



**Center for Faith & Learning  
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**"The Shivering"  
by  
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## THE SHIVERING

On the day a plane crashed in Nigeria, the same day the Nigerian first lady died, somebody knocked loudly on Ukamaka's door in Princeton. The knock surprised her because nobody ever came to her door unannounced—this after all was America, where people called before they visited—except for the FedEx man, who never knocked that loudly; and it made her jumpy because since morning she had been on the Internet reading Nigerian news, refreshing pages too often, calling her parents and her friends in Nigeria, making cup after cup of Earl Grey that she allowed to get cold. She had minimized early pictures from the crash site. Each time she looked at them, she brightened her laptop screen, peering at what the news articles called “wreckage,” a blackened hulk with whitish bits scattered all about it like torn paper, an indifferent lump of char that had once been a plane filled with people—people who buckled their seat belts and prayed, people who unfolded newspapers, people who waited for the flight attendant to roll down a cart and ask, “Sandwich or cake?” One of those people might have been her ex-boyfriend Udenna.

The knock sounded again, louder. She looked through the peephole: a pudgy, dark-skinned man who looked vaguely familiar though she could not remember where she had seen him before. Perhaps it was at the library or on the shuttle to the Princeton campus. She opened the door. He half-smiled and spoke without meeting her eye. “I am Nigerian. I live on the third floor. I came so that we can pray about what is happening in our country.”

She was surprised that he knew she, too, was Nigerian, that he knew which apartment was hers, that he had come to knock on her door; she still could not place where she had seen him before.

“Can I come in?” he asked.

She let him in. She let into her apartment a stranger wearing a slack Princeton sweatshirt who had come to pray about what was happening in Nigeria, and when he reached out to take her hands in his, she hesitated slightly before extending hers. They prayed. He prayed in that particularly Nigerian Pentecostal way that made her uneasy: he covered things with the blood of Jesus, he bound up demons and cast them in the sea, he battled evil spirits. She wanted to interrupt and tell him how unnecessary it was, this bloodying and binding, this turning faith into a pugilistic exercise; to tell him that life was a struggle with ourselves more than with a spear-wielding Satan; that belief was a choice for our conscience always to be sharpened. But she did not say these words, because they would sound sanctimonious coming from her; she would not be able to give them that redeeming matter-of-fact dryness as Father Patrick so easily did.

“Jehova God, all the machinations of the Evil One shall not succeed, all the weapons fashioned against us shall not prosper, in the name of Jesus! Father Lord, we cover all

the planes in Nigeria with the precious blood of Jesus; Father Lord, we cover the air with the precious blood of Jesus and we destroy all the agents of darkness....” His voice was getting louder, his head bobbing. She needed to urinate. She felt awkward with their hands clasped together, his fingers warm and firm, and it was her discomfort that made her say, the first time he paused after a breathless passage, “Amen!” thinking that it was over, but it was not and so she hastily closed her eyes again as he continued. He prayed and prayed, pumping her hands whenever he said “Father Lord!” or “in Jesus’ name!”

Then she felt herself start to shiver, an involuntary quivering of her whole body. Was it God? Once, years ago when she was a teenager who meticulously said the rosary every morning, words she did not understand had burst out of her mouth as she knelt by the scratchy wooden frame of her bed. It had lasted mere seconds, that outpouring of incomprehensible words in the middle of a Hail Mary, but she had truly, at the end of the rosary, felt terrified and sure that the white-cool feeling that enveloped her was God. Udenna was the only person she had ever told about it, and he said she had created the experience herself. But how could I have? she had asked. How could I have created something I did not even want? Yet, in the end, she agreed with him, as she always agreed with him about almost anything, and said that she had indeed imagined it all.

Now, the shivering stopped as quickly as it had started and the Nigerian man ended the prayer. “In the mighty and everlasting name of Jesus!”

“Amen!” she said.

She slipped her hands from his, mumbled “Excuse me,” and hurried into the bathroom. When she came out, he was still standing by the door in the kitchen. There was something about his demeanor, the way he stood with his arms folded, that made her think of the word “humble.”

“My name is Chinedu,” he said.

“I’m Ukamaka,” she said.

They shook hands, and this amused her because they had only just clasped each other’s hands in prayer.

“This plane crash is terrible,” he said. “Very terrible.”

“Yes.” She did not tell him that Udenna might have been in the crash. She wished he would leave, now that they had prayed, but he moved across into the living room and sat down on the couch and began to talk about how he first heard of the plane crash as if she had asked him to stay, as if she needed to know the details of his morning ritual, that he listened to BBC News online because there was never anything of substance in American news. He told her he did not realize at first that there were two separate incidents—the first lady had died in Spain shortly after a tummy-tuck surgery in preparation for her sixtieth birthday party, while the plane had crashed in Lagos minutes after it left for Abuja.

“Yes,” she said, and sat down in front of her laptop. “At first I thought she died in the

crash, too.”

He was rocking himself slightly, his arms still folded. “The coincidence is too much. God is telling us something. Only God can save our country.”

Us. Our country. Those words united them in a common loss, and for a moment she felt close to him. She refreshed an Internet page. There was still no news of any survivors.

“God has to take control of Nigeria,” he went on. “They said that a civilian government would be better than the military ones, but look at what Obasanjo is doing. He has seriously destroyed our country.”

She nodded, wondering what would be the most polite way to ask him to leave, and yet reluctant to do so, because his presence gave her hope about Udenna being alive, in a way that she could not explain.

“Have you seen pictures of family members of the victims? One woman tore her clothes off and ran around in her slip. She said her daughter was on that flight, and that her daughter was going to Abuja to buy fabric for her. *Chai!*” Chinedu let out the long sucking sound that showed sadness. “The only friend I know who might have been on that flight just sent me an e-mail to say he is fine, thank God. None of my family members would have been on it, so at least I don’t have to worry about them. They don’t have ten thousand naira to throw away on a plane ticket!” He laughed, a sudden inappropriate sound. She refreshed an Internet page. Still no news.

“I know somebody who was on the flight,” she said. “Who might have been on the flight.”

“Jehova God!”

“My boyfriend Udenna. My ex-boyfriend, actually. He was doing an MBA at Wharton and went to Nigeria last week for his cousin’s wedding.” It was after she spoke that she realized she had used the past tense.

“You have not heard anything for sure?” Chinedu asked.

“No. He doesn’t have a cell phone in Nigeria and I can’t get through to his sister’s phone. Maybe she was with him. The wedding is supposed to be tomorrow in Abuja.”

They sat in silence; she noticed that Chinedu’s hands had tightened into fists, that he was no longer rocking himself.

“When was the last time you spoke to him?” he asked.

“Last week. He called before he left for Nigeria.”

“God is faithful. God is faithful!” Chinedu raised his voice. “God is faithful. Do you hear me?”

A little alarmed, Ukamaka said, “Yes.”

The phone rang. Ukamaka stared at it, the black cordless phone she had placed next to her laptop, afraid to pick it up. Chinedu got up and made to reach for it and she said “No!” and took it and walked to the window. “Hello? Hello?” She wanted whomever it

was to tell her right away, not to start with any preambles. It was her mother.

“*Nne*, Udenna is fine. Chikaodili just called me to say they missed the flight. He is fine. They were supposed to be on that flight but they missed it, thank God.”

Ukamaka put the phone down on the window ledge and began to weep. First, Chinedu gripped her shoulders, then he took her in his arms. She quieted herself long enough to tell him Udenna was fine and then went back into his embrace, surprised by the familiar comfort of it, certain that he instinctively understood her crying from the relief of what had not happened and from the melancholy of what could have happened and from the anger of what remained unresolved since Udenna told her, in an ice-cream shop on Nassau Street, that the relationship was over.

“I knew my God would deliver! I have been praying in my heart for God to keep him safe,” Chinedu said, rubbing her back.

Later, after she had asked Chinedu to stay for lunch and as she heated up some stew in the microwave, she asked him, “If you say God is responsible for keeping Udenna safe, then it means God is responsible for the people who died, because God could have kept them safe, too. Does it mean God prefers some people to others?”

“God’s ways are not our ways.” Chinedu took off his sneakers and placed them by the bookshelf.

“It doesn’t make sense.”

“God always makes sense but not always a human kind of sense,” Chinedu said, looking at the photos on her bookshelf. It was the kind of question she asked Father Patrick, although Father Patrick would agree that God did not always make sense, with that shrug of his, as he did the first time she met him, on that late summer day Udenna told her it was over. She and Udenna had been inside Thomas Sweet, drinking strawberry and banana smoothies, their Sunday ritual after grocery shopping, and Udenna had slurped his noisily before he told her that their relationship had been over for a long time, that they were together only out of habit, and she looked at him and waited for a laugh, although it was not his style to joke like that. “*Staid*” was the word he had used. There was nobody else, but the relationship had become *staid*. *Staid*, and yet she had been arranging her life around his for three years. *Staid*, and yet she had begun to bother her uncle, a senator, about finding her a job in Abuja after she graduated because Udenna wanted to move back when he finished graduate school and start building up what he called “political capital” for his run for Anambra State governor. *Staid*, and yet she cooked her stews with hot peppers now, the way he liked. *Staid*, and yet they had spoken often about the children they would have, a boy and a girl whose conception she had taken for granted, the girl to be named Ulari and the boy Udoka, all their first names to be U-names. She left Thomas Sweet and began to walk aimlessly all the way up Nassau Street and then back down again until she passed the gray stone church and she wandered in and told the man wearing a white collar and just about to climb into his Subaru that life did not make sense. He told her his name was Father Patrick and that life did not make sense but we all had to have faith nonetheless.

Have faith. “Have faith” was like saying be tall and shapely. She wanted to be tall and shapely but of course she was not; she was short and her behind was flat and that stubborn soft bit of her lower belly bulged, even when she wore her Spanx body-shaper, with its tightly restraining fabric. When she said this, Father Patrick laughed.

“‘Have faith’ is not really like saying be tall and shapely. It’s more like saying be okay with the bulge and with having to wear Spanx,” he said. And she had laughed, too, surprised that this plump white man with silver hair knew what Spanx was.

Ukamaka dished out some stew beside the already warmed rice on Chinedu’s plate. “If God prefers some people to others, it doesn’t make sense that it would be Udenna who would be spared. Udenna could not have been the nicest or kindest person who was booked on that flight,” she said.

“You can’t use human reasoning for God.” Chinedu held up the fork she had placed on his plate. “Please give me a spoon.”

She handed him one. Udenna would have been amused by Chinedu, would have said how very bush it was to eat rice with a spoon the way Chinedu did, gripping it with all his fingers—Udenna with his ability to glance at people and know, from their posture and their shoes, what kind of childhood they had had.

“That’s Udenna, right?” Chinedu gestured toward the photo in the wicker frame, Udenna’s arm draped around her shoulders, both their faces open and smiling; it had been taken by a stranger at a restaurant in Philadelphia, a stranger who had said, “You are such a lovely couple, are you married?” and Udenna had replied, “Not yet,” in that flirty crooked-smile way he had with female strangers.

“Yes, that is the great Udenna.” Ukamaka made a face and settled down at the tiny dining table with her plate. “I keep forgetting to remove that picture.” It was a lie. She had glanced at it often in the past month, sometimes reluctantly, always frightened of the finality of taking it down. She sensed that Chinedu knew it was a lie.

“Did you meet in Nigeria?” he asked.

“No, we met at my sister’s graduation party three years ago in New Haven. A friend of hers brought him. He was working on Wall Street and I was already in grad school here but we knew many of the same people from around Philadelphia. He went to UPenn for undergrad and I went to Bryn Mawr. It’s funny that we had so much in common but somehow we had never met until then. Both of us came to the U.S. to go to university at about the same time. It turned out we even took the SATs at the same center in Lagos and on the same day!”

“He looks tall,” Chinedu said, still standing by the bookcase, his plate balanced in his hand.

“He’s six feet four.” She heard the pride in her own voice. “That’s not his best picture. He looks a lot like Thomas Sankara. I had a crush on that man when I was a teenager. You know, the president of Burkina Faso, the popular president, the one they killed—”

“Of course I know Thomas Sankara.” Chinedu looked closely at the photograph for a

moment, as though to search for traces of Sankara's famed handsomeness. Then he said, "I saw both of you once outside in the parking lot and I knew you were from Nigeria. I wanted to come and introduce myself but I was in a rush to catch the shuttle."

Ukamaka was pleased to hear this; his having seen them together made the relationship tangible. The past three years of sleeping with Udenna and aligning her plans to Udenna's and cooking with peppers were not, after all, in her imagination. She restrained herself from asking what exactly Chinedu remembered: Had he seen Udenna's hand placed on her lower back? Had he seen Udenna saying something suggestive to her, their faces close together?

"When did you see us?" she asked.

"About two months ago. You were walking toward your car."

"How did you know we were Nigerian?"

"I can always tell." He sat down opposite her. "But this morning I looked at the names on the mailboxes to find out which apartment was yours."

"I remember now that I once saw you on the shuttle. I knew you were African but I thought you might be from Ghana. You looked too gentle to be Nigerian."

Chinedu laughed. "Who says I am gentle?" He mockingly puffed out his chest, his mouth full of rice. Udenna would have pointed out Chinedu's forehead and said that one did not need to hear Chinedu's accent to know that he was the sort of person who had gone to a community secondary school in his village and learned English by reading a dictionary in candlelight, because one could tell right away from his lumpy and vein-scarred forehead. It was what Udenna had said about the Nigerian student at Wharton whose friendship he consistently snubbed, whose e-mails he never replied to. The student, with his giveaway forehead and bush ways, simply did not make the cut. Make the cut. Udenna often used that expression and she at first thought it puerile but had begun, in the last year, to use it herself.

"Is the stew too peppery?" she asked, noticing how slowly Chinedu was eating.

"It's fine. I'm used to eating pepper. I grew up in Lagos."

"I never liked hot food until I met Udenna. I'm not even sure I like it now."

"But you still cook with it."

She did not like his saying that and she did not like that his face was closed, his expression unreadable, as he glanced at her and then back at his plate. She said, "Well, I guess I'm used to it now."

"Can you check for the latest news?"

She pressed a key on her laptop, refreshed a Web page. *All Killed in Nigeria Plane Crash*. The government had confirmed that all one hundred and seventeen people aboard the airplane were dead.

"No survivors," she said.

"Father, take control," Chinedu said, exhaling loudly. He came and sat beside her to

read from her laptop, their bodies close, the smell of her peppery stew on his breath. There were more photographs from the crash site. Ukamaka stared at one of shirtless men carrying a piece of metal that looked like the twisted frame of a bed; she could not imagine what part of the plane it could possibly have been.

“There is too much iniquity in our country,” Chinedu said, getting up. “Too much corruption. Too many things that we have to pray about.”

“Are you saying the crash was a punishment from God?”

“A punishment and a wake-up call.” Chinedu was eating the last of his rice. She found it distracting when he scraped the spoon against his teeth.

“I used to go to church every day when I was a teenager, morning Mass at six. I did it by myself, my family was a Sunday-Sunday family,” she said. “Then one day I just stopped going.”

“Everybody has a crisis of faith. It’s normal.”

“It wasn’t a crisis of faith. Church suddenly became like Father Christmas, something that you never question when you are a child but when you become an adult you realize that the man in that Father Christmas costume is actually your neighbor from down the street.”

Chinedu shrugged, as though he did not have much patience for this decadence, this ambivalence of hers. “Is the rice finished?”

“There’s more.” She took his plate to warm up some more rice and stew. When she handed it to him, she said, “I don’t know what I would have done if Udenna had died. I don’t even know what I would have felt.”

“You just have to be grateful to God.”

She walked to the window and adjusted the blinds. It was newly autumn. Outside, she could see the trees that lined Lawrence Drive, their foliage a mix of green and copper.

“Udenna never said ‘I love you’ to me because he thought it was a cliché. Once I told him I was sorry he felt bad about something and he started shouting and said I should not use an expression like ‘I’m sorry you feel that way’ because it was unoriginal. He used to make me feel that nothing I said was witty enough or sarcastic enough or smart enough. He was always struggling to be different, even when it didn’t matter. It was as if he was performing his life instead of living his life.”

Chinedu said nothing. He took full mouthfuls; sometimes he used a finger as a wedge to nudge more rice onto his spoon.

“He knew I loved being here, but he was always telling me how Princeton was a boring school, and that it was out of touch. If he thought I was too happy about something that did not have to do with him, he always found a way to put it down. How can you love somebody and yet want to manage the amount of happiness that person is allowed?”

Chinedu nodded; he both understood her and sided with her, she could tell. In the



following days, days now cool enough for her knee-length leather boots, days in which she took the shuttle to campus, researched her dissertation at the library, met with her advisor, taught her undergraduate composition class, or met with students asking for permission to hand in assignments late, she would return to her apartment in the late evening and wait for Chinedu to visit so she could offer him rice or pizza or spaghetti. So she could talk about Udenna. She told Chinedu things she could not or did not want to tell Father Patrick. She liked that Chinedu said little, looking as if he was not only listening to her but also thinking about what she was saying. Once she thought idly of starting an affair with him, of indulging in the classic rebound, but there was a refreshingly asexual quality to him, something about him that made her feel that she did not have to pat some powder under her eyes to hide her dark circles.

Her apartment building was full of other foreigners. She and Udenna used to joke that it was the uncertainty of the foreigners' new surroundings that had congealed into the indifference they showed to one another. They did not say hello in the hallways or elevators, nor did they meet one another's eyes during the five-minute ride on the campus shuttle, these intellectual stars from Kenya and China and Russia, these graduate students and fellows who would go on to lead and heal and reinvent the world. And so it surprised her that as she and Chinedu walked to the parking lot, he would wave to somebody, say hi to another. He told her about the Japanese post-doc fellow who sometimes gave him a ride to the mall, the German doctoral student whose two-year-old daughter called him Chindle.

"Do you know them from your program?" she asked, and then added, "What program are you in?"

He had once said something about chemistry, and she assumed he was doing a doctorate in chemistry. It had to be why she never saw him on campus; the science labs were so far off and so alien.

"No. I met them when I came here."

"How long have you lived here?"

"Not long. Since spring."

"When I first came to Princeton, I wasn't sure I wanted to live in a house only for grad students and fellows, but I kind of like it now. The first time Udenna visited me, he said this square building was so ugly and charmless. Were you in graduate housing before?"

"No." Chinedu paused and looked away. "I knew I had to make the effort to make friends in this building. How else will I get to the grocery store and to church? Thank God you have a car," he said.

She liked that he had said "Thank God you have a car," because it was a statement about friendship, about doing things together in the long term, about having somebody who would listen to her talk about Udenna.

On Sundays, she drove Chinedu to his Pentecostal church in Lawrenceville before going to the Catholic church on Nassau Street, and when she picked him up after service, they went grocery shopping at McCaffrey's. She noticed how few groceries he bought and how carefully he scoured the sale flyers that Udenna had always ignored.

When she stopped at Wild Oats, where she and Udenna had bought organic vegetables, Chinedu shook his head in wonder because he did not understand why anybody would pay more money for the same vegetables just because they had been grown without chemicals. He was examining the grains displayed in large plastic dispensers while she selected broccoli and put it in a bag.

"Chemical-free this. Chemical-free that. People are wasting money for nothing. Aren't the medicines they take to stay alive chemicals, too?"

"You know it's not the same thing, Chinedu."

"I don't see the difference."

Ukamaka laughed. "It doesn't really matter to me either way, but Udenna always wanted us to buy organic fruits and vegetables. I think he had read somewhere that it was what somebody like him was supposed to buy."

Chinedu looked at her with that unreadable closed expression again. Was he judging her? Trying to make up his mind about something he thought of her?

She said, as she opened the trunk to put in the grocery bag, "I'm starving. Should we get a sandwich somewhere?"

"I'm not hungry."

"It's my treat. Or do you prefer Chinese?"

"I'm fasting," he said quietly.

"Oh." As a teenager, she, too, had fasted, drinking only water from morning until evening for a whole week, asking God to help her get the best result in the Senior Secondary School exam. She got the third-best result.

"No wonder you didn't eat any rice yesterday," she said. "Will you sit with me while I eat then?"

"Sure."

"Do you fast often, or is this a special prayer you are doing? Or is it too personal for me to ask?"

"It is too personal for you to ask," Chinedu said with a mocking solemnity.

She took down the car windows as she backed out of Wild Oats, stopping to let two jacketless women walk past, their jeans tight, their blond hair blown sideways by the wind. It was a strangely warm day for late autumn.

"Fall sometimes reminds me of harmattan," Chinedu said.

"I know," Ukamaka said. "I love harmattan. I think it's because of Christmas. I love the dryness and dust of Christmas. Udenna and I went back together for Christmas last

year and he spent New Year's Day with my family in Nimo and my uncle kept questioning him: 'Young man, when will you bring your family to come and knock on our door? What are you studying in school?'" Ukamaka mimicked a gruff voice and Chinedu laughed.

"Have you gone home to visit since you left?" Ukamaka asked, and as soon as she did, she wished she had not. Of course he would not have been able to afford a ticket home to visit.

"No." His tone was flat.

"I was planning to move back after graduate school and work with an NGO in Lagos, but Udenna wanted to go into politics, so I started planning to live in Abuja instead. Will you move back when you finish here? I can imagine the loads of money you'll make at one of those oil companies in the Niger Delta, with your chemistry doctorate." She knew she was speaking too fast, babbling, really, trying to make up for the discomfort she had felt earlier.

"I don't know." Chinedu shrugged. "Can I change the radio station?"

"Of course." She sensed his mood shift in the way he kept his eyes focused on the window after he changed the radio from NPR to an FM station with loud music.

"I think I'll get your favorite, sushi, instead of a sandwich," she said, her tone teasing. She had once asked if he liked sushi and he had said, "God forbid. I am an African man. I eat only cooked food." She added, "You really should try sushi sometime. How can you live in Princeton and not eat sashimi?"

He barely smiled. She drove slowly to the sandwich place, over-nodding to the music from the radio to show that she was enjoying it as he seemed to be.

"I'll just pick up the sandwich," she said, and he said he would wait in the car. The garlic flavors from the foil-wrapped chicken sandwich filled the car when she got back in.

"Your phone rang," Chinedu said.

She picked up her cell phone, lodged by the shift, and looked at it. Rachel, a friend from her department, perhaps calling to find out if she wanted to go to the talk on morality and the novel at East Pyne the next day.

"I can't believe Udenna hasn't called me," she said, and started the car. He had sent an e-mail to thank her for her concern while he was in Nigeria. He had removed her from his Instant Messenger buddy list so that she could no longer know when he was online. And he had not called.

"Maybe it's best for him not to call," Chinedu said. "So you can move on."

"It's not that simple," she said, slightly annoyed, because she wanted Udenna to call, because the photo was still up on her bookcase, because Chinedu sounded as if he alone knew what was best for her. She waited until they were back at their apartment building and Chinedu had taken his bags up to his apartment and come back down

before she said, “You know, it really isn’t as simple as you think it is. You don’t know what it is to love an asshole.”

“I do.”

She looked at him, wearing the same clothes he had worn the afternoon he first knocked on her door: a pair of jeans and an old sweatshirt with a saggy neckline, PRINCETON printed on the front in orange.

“You’ve never said anything about it,” she said.

“You’ve never asked.”

She placed her sandwich on a plate and sat down at the tiny dining table. “I didn’t know there was anything to ask. I thought you would just tell me.”

Chinedu said nothing.

“So tell me. Tell me about this love. Was it here or back home?”

“Back home. I was with him for almost two years.”

The moment was quiet. She picked up a napkin and realized that she had known intuitively perhaps from the very beginning, but she said, because she thought he expected her to show surprise, “Oh, you’re gay.”

“Somebody once told me that I am the straightest gay person she knew, and I hated myself for liking that.” He was smiling; he looked relieved.

“So tell me about this love.”

The man’s name was Abidemi. Something about the way Chinedu said his name, Abidemi, made her think of gently pressing on a sore muscle, the kind of self-inflicted ache that is satisfying.

He spoke slowly, revising details that she thought made no difference—was it on a Wednesday or Thursday that Abidemi had taken him to a private gay club where they shook hands with a former head of state?—and she thought that this was a story he had not told often in its entirety, perhaps had never told. He talked as she finished her sandwich and sat beside him on the couch and she felt oddly nostalgic about the details of Abidemi: he drank Guinness stout, he sent his driver to buy roast plantains from the roadside hawkers, he went to House on the Rock Pentecostal church, he liked the Lebanese kibbe at Double Four restaurant, he played polo.

Abidemi was a banker, a Big Man’s son who had gone to university in England, the kind of guy who wore leather belts with elaborate designer logos as buckles. He had been wearing one of those when he came into the Lagos office of the mobile phone company where Chinedu worked in customer service. He had been almost rude, asking if there wasn’t somebody senior he could talk to, but Chinedu did not miss the look they exchanged, the heady thrill he had not felt since his first relationship with a sports prefect in secondary school. Abidemi gave him his card and said, curtly, “Call me.” It was the way Abidemi would run the relationship for the next two years, wanting to know where Chinedu went and what he did, buying him a car without consulting him,

so that he was left in the awkward position of explaining to his family and friends how he had suddenly bought a Honda, asking him to come on trips to Calabar and Kaduna with only a day's notice, sending vicious text messages when Chinedu missed his calls. Still, Chinedu had liked the possessiveness, the vitality of a relationship that consumed them both. Until Abidemi said he was getting married. Her name was Kemi and his parents and hers had known one another a long time. The inevitability of marriage had always been understood between them, unspoken but understood, and perhaps nothing would have changed if Chinedu had not met Kemi, at Abidemi's parents' wedding anniversary party. He had not wanted to go to the party—he stayed away from Abidemi's family events—but Abidemi had insisted, saying he would survive the long evening only if Chinedu was there. Abidemi spoke in a voice lined with what seemed troublingly like laughter when he introduced Chinedu to Kemi as “my very good friend.”

“Chinedu drinks much more than I do,” Abidemi had said to Kemi, with her long weave-on and strapless yellow dress. She sat next to Abidemi, reaching out from time to time to brush something off his shirt, to refill his glass, to place a hand on his knee, and all the while her whole body was braced and attuned to his, as though ready to spring up and do whatever it took to please him. “You said I will grow a beer belly, *abi*?” Abidemi said, his hand on her thigh. “This man will grow one before me, I'm telling you.”

Chinedu had smiled tightly, a tension headache starting, his rage at Abidemi exploding. As Chinedu told Ukamaka this, how the anger of that evening had “scattered his head,” she noticed how tense he had become.

“You wished you hadn't met his wife,” Ukamaka said.

“No. I wished he had been conflicted.”

“He must have been.”

“He wasn't. I watched him that day, the way he was with both of us there, drinking stout and making jokes about me to her and about her to me, and I knew he would go to bed and sleep well at night. If we continued, he would come to me and then go home to her and sleep well every night. I wanted him not to sleep well sometimes.”

“And you ended it?”

“He was angry. He did not understand why I would not do what he wanted.”

“How can a person claim to love you and yet want you to do things that suit only them? Udenna was like that.”

Chinedu squeezed the pillow on his lap. “Ukamaka, not everything is about Udenna.”

“I'm just saying that Abidemi sounds a little bit like Udenna. I guess I just don't understand that kind of love.”

“Maybe it wasn't love,” Chinedu said, standing up abruptly from the couch. “Udenna did this to you and Udenna did that to you, but why did you let him? Why did you let him? Have you ever considered that it wasn't love?”

It was so savagely cold, his tone, that for a moment Ukamaka felt frightened, then she felt angry and told him to get out of her apartment.

She had begun, before that day, to notice strange things about Chinedu. He never asked her up to his apartment, and once, after he told her which apartment was his, she looked at the mailbox and was surprised that it did not have his last name on it; the building superintendent was very strict about all the names of renters being on the mailbox. He did not ever seem to go to campus; the only time she asked him why, he had said something deliberately vague, which told her he did not want to talk about it, and she let it go because she suspected that he had academic problems, perhaps was grappling with a dissertation that was going nowhere. And so, a week after she asked him to get out of her apartment, a week of not speaking to him, she went up and knocked on his door, and when he opened it and looked at her warily, she asked, "Are you working on a dissertation?"

"I'm busy," he said, shortly, and closed the door in her face.

She stood there for a while before going back to her apartment. She would never speak to him again, she told herself; he was a crude and rude person from the bush. But Sunday came and she had become used to driving him to his church in Lawrenceville before going to hers on Nassau Street. She hoped he would knock on her door and yet knew that he would not. She felt a sudden fear that he would ask somebody else on his floor to drop him off at church, and because she felt her fear becoming a panic, she went up and knocked on his door. It took him a while to open. He looked drawn and tired; his face was unwashed and ashy.

"I'm sorry," she said. "That question about whether you are working on a dissertation was just my stupid way of saying I'm sorry."

"Next time if you want to say you're sorry just say you're sorry."

"Do you want me to drop you off at church?"

"No." He gestured for her to come in. The apartment was sparsely furnished with a couch, a table, and a TV; books were piled one on top of the other along the walls.

"Look, Ukamaka, I have to tell you what's happening. Sit down."

She sat down. A cartoon show was on TV, a Bible open facedown on the table, a cup of what looked like coffee next to it.

"I am out of status. My visa expired three years ago. This apartment belongs to a friend. He is in Peru for a semester and he said I should come and stay while I try to sort myself out."

"You're not here at Princeton?"

"I never said I was." He turned away and closed the Bible. "I'm going to get a deportation notice from Immigration anytime soon. Nobody at home knows my real situation. I haven't been able to send them much since I lost my construction job. My

boss was a nice man and was paying me under the table but he said he did not want trouble now that they are talking about raiding workplaces.”

“Have you tried finding a lawyer?” she asked.

“A lawyer for what? I don’t have a case.” He was biting his lower lip, and she had not seen him look so unattractive before, with his flaking facial skin and his shadowed eyes. She would not ask for more details because she knew he was unwilling to tell her more.

“You look terrible. You haven’t eaten much since I last saw you,” she said, thinking of all the weeks that she had spent talking about Udenna while Chinedu worried about being deported.

“I’m fasting.”

“Are you sure you don’t want me to drop you off at church?”

“It’s too late anyway.”

“Come with me to my church then.”

“You know I don’t like the Catholic Church, all that unnecessary kneeling and standing and worshiping idols.”

“Just this once. I’ll go to yours with you next week.”

Finally he got up and washed his face and changed into a clean sweater. They walked to the car in silence. She had never thought to tell him about her shivering as he prayed on that first day, but because she longed now for a significant gesture that would show him that he was not alone; that she understood what it must be like to feel so uncertain of a future, to lack control about what would happen to him tomorrow—because she did not, in fact, know what else to say—she told him about the shivering.

“It was strange,” she said. “Maybe it was just my suppressed anxiety about Udenna.”

“It was a sign from God,” Chinedu said firmly.

“What was the point of my shivering as a sign from God?”

“You have to stop thinking that God is a person. God is God.”

“Your faith, it’s almost like fighting.” She looked at him. “Why can’t God reveal himself in an unambiguous way and clear things up once and for all? What’s the point of God being a puzzle?”

“Because it is the nature of God. If you understand the basic idea of God’s nature being different from human nature, then it will make sense,” Chinedu said, and opened the door to climb out of the car. What a luxury to have a faith like his, Ukamaka thought, so uncritical, so forceful, so impatient. And yet there was something about it that was exceedingly fragile; it was as if Chinedu could conceive of faith only in extremes, as if an acknowledgment of a middle ground would mean the risk of losing everything.

“I see what you mean,” she said, although she did not see at all, although it was answers like his that, years back, had made her decide to stop going to church, and kept

her away until the Sunday Udenna used “staid” in an ice-cream shop on Nassau Street.

Outside the gray stone church, Father Patrick was greeting people, his hair a gleaming silver in the late morning light.

“I’m bringing a new person into the dungeon of Catholicism, Father P.,” Ukamaka said.

“There’s always room in the dungeon,” Father Patrick said, warmly shaking Chinedu’s hand, saying welcome.

The church was dim, full of echoes and mysteries and the faint scent of candles. They sat side by side in the middle row, next to a woman holding a baby.

“Did you like him?” Ukamaka whispered.

“The priest? He seemed okay.”

“I mean like like.”

“Oh, Jehova God! Of course not.”

She had made him smile. “You are not going to be deported, Chinedu. We will find a way. We will.” She squeezed his hand and knew he was amused by her stressing of the “we.”

He leaned close. “You know, I had a crush on Thomas Sankara, too.”

“No!” Laughter was bubbling up in her chest.

“I didn’t even know that there was a country called Burkina Faso in West Africa until my teacher in secondary school talked about him and brought in a picture. I will never forget how crazy in love I fell with a newspaper photograph.”

“Don’t tell me Abidemi sort of looks like him.”

“Actually he does.”

At first they stifled their laughter and then they let it out, joyously leaning against each other, while next to them, the woman holding the baby watched.

The choir had begun to sing. It was one of those Sundays when the priest blessed the congregation with holy water at the beginning of Mass, and Father Patrick was walking up and down, flicking water on the people with something that looked like a big saltshaker. Ukamaka watched him and thought how much more subdued Catholic Masses were in America; how in Nigeria it would have been a vibrant green branch from a mango tree that the priest would dip in a bucket of holy water held by a hurrying, sweating Mass-server; how he would have stridden up and down, splashing and swirling, holy water raining down; how the people would have been drenched; and how, smiling and making the sign of the cross, they would have felt blessed.