CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE:
THE THING AROUND YOUR NECK (2009)

IMITATION

Nkem is staring at the bulging, slanted eyes of the Benin mask on the living room mantel as she learns about her husband's girlfriend.

"She's really young. Twenty-one or so," her friend Ijemamaka is saying on the phone. "Her hair is short and curly—you know, those small tight curls. Not a relaxer. A texturizer, I think. I hear young people like texturizers now. I wouldn't tell you *sha,* I know men and their ways, but I heard she has moved into your house. This is what happens when you marry a rich man." Ijemamaka pauses and Nkem hears her suck in her breath—a deliberate, exaggerated sound. "I mean, Obiora is a good man, *of course,*" Ijemamaka continues. "But to bring his girlfriend into your house? No respect. She drives his cars all over Lagos. I saw her myself on Awolowo Road driving the Mazda."

"Thank you for telling me," Nkem says. She imagines the way Ijemamaka's mouth scrunches up, like a sucked-until-limp orange, a mouth wearied from talk.

"I had to tell you. What are friends for? What else could I *do*?" Ijemamaka says, and Nkem wonders if it is glee, that highness in Ijemamaka's tone, that inflection in "do."

For the next fifteen minutes, Ijemamaka talks about her visit to Nigeria, how prices have risen since the last time she was back—even *garri* is so expensive now. How so many more children hawk in traffic hold-ups, how erosion has eaten away chunks of the major road to her hometown in Delta State. Nkem clucks and sighs loudly at the appropriate times. She does not remind Ijemamaka that she, too, was back in Nigeria some months ago, at Christmas. She does not tell Ijemamaka that her fingers feel numb, that she wishes Ijemamaka had not called. Finally, before she hangs up, she promises to bring the children up to visit Ijemamaka in New Jersey one of these weekends—a promise she knows she will not keep.

She walks into the kitchen, pours herself a glass of water, and then leaves it on the table, untouched. Back in the living room, she stares at the Benin mask, copper-colored, its abstract features too big. Her neighbors call it "noble"; because of it, the couple two houses down have started collecting African art, and they, too, have settled for good imitations, although they enjoy talking about how impossible it is to find originals.

Nkem imagines the Benin people carving the original masks four hundred years ago. Obiora told her they used the masks at royal ceremonies, placing them on either side of their king to protect him, to ward off evil. Only specially chosen people could be custodians of the mask, the same people who were responsible for bringing the fresh human heads used in burying their king. Nkem imagines the proud young men, muscled, brown skin gleaming with palm kernel oil, graceful loincloths on their waists. She imagines—and this she imagines herself because Obiora did not suggest it happened that way—the proud young men wishing they did not have to behead strangers to bury their king, wishing they could use the masks to protect themselves, too, wishing they had a say.

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She was pregnant when she first came to America with Obiora. The house Obiora rented, and would later buy, smelled fresh, like green tea, and the short driveway was thick with gravel. We live in a lovely suburb near Philadelphia, she told her friends in Lagos on the phone. She sent them pictures of herself and Obiora near the Liberty Bell, proudly scrawled *very important in American history* behind the pictures, and enclosed glossy pamphlets featuring a balding Benjamin Franklin.

Her neighbors on Cherrywood Lane, all white and pale-haired and lean, came over and introduced themselves, asked if she needed help with anything—getting a driver's license, a phone, a maintenance person. She did not mind that her accent, her foreignness, made her seem helpless to them. She liked them and their lives. Lives Obiora often called "plastic." Yet she knew he, too, wanted the children to be like their neighbors', the kind of children who sniffed at food that had fallen on the dirt, saying it was "spoiled." In her life, her childhood, you snatched the food up, whatever it was, and ate it.

Obiora stayed the first few months, so the neighbors didn't start to ask about him until later. Where was her husband? Was something wrong? Nkem said everything was fine. He lived in Nigeria *and* America; they had two homes. She saw the doubt in their eyes, knew they were thinking of other couples with second homes in places like Florida and Montreal, couples who inhabited each home at the same time, together.

Obiora laughed when she told him how curious the neighbors were about them. He said *oyibo* people were like that. If you did something in a different way, they would think you were abnormal, as though their way was the only possible way.

And although Nkem knew many Nigerian couples who lived together, all year, she said nothing.

Nkem runs a hand over the rounded metal of the Benin mask's nose. One of the best imitations, Obiora had said when he bought it a few years ago. He told her how the British had stolen the original masks in the late 1800s during what they called the Punitive Expedition; how the British had a way of using words like "expedition" and "pacification" for killing and stealing. The masks—thousands, Obiora said—were regarded as "war booty" and were now displayed in museums all over the world.

Nkem picks up the mask and presses her face to it; it is cold, heavy, lifeless. Yet when Obiora talks about it—and all the rest—he makes them seem breathing, warm. Last year, when he brought the Nok terra-cotta that sits on the table in the hallway, he told her the ancient Nok people had used the originals for ancestor worship, placing them in shrines, offering them food morsels. And the British had carted most of those away, too, telling the people (newly Christianized and stupidly blinded, Obiora said) that the sculptures were heathen. We never appreciate what we have, Obiora always ended by saying, before repeating the story of the foolish head of state who had gone to the National Museum in Lagos and forced the curator to give him a four-hundred-year-old bust, which he then gave to the British queen as a present. Sometimes Nkem doubts Obiora's facts, but she listens, because of how passionately he speaks, because of how his eyes glisten as though he is about to cry.

She wonders what he will bring next week; she has come to look forward to the art pieces, touching them, imagining the

originals, imagining the lives behind them. Next week, when her children will once again say "Daddy" to someone real, not a telephone voice; when she will wake up at night to hear snoring beside her; when she will see another used towel in the bathroom.

Nkem checks the time on the cable decoder. She has an hour before she has to pick up the children. Through the drapes that her housegirl, Amaechi, has so carefully parted, the sun spills a rectangle of yellow light onto the glass center table. She sits at the edge of the leather sofa and looks around the living room, remembers the delivery man from Ethan Interiors who changed the lampshade the other day. "You got a great house, ma'am," he'd said, with that curious American smile that meant he believed he, too, could have something like it someday. It is one of the things she has come to love about America, the abundance of unreasonable hope.

At first, when she had come to America to have the baby, she had been proudly excited because she had married into the coveted league, the Rich Nigerian Men Who Sent Their Wives to America to Have Their Babies league. Then the house they rented was put up for sale. A good price, Obiora said, before telling her they would buy. She liked it when he said "we," as though she really had a say in it. And she liked that she had become part of yet another league, the Rich Nigerian Men Who Owned Houses in America league.

They never decided that she would stay with the children—Okey was born three years after Adanna. It just happened. She stayed back at first, after Adanna, to take a number of computer courses because Obiora said it was a good idea. Then Obiora registered Adanna in preschool, when Nkem was pregnant with Okey. Then he found a good private elementary school

and told her they were lucky it was so close. Only a fifteen-minute drive to take Adanna there. She had never imagined that her children would go to school, sit side by side with white children whose parents owned mansions on lonely hills, never imagined this life. So she said nothing.

Obiora visited almost every month, the first two years, and she and the children went home at Christmas. Then, when he finally got the huge government contract, he decided he would visit only in the summer. For two months. He couldn't travel that often anymore, he didn't want to risk losing those government contracts. They kept coming, too, those contracts. He got listed as one of Fifty Influential Nigerian Businessmen and sent her the photocopied pages from *Newswatch,* and she kept them clipped together in a file.

Nkem sighs, runs her hand through her hair. It feels too thick, too old. She has planned to get a relaxer touch-up tomorrow, have her hair set in a flip that would rest around her neck the way Obiora likes. And she has planned, on Friday, to wax her pubic hair into a thin line, the way Obiora likes. She walks out into the hallway, up the wide stairs, then back downstairs and into the kitchen. She used to walk like this throughout the house in Lagos, every day of the three weeks she and the children spent at Christmas. She would smell Obiora's closet, run her hand over his cologne bottles, and push suspicions from her mind. One Christmas Eve, the phone rang and the caller hung up when Nkem answered. Obiora laughed and said, "Some young prankster." And Nkem told herself that it probably was a young prankster, or better yet, a sincere wrong number.

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Nkem walks back upstairs and into the bathroom, smells the pungent Lysol that Amaechi has just used to clean the tiles. She stares at her face in the mirror; her right eye looks smaller than the left. "Mermaid eyes," Obiora calls them. He thinks that mermaids, not angels, are the most beautiful creatures. Her face has always made people talk—how perfectly oval it is, how flawless the dark skin—but Obiora's calling her eyes mermaid eyes used to make her feel newly beautiful, as though the compliment gave her another set of eyes.

She picks up the scissors, the one she uses to cut Adanna's ribbons into neater bits, and raises it to her head. She pulls up clumps of hair and cuts close to the scalp, leaving hair about the length of her thumbnail, just enough to tighten into curls with a texturizer. She watches the hair float down, like brown cotton wisps falling on the white sink. She cuts more. Tufts of hair float down, like scorched wings of moths. She wades in further. More hair falls. Some gets into her eyes and itches. She sneezes. She smells the Pink Oil moisturizer she smoothed on this morning and thinks about the Nigerian woman she met once—Ifeyinwa or Ifeoma, she cannot remember now—at a wedding in Delaware, whose husband lived in Nigeria, too, and who had short hair, although hers was natural, no relaxer or texturizer.

The woman had complained, saying "our men," familiarly, as though Nkem's husband and hers were somehow related to each other. Our men like to keep us here, she had told Nkem. They visit for business and vacations, they leave us and the children with big houses and cars, they get us housegirls from Nigeria who we don't have to pay any outrageous American wages, and they say business is better in Nigeria and all that. But you know why they won't move here, even if business were better here? Because America does not recognize Big

Men. Nobody says "Sir! Sir!" to them in America. Nobody rushes to dust their seats before they sit down.

Nkem had asked the woman if she planned to move back and the woman turned, her eyes round, as though Nkem had just betrayed her. But how can I live in Nigeria again? she said. When you've been here so long, you're not the same, you're not like the people there. How can my children blend in? And Nkem, although she disliked the woman's severely shaved eyebrows, had understood.

Nkem lays the scissors down and calls Amaechi to clean up the hair.

"Madam!" Amaechi screams. "*Chim o!* Why did you cut your hair? What happened?"

"Does something have to happen before I cut my hair? Clean up the hair!"

Nkem walks into her room. She stares at the paisley cover pulled sleek across the king-size bed. Even Amaechi's efficient hands can't hide the flatness on one side of the bed, the fact that it is used only two months of the year. Obiora's mail is in a neat pile on his nightstand, credit card preapprovals, flyers from LensCrafters. The people who matter know he really lives in Nigeria.

She comes out and stands by the bathroom as Amaechi cleans up the hair, reverently brushing the brown strands into a dustpan, as though they are potent. Nkem wishes she had not snapped. The madam/housegirl line has blurred in the years she has had Amaechi. It is what America does to you, she thinks. It forces egalitarianism on you. You have nobody to talk to, really, except for your toddlers, so you turn to your housegirl. And before you know it, she is your friend. Your equal.

"I had a difficult day," Nkem says, after a while. "I'm sorry."

"I know, madam, I see it in your face," Amaechi says, and smiles.

The phone rings and Nkem knows it is Obiora. Nobody else calls this late.

"Darling, *kedu*?" he says. "Sorry, I couldn't call earlier. I just got back from Abuja, the meeting with the minister. My flight was delayed until midnight. It's almost two a.m. now. Can you believe that?"

Nkem makes a sympathetic sound.

"Adanna and Okey *kwanu*?" he asks.

"They are fine. Asleep."

"Are you sick? Are you okay?" he asks. "You sound strange."

"I'm all right." She knows she should tell him about the children's day, she usually does when he calls too late to talk to them. But her tongue feels bloated, too heavy to let the words roll out.

"How was the weather today?" he asks.

"Warming up."

"It better finish warming up before I come," he says, and laughs. "I booked my flight today. I can't wait to see you all."

"Do you—?" she starts to say, but he cuts her off.

"Darling, I have to go. I have a call coming in, it's the minister's personal assistant calling at this time! I love you."

"I love you," she says, although the phone is already dead. She tries to visualize Obiora, but she can't because she is not sure if he is at home, in his car, somewhere else. And then she wonders if he is alone, or if he is with the girl with the short curly hair. Her mind wanders to the bedroom in Nigeria, hers and Obiora's, that still feels like a hotel room every Christmas.

Does this girl clutch her pillow in sleep? Do this girl's moans bounce off the vanity mirror? Does this girl walk to the bathroom on tiptoe as she herself had done as a single girl when her married boyfriend brought her to his house for a wife-away weekend?

She dated married men before Obiora—what single girl in Lagos hadn't? Ikenna, a businessman, had paid her father's hospital bills after the hernia surgery. Tunji, a retired army general, had fixed the roof of her parents' home and bought them the first real sofas they had ever owned. She would have considered being his fourth wife—he was a Muslim and could have proposed—so that he would help her with her younger siblings' education. She was the *ada,* after all, and it shamed her, even more than it frustrated her, that she could not do any of the things expected of the First Daughter, that her parents still struggled on the parched farm, that her siblings still hawked loaves of bread at the motor park. But Tunji did not propose. There were other men after him, men who praised her baby skin, men who gave her fleeting handouts, men who never proposed because she had gone to secretarial school, not a university. Because despite her perfect face she still mixed up her English tenses; because she was still, essentially, a Bush Girl.

Then she met Obiora on a rainy day when he walked into the reception area of the advertising agency and she smiled and said, "Good morning, sir. Can I help you?" And he said, "Yes, please make the rain stop." Mermaid Eyes, he called her that first day. He did not ask her to meet him at a private guesthouse, like all the other men, but instead took her to dinner at the vibrantly public Lagoon restaurant, where anybody could have seen them. He asked about her family. He ordered wine

that tasted sour on her tongue, telling her, "You will come to like it," and so she made herself like the wine right away. She was nothing like the wives of his friends, the kind of women who went abroad and bumped into each other while shopping at Harrods, and she held her breath waiting for Obiora to realize this and leave her. But the months passed and he had her siblings enrolled in school and he introduced her to his friends at the boat club and he moved her out of the self-contained in Ojota and into a real flat with a balcony in Ikeja. When he asked if she would marry him, she thought how unnecessary it was, his asking, since she would have been happy simply to be told.

Nkem feels a fierce possessiveness now, imagining this girl locked in Obiora's arms, on their bed. She puts the phone down, tells Amaechi she will be right back, and drives to Walgreens to buy a carton of texturizer. Back in the car, she turns the light on and stares at the carton, at the picture of the women with tightly curled hair.

Nkem watches Amaechi slice potatoes, watches the thin skin descend in a translucent brown spiral.

"Be careful. You are peeling it so close," she says.

"My mother used to rub yam peel on my skin if I took away too much yam with the peel. It itched for days," Amaechi says with a short laugh. She is cutting the potatoes into quarters. Back home, she would have used yams for the *ji akwukwo* pottage, but here there are hardly any yams at the African store—real African yams, not the fibrous potatoes the American supermarkets sell as yams. Imitation yams, Nkem thinks, and smiles. She has never told Amaechi how similar their childhoods were. Her mother may not have rubbed yam peels on her skin, but then there were hardly any yams. Instead, there was improvised food. She remembers how her mother plucked plant leaves that nobody else ate and made a soup with them, insisting they were edible. They always tasted, to Nkem, like urine, because she would see the neighborhood boys urinating on the stems of those plants.

"Do you want me to use the spinach or the dried *onugbu*, madam?" Amaechi asks. She always asks, when Nkem sits in as she cooks. Do you want me to use the red onion or the white? Beef broth or chicken?

"Use whichever you like," Nkem says. She does not miss the look Amaechi darts her. Usually Nkem will say use that or use this. Now she wonders why they go through the charade, who they are trying to fool; they both know that Amaechi is much better in the kitchen than she is.

Nkem watches as Amaechi washes the spinach in the sink, the vigor in Amaechi's shoulders, the wide solid hips. She remembers the shy, eager sixteen-year-old Obiora brought to America, who for months remained fascinated by the dishwasher. Obiora had employed Amaechi's father as a driver, bought him his own motorcycle and said Amaechi's parents had embarrassed him, kneeling down on the dirt to thank him, clutching his legs.

Amaechi is shaking the colander full of spinach leaves when Nkem says, "Your *oga* Obiora has a girlfriend who has moved into the house in Lagos."

Amaechi drops the colander into the sink. "Madam?"

"You heard me," Nkem says. She and Amaechi talk about which Rugrats character the children mimic best, how Uncle Ben's is better than basmati for *jollof* rice, how American chil-

dren talk to elders as if they were their equals. But they have never talked about Obiora except to discuss what he will eat, or how to launder his shirts, when he visits.

"How do you know, madam?" Amaechi asks finally, turning around to look at Nkem.

"My friend Ijemamaka called and told me. She just got back from Nigeria."

Amaechi is staring at Nkem boldly, as though challenging her to take back her words. "But madam—is she sure?"

"I am sure she would not lie to me about something like that," Nkem says, leaning back on her chair. She feels ridiculous. To think that she is affirming that her husband's girlfriend has moved into her home. Perhaps she should doubt it; she should remember Ijemamaka's brittle envy, the way Ijemamaka always has something tear-her-down to say. But none of this matters, because she knows it is true: a stranger is in her home. And it hardly feels right, referring to the house in Lagos, in the Victoria Garden City neighborhood where mansions skulk behind high gates, as home. *This* is home, this brown house in suburban Philadelphia with sprinklers that make perfect water arcs in the summer.

"When *oga* Obiora comes next week, madam, you will discuss it with him," Amaechi says with a resigned air, pouring vegetable oil into a pot. "He will ask her to move out. It is not right, moving her into your house."

"So after he moves her out, then what?"

"You will forgive him, madam. Men are like that."

Nkem watches Amaechi, the way her feet, encased in blue slippers, are so firm, so flatly placed on the ground. "What if I told you that he has a girlfriend? Not that she has moved in, only that he has a girlfriend."

"I don't know, madam." Amaechi avoids Nkem's eyes. She

pours onion slices into the sizzling oil and backs away at the hissing sound.

"You think your *oga* Obiora has always had girlfriends, don't you?"

Amaechi stirs the onions. Nkem senses the quiver in her hands.

"It is not my place, madam."

"I would not have told you if I did not want to talk to you about it, Amaechi."

"But madam, you know, too."

"I know? I know what?"

"You know *oga* Obiora has girlfriends. You don't ask questions. But inside, you know."

Nkem feels an uncomfortable tingle in her left ear. What does it mean to know, really? Is it knowing—her refusal to think concretely about other women? Her refusal to ever consider the possibility?

"*Oga* Obiora is a good man, madam, and he loves you, he does not use you to play football." Amaechi takes the pot off the stove and looks steadily at Nkem. Her voice is softer, almost cajoling. "Many women would be jealous, maybe your friend Ijemamaka is jealous. Maybe she is not a true friend. There are things she should not tell you. There are things that are good if you don't know."

Nkem runs her hand through her short curly hair, sticky with the texturizer and curl activator she had used earlier. Then she gets up to rinse her hand. She wants to agree with Amaechi, that there are things that are best unknown, but then she is not so sure anymore. Maybe it is not such a bad thing that Ijemamaka told me, she thinks. It no longer matters *why* Ijemamaka called.

"Check the potatoes," she says.

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Later that evening, after putting the children to bed, she picks up the kitchen phone and dials the fourteen-digit number. She hardly ever calls Nigeria. Obiora does the calling, because his Worldnet cell phone has good international rates.

"Hello? Good evening." It is a male voice. Uneducated. Rural Igbo accent.

"This is Madam from America."

"Ah, madam!" The voice changes, warms up. "Good evening, madam."

"Who is speaking?"

"Uchenna, madam. I am the new houseboy."

"When did you come?"

"Two weeks now, madam."

"Is *Oga* Obiora there?"

"No, madam. Not back from Abuja."

"Is anybody else there?"

"How, madam?"

"Is anybody else there?"

"Sylvester and Maria, madam."

Nkem sighs. She knows the steward and cook would be there, of course, it is midnight in Nigeria. But does this new houseboy sound hesitant, this new houseboy that Obiora forgot to mention to her? Is the girl with the curly hair there? Or did she go with Obiora on the business trip to Abuja?

"Is anybody else there?" Nkem asks again.

A pause. "Madam?"

"Is anybody else in that house except for Sylvester and Maria?"

"No, madam. No."

"Are you sure?"

A longer pause. "Yes, madam."

"Okay, tell *oga* Obiora that I called."

Nkem hangs up quickly. This is what I have become, she thinks. I am spying on my husband with a new houseboy I don't even know.

"Do you want a small drink?" Amaechi asks, watching her, and Nkem wonders if it is pity, that liquid glint in Amaechi's slightly slanted eyes. A small drink has been their tradition, hers and Amaechi's, for some years now, since the day Nkem got her green card. She had opened a bottle of champagne that day and poured for Amaechi and herself, after the children went to bed. "To America!" she'd said, amid Amaechi's too-loud laughter. She would no longer have to apply for visas to get back into America, no longer have to put up with condescending questions at the American embassy. Because of the crisp plastic card sporting the photo in which she looked sulky. Because she really belonged to this country now, this country of curiosities and crudities, this country where you could drive at night and not fear armed robbers, where restaurants served one person enough food for three.

She does miss home, though, her friends, the cadence of Igbo and Yoruba and pidgin English spoken around her. And when the snow covers the yellow fire hydrant on the street, she misses the Lagos sun that glares down even when it rains. She has sometimes thought about moving back home, but never seriously, never concretely. She goes to a Pilates class twice a week in Philadelphia with her neighbor; she bakes cookies for her children's classes and hers are always the favorites; she expects banks to have drive-ins. America has grown on her, snaked its roots under her skin. "Yes, a small drink," she says to Amaechi. "Bring the wine that is in the fridge and two glasses."

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Nkem has not waxed her pubic hair; there is no thin line between her legs as she drives to the airport to pick Obiora up. She looks in the rearview mirror, at Okey and Adanna strapped in the backseat. They are quiet today, as though they sense her reserve, the laughter that is not on her face. She used to laugh often, driving to the airport to pick Obiora up, hugging him, watching him hug the children. They would have dinner out the first day, Chili's or some other restaurant where Obiora would look on as the children colored their menus. Obiora would give out presents when they got home and the children would stay up late, playing with new toys. And she would wear whatever heady new perfume he'd bought her to bed, and one of the lacy nightdresses she wore only two months a year.

He always marveled at what the children could do, what they liked and didn't like, although they were all things she had told him on the phone. When Okey ran to him with a boo-boo, he kissed it, then laughed at the quaint American custom of kissing wounds. Does spit make a wound heal? he would ask. When his friends visited or called, he asked the children to greet Uncle, but first he teased his friends with "I hope you understand the big-big English they speak; they are *Americanah* now, oh!"

At the airport, the children hug Obiora with the same old abandon, shouting, "Daddy!"

Nkem watches them. Soon they will stop being lured by toys and summer trips and start to question a father they see so few times a year.

After Obiora kisses her lips, he moves back to look at her. He

looks unchanged: a short, ordinary light-skinned man wearing an expensive sports jacket and a purple shirt. "Darling, how are you?" he asks. "You cut your hair?"

Nkem shrugs, smiles in the way that says *Pay attention to the children first.* Adanna is pulling at Obiora's hand, asking what did Daddy bring and can she open his suitcase in the car.

After dinner, Nkem sits on the bed and examines the Ife bronze head, which Obiora has told her is actually made of brass. It is stained, life-size, turbaned. It is the first original Obiora has brought.

"We'll have to be very careful with this one," he says.

"An original," she says, surprised, running her hand over the parallel incisions on the face.

"Some of them date back to the eleventh century." He sits next to her to take off his shoes. His voice is high, excited. "But this one is eighteenth-century. Amazing. Definitely worth the cost."

"What was it used for?"

"Decoration for the king's palace. Most of them are made to remember or honor the kings. Isn't it perfect?"

"Yes," she says. "I'm sure they did terrible things with this one, too."

"What?"

"Like they did with the Benin masks. You told me they killed people so they could get human heads to bury the king."

Obiora's gaze is steady on her.

She taps the bronze head with a fingernail. "Do you think the people were happy?" she asks.

"What people?"

"The people who had to kill for their king. I'm sure they wished they could change the way things were, they couldn't have been *happy.*"

Obiora's head is tilted to the side as he stares at her. "Well, maybe nine hundred years ago they didn't define 'happy' like you do now."

She puts the bronze head down; she wants to ask him how he defines "happy."

"Why did you cut your hair?" Obiora asks.

"Don't you like it?"

"I loved your long hair."

"You don't like short hair?"

"Why did you cut it? Is it the new fashion trend in America?" He laughs, taking his shirt off to get in the shower.

His belly looks different. Rounder and riper. She wonders how girls in their twenties can stand that blatant sign of self-indulgent middle age. She tries to remember the married men she had dated. Had they ripe bellies like Obiora? She can't recall. Suddenly, she can't remember anything, can't remember where her life has gone.

"I thought you would like it," she says.

"Anything will look good with your lovely face, darling, but I liked your long hair better. You should grow it back. Long hair is more graceful on a Big Man's wife." He makes a face when he says "Big Man," and laughs.

He is naked now; he stretches and she watches the way his belly bobs up and down. In the early years, she would shower with him, sink down to her knees and take him in her mouth, excited by him and by the steam enclosing them. But now, things are different. She has softened like his belly, become pliable, accepting. She watches him walk into the bathroom.

"Can we cram a year's worth of marriage into two months in the summer and three weeks in December?" she asks. "Can we compress marriage?"

Obiora flushes the toilet, door open. "What?"

"*Rapuba.* Nothing."

"Shower with me."

She turns the TV on and pretends she has not heard him. She wonders about the girl with the short curly hair, if she showers with Obiora. She tries, but she cannot visualize the shower in the house in Lagos. A lot of gold trimmings—but she might be confusing it with a hotel bathroom.

"Darling? Shower with me," Obiora says, peeking out of the bathroom. He has not asked in a couple of years. She starts to undress.

In the shower, as she soaps his back, she says, "We have to find a school for Adanna and Okey in Lagos." She had not planned to say it, but it seems right, it is what she has always wanted to say.

Obiora turns to stare at her. "What?"

"We are moving back at the end of the school year. We are moving back to live in Lagos. We are moving back." She speaks slowly, to convince him, to convince herself as well. Obiora continues to stare at her and she knows that he has never heard her speak up, never heard her take a stand. She wonders vaguely if that is what attracted him to her in the first place, that she deferred to him, that she let him speak for both of them.

"We can spend holidays here, together," she says. She stresses the "we."

"What . . . ? Why?" Obiora asks.

"I want to know when a new houseboy is hired in my house," Nkem says. "And the children need you."

"If that is what you want," Obiora says finally. "We'll talk about it."

She gently turns him around and continues to soap his back. There is nothing left to talk about, Nkem knows; it is done.