. But it was different for a boy, she supposed. Girls things just needed to be pretty, but for boys, it needed to be trendy. Obi hadn't had the latest instalment of Super Mario, the new sneakers all the kids were wearing with lights on the heels. And then there was his school fees. They had never had to do without anything important.

But that was not enough for a person to sell their soul was it?

Ganong grew angrier. And more wrathful. Whoever this man was that her mum wanted to replace their dad with, she knew he would not measure up. Yes, he might make their lives a little bit easier, but he would never be her dad. He would have a bigger belly than her dad, and she would not like to wrap her arms around this stranger's middle as she had her dad's. He would have bad table manners, worse than Dad's belching which was funny, not gross. Maybe he would not even like to shower. His nails would be grimy like Obi's after he dug for worms. It sucked that she would still be outnumbered. Obi still had their mum. She would still not have her dad. She felt the heat rise in the throat again and swallowed it down.

Her mum bustled out, and Ganong did a double-take. She looked...pretty. She hadn't looked pretty since her dad left them. She had forgotten how to smile, except for the last three weeks—Ganong was certain that is when she met this man. But all week long, she had been humming and whistling and singing under her breath. And now she had a big smile under her

makeup. She had not worn makeup in such a long time. She had even stopped wearing makeup for her dad. What was happening? She wore a flowing Ankara boubou that she'd always reserved for when she went out with her dad for his work parties. Ganong felt a weightlessness in her belly like she was going to faint.

Actually, she probably *was* going to faint. Ganong's tummy rumbled, and she glanced at her mum. They had been waiting since 1p.m. It was now 1.45p.m and she was sure she had never been hungrier. She was surprised to see Obi contentedly sucking his thumb, and she suspected her mum had cheated again and snuck him a snack. She always claimed she was punishing both of them, and then found a way to punish only Ganong. But in this case it was not even punishment. For whatever reason, her mum had declared that they would wait for Mr. Clément, her suitor, to get here and they would eat together as a family. She didn't want them to greet him with stinky breaths, as though they couldn't brush after eating.

Well, he was late and she was hungry. And she hated his name.

Her mum looked unfazed, although she did glance at her watch from time to time.

Another ten minutes passed and Ganong shifted in her chair. This was more uncomfortable than waiting in the common area at the bank for her dad to close from work and take them home. She looked around the parlor. It sparkled. The red carpet looked cleaner than it had for months, now that dad no longer went down on it with a brush once a month. The curtains, the same shade of red looked somehow brighter, with the sun streaming in and bleaching parts of it a different shade which gave an ombre effect. The three green chairs, a sofa and two armchairs that surrounded a low brown coffee table had all been brushed and plumped. The radio cassettes lined the room divider over the Television section had all been rearranged. A stack of magazines and newspapers sat on the floor in a corner. Her mum had

wanted them thrown away but Ganong threw a fit, and was surprised when her mum relented. All in all, for the little time they had had, they'd done a good job.

“Mum, can you call his house?”

“Ganong, have you forgotten that our line has been cut off for three months now since I've been unable to pay the bill?”

She had forgotten and blushed. But rallied.

“Sorry.” Then another ten minutes. “Mum, can I at least have a snack? There's cabin biscuit in the tin on the shelf.”

Her mum looked at her.

“Selfish as always, only thinking about herself. Look at your younger brother. Has he eaten? Is he whining?” She looked angry, but since she kept glancing at her watch, Ganong suspected her anger was also directed at Mr. No-Show Clément.

Ganong surprised herself when she turned to Obi. “Have you eaten?”

Obi was playing a game on his Tetris brick game pad and had not been following the conversation, so was caught off guard.

“Uh huh”.

“You have eaten! Mum, you see? You always do this. I'm sure you too have eaten. I am the only one that is being left to starve. I don't know what I ever did to you-”

“Will you shut up there? How dare you speak to me-”

“I will not shut up. I am hungry and I am tired of waiting for your boyfriend. In fact, I'm going to my room.”

She jumped to her feet, started to yank the stupid shoes off her feet, when she heard the sound of a car pulling into the driveway. Her mum and Obi became alert too and they stopped

and listened. The car stopped in front of the house, but the heavy curtain was drawn and they could not see outside. All three seemed to hold their breaths, and it seemed as though however much they wanted confirmation, were in agreement that to go peeking out the window would not show them in the best light. Her mum's face was suddenly anxious, as they waited, and she leaned back in the chair, visibly making herself relax. Oh, so she too was nervous. Good.

A car door opened and closed. The sound like the boot of a car whined and moments later was banged shut with a thunk. Footsteps walked towards their front door and stopped. And then there was a soft knock. They all remained frozen, and the knock came again. Obi's eyes were large coins as they stared at the door.

Then her mum seemed to recover her wits and rushed to fling the door wide open.

A tall, spare man dressed in white caftan smiled at her and Obi over her mum's head. Then he looked down at her mum.

"Clara my dear." His voice was deep and gravelly.

He was a head taller than her mum and bent slightly to kiss her cheek. Her mum smiled up at him, stood to the side and let him in. He took a step in, looked at them.

And Ganong saw that in either hand he held a BMX bicycle, perfect sizes for a girl of eleven and a boy of nine. Obi's eyes widened.

And Ganong's stomach sank.

Vignette 2

The wedding ceremony was a simple affair. Ganong stared at the couple as they repeated the vows Pastor Emma read out to them.

"I Clément Ohimai..."

"I Clément Ohimai..."

“Take thee...”

Clément waited, brows raised slightly as though thinking what Ganong was thinking, that Pastor Emma surely could fit more words in before he had to repeat them, and she suppressed a giggle with her hand. Obi glanced up at her, kicked her foot and she scowled at him.

Clément wore a two-piece navy blue suit with a pale blue shirt and black bowtie. On his feet were a pair of gleaming black shoes. When he'd picked them up that morning to drive them all to the church, Ganong felt a momentary appreciation which she quickly quelled. Not that she was comparing them, but she had never seen her dad look that sharp. He'd worked at the bank and of course wore suits and ties, but Ganong had never thought he looked sharp. His suits were often rumpled and sometimes had pilling on them which he brushed at with his hairbrush and then gave up, scoffing as he tossed the brush aside. Whenever he visited their house, Clément mostly dressed casually in caftans and palms slippers, but sometimes he wore jeans. Reluctantly, she admitted that he always looked nice. And his smile, as he looked at her mum, was also nice. He smiled as he spoke, looking directly at her mum like he wanted to fall into her eyes. He had a smiling mouth; she had never known a person to smile while speaking the way Clément was always doing.

Ganong looked at her mum. She was wearing a formfitting mid-length lace dress the same blue as Clément's shirt that had been hanging in her wardrobe since the day after she first met Clément. Once Ganong had realized what the dress was going to be, every day was a battle not to smear it with stew 'by mistake', and all that stopped her was how she would explain how stew got, not just inside the wardrobe but also made its way under the see-through cellophane wrap the dress nested in. Now she was somewhat glad that she hadn't ruined it. She may not approve of the marriage, but her mum looked okay, she guessed. Perched on her head at an angle

was a small hat in the same blue fabric, circled with yellow, purple and lilac hydrangeas that matched her artificial bouquet, the hat no doubt secured with fasteners and pins for how slippery her hair was. Her dad had always told her mum that pastel colors flattered her dark skin, and he hadn't lied. Around her neck was a white flowered scarf bordered with thick navy blue lines. She wore a tan panty hose and white court shoes that made her legs look fat and like they belonged to a different person than the one who had the arms and face.

Yesterday her mum had gone to the salon and had her hair cut shorter, and done in a Jheri curl style—a mass of fat, loose, shiny coils that sparkled when they caught the light and dripped oil onto her neck and collar which she was compelled to dab frequently. Her mum had complained about this to Aunty Beatrice, who tut-tutted.

“Come on, Clara. What does it matter? Clément adores you. He would marry you if you wrapped your underskirt around your head.”

Her mum giggled, preening into the mirror. She pushed a few tendrils that threatened to fall in her eye out of the way and patted her own face softly, surely like she saw the woman do in the advertisement for Lux beauty soap, her lashes drifting downwards. Except that the advert was in slow motion and her mum was real life, which made her look silly, kind of like how you thought you sounded when you were singing in the bathroom but not how you actually sounded. Ganong scowled. She was not in a laughing mood, not even to laugh at her mum.

“It does frame my face really well, doesn't it?”

“Oh, beautifully. For tomorrow, just tie a scarf around your neck so it doesn't stain your dress. I know the one. But I'm telling you, Clément will not notice it if you rolled in palm oil. Look how fast he's marrying you. I cannot believe you met him only two months ago.”

“It’s hard for me to believe too. You know, after he met the children, he told me that before, he was not sure whether he was going to marry me, but meeting them made him certain.”

Aunty Beatrice’s forehead came together in two vertical lines that formed between her brows. “Really? Most men would run away from two children that age. So you are saying that he said that the children, instead of chasing him off rather motivated him? Ha! Wonders will never end.

Her mum shook her head, spreads her hands and widened her eyes in the way people did when they were pretending to be humble about something but weren’t truly. It was a gesture that if it was translated into words, the language would be, *I’m going to act like I don’t deserve it but I deserve it and we both know that I deserve it and that I think I deserve it but it is only proud people who behave like they deserve something and I know that you know what I’m doing but you will do like you don’t know because that’s how friends do.* “My dear, I give God all the glory.”

A long moment passed with Ganong’s mum moving things around on her table , pretending to be busy. The air was a bit uneasy and Ganong looked from her mum to Aunty Beatrice, not sure why the silence sounded bus. Aunty Beatrice looked slightly skeptical and grunted. “So, you are not worried at all. You know, about his motives?”

“What could they be? Ehn? I thought you were happy for me.” She glared at Aunty Beatrice, who immediately backed down, cowed.

“No no, Ah, of course I am happy for you. You deserve to be happy, after everything...” She looked down at Ganong and her voice trailed off.

More silence hung between them. Sweat dampened Ganong’s armpits and she picked up a hand fan she had woven from grass and started to fan herself with it. She had to strain to hear

the next words her mum spoke because her voice had dropped to almost a whisper. “Do you think... Is there anything, you know, that you think maybe I should worry about?” Her voice, her whole body was begging for Aunty Beatrice to ease her mind.

Aunty Beatrice responded as though it was not she who had created the doubt in the first place. “Like what? For what? He is lucky that you said yes to him. A beautiful woman like you!” She tickled Ganong’s mum and the two women laughed. She continued, “It is not as if the children should be a problem. Obi is nine. But his sister here is ten plus. Aren’t you, my dear?”

The two women turned to look at Ganong who was kneeling in a corner by the bed, her hands dropped heavy to her sides.

“Put your hands up.” Her mum barked. “Did I say you could put your hands down?”

“Mummy, I am tired”. Ganong could have kept her hands up for a good thirty minutes more. But why should her mum derive any pleasure from punishing her?

“Then you should not be rude next time.” She turned to Aunty Beatrice, seeking corroboration.

“Tell her. I don’t know what to do with this girl. Hands up!”

Aunty Beatrice looked at Ganong with something like sympathy. But Ganong knew that Aunty Beatrice never disagreed with her mum, and she knew why. Her dad had made a joke about how Aunt Beatrice was to her mum what Prof was to him. Except that what Prof left their house with only fit in the belly and cost no one anything. Ganong knew what he’d meant and giggled. Aunty Beatrice often left their house with a nylon bag stuffed with wrappers and blouses that her mum was no longer using and sometimes foodstuff. Her mum had not spoken to her dad throughout dinner that evening and she went to bed immediately after.

“Well... Ganong, you should try and support your mummy. She’s doing all this for you, you know?”

Ganong gave her the evil eye.

Her mum, seeing this, flared. “Do you see what I mean? That is exactly how she stared at Clems throughout dinner yesterday.”

Aunty Beatrice walked over to her. Ganong tucked her chin into her chest, even when Aunty Beatrice nudged it up with a finger that smelled of onions.

“Look at me, dear.”

Should she? Looking up meant also encountering her mum’s sure to be irate gaze. Could she blur out her mum’s face, even though she was right behind Aunty Beatrice the way they blurred out they faces of those two members of Anini’s gang in dad’s old newspaper. Pouting her mouth into stubborn lines, she looked up. But not at Aunty Beatrice. Her defiant eyes challenged her mum.

Aunty Beatrice’s voice was soft as she queried her. “Ganong dear, do you not want your mummy to be happy?”

Did she? Truth is, she did not really care if her mum was happy or not. She just didn’t want that man coming into their lives and replacing her dad. That was all.

Her voice was a mumbled, “I don’t know”.

“You see?” her mum shrieked. Shouldn’t that just be a ‘yes’? I swear, this child is selfish. Just like her father.

She didn’t think about it. One minute she was kneeling, fingers twined behind her back. The next she was flying head-first into her mum’s thigh like a bull in a ring. As her mum staggered back and crashed into the table that held her cosmetics, still managing to remain

upright but sending several bottles and jars of her cosmetics toppling to the floor, Ganong continued to come at her, pummeled her thighs and stomach with clenched fists, screaming,

“My daddy was not selfish. You are. You are the one that is selfish.” Over and over she screamed the words.

Her mum drew back, staring at her in a mixture of surprise and fury, while Aunty Beatrice tried to pull her away. She kicked and flailed and eventually went limp, collapsing to the floor.

“Do you see what I deal with? Every single day. She was bad before but now she is just impossible.”

Aunty Beatrice squatted beside Ganong, who was now crying furious tears.

“Darling, your mummy is not selfish. She is doing the best she can for you and your brother. She paused, then asked in the same gentle voice. “You have seen uncle Clément. He’s a nice man. So, what are you afraid of?”

Ganong gathered her skirt around her, tucked the pleats between her thighs as she curled up into a ball and wept until her head felt hot. But her mind whirled and worked. Her dad, selfish? He was not selfish. And was she afraid? She had been looking for a word that encapsulated all the feelings that had been amassing inside her these last two months since she’d first heard of Clément, but...fear? Of what? Why? And even as she mulled the question, she felt she knew. She was afraid of what she did not know, and that was the worst fear of all. What you knew, you could plan for and plan against. But this man—this new life—what was she to expect?

In her storybooks, when the heroes stepped into a new expedition, they felt fearless and met it with eager anticipation. The unknown was exciting because it gave a promise of adventure and fun, even though everything about it forewarned of trouble. But here she was; there was

nothing to indicate doom or peril ahead. So why was she besieged with fear? Why, when she looked to the future did it look dark and impossible?

One holiday three years ago, they had all travelled to the village for Christmas. When they got back, as her dad drove down the street, Ganong looked out the window and could not place it, but everything seemed somehow different. It took a moment before she realized why. There were large mounds of sand on one side of the street, the dug earth a bright orange clay soil that was starkly different from the dark brown surface sand. These large new gutters had been sealed with cement, and inside them lay these long, big concrete things that looked like drums but were open on either side. Ganong was about to ask her dad what those were, but he was already explaining that the government was finally bringing pipe borne water.

About time we had running water," he exclaimed.

Ganong could not believe it. No more having to go out when it rained to collect water to fill their drums at home whenever it rained? No more waking early to line up at public boreholes to buy water and carry the buckets home on her head, which was really painful, especially on the days after her hair was freshly made. To want to bath and just turn a tap and whoosh, water flowed out. Even her mum who had been quarreling with her dad for driving too fast started talking about it. Later, Ganong and Obi snuck off to inspect the drum-things. They looked around, and when they were sure that none of their dad and mum's friends who could go and report them were about, they jumped into the gutter and quickly crept inside the drum. Ganong was surprised how cool it was after the heat of the sun. They crawled back and forth inside, closed their eyes and pretended the thing was spinning round and round. It felt safe inside there, like a womb, with all the noise of the world overhead and around them and nobody knew they were there. But Ganong discovered that when she went to one end and Obi went to the other end

and she called out to him or said something, Obi could not hear her because the space swallowed her voice and her words bounced around and around uselessly. This frightened her, but what frightened her more was a frightening imagination. They did not know when the government would start pumping water. Her dad had said that the work was not even nearly finished, but it was almost like she could see it; water coming fast—so fast and she could not run and she would be heavy with fear, her feet planted into the concrete like it had softened and then solidified over them, slow like when she was dreaming and had slept with her legs crossed which meant you could not run in the dream. And the water would open its mouth and swallow her like the boy that rain whooshed away in the flood the last time there was a heavy rain. She jumped out of the drum in terror and started running. Obi followed her, calling after her, confused. She could not explain that fear then; and she could not explain this fear now. Nothing had happened then. Nothing was happening now. But this was as real to her as that was so she never went to the drum again.

Ganong brought herself back to the room and continued to ponder Aunty Beatrice's question. Unbidden, she thought about her bike. Since that first day when Clément was introduced to them and she was made to thank him, she had rolled her bicycle into the garage and never touched it again. Obi did not seem to have any trouble at all accepting his and yelping in excitement. The moment he was presented his bike, he sat on it and it seemed like his bottom had been glued to it since then. Obi rode his bicycle up and down their driveway, into the street where the gutters and the drums remained as the government had left them three years ago, stopping just shy of the tarred main road because their mum had warned that she would seize the bicycle if he went any further. But from Ganong she had nothing to fear. Of course she could not know how Ganong's her heart longed for that shiny pretty pink mass of metal, its handlebars

decorated with pink and silver streamers. She had snuck into the garage several times, ran her fingers a hair's breadth from actual contact along the frame, admired the bodywork and the silver wheels, marveled that it was hers. If only she would accept it. Her palms itched to be placed on those bars, her feet in the stirrup of the pedals, cycling down the street. How the kids at school would envy her. If she closed her eyes, she could feel the breeze as it flowed past her ears. She would take her bike up a hill and take her legs off the pedals, fly. When she skinned her knee, she would get a bandage like Obi frequently had, and so she would be able to tell her friends at school in a bored voice, "Oh, it was just a small accident. Oh yes, I have a brand new bicycle. Yes, you can come and ride it." And Ofonime would make her, her best friend again.

But before all that could happen, she had to ride the bike. And she didn't know how. Clément had offered to teach her, but when she thought of him bent over her the way she had seen a father do in one of her Enid Blyton storybooks, imagined his closeness, his cologne tickling her nostrils, heat coming from his body and heating up her skin, she had shrunk back from the image and her fancies warped into a nightmare. It was her dad that was supposed to teach her. He had promised. Her eyes prickled and she decided she would not think of her dad right now.

Even if she relented and let Clément teach her, she had to first accept the bike. She knew that accepting the bike was saying that she accepted him. Whenever her mum pressed her to accept the bike and added "give Clément a chance", so no longer doubted that the two things were tied together. Her dad would have sneered *A Greek gift!* The bike was not just an innocent first time meeting present. It was a temptation and a challenge all in one—an offering and a dare—and as she longed for the bicycle she resented him for it. No, she would not accept it.

But that did not answer the question Aunty Beatrice was waiting for as she remained patiently squatted beside Ganong. Okay, so she was afraid. Her dad had always said that it was okay to be afraid. But usually she could tell him what she was afraid of. What was she afraid of? It was true, Clément had been nice. He said they did not have to call him Dad, and could just call him Uncle Clément. Which was just as well, because Ganong had no intention of calling him dad. But they were all going to have to live in the same house with him. And move away...

That was another thing. Clément and her mum planned to sell this house. She'd heard them talking about it last night. It was after dinner and she'd finished washing the dishes and wiped her hands on her skirt, then come to sit in the dimly lit dining section. Her mum and Clément sat in the parlor area and spoke in low voices. But she'd heard them well enough when they said they would sell the house.

"I mean, you are all moving in with me. I have a lot of space for you and the children. They will have their own rooms."

Ganong held her breath in the silence that followed. Surely her mum would say an unequivocal no. They could not move in with this man. But she also did not want him to move in *here*.

Her mum replied in a whisper that seemed more weighted by sadness than a need for discretion. "But what will happen to this house?"

"Oh, that's no problem. There's a good market for houses right now here in the south. You know that with the political situation of the country and how things are heating up in the North and even in the West, most of our people in those areas have been flooding back here. Well, they're buying houses left and right--"

Ganong's held breath exploded in a rage as she rose in the darkness. "You want to sell daddy's house? You cannot sell this house."

Clément just bowed his head, as though abdicating the resolution of this to her mum. Who tuned in her chair to look at Ganong.

"I did not know you were there."

The silence drew out. And then she sighed.

"Ganong, you know very well that we cannot live in two houses"

Ganong swallowed, stumped. But in the stubborn way of children who only thrum up problems but feel no responsibility to proffer solution, she shook her head.

"You cannot sell this house."

Her mum glared at her.

"Well, good thing nobody is asking you."

Ganong stood there, shaking. She did not know what to do. She wanted to cry. She wanted to die. She wanted to be where her dad was. She sat back down slowly, feeling impotent. She felt so many feelings well up inside her, and it was from this excess that she searched for, found the expletive and flung it at him.

"You are just a charlatan".

She didn't know what the word meant, but she had heard her dad say it several times. The new clerk they had hired at the bank was a charlatan. The ragtag youth that sold cure-all medicines at the junction right beside the newspaper vendor was a charlatan. The mechanic before dad discovered Prof who had swapped his perfectly fine spark plugs for secondhand ones that didn't work well was a charlatan. But most of all, the man who had married Aunty Beatrice in a lavish ceremony, and then run away in the middle of the night after two years with his

friend's teenage daughter and all of Aunty Beatrice's money, and who now lived on the other end of town around Anansa, well, he was the biggest charlatan of all. So big, in fact, that any mention of him was taboo in this house and at Aunty Beatrice's too. So the word seemed appropriate and she gathered it like the clay she used to mold animal shapes and hurled it at him.

Her mum was beside her in a flash, yanking her up out of the chair by the scruff of her blouse.

“What did you just say?”

Clément had said it was alright, Ganong had a right to her feelings.

But her mum raised her voice to him for the first time. “I will not tolerate such insolence in my house. I will not let her speak to you in that manner either. Apologize. Right now.”

As this was happening, Obi continued eating, observing the events before him over greasy fingers as he sucked on a chicken bone, as if the whole thing was a performance staged specially for his entertainment. He was always the last to leave the table. She did not blame him. It was true that Obi would eat anything. But the meal was sumptuous. Her mum had outdone herself and Clément had tagged it “The Last Supper” after which they were to become a family. Ganong thought this ‘highly irreverent,’ as Pastor Emma would say, and although she'd said nothing, she glanced pointedly at the painting of *The Last Supper* on the wall above Obi's head. Her mum followed her gaze and eyed her sternly, but she also seemed embarrassed as though she'd read Ganong's mind. Which pleased Ganong and made her enjoy the meal far more than it warranted. It had been an altogether okay evening, Ganong even managing to ignore the looming wedding. And then this.

“No!”

Their eyes met and Ganong stuck her tongue out. Which further inflamed her mum, and Clément had to hold her mum back, his hands around her waist. Eventually, heaving, her mum subsided.

“I will deal with you later.”

Later after Clément had gone, her mum had insisted she say she was sorry. Ganong refused.

“Why won’t you just say you’re sorry?”

“You said we should not tell lies.”

She had been doing all manner of punishment since then. Corporal punishment, as it was called in school. She didn’t mind. The strain in her muscles as she did *pick-pin* and *sit in the air* kept her mind from thinking about the wedding. Which is how she came to be lying on the ground now and being waited upon for answers of which she had none.

Finally, Aunty Beatrice, deciding that she was not going to get anything out of her, rose and put a hand on her mum’s shoulder. “Clara, I know you are upset, but please focus on what you want. You want tomorrow to be happy and go on without a hitch, right?” Her mum nodded. Aunty Beatrice beamed. “Well then, don’t let her worry you so much. She’s just a child.

Her mum had glanced down at her for a long moment. And then,

“Get up. Go clean yourself up. Iron that your orange blouse and skirt—”

“But I want to wear the green one.”

Her mum looked at Aunty Beatrice in mute appeal. Aunty Beatrice shrugged, and her mum nodded.

“Just go. Wear whatever you want”.

When she stood, her joints were stiff and they ached. She had to limp out of the room. She shut the door behind her with a bang which she knew her mum hated. But something made her stop and press her ear against the door.

The adults were certain she had gone and did not bother to lower their voices.

“She thinks her father was perfect.” Her mum snorted.

“But that’s the thing. However she antagonizes you, you know you cannot say anything. Let her have her memory of her father.”

Ganong drew back, then stepped away from the door. Unsettled.

Now she watched her mum repeat her vows, her pancaked face smiling up at Clément, who looked serious but kind and warm as he smiled down at her. Flanking them to one side, Pastor Emma, who looked more excited than the couple themselves, pausing several times to dab large beads of sweat on his forehead and neck beamed at them as he pronounced them husband and wife. The few people there, mostly church members, clapped enthusiastically and loudly for longer than was necessary, as though trying to make up for the shortage of attendees, and the choir belted out rehearsed songs of jubilation and congratulations for the newly wedded couple. Ganong knew that many of her mum and dad’s friends had refused to come because her mum was marrying too soon after. Her mum had not invited Prof. Not that he would have come. He disapproved of the marriage and had come to the house to tell her so and her mum told him he was no longer welcome.

Pastor Emma announced that it was offering time and a stainless steel tray was passed along from row to row, each person delaying its course in order to take a Naira note from their pocket or purse and drop into the tray before permitting it to continue on its way. Finally two male ushers brought the money forward, placing their copies of the printed wedding program atop the money to keep it from being blown away by gusts from the otherwise ineffectual standing fans that were placed on either side of the altar. Pastor Emma said prayers over the money. Ganong wished she could tell him to enjoy this one last time. The couple were having their marriage thanksgiving the next day. And that was the last time he would see them at Dominion Life Assembly. She'd heard them talk about this too, Clément softly telling her mum that he understood her feelings of loyalty and fraternity to them, but that a wife attended her husband's church. It's just the way things were.

And, she realized now with a start; that was it. Everything was changing. Everything was moving. The ground was shifting beneath her, stripping her of all that was familiar and all her feelings of secureness and certitude threatened. Her dad was gone, their house was going, their church was next. And who knew what else. This. This was her fear.

And somehow she knew that she was right to be afraid.

Vignette 3

It was three weeks after the wedding and they were all sitting at the dining table having breakfast. Weekend breakfasts had become a routine, or rather, a tradition, as Clément called it. On Friday nights while they watched TV, he would ask them what they wanted for breakfast. He made it sound like they could have anything they wanted. Obi always wanted bread and tea and eggs, which was a failure of imagination. What he called tea was a rich chocolate milk hot drink heaped with sugar.

Ganong had ignored him the first week, but rather than take this as an insult as it was meant, Clément had turned to Obi and queried him.

“So, what do you think your sister would want for breakfast?”

Ganong trained her eyes to the TV, pretending to be engrossed in the *The New Masquerade* on NTA, but she was listening. She never got what she liked, which was fried sweet potatoes and Pumpkin sauce. She didn't really like pumpkin when it was used to cook edikaikong, but the sauce made with leaves plucked fresh from their backyard garden and fried with tomatoes, onions and pepper, *that* she loved. But it was as if because her mum knew she liked it, she never made it unless her dad asked. So often, she would beg her dad to request it. If her mum knew where the request was coming from, she never indicated.

Obi pretended to think hard, making *mmm* sounds.

“I know, I know. She likes boiled unripe plantain with scrambled eggs.”

Ganong was incensed. Obi had mentioned the two things she absolutely hated. Whenever the family was having unripe plantains in any form for any meal, her mum, when she was in a good mood, added some yam to the boil for Ganong. At other times, she was allowed to go hungry until she decided to steal a few slices of bread from the top of the fridge. She was always careful not to take the first two slices so no one would know if the bread had been touched. Sometimes she'd stare at the loaf on the breakfast table the next morning, especially on days when she'd taken up to four slices the night before, measuring with her eyes to see if the loaf seemed shorter. She fancied her mum looking at her, but that was her guilt, she was sure. As for scrambled eggs, she always announced to anyone who cared to listen that eggs fried without tomatoes, onions and pepper was no different than eating paper seasoned with salt and fried with oil. She knew that Obi knew this, but just as she had been preparing to give him the benefit of the

doubt, perhaps he had forgotten, she caught the wicked smile he flashed her and was assured he had deliberately given the wrong information.

But she was too proud to correct him, and her mum was not paying attention. She was laughing at something on the black and white TV that still had some streaks from where three year ago, she and Obi had tried to gum the wrapper of Lucozade Boost to the screen to turn it into a colored television.

“So, for breakfast tomorrow, bread, tea and eggs for Obi, plantain and scrambled eggs for Ganong.”Clément beamed.

She clamped her lips together and said nothing. The next day, she forced herself to eat and even offered Clément a stiff smile and he seemed pleased. But later in the late afternoon while Obi played football outside, she went to the fridge, rummaged around in the freezer and found what she knew would be there; Obi’s cup—a large orange one that had once been the cap of a now discarded water thermos. His chocolate drink was now frozen and ready to be enjoyed. She had watched him at breakfast thoroughly enjoying his own meal while she slugged through hers, but the idea came when she noticed how he took mincing sips of his tea. That was when she knew how she was going to punish him. They never had a cocoa drink or a soda without reserving a large part of it which they put in the freezer to freeze.

She grabbed a teaspoon, went to their room and plopped down on the bed belly first. She started to scrape spoonful of the frozen slush into her mouth and had just come to the best part—the bottom where the consistency of the thicker milk and cocoa had settled— when she heard Obi’s thumping footsteps as he entered the house. He headed straight to the fridge, and as the door whined open, Ganong broke the bottom part into smaller chunks, put them in her mouth and chewed, suffering the shock to her teeth. He would be hot and sweaty and desperate for his

carefully reserved treat. She knew how long those hours could be when they waited for their drinks to freeze. She waited.

A long minute passed; her heart thumped. And then Obi bellowed. “Who took my ice cream from the fridge?”

Ganong held her breath. He barged into the room moments later. And just as she had planned, she held the cup aloft and clinked it with her spoon the way Clément had clinked his glass with the cake knife at the small wedding reception they’d had, before giving his vote of thanks. Her laughter was challenging. She tipped the cup over, letting the last drops of liquid fall to the floor.

“Oops,” she trilled.

Abruptly, Obi started crying. Her mum barged in, ready to flog her. But Clément walked in just then and held her mum’s arm. He said something to her and her mum walked away, picking Obi up from the floor as she went. Clément came and stood in front of her. He tipped her chin to look into her eyes.

“Why did you do that?”

Ganong did not answer, her face set in defiant lines. And when he tried to take her hand, she shook his away.

Sighing, Clément straightened and announced to the room, “Let’s go for ice-cream.” He raised his voice. “Obi, come on, wear your sandals. We’re going to Leventis.” Obi appeared.

“We’re going for ice-cream? Can I have two?”

“Yes.”

“Can I also have two?” Ganong asked. She wanted Clément to pick a side.

“Yes.”

“If she has two then I want three. She ate my ice cream!” His chin wobbled, his hand slackened on the strap of the sandals he was preparing to wear and he looked like he would not go if Clément said the wrong thing. Ganong felt a slight panic. Not waiting to find out how Clément decided, not wanting to wait to know if he would pick her side, she volunteered.

“Okay, fine. You can have one more than me.”

“Good girl,” Clément beamed at her. And that was that. Ganong started to think that maybe Clément was not too bad. He was never going to be her dad, but she maybe didn’t mind him too much.

By the next Friday, she had not waited for Obi to speak for her; and now she spent all day dreaming of what she would ask for, for her next Saturday’s breakfast. It turned out there were actually limits to what she could get. She had seen fried courgett and whipped double cream in one of her story books and asked for it. Clément shook his head, amused, and said he didn’t even know what those were. Today was sausage and fried ripe plantain. She had never eaten sausage before, but she’d had heard some girls talking about it in school. The new girl, Nana said they ate it all the time in Accra and her mum was happy to find it here in Leventis Stores. Ofonime said her mummy too had found it in Leventis, but Ganong did not ask her how *her* mummy even knew what it was in the first place. Ofonime liked to copy anything Nana said.

Clément fried the sausage for her and she was still trying to decide if she liked it. It was like very salty rubber slippers, but softer. She would describe it to her friends on Monday. At break time, while they were waiting to take turns on the swing, she would just say, “Maybe my mummy doesn’t know how to cook sausage right. I’m not sure I like it very much.” But would that annoy Ofonime? She did not want to annoy her.

Ganong was thinking these thoughts as she idly bit off pieces from her sausage which she'd forked whole and held to her mouth, when there was a loud knock on the door. This was the kind of knock her dad called "landlord knock" and at other times "money lender knock". If someone banged on their door in this way, when he opened the door the first thing he asked was, "Am I owing you?"

"Are we expecting anybody?" Clément asked her mum.

She shook her head. "I wonder who is coming to visit this early. It's not even nine!" Looking ready to upbraid the visitor, her mum stood, tied the sash of her satin robe tight and went to the door. Since Clément moved in, she had discarded the mid-length cotton nightgowns she had worn all Ganong's life and started to wear these satin and lace ones. Ganong did not know what to make of that. She was trying not to hate Clément, but her mum made it hard.

Her mum pulled the door open, but the anticipated scolding never came. Instead, it was a gasp of surprise. "Ehm, Uncle Nkim, Brother Joe, Brother Asiyah, welcome. Good morning. You came? Good morning."

Ganong listened, curious, as her mum's words tripped over each other. The last time Ganong had seen her mum's composure crumble like this was five months ago. Things were just getting back to normal after that first month, and her mum had stopped crying all the time and had started to notice Ganong again and have something to say about everything she did. And then, without warning, her uncles had shown up. She and Obi were sent to their room, but they heard the raised voices—the uncles, and crying and desperate. pleading—their mum's. When her uncles left, Ganong got only stony silence when she asked what they came for, her mum's lips tightening as she returned to resumed chopping waterleaf for soup but now with such ferocity that she sliced her finger with the sharpened knife. She did not seem to notice until Ganong, who

had turned from cutting periwinkles with a blunt short machete saw the crimson stream flowing into the vibrant green and shrieked. She ran over, yanked her mum's hand out of the tray and into the basin that held the murky water the leaves had been rinsed in. Ganong stared up at her mum who was unnaturally still, staring straight ahead but somehow also trembling with an anger that emanated like white heat from her skin. After a moment, her mum snatched her hand out of Ganong's and stomped inside. They had no lunch and Ganong and Obi made do with kernels that had fallen off the palm tree and dried on the ground. Later she heard her mum telling Auntie Beatrice, "So if not that I have his children, that's how they would just have thrown me out of this house." Then she heard muffled sobs and Auntie Beatrice whispering comforting words.

And now, here they were again, her uncles, and her mum was stepping back and holding the door open. Sensing the tension, Clément rose and strode quickly to the parlor.

"Welcome," he said, and tried to shake hands with them. But they gave him stony stares and Clément smoothly converted the handshake to a gesture inviting the men to take seats.

"We were just finishing breakfast," he informed them. "But we can offer you some drinks or something."

The oldest, Uncle Nkim, who had settled down, stared at Clément who was still standing, and somehow it looked like it was he who was standing and Clément seated. "You want to offer us something as you are what? Or who, in this house?"

Ganong's mum plastered herself to a wall, seeming unwilling to join the party. "Ganong, Obi, come and greet your uncles."

They came forward and mumbled greetings.

"What did you say?" Uncle Joe barked. His thick bushy eyebrows gave him a ferocious look and had always terrified Ganong.

She heard her voice emerge as a croak. “I said Good morning, Uncle—”

The men traded looks and shook their heads.

“You children greet us in English? Is it that you cannot speak your native language?”

Uncle Joe asked.

Ganong and Obi stared at their toes.

Uncle Asiyah pulled them forward in a hug. “It is not their fault, my brother. That is what happens when a man marries a stranger. We told our brother, ‘Marry from your own place; marry a woman that speaks the same language as you and can teach your children to speak it too,’ but did he hear? No. Now see here, his children don’t know who they are or where there are from.” He moved the children away from himself the better to observe them. “You little ones are not looking too bad. Are you eating well?” Ganong and Obi nodded. He pinched Ganong’s cheeks with his thumbs and forefingers that smelled of snuff, and twisted so hard, turning her face by her cheeks from side to side so she yelped. He always did this and she hated it. He laughed and released them. “Good, good. At least somebody is doing something right. God forbid my late brother’s children die of starvation.”

My late brother.

Ganong had hoped never to hear those words again. After it happened, all the weeks following, people kept repeating the phrase; the condolence visits, prayers for her dad’s soul repose at the church, the obituary on the radio, the funeral...and Ganong hated it all. How did her dad go from being just himself to ‘the late’? She remembered once in class, her English Comprehension teacher, Mr. Titus had written on the board, *It is better to be late than to be the late*. Nobody had known what it meant and he had had to explain that if you merely didn’t get somewhere on time, you were late. If you exited the stage of life, however, you were ‘the late’.

That was exactly what had happened. Her dad had been in a hurry to get somewhere and had become the late. Perhaps if she had told him about this quote, reminded him every morning to drive slow and be late, perhaps he would... She never wanted to hear it again, late anything.

The men turned their attention to her mum, who first stared back at them, then let her glance flick to Clément. He smiled reassuringly at her.

Uncle Nkim's voice was a barked order. "Clara, come and sit down here. We want to discuss something with you." He looked at Clément. "You can leave us."

Clément smiled and spoke mildly "Clara is my wife, so if you want to say something to her, I want to be here to hear it."

The men looked at each other, genuinely surprised. What had they thought, that their brother's widow had replaced him with a man who would cower and quake at their command?

Uncle Nkim nodded. "Okay, stay. In fact, it is good that you hear this."

Clément went and brought Ganong's mum over to a chair and they sat down side by side. He held her hand firmly and looked at the uncles with a polite expressionless stare. Ganong could have cheered.

Ganong observed all this, her back now braced against a wall as she sat on the floor, idly weaving the silky hair of her doll. Obi played with his plastic toy car. She suspected that like her, he wanted to eavesdrop and was pretending to be invisible.

Her mum looked over at them. "You children, go to your room."

"Why should they go? They are growing up. Let them stay and learn how to behave appropriately". This was Uncle Asiyah, and the others nodded.

"What do you mean?" her mum's voice was high.

Uncle Nkim observed her with what could only be described as malice. “What we mean is that you, Clara, have behaved very inappropriately indeed. You remarried, not even up to one full year after our brother passed. Is that how a widow is supposed to behave? Ehn?”

“Uncle Nkim, I don’t know what you are saying. My late husband died eight months ago. I mourned him as is expected of me, and I buried him. I am moving on and trying to take care of my children—”

Uncle Joe exploded. “Do you hear what this woman is saying? Can you hear her? What manner of talk is that? Ehn?”

Ganong, a dull pounding starting in her chest watched her mum bow her head, but there was something in her demeanor that had changed. It no longer looked like humility. It now looked like defiance, and as though sensing this, Clément squeezed her hand and murmured something to her.

“It’s okay, Joe,” said Uncle Nkim. “We are the elders, so we will ignore the foolishness she is talking. A child can grow eyes as big as coconuts but a blind elder will always see more and farther.” He turned to her mum. “Clara, was it not in this very parlor that we are sitting that we allowed you to remain in this house and raise our brother’s children? Was it not you that was on your knees, crying and begging us not to throw you away—”

Her mum shot back, “And the question is why should we have been talking about that in the first place? So when you came to throw me and your brother’s children out, what was your plan for us? For them? I should kneel down and thank you, is that what you want?” Without warning, she dropped to her knees before even Clément knew what she was planning and feigned exaggerated gratitude, hands clasped together as she faced one uncle and then the other in turn. “Thank you, Uncle Nkim. Thank you, brother Asiyah, and thank you, brother Joe. Thank you all

for letting me live in the house that me and my husband built and where I am raising his children. Thank you for holding your greed in check and not trying to benefit from the death of your brother and nephew. I am so grateful. Are you happy now?”

Uncle Asiyah jumped to his feet. “Look at this woman. I always knew that you were a bad woman—”

“If you want me to come to your houses every morning and thank you, I will do so.”

Clément had been tugging at her and finally she allowed herself be pulled back into the seat. Then he looked at the men, presenting the face of calm affability.

“Gentlemen, I apologize. Clara, as you can imagine, is overwrought.”

Uncle Nkim eyed him derisively. “So you know that she is overwrought, and you hurried and married her. Why? What kind of man will rush and marry a woman —not a young woman o—a widow with two children and her husband’s body not even cold in the ground. What are you after. Ehn? Answer us.”

“You are asking? It is obvious. The man is shameless and homeless; a lazy man that thinks that this house is where he will come and abide. A house that another man built with his sweat” Uncle Joe made a spitting sound, “Over my dead body.” The others nodded in consensus.

Clément sighed, but showed no signs of having been affected by the insults. He pulled forward in his seat respectfully. “Gentlemen, brothers and uncles, I know you have many questions and concerns, and I thank you for expressing them. I will try to answer them.” He took Clara’s hand again and smiled briefly at her before continuing. “I married Clara for only one reason; I love her. She is a wonderful woman. And when I met your nephew and niece here, I just knew that I wanted to help her take care of them and raise them.” He turned a warm smile first to Obi, and then to Ganong. She blinked, feeling caught, but instinctively smiled back.

“Ehen?” Uncle Joe asked skeptically. “Why? Why will a man such as yourself just come and want to carry the burden of another man’s children?”

“Or is it that you cannot have children of your own? Is your seed not swimming?” The men laughed.

Ganong knew what that meant and flushed. She had been taught in Integrated Science class how the man’s sperm swam and fused with the woman’s egg. This sperm is what Uncle Asiyah was calling seed like in plants, she knew. And she knew too how it happened. Princess had raised her hand and asked Mr. Okachi how it happened and he told her she would understand when she was older. But during break time, Ofonime had explained to them in a whisper that the man put his thing in the woman’s thing. They did not believe her. But the next day, she came to class with a tiny plastic box that looked like a toy camera. Only one person could look into the small peephole at a time. When it was Ganong’s turn, she fed her eye into the viewer and pressed the small shutter at the top. As she clicked, image after image of film appeared where men and women were doing strange things with their bodies. The other girls had giggled, but she somehow felt embarrassed. Later, when her mum and dad went to their room and their bed squeaked, she knew what was happening and felt ashamed for knowing.

She was drawn back to the sound of Clément’s deep voice. He had a voice that rumbled like it was coming from a subterranean cavern. Like he called it from somewhere deep before he could use it. Maybe that was why he spoke so seldom. A voice like that you had to measure. He seemed unfazed by the men’s crude insinuations as he continued. “I want to reassure you that the children will always be taken care of. You don’t have to worry about them.”

Her mum shot a malice-filled and triumphant smile at the uncles as they exchanged glances with one another. Had Clément just made a jibe at them? Her uncles had never bought

them anything, and she had heard her mum say that left to them alone, her children would starve. It was as though Clément had just scoffed at their pretend concern and given them a graceful way out in a way that they all understood what he was really saying. They all stared at each other.

Uncle Nkim recovered first. “Okay. Well spoken. Well spoken. But that brings us to the crux of our visit here. This house. As a man yourself, Mr.... What is your name again?”

“Clément.”

“Clément. As a man yourself, you know that you cannot be living here under another man’s roof. It is bad enough that you are...” he hesitated, searching for an appropriate phrase. “It is bad enough that you are having relations with his wife and enjoying his children, but to just be living in his house like this for free, it is improper.”

The others nodded. Ganong felt an odd pang. Only three weeks ago she would have been in complete agreement with her uncles. But now, as she looked at Clément staring straight ahead, his shoulders straight, she felt a certain protectiveness towards him. Maybe it was because she did not like her uncles. Clément had been doing things for them since even before the wedding, and even more after. It was like he could not do enough; like he was trying to woo them now as he would surely have wooed their mum. The way Cyril was when he gave Ofonime his snacks money. Clément cooked, so the meals had gotten better, he played with Obi, and since Ganong did not join them despite repeated invitations, he bought her books she read while they played. He had seen that she was reading the bedtime stories series, and he took an inventory of the six she had. Then he bought her ten more, as well as a few Enid Blyton pocket books. He’d also bought her two Nigerian color books *The Flute*, and *The Drum*. She felt a certain safety with him, like all she needed to do was ask him for anything. When she fell asleep on the living room

rug, she had woken on his shoulder to him putting her gently to bed and then covering her with her wrapper. Her eyes had opened, startled, after he closed the door and her heart thumped. Her dad used to carry her to bed like that and she had instinctively wrapped her arms around Clément's neck in sleep. She felt like she had betrayed her dad, was betraying him. The next morning she had not looked at him or spoken to him.

So she did not like her uncles talking to him like this and she felt angry for Clément. Their eyes met, and as if he read her thoughts, he smiled at her, then looked at the uncles.

“We don't intend to live here. I have a house around parliamentary. I'm just getting it ready. I finished building it a year ago, but since I was living alone...” he drifted off, then resumed. “So in about a month's time, we'll be selling this house—”

Uncle Joe and Uncle Asiyah sprung to their feet so fast it was a surprise they weren't dizzy.

“What did you say?”

“Selling what?”

“Gentlemen—” Clément began, but the uncles were hearing none of it and started a tirade.

“So that is your plan.” Uncle Joe drew out the so. “I knew that there was something that your eye was planted on.”

“Apart from enjoying the wife”, uncle Asiyah concurred with a smirk at her mum.

“Her mum jumped to her feet too, shaking off Clément's restraining hand. “Yes. We are selling the house. And so? Is it your house?”

“Is it your own?” Uncle Nkim fired back.

Her mum drew the front halves of her robe tighter and retied the belt the way the women traders in the market did when they were getting ready to fight, but theirs was their wrapper.

“Yes. It is my own. My husband and I built this house together. Where were you? Ehn? Did you people contribute one grain of sand to this house? My salary is in this house. My ideas are in the design. My sweat, my energy, my labor, all of it is in this house.”

“But is your name on the deed?” Uncle Joe shot back at her.

They stared at each other in open hostility.

Finally, Clément spoke again. “Please, let us not argue. What do you want? I said we should sell the house so that Clara can have something of her own to put in her side business. So perhaps we can come to an amicable solution.”

Everything was calm for moment and the angry parties settled back into their seats. Then Uncle Nkim spoke. “As the representative of the Ete family, I rule that the house be sold—”

“Is that not what he said we are doing?”

“This woman, calm down,” said Uncle Joe. “Your blood is too hot. Uncle Nkim, please continue.”

“The house will be sold, and the proceeds distributed equally among your late husband’s close relatives. You will receive an equal portion—”

“You are mad.” Her mum flared, jumping again to her feet. “What did I say? I say you are mad. Madness runs in your family.”

The men looked at each other, unable to believe her audacity.

“Clara,” began Uncle Joe, “we have always known that you are a very arrogant woman. Maybe it’s because of that small degree you have and because you work at the university you think that you can talk to us anyhow, as if we are one of your students. I now see why your husband was planning to leave you.”

Dead silence fell. Ganong's mind unspooled. She forgot that she was supposed to be invisible, *children should be seen and not heard* and shrieked. "It's a lie. It's a big lie." She rose to her feet, trembling. "You people are always lying." Her breath was catching. She would not cry. She could not cry.

Uncle Nkim looked at her, and it seemed to her that he was measuring her, judging if she was worth his time. Then he smiled and beckoned her forward. She walked forward with wooden legs. He pulled her forward and placed her on his knee. "Why would I lie? An old man like me with grey hairs."

"Uncle Nkim," her mum said between a plea and a threat.

He did not even look at her as he continued. "Your daddy was tired of this woman and he had already introduced us to the woman that he was planning to use to replace her."

"Stop it." And now her mum's voice was shaking and it was no longer a question of which; she was begging. "Please. Stop. We will do whatever you want."

"No. let the child hear."

"Ganong, go to your room. Obi, you too"

Confused, Ganong tried to stand, but uncle Nkim tightened his arm around her stomach and held her in place. "Let her hear it. Let her know that this house you are fighting so hard for, he was going to push all of you out of it. Did you tell her that the night our brother had the accident, he was dropping that unfortunate young lady at home after bringing her to meet me when it happened?"

"That is how we confirmed that you are a witch. You are lucky we cannot prove it, or else," spat uncle Asiyah.

Clément rose, and for the first time, showed anger as he asked the men to leave with a different voice. But Ganong did not hear any more, did not know what was happening or where she was. Her eyes were blinded by the flood of tears and with a strength she did not know she possessed, she pushed out of Uncle Nkim's grasp and stumbled out of the room to the bedroom where she flung herself on the bed, holding her body together, sure it would shatter.

She lay there as the voices rose and rose. Then ebbed and ebbed. Finally as the sun rose over the house, silence fell over the home. The hushing of voices outside her door echoed the hushing of the thumping of her heart. She lay there, head hot and heavy, mucus dried in her nostrils. She didn't know how much time passed. Her breakfast, rather than digesting had become laden in her belly. Her mind, whirling and whirling.

They were lying, her uncles. Weren't they? They had to be. Her dad would never leave them. He had, but that was the accident, not by choice. He was happy with them. They played together, he, she and Obi. He teased her mum, paid their school fees, drove her to write her Common Entrance examination. He drove them to church and they all sat in one row in the pews, sometimes holding hands, and he prayed over them. They held hands at table before meals and said grace. She was not struggling with evidence of her dad's love and devotion to their family; she was suffused with an overabundance. He was there, everywhere; in every corner of her mind and beat of her heart he was there; laughing, tossing her around, dancing with her mum who always feigned reluctance and spinning her around anyway. He worked hard and always said it was for them. *Everything I do, I do for my children.* He took them to the zoo and to *Play*

House, a small theatre-like group for children that met on Saturdays in an empty class of the Theatre Arts Department at the University.

Her dad had discovered the group only two months to his death and left her there every Saturday for three hours. It was the first time she met other children who took to her without her having to prove herself. No one did. It was not a requirement. There were no popular kids, no cliques. They all were from different schools and backgrounds but met in this mixed pot, and the coordinator of the group, Aunty Adesuwa embraced them all with such effusive joy there not a moment to wonder who was whom. It did not matter. Aunty Adesuwa was a tall, eccentric woman who dressed like a witch; flowing patchwork dresses, heavy makeup more suited for the stage and assorted headgears ranging from turbans to pointy hats. She looked scary at first sight when a new child was introduced to her; frowning down and nodding in concentration. But almost immediately her face would split into the biggest smile and she would sweep the child up, hoist them over her head and tickle them. When it was time to begin and she stood before the earnest eyes staring up at her, she always asked,

“And children, what do you say to me?”

And the children would yell with all their might, “Good morning, Aunty Adesuwa, mwah,” because she insisted that all the children blow her a kiss whenever they spoke her name. She would throw her head back and giggle and throw her arms out in such a pure show of affection and childlike glee. Ganong loved Saturdays for this. For hours when she did not have to tolerate Obi’s whining and her mum’s incessant errands, “go and bring me water to drink, go and buy me thread from mama Blessing.” She missed Saturdays.

She missed her dad.

She knew him. He was devoted to them. To her mum. He sneered at men that abandoned their families. He called them charlatans! How could her uncles claim he was planning to be one. A feeling of anger lurched, knowing that these accusations came when he could no longer defend himself. His memory was being tarnished and she was helpless to evade the swarming seeds of...doubt? Did she doubt?

Unbidden, it came to her mind obscure nights when the house was shrouded in a vague veil of unease. When her dad was late and her mother slammed their dinner in front of them and snapped at them when they asked where he was. There were stifled fights, hoarse hushed voices and smiles that slipped at breakfast. Ganong had never examined the words she had heard. She had heard and then immediately unheard them, in fact, obliterated them. And even as now she desperately tried to recapture her errant thoughts from chasing after the mirage of these memories they surged. Because thoughts are fleet-footed and crafty and mastered by none. They slither through cracks, however reinforced the bastion was against them. Her thoughts refused to be corralled—she was badgered by them, pounding up her walls, forcing her to memory; granting words to the memories, words disembodied, rising like unfriendly wraiths.

“...You are a horrible man...”

“...Nothing is ever good enough for you. I work so hard...”

“You are selfish...your family hates me...”

“You hate everyone. What do you have to be so proud about?”

“...Your breath stinks. Where have you been?”

“None of your business...”

“...that woman...”

“I don't love you any more...”

“You never loved me...”

“...the children...”

“...why I’m still here?!...”

Ganong fought against hands that held her down. “Leave me alone, leave me alone.”

“Ganong, what is it?”

She opened her startled eyes and saw her mum looking down at her, part worry but also part irritation. Then she realized her palms were clamped over her ears, heard the leftover echo of her voice. She had been shrilling. She caught her mouth open and clamped it shut with her hand.

“What is it?” her mum asked again. “Your uncles are gone. You can come out now.”

As her mum shifted away, her eyes went to the door and she saw Obi standing there staring at her, his eyes big with fear. Clément stood there too, his expression concerned but modulated so as not to alarm her further. She looked back at her mum.

“Mummy, what they said...is it true? Did daddy...” she faltered, then braced herself.

“Was daddy planning to leave us?”

A tinge of sympathy washed over her mum’s face. She took Ganong’s hand, rubbed her palm with a forefinger. “Not us. Me. I’m sorry that you had to hear that. I wish you had not heard that. Your dad would never leave you.”

Ganong stared at her mum, her mind working.

“He was planning to leave you? But that means he would have thrown us out...”

“No. He would have moved out, if it came to it. But I don’t think he would have left anyway—”

“But if he left, he would have left us here and gone away. With the other woman.”

Unsure how to respond, her mum looked at her, then looked to Clément as though looking for help. Finally she sighed. “We will never know now what would have happened. I’m glad you never get to find out what might or might not have happened.

“So you’re happy my daddy is dead,” Ganong flared and snatched her hand out of her mum’s. “You made him do it. You made him want to leave us. It’s your fault.”

Her mum flinched, pulled back at the suddenness of the attack. “Why would you say such a thing? You don’t know anything.”

“I know everything,” she declared with heat. “You were always shouting at daddy and abusing his friends and—”

The slap came so swiftly and resoundingly that Ganong gasped and held her face. She started crying so suddenly it took her by surprise. But the grief was gone and the anger was here, brimming over. These were uncompromisingly angry tears, loud and unruly. She screamed, flailed and looked so unmoored that her mum stood, looking scared as she stared at her.

“Ganong. Ganong!”

But Ganong would not be contained. Looking desperate, her mum shook her shoulder and screamed Ganong’s name until her tone matched Ganong’s in pitch. Obi started wailing and threw himself to the floor.

This was when Clément stepped forward and grabbed her mum around the waist, pulling her upright. He soothed her with embraces and shushes and he wiped her face, she looking surprised, just as Ganong had only moments before, to see that she had been crying too. When he had calmed her, he whispered something to her. Her mum nodded, said something in return and then walked away, stopping to pick Obi off the floor as she went.

Clément came and stood looking down at her. Ganong was now facedown but she felt him. He made no move towards her, no attempt to dam her crying. She wept, for how long did not know. But then out of nowhere she started to feel self-conscious. Her tears which had felt heartrending a moment ago took on a sudden luster of insincerity, like it was a show she was putting on. Somehow this feeling fueled a fresh anger and correspondingly a fresh bout of tears. Why was he standing there? Why would he not intervene?

After some time, again she could not say how long, she felt the bed dip and knew that Clément had sat down beside her. This brought on a surge of nostalgia, as she remembered all the times the bed had dipped in exactly that way whenever her dad had sat in exactly that place, and had taken her in his arms in exactly the way Clément did now, that she felt a fresh wave of sobs.

She was also relieved, although she would rather hang herself than admit this. She was exhausted from crying and had wanted badly to be rescued. Had imagined what would happen if he had chosen to stay staring down at her like that, and she, forced to uphold the charade. Now that she was free of that and Clément was speaking softly, telling her it was okay to feel what she was feeling and that he was here, the tears were imbued with a resurgence of genuine grief. Her caterwauling subsided to a keening as she grieved. It was profound how, in one episode of crying, tears could take on many flavors and qualities, each distinct and apart but still a part of the huge ball of feeling that whirled. The feelings that swamped over her felt big and deep and her breath caught at the vastness. She realized, startled, that she had not grieved her dad. She had tried to take care of Obi, had tried to deny it was happening, had clung to the hope that it was all a mistake. She had watched her mum and was never pleased. When her mum cried despondently, Ganong had envied her, feeling more entitled to that depth. She felt in part as though her mum's

grief was limiting her own. Like she could not cry while watching her mum cry. Moreover, somebody had to take care of Obi. But when her mum had rallied with equanimity, Ganong hated her for not grieving as long and as hard as her dad deserved. When Clément entered her mum's life, she felt justified; vindicated, sure that she had predicted this exactly, that her mum had not loved her dad enough and that Clément so soon after was proof.

Clément who now rubbed her shoulder and her neck and told her it was okay to cry. When he lost his dad, he said, he was around her age; and when he had not wept, an old woman in the village had given him a knock so solid that it drove him to his knees, so Ganong should be grateful that she had someone here encouraging her to grieve, to lean on him. Ganong's laugh, riding right of the crest of her tears was unexpected, and then she could not stop laughing. Clément's chest rumbled and she knew he was laughing with her. There was a long silence when Ganong's head felt empty, her mind stripped. The only sensations she was aware of, Clément's heart as it beat against her head, his finger as it traced a path on her back.

Finally as Ganong started to feel sleepy, he spoke. "I will take care of you. Do you believe me?"

Ganong nodded into his shirt and inhaled the clean smell of the starch and the crispness of the ironing and his cologne.

"Do you trust me?"

She was halfway to a nod when she froze and the nod walked itself back. He waited his hand, stilled. She waited, too. She did not know why she hesitated. Things were happening too fast. She just stayed like that. Clément's arm tightened around her.

"It is alright. I am in no hurry."

Ganong's mind was already adrift towards sleep, white and floaty. Feeling secure for the first time since her dad died. Not quite there yet. Not quite trust. But the beginnings of something warm and safe.