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New Husband

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New Husband

My new husband carried the suitcase out of the taxi and led the way into the brownstone building, up a flight of brooding stairs, down an airless hallway with frayed carpeting and stopped at a door. 5D, unevenly fashioned from yellowish metal, was plastered on it.

“We’re here,” he said. He had always used the word ‘house’ when he told me about our home. I had imagined a gravelly driveway snaking between cucumber-colored lawns, a wide doorway that he would carry me over, walls with serene paintings. Like the white newlyweds in the American films that Lagos Channel 5 showed on Saturday nights.

He turned the light on in the living room where a beige couch sat alone in the middle, slanted, as though dropped there by accident. Old smells hung heavy in the room, musty, nose-stuffing.

“I’ll show you around,” he said.

The smaller bedroom had a bare mattress lodged in one corner. The bigger bedroom had a bed and dresser, and a phone on the carpeted floor. Still, both rooms lacked a sense of space, as though the walls had become uncomfortable with each other, with so few things between them.

“Now that you’re here, we’ll get more furniture. I didn’t need that much when I was alone,” he said.

“Okay,” I said. I felt faint, light-headed. The ten-hour flight from Lagos to New York and the interminable wait while the blond customs officer raked through my suitcase had left me woozy, stuffed my head full of cotton wool. The customs officer had examined my foodstuffs, the ground *egusi* and dried *onugbu* leaves and *uziza* seeds—carefully wrapped in see-through waterproof bags—as if they were spiders, and finally seized my *uziza* in her gloved hand. She feared I would grow the *uziza* on American soil. It didn’t matter that the *uziza* seeds were as hard as a bicycle helmet, sun-dried for weeks.

“*Ike agwum*,” I said, placing my handbag, green passport peeking out, down on the floor.

“Yes, I’m exhausted too. We should get to bed.”

In the bed with sheets that smelled of camphor balls, I curled up tight like Uncle Ike's fist when he is angry and hoped that no wife-like duties would be required of me. I relaxed moments later when I heard the measured snoring. It started like a deep rumble in his throat then ended on a high pitch, a sound like an obscene whistle. They did not warn you about things like this when they arranged your marriage. No mention of offensive snoring, no mention of houses that turned out to be furniture-challenged flats.

My husband woke me up by settling his heavy body, wide as a family suitcase, on top of mine. His chest flattened my breasts.

"Good morning," I said, opening sleep-crusting eyes. He grunted, a sound that might have been a response to my greeting or part of the ritual he was performing. He raised himself to pull my nightdress up above my waist.

"Wait..." I said, so I that could take the nightdress off, so it would not seem so hasty. But he had crushed his mouth down on mine.

Another thing they failed to mention, the arrangers of marriage—mouths that told the story of sleep, that felt clammy like old chewing gum, that smelled like the rubbish dumps in Lagos Mainland Market. His breathing rasped as he moved, as if his cavities were too narrow for the air that had to be let out.

When he finally stopped thrusting, he rested his entire weight on me, even the weight of his legs. I did not move until he climbed off me to go into the bathroom. I pulled my nightdress down, straightened it over my hips.

"Good morning, baby," he said, coming back into the room. He handed me the phone. "We have to call your uncle and aunt to tell them we arrived safely. Just for a few minutes, it costs almost a dollar a minute to Nigeria. Dial 011 and then 234 before the number."

"*Ezi okwu?* All that?"

"Yes. International dialing code first and then Nigeria's country code."

"Oh," I said. I punched in the fourteen numbers. The stickiness between my legs itched.

The phone line crackled with static, reaching out across the Atlantic. I knew Uncle and Auntie would sound warm for once, they would ask what the weather in America was like, what I had eaten. But none of my responses would register, they would ask just to ask. Uncle would probably smile into the phone. The same kind of

smile that had loosened his hard-knotted face when he told me that the perfect husband had been found for me. The same smile I had last seen months before when the Super Eagles won the gold medal at the Atlanta Olympics.

“A doctor in America,” he had said, beaming. “What could be better? Ofodile’s mother was looking for a wife for him, she was very concerned that he would marry an American. He hadn’t been home in six years. I gave her a photo of you. I did not hear from her for a while and I thought they had found someone. But—” Uncle Ike let his voice trail away, let his beam get wider.

“Yes, Uncle.”

“He will be home in early June. You will have plenty of time to get to know each other before the wedding.”

“Yes Uncle.” Plenty of time was two weeks.

“What have I not done for you? I raise you as my own and then I find you an *ezigbo di!* A doctor in America! It is like I won a lottery for you!”

I had thanked Uncle Ike warmly, for everything—finding me a husband, taking me into his home, buying me a new pair of shoes every two years. It was the only way to avoid being called ungrateful. I did not remind him that I wanted to try for the University, that I had worked hard in Aunt Ify’s bakery while going to secondary school, that the furniture and floors in the house shone because of me.

“Did you get through?” My new husband asked.

“It’s engaged,” I said. I looked away so that he would not see the relief on my face.

“Busy. Americans say busy, not engaged,” he said. “We’ll try later. Let’s have breakfast.”

For breakfast, he defrosted pancakes from a bright-yellow bag. I watched what buttons he pressed on the white microwave, carefully memorizing them.

“Boil some water for tea,” he said

“Is there some dried milk?” I asked, taking the kettle to the sink. Rust clung to the sides of the sink like peeling brown paint.

“Americans don’t drink their tea with milk and sugar.”

“*Ezi okwu?* Don’t you drink yours with milk and sugar?”

“No, I got used to the way things are done here a long time ago. You will too.”

I sat before my limp pancakes—they were so much thinner than the chewy slabs I made at home—and bland tea that I feared would not get past my throat. The doorbell rang and he got up. He walked with his hands swinging to his back, I had not really noticed before, I had not had time to notice.

“I heard you come in last night. Welcome back.” The voice at the door was American, the words flowed fast, ran into each other. Supri-supri, Aunty Ify called it, fast-fast. When you come back to visit, you will be speaking supri-supri like Americans, she had said.

“Thanks, Shirley. Thanks for keeping my mail.”

“How did your wedding go? Is your wife here?”

“Yes, come and say hello.”

A woman with hair the color of ash came into the living room, her body was wrapped in a pink robe knotted at the waist. Judging from the lines that ran across her shriveled face like ribbed fabric, she could be anything from six to eight decades old. I had not seen enough white people to correctly gauge their ages.

“Good morning,” I said, rising.

“I’m Shirley from 5A. Nice to meet you, nice indeed.” She had a nasal voice, as if battling a cold.

“Nice to meet you too.”

“Well, I’ll let you get back to breakfast. Welcome, welcome again.” Shirley shuffled out. My new husband shut the door. One of the dining table legs was short and so the table rocked, like a see-saw, when he leaned on it and said, “You say hi to people here, not good morning.”

“She’s not close to my age. I wanted to show respect.”

“It doesn’t work that way here. Everybody says hi.”

“*O di mma.*” Okay.

“I’m not called Ofodile here, by the way. I go by Dave,” he said, looking down at the pile of envelopes Shirley gave him. Many of them had lines of writing on the envelope itself, above the address, as though the sender had remembered to add something only after the envelope was sealed. “Dave?” I knew he didn’t have an English name. The invitation cards to our wedding had read Ofodile Emeka Udenwa and Chika Agatha Okafor.

“The last name I use here is different. Americans have a hard time with Udenwa so I changed it.”

“What is it?” I was trying to get used to Udenwa, a name I had known only a few weeks.

“Its Bell.”

“Bell!” I had heard about a Waturuocha that changed to Waturu in America, a Chikelugo that took the more American-friendly Chikel, but from Udenwa to Bell? “*Otu onezi?* That’s not even close to Udenwa.”

He got up. “You don’t understand how it works in this country. If you want to get anywhere you have to be as mainstream as possible. If not, you will be left by the roadside. You will use your English name here.”

“I never have, my English name is just something on my birth certificate. I’ve been Chika Okafor my whole life.”

“You’ll get used to it,” he said, reaching out to caress my cheek shortly. “You’ll see.”

When he filled out a social security number application for me that evening, the name he entered in bold letters was AGATHA BELL.

Our neighborhood was called Flatbush, my new husband told me the next day, as we walked to the bus stop, down a noisy street that smelled of fish left out too long before refrigeration. He wanted to show me how to do the grocery and how to use the bus.

“Look around, look around. You get used to things faster that way,” he said. I turned my head from side to side so he would see that I was looking around. Dark restaurant windows promised the Best Caribbean and American Food in lopsided print, a car wash across the street advertised \$3.50 washes on a chalk board nestled among Coke cans and bits of paper. The sidewalk was chipped away at the edges, like something nibbled at by mice.

Inside the bus, he showed me where to pour in the coins, how to press the tape on the wall to signal my stop. This is not like back home where you shout out to the conductor, he said, sneering, as though he had invented the superior American system.

Inside Key Food, we walked from aisle to aisle slowly. I was wary when he put a beef pack in the cart. I wished I could touch it, to examine its redness, like back home where the butcher held up fresh-cut slabs buzzing with flies.

“Can we buy those biscuits?” I asked. The blue packets of Burtons Rich Tea were familiar, they were in every store in Lagos. I did not want to eat biscuits but I wanted something familiar in the cart.

“Cookies. Americans call them cookies,” he said.

I reached out for the biscuits (cookies).

“Get the store brand. They’re cheaper, but still the same thing,” he said, pointing at a white packet.

“Okay,” I said. I put the store brand in the cart and stared at the blue packet on the shelf, at the familiar grain embossed Burtons logo, until we left the aisle.

“When I become an Attending, we will not buy store brands but for now we have to, they add up,” he said.

“When you become a Consultant?”

“Yes, but it’s called an Attending here. An Attending Physician.”

The arrangers of marriage only told you that doctors made a lot of money in America. They did not add that before doctors started to make a lot of money, they had to do an internship and a residency program, which my new husband had not completed. My new husband had told me this during our short in-flight conversation, right after we took off from Lagos, before he fell asleep.

Interns are paid twenty-eight thousand and work up to eighty hours a week. It’s like three dollars an hour, he had said. Can you believe it? Three dollars an hour. I did not know if three dollars an hour was very good or very bad—I leaned towards very good—until he added that even store cashiers made much more.

“Also when I become an Attending, we will not live in a neighborhood like this,” my new husband said. He stopped for a woman with her child tucked into her shopping cart to pass by. “See how they have bars so you can’t take the shopping carts out? In the good neighborhoods, they do not have them. You can take your shopping cart all the way to your car.”

“Oh,” I said. He did not know that my brows dipped low above my nose when I struggled to understand something, so I did not bother to look away. What did it matter that you could or could not take the carts out? The point was, there were carts.

“Look at the people who shop here, they are the ones who immigrate and continue to act as if they are back in their countries. They will never move forward unless they adapt to America. They will always be doomed to supermarkets like this,” he said.

I murmured something to show I was listening. I thought about the open markets back home, the traders who sweet-talked you into stopping at their zinc-covered sheds, who were prepared to bargain all day to add one single kobo to the price. They wrapped what you bought in plastic bags when they had them and when they did not have them, they apologized and laughed and offered you old hole-ridden newspapers.

My new husband took me to the mall the next day. He wanted to show me as much as he could before he started work on Monday. His car rattled as he drove, as though there were many parts that had come loose, a sound similar to shaking a tin full of nails.

“I’ll buy a new car after my residency,” he said.

Inside the mall, the floors gleamed, smooth as ice cubes and the high-as-sky ceiling blinked with tiny ethereal lights. I felt as though I was in a different physical world, another planet, a film set. The people who pushed against us, even the black ones, wore the mark of foreignness, otherness, on their faces.

“We’ll get pizza first,” he said. “Its one thing you have to like in America.”

We walked up to the pizza stand, to the man wearing a nose ring and a tall white hat.

“Two pepperoni and sausage. Is your combo deal better?” he asked. He sounded different when he spoke to Americans. His R was over-pronounced and his T was under-pronounced. And he smiled.

We ate the pizza sitting at a small round table in what he called a food court. A sea of people sitting around circular tables, hunched over paper plates of food. Uncle Ike would be horrified at the thought of eating here; he was a titled man and did not even eat at weddings unless he was served in a private room. There was something humiliatingly public, something lacking in dignity, about this place, this open space of too many tables and too much food.

“Do you like the pizza?” my new husband asked. His paper plate was empty.

“The tomatoes are not cooked well.”

“We overcook food back home, that is why we lose all the nutrients. Americans cook things right. See how they look healthy? Not

like the bodies of people back home, like dried sticks covered with skin.”

I nodded, looking around. At the next table, a woman with a body as soft and wide as a pillow held sideways smiled at me. I smiled back and took another pizza bite, tightening my stomach so it would not eject anything. We went into Macy’s afterwards. My new husband asked a woman standing by a glass counter full of twinkling jewelry where the outerwear department was and then he led the way towards a sliding staircase. Its movement was rubbery smooth, I knew I would fall the moment I stepped on it.

“*Biko*, don’t they have a lift instead?” I asked. At least we had the creaky ones in the school Administration Building back home, the ones that quivered for a full minute before the doors rolled open.

“Speak English. There are people behind you,” he whispered, pulling me away. “It’s an elevator, not lift. Americans say elevator.”

“Okay.”

He led me to the lift (elevator) and we went up a section lined by rows of weighty-looking coats. He bought me a coat the color of a gloomy day’s sky, puffy with what felt like foam inside its lining. The coat looked big enough for two of me to snugly fit into it.

“Winter is coming,” he said. “It is like being inside a freezer, so you need a warm coat.”

“Thank you.”

“We’ll get you some jeans too. You have to wear jeans often, it’s like the American uniform.”

“Okay.”

“Always best to shop when there is a sale. Sometimes, you get the same thing for less than half the price. It’s one of the wonders of America.”

“*Ezi okwu?*” I said then hastily added, “really?”

“We’ll take a walk around the mall. There are some other wonders of America here.”

We walked around until the bottoms of my feet ached, looking at stores that sold clothes and tools and plates and everything else.

Before we left, he led the way to MacDonaldis, another wonder of America. The restaurant was nestled near the rear of the mall, a yellow and red ‘M’ the size of a car stood at its entrance. My new husband did not look at the menu board that hovered overhead as he ordered two large number two meals.

“We could go home so I can cook,” I said. Don’t let your husband eat out too much, Aunty Ify had said. It will push him into the arms of a woman who cooks. Always guard your husband like a guinea fowl’s egg.

“I like to eat this once in a while,” he said.

I made coconut rice on Monday, to make up for the eating out. I wanted to make pepper soup too, the kind Aunty Ify said softened a man’s heart. But I needed the *uziza* that the customs officer had seized, pepper soup was just not pepper soup without it. I bought a coconut in the Jamaican store down the street and spent hours cutting it into tiny bits because there was no grater, and then soaked it in hot water to extract the juice. I had just finished cooking when he came home.

“*Nno*,” I said. “Did you work well?”

“You have to speak English at home too. So you can get used to it.” He brushed his lips against my cheek just as the doorbell rang. It reverberated in the bowels of the apartment, seared its way between us. He opened the door and let Shirley in. Shirley’s body was wrapped in the same pink robe and she twirled the belt at her waist.

“That smell,” she said, in her phlegm-filled voice. “It’s everywhere, all over the building. What are you cooking?”

“Coconut rice,” I said.

“A recipe from your country?”

“Yes.”

“It smells really good. The problem with us here is we have no culture, no culture at all.”

My new husband said nothing after she left. He ate the fragrant meal I placed before him quickly, even smacking his lips like Uncle Ike sometimes did to show Aunty Ify how pleased he was with her cooking. But the next day, he came back with a Good Housekeeping All-American cook book, thick as a Bible.

“I don’t want you cooking things from home anymore,” he said. “Or else we will be known as the people who fill the apartment building with smells of foreign food.”

I took the cookbook, ran my hand over the cover, over the picture of something that looked like a flower but was probably food. Another thing the arrangers of marriage did not tell you, the strug-

gle to brown beef in oil and dredge skinless chicken in flour. I had always cooked beef in its own juices, adding water later. Chicken I had always poached with its skin intact.

The first time I saw Nia, who lived in 5A, I thought she was the kind of woman Uncle Ike would disapprove of. He would call her an *asha-wo*, because of the see-through tops she wore so that her bra, often a mismatched shade, glared through. Or he would base his judgment on her lipstick, the color of a blooming hibiscus, and the eye shadow that clung to her heavy lids, as close as possible to the shade of the lipstick.

“Hi,” she said when I went down to get the mail. “You’re Dave’s new wife. I’ve been meaning to come over and meet you. Welcome. I’m Nia.”

“Thanks. I’m Chika... Agatha.”

“What was the first thing you said?”

“My Nigerian name.”

“It’s an Igbo name, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“What does it mean?”

“God is the greatest.”

“You know, Nia is a Swahili name. I changed my name when I was eighteen. I spent three years in Tanzania.”

“Oh,” I said. She had chosen an African name, while my husband made me change mine to an English one.

Later Nia said, “We’re hiring entry level salespeople at the store where I work. I’m a manager. So if you’re interested, you’re pretty much hired.”

Something leaped inside me, at the thought of earning what would be mine. Mine.

“I haven’t gotten my work permit yet,” I said.

“But Dave has filed for you?”

“Yes.”

“He’s a permanent resident, so it shouldn’t take long, at least before winter. Let me know as soon as you do.”

“Thank you,” I said. “Thank you.”

I liked the way Nia smiled to show a tooth that was chipped neatly, a perfect triangle missing at the edge. She started to stop by after work, for a while, drinking from a diet soda she brought with her

and watching me cook. She smoked excessively. She collected imitations of Nok and Shona art. She was so liberated she sprinkled her everyday conversation with words like the noun clitoris and the verb fuck.

Winter sneaked up on me. One day I stepped out of the apartment building and gasped. It was as though God was shredding tufts of cotton wool and flinging them down. I sat staring at my first snow, at the twirling flakes, for a long, long time before turning to go back inside the apartment. I scrubbed the kitchen floor again, cut out more coupons from the Key Food catalogue that came in the mail and then sat by the window, watching God's shredding become frenzied.

Winter had come and I was still unemployed. When my husband came home, I placed his French fries and fried chicken before him and asked why it was taking so long to get me a work permit.

He ate almost all of the oily-fried potatoes before responding. We spoke only English now, he did not know that I whispered Igbo sentences to myself while I cooked.

"The American woman I married to get a green card is making trouble. Our divorce was almost final, but not completely, before I married you in Nigeria. Just a minor thing, but she found out about it and now she's threatening to take legal action, she wants more money."

"You were married before?" I laced my fingers together because they had started to shake.

"Would you pass that please?"

"The jug?"

"Pitcher. Americans say pitcher, not jug."

I pushed the jug (pitcher) across. The pounding in my head was loud, filling my ears with a fierce liquid. "You were married before?"

"It was just on paper. A lot of our people do that here. It's business, you pay the woman but sometimes it goes wrong and either she refuse to divorce you or she decides to blackmail you."

I pushed the pile of coupons towards me and started to rip them in two, one after the other. "You should have let me know this before now."

"Why?"

“Why? I was going to be your wife! I deserved to know.” I sank down on the chair opposite him, slowly, as if the chair would crack if I didn’t.

“It wouldn’t have made a difference, you know that. Your uncle and aunt had decided. You couldn’t say no, not after they had taken care of you since your parents died.”

I stared at him, silent, shredding the coupons. Into smaller and smaller bits.

“Besides, with the way things are messed up in Nigeria, what would you have done? Aren’t people with Master’s degrees roaming the streets, jobless? They would still have been stuck with you until a husband came along. I was like manna, relieving them of you.” His voice was flat, as though he was reading from a required literature text that he did not enjoy. I watched him eat the batter-covered chicken, noticing that he did not finish chewing before he took a sip of water.

“Why did you marry me?” I asked, watching some coupon pieces fall to the floor. Broken up pictures of detergents and meat packs and paper towels.

“I’m not getting any younger. My parents kept sending pictures. They were afraid I would end up with an American. I liked your picture and my mother said you were a good girl, quiet. She said you might even be a virgin.” He smiled. “I probably should tell her how wrong she was.”

I shoved the coupons to the floor. Clasped my hands together and dug my short nails into my skin.

“I did like your picture,” he said, smacking his lips. “You were light-skinned and tall. I had to think about my children’s looks. Light-skinned blacks fare better in America.”

That evening, while he napped, I put only the clothes he hadn’t bought me, two embroidered boubous and one caftan, all Aunty Ify’s cast-offs, in the bag I had brought from Nigeria and went to Nia’s apartment.

Nia made me tea, with milk and sugar, and sat with me at her dining table, a squeaky affair with three tall stools around it.

“You can’t leave him,” Nia said. “Where will you go? You don’t even have your papers yet so you can’t apply for any benefits.”

“I know.”

“If you want to call your family back home, you can call them here. Stay as long as you want, I’ll get on a payment plan with Bell Atlantic.”

“There’s nobody to talk to at home.” I said, staring at the pear-shaped face of the imitation Nok sculpture on the wooden shelf. Its hollow eyes stared back, flat and sad.

“Your uncle?”

I shook my head. You left your husband, Auntie Ify would shrill, are you mad? Does one throw away a guinea fowl’s egg? Do you know how many women would offer both eyes for a doctor in America? For any husband at all? And Uncle Ike would bellow about my ingratitude, my stupidity, his fist and face tightening, before dropping the phone.

“You know, I read a book that claimed we do not fall in love, we climb up to love. Maybe if you gave it time—” Nia said.

“It’s not about love.”

“Was there someone back home?”

“Not really. There was once, but he was Yoruba, from a different ethnic group. My uncle would never let me marry him. Besides, he didn’t have any money.”

“Sounds really fucked up.”

“I wonder who the woman my husband married is.”

“He probably didn’t know her well. Most men don’t do green card marriages with people they know well.”

“I wonder if my husband had many girlfriends.”

“You never say his name, you never say Dave. Is that a cultural thing?”

“No.” I looked down at the Kente tablemat made with waterproof fabric. I wanted to say that perhaps it was because I didn’t know his name, didn’t know him.

“Did you know any of his girlfriends?” I asked.

Nia looked away. The kind of dramatic turning of head that speaks, that intends to speak, volumes.

“Nia?”

“I fucked him, almost two years ago, when he first moved in. I seduced him and fucked him and after a week it was over.”

“Oh,” I said and sipped my tea with milk and sugar.

“I had to be honest with you, get everything out.”

“Yes,” I said. I stood to look out of the window. The world outside seemed mummified into a sheet of dead whiteness. The sidewalks had piles of snow the height of a six-year-old child.

Nia was right, I could not leave. I went back the next evening. I rang the doorbell and he opened the door, stood aside, and let me pass.