

“Steady-handed and gut-punching. I’m in awe of this mad collection, this necessary writer.” —NOVIOLET BULAWAYO,  
author of *Glory*

“I have no words for what I felt upon reading that last story, that last page. What an accomplishment this book is. *A Kind of Madness* depicts the idiosyncrasies and minutiae of everyday Nigerian life with a careful eye that respects their said idiosyncrasies as worthy of attention, of chronicling, of reinventing. Uche Okonkwo’s language is sinuous, maneuvering the reader through stories with a clear-eyed pragmatism and a masterful, often hilarious, use of irony. Her eye is both generous and discerning, and her careful attention asks the reader: won’t you see them clearly, too? Marvelous.”

—LESLEY NNEKA ARIMAH,  
author of *What It Means When  
a Man Falls from the Sky*

“In *A Kind of Madness*, Okonkwo casts a critical eye on family and friendships, the ineptness of parents, how the West encroaches on everyday life in Nigeria, the contradictions of chicken as a named entity and chicken in a pepper soup pot. While each story is a world of its own, the collection is at once hilarious and heart-breaking. This is a delightful debut. Congratulations to Uche.”

—JENNIFER NANSUBUGA MAKUMBI,  
author of *A Girl is a Body of Water*

“Uche Okonkwo’s voice is absorbing. I was immersed in the familiar world of these tender, playfully haunting, darkly funny stories. Okonkwo is a writer to watch.”

—CHINELO OKPARANTA,  
author of *Harry Sylvester Bird*

“To read Uche Okonkwo’s *A Kind of Madness* is to have an experience: of complex characters grappling with life’s many troubles, of a robust culture, of history, of the battle between the domestic and the public, and all the big themes of life woven together. Like Jhumpa Lahiri, Okonkwo’s mastery of the form is as rich as some of the short story’s best practitioners and deserves every recognition it is sure to get.”

—CHIGOZIE OBIOMA,  
author of *An Orchestra of Minorities*

“A collection of bangers with protags who run up against and redefine Nigerian society. Lost count of how many times I said hmmm and touched my heart. Uche Okonkwo’s stories are among the very best.”

—SIDIK FOFANA,  
author of *Stories from the  
Tenants Downstairs*

“Uche Okonkwo’s *A Kind of Madness* is full of vivid, unforgettable characters and rare insight. This is a book that pulls you in, with its fierce undertow, and once you start reading, you won’t want to stop. Okonkwo is one of the most exciting young writers working today, and these stories are brilliant.”

—ELLIOTT HOLT,  
author of *You Are One of Them*

“Uche Okonkwo’s stories, set in contemporary Nigeria, have a gentle allure, drawing us into the intimate lives of characters and their worlds with elegant, assured prose and a deep understanding of the complex machinations of human manners and sentiment. A striking debut!”

—KWAME DAWES,  
author of *Sturge Town*

A  
KIND OF  
MADNESS

STORIES

UCHE OKONKWO



TIN HOUSE / PORTLAND, OREGON

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in these stories are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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# A KIND OF MADNESS

# NWUNYE BELGIUM

.....

UDOKA WAS DISAPPOINTED TO FIND THAT HER PROSPECTIVE in-laws' house wasn't two stories tall, with a uniformed guard and a big gate to keep out prying eyes. But though not as impressive as Udoka had imagined, it was still a better house than her mother's. It was painted, for one, and the corrugated roof wasn't coming apart with rust.

Udoka understood exactly what this visit was. When her mother had come home two weeks ago from her trip to Orlu, where she'd attended the burial of a distant relative, singing about God's rain of blessings, Udoka had known that something very good had happened.

"You remember my friend Marigold, who lives in Orlu?" her mother began as she unpacked her bag. "I went to visit her and she told me something."

Udoka waited as her mother took out yet another item from her bag: a kitchen towel, a souvenir from the funeral. She handed it to Udoka.

"What did she tell you, Mama?" Udoka finally asked.

"She told me her son is looking for a wife," her mother said with a grin. "The same son that went to Belgium—fifteen years ago? Yes, in 1982, I remember. Marigold told me that her people were thinking of coming here to Umueze to talk to Gloria's

family, to ask for Gloria's hand for her son. So I told her, I said, 'Gloria? My sister, don't try it o. That girl is public property. Ask anybody in Umueze. That's why no man has come to ask for her hand.'

Udoka chuckled. "Mama, you didn't have to say that."

"But it's no secret. Everybody in this village knows about Gloria." Her mother leaned forward. "Besides, why send a fine man like my friend's son to another girl's house when you are here?"

Udoka frowned. "But Mama, what about—"

"Wait, let me finish. I told Marigold, I said, 'Don't talk to Gloria's people, my sister. You don't want a prostitute for a daughter-in-law.' And when it was almost time for me to leave, ask me what I did."

"What did you do?"

"I acted as if I just remembered. I said, 'Ah, my daughter sends her greetings. You remember my Udoka? She is now in her second year at Awka Polytechnic.' And she said, 'Oh, tiny Udoka of those days. She must be a big girl now.' Then when she was seeing me off, she said, 'But wait, Agatha. Why can't my son marry your Udoka?'"

"Was she serious, Mama?"

"She was. But you know me, I acted as if it had not even entered my mind. I said, 'That's a very good idea. Let me go home and talk with her.' And that was how it happened."

Udoka shifted her weight from one foot to the other.

"It's a good thing you convinced me to go to this burial, Udoka. If I hadn't gone to Orlu, we would have missed this blessing. See how God works!"

"But Mama, what about Enyinna?"

"What about Enyinna?"

"You know he said he will soon come with his people to discuss my bride price."



“After all these months?” Agatha said. “Forget Enyinna. My friend’s son, Uzor, he is a doctor, and he lives in Belgium. You want to compare that to a wretched trader at Onitsha Main Market?”

“Wretched, Mama? His shop is doing okay.”

“Ehn, you have said it: ‘His shop is doing *okay*.’”

Udoka winced at her mother’s deliberately bad impression of her voice.

“You want to manage with a trader that is ‘doing okay,’ a man who drives a rotten matchbox and calls it a car, when you can marry a doctor making big money in Belgium?”

Udoka considered this. Enyinna was a fine man, but he was no doctor and definitely not a Belgian one. He had never even been outside of the country and had said many times that he had no interest in pursuing a university degree—something that had never bothered Udoka until now.

“But—so what will we tell Enyinna and his family? And even our umunna?” Udoka said. “Won’t it be a shame to—”

“Udoka, leave shame to its owners. Think about your own life. When Marigold’s son marries you, he will take you to Belgium. You will leave that stupid Awka Polytechnic, where the lecturers are always on strike. When you go to Belgium, you will attend a proper school!”

Udoka chewed her lower lip. “That’s true,” she said. “They have good schools in Belgium.”

“Of course! And guess who will be paying your fees?”

Udoka started to speak, but her mother’s pause lasted only a second.

“Your husband! And when you finish school, you won’t even have to work if you don’t want to. You can just relax and let your husband take care of you. And you know they don’t have sun in those places like Belgium, so your body will be

very fresh. By the time you come back to visit me ehn, this your skin that was yellow before, it will be shining white like that of an oyibo. And you will be talking like them, *shiriri, shiriri*, as if you are holding water in your mouth. And all these bush village people of Umueze will not be able to understand what you are saying, and they will be asking, ‘Is that Udoka? The same Udoka of yesterday?’ And I will say, ‘Yes, yes, that is my Udoka.’” Agatha laughed, clapping her hands with delight. “And Uzor will be sending me plenty of dollars, and I will expand my shop and hire girls to work for me. And I will campaign for the head of the women’s group of Umueze, and they will be looking at me every time from the corners of their eyes, because I am the only one of them to have a daughter that lives in obodo-oyibo Belgium.”

Udoka watched her mother’s face soften into a dreamy, far-away look, one she imagined her mother had worn a lot more before her father’s death and the hardships that followed. When her mother gave her a conspiratorial nudge, Udoka responded with a smile.

Udoka’s mother had spent the next few days preparing her for the visit, telling her all the things that Marigold would be looking for. Marigold, like any mother-in-law, would want to see that Udoka could take care of a home. She would want to know if Udoka was modest and submissive, or if she was the kind who would want to seize her husband’s trousers and wear them. Marigold had said she had a preference for light-skinned girls like Udoka; she wanted a daughter-in-law she could brag about and call *nwanyi-ocha*, fair lady. It was also a good thing Udoka was not too thin—Marigold didn’t like “toothpicks.”

. . .

UDOKA SMOOTHED DOWN THE FRONT of her skirt with shaky hands. Her palms were damp with sweat. She stood still and girded herself as her mother gave her a final once-over. “Perfect,” her mother said, placing a finger on Udoka’s chin and gently lifting her face. Udoka felt a surge of warmth in her chest.

Agatha knocked and the door opened. Marigold’s massive frame appeared in the doorway.

“Agatha, Udoka, our daughter, welcome.” She stepped forward to embrace first Agatha and then Udoka.

Marigold led her guests into the living room, where her husband, Mazi Okoro—appearing comically small beside her—set aside his newspaper and rose from his chair. He greeted Udoka and her mother with a smile, peering at them through the thick lenses of his glasses as he asked polite questions about their journey and life in Umueze. Udoka found herself slightly disappointed with the living room. The paint on the walls was fresh and unmarked, but the furniture, though sturdy-looking, was faded. The room was decorated with artificial plants, and an old family photo showing Marigold, Mazi Okoro, and their son, Uzor, hung on a wall. Udoka squinted at the photo, hoping to see something of the man she would marry in the scrawny boy.

Udoka and her mother sat on the mud-colored sofa across from Mazi Okoro, and Marigold took the vacant chair beside her husband. Conscious of her every move being watched, Udoka was careful to appear shy (a sure sign of modesty), smiling and averting her eyes each time Marigold or her husband complimented her on her skin or her manners. She could tell that Marigold approved of her attire of an ankle-length skirt and a top with sleeves long enough to cover her elbows. Her mother had made her take out her hair extensions and wear her

God-given hair in plaits, and when Mazi Okoro made a joke about women who went into hair salons looking like humans only to come out looking like Ekpo masquerades, Udoka knew it had been a wise decision.

After a while, Marigold served steaming wraps of okpa on a large platter. “Just something small to hold our stomachs until I prepare lunch,” she said as she set it down on the center table. Udoka relished the firmness of the okpa, the way the spices came together in her mouth—the pepper sharp enough to sting but not hot enough to catch in her throat. The palm oil was the good kind; it didn’t leave a gritty feeling on the roof of her mouth. Marigold would expect the same level of culinary excellence from a daughter-in-law.

When they finished the okpa, Marigold invited Udoka into the kitchen to help with lunch, telling Agatha to rest in the guest bedroom. Udoka recognized this as a ploy to get her alone, and she felt suddenly grateful for all the cooking lessons her mother had subjected her to as a girl. She would be on her best behavior. Her future, and her mother’s, depended on it.

Marigold’s kitchen was impressively modern to Udoka, with its terrazzo floor, tiled counters, and gleaming stainless-steel sink with running water. There was also a gas cooker, which spurted a cool blue flame when Marigold turned it on. Udoka tried to keep her eyes from widening in appreciation. She was not sure how much Marigold knew of her family’s financial situation, especially since her father’s death eleven years ago, but she didn’t want her potential mother-in-law thinking she and her mother were undeserving of her sophisticated son. She wondered what Marigold would think when she visited their house and saw the extent of her family’s decline. She was particularly ashamed of the old mud structure that stood at the back of the compound and served as a kitchen, with its walls

blackened from smoke, the firewood smell that clung to one's clothes, and the lizards playing endless games of hide-and-seek in the rafters.

Udoka reminded herself to focus on the tasks at hand. She needed to make a good impression today so Marigold would overlook anything she might consider less than ideal about Udoka and her mother's status.

"What are we making, Mama?" Udoka asked.

"Egusi soup. It's Mazi Okoro's favorite."

As they worked, Udoka felt Marigold watching her, noting how thoroughly she washed the meat and cleaned the tripe and cow skin. Marigold measured with her eyes how much spice and seasoning Udoka used, how high she set the fire to cook the meat. Marigold, smiling and disingenuous, kept assigning the more difficult tasks to Udoka. When Marigold placed a bowl of live, unshelled periwinkles before her, Udoka tried not to show her distress.

"Mazi Okoro likes periwinkles in his soup," Marigold said.

Udoka swallowed. She had never handled unshelled periwinkles. Her mother, whenever she bought periwinkles, had them shelled at the market. In her panic, she asked what she thought was a stupid question.

"Should I remove them from the shells, Mama?"

"No, my dear. Just break off the tail end. Use this." Marigold took a small machete from a drawer and handed it to Udoka. "My husband likes to suck the periwinkles out of the shells."

Marigold gave her a low stool to sit on and spread a few newspaper pages on the floor, so she could break off the shells without scarring it. She said, "Make sure you don't cut too much or too little off the shell. If you cut too much, the periwinkle will fall out; cut too little, and it will be impossible to suck it from the shell."

Udoka took the first periwinkle between her thumb and index finger, held it to the floor, said a silent prayer, and brought the machete down hard on the pointed end. The end came off with a satisfying snap, and Udoka hid her relief. Marigold watched her work on a few more periwinkles, nodding her approval before turning away to check on the meat.

With the periwinkles cut and washed several times over, Udoka heated palm oil in a pot on the stove while Marigold pretended to arrange her shelves. Udoka added the onions that Marigold had chopped, fragrant steam from the pot enveloping her face and filling the room. With the onions frying, Udoka poured in the ground melon seeds Marigold had measured out, stirring the yellow paste to keep it from burning. She tasted the mixture after a while, remembering to put the ladle to her palm and not her tongue. When the melon seeds had fried long enough, Udoka added the meats and stock, tasted the mixture again, added some more pepper, salt, seasoning cubes, and crayfish, covered the pot, and left it to simmer. She would add the periwinkles later and, finally, when the pot was almost ready to come off the stove, the ugu leaves.

With most of the cooking done, Udoka started to tidy up the kitchen, gathering the dirty utensils into the sink and filling a bowl with water from the tap. There was no running water in her mother's house, and so Udoka enjoyed this, the way the tap sputtered to life and let out a stream of sun-warmed water when she turned its head.

Marigold cleared her throat, startling Udoka. She looked up from the sink to find Marigold standing very close.

"My dear," Marigold said quietly, "I want to ask you something."

"Yes, Mama?"

"Are you—?" She gave Udoka's crotch a meaningful look. "When my son knocks at the door, will he meet you at home?"

Udoka looked away—it was the reaction expected from any decent girl when topics like this were raised. She contemplated the dishwashing water. There had been that one boy when she was in her first year at Awka Poly, that one evening, with her panties down and him panting on top of her. “Just the tip. Let me put just the tip,” he’d croaked, his eyes bulging like he was choking to death. She had let him (but just the tip), and moments later he shuddered his release, and she shoved him off her so she could look, with dread, for any sign of red on his off-white sheets. There had been nothing, and therefore she could say the words with a clear conscience.

“Yes, Mama. I am a virgin.”

“Hewu!” Marigold cried, enfolding Udoka in her arms. “My daughter, you have made me very happy. I didn’t think I could find a virgin wife for my Uzor; you know how girls are these days, not like when your mother and I were young. I thank God for my friend Agatha, for bringing you for my son!”

Udoka started to smile, but then she remembered how attractive a little insecurity could be. She lowered her gaze to the floor. “But, Mama, what if Uzor doesn’t like me?”

“What do you mean he won’t like you?” Marigold scolded gently. “What else can my son be looking for? Beautiful nwanayi-ocha like you, modest and intelligent. I know a good thing, and so does my son. If he does not marry you, it means he won’t marry at all.”

Udoka allowed herself a small smile. Her mother would be proud.

. . .

IT HAD BEEN JUST OVER a week since the visit to her new in-laws, and Udoka was happy. If she didn’t have her Belgian

doctor, she would have been worried: about the academic staff at her school, who were still on their months-long “indefinite” strike; about her mother having to borrow money from the women’s cooperative from time to time to keep her in school. But her Belgian doctor had erased the creases on her forehead. She was in such high spirits that, at the market a few minutes ago, it had been impossible for her to curse back at the butcher when he’d insulted her for haggling too low. “Carry your bad luck and leave my stall!” he’d yelled, waving his knife. Bad luck? Udoka laughed. Bad luck did not fetch one a husband from Belgium.

After their return from Orlu, Udoka had watched her mother, with a feeling of awe and mild unease, as she set about dismantling the wedding plans with Enyinna’s family, like a God-ordained whirlwind. Within a few days, Agatha had arranged a meeting with both families to call the wedding off. It didn’t matter that Enyinna’s family was shocked and upset, or that Enyinna, who lived and worked in Onitsha, was yet to be informed of the new developments. With the news broken to Enyinna’s family, Agatha had gone ahead and set up a date with the umunna—agreed upon by her, Marigold, and Mazi Okoro—in the coming week for Marigold’s family to make their marriage request official. When this was done, and the umunna gave consent, the way would be paved for the bride price negotiation and then the wedding proper. Marigold had said Uzor would be visiting Nigeria in about three weeks, and once he arrived in Orlu, things would move even quicker. Udoka was more than ready to leave what she considered her old life behind. Her mother, in addition to handling the breakup, had spread the word of her daughter’s new suitor all around Umueze, so that some people had begun calling Udoka “Nwunye Belgium”—Belgium wife—telling her to remember them when she entered into her obodo-oyibo paradise.



So far, since the breakup, Udoka had succeeded, through careful effort, in avoiding Enyinna's family around the village. She had begun making her daily trips to the water pump in the afternoons, when the sun was at its fieriest and she was least likely to run into other people out fetching water. Each time Udoka visited her mother's tailoring shop, she would take a circuitous route of narrow footpaths, sometimes cutting through private backyards and gardens, just so she could stay off the main road and avoid Enyinna's family house. Now, on her way back from the village market, she walked quickly and stayed alert, prepared to duck behind a tree or a fence if she saw one of Enyinna's people. She wondered if Enyinna had heard the news yet. She told herself that when the inevitable confrontation came, she would face him, bold and unwavering. Because, given the choice, anyone would do as she had.

Udoka swung her bag of foodstuff back and forth and skipped lightly as she turned onto her street, pleased to have avoided her ex-fiancé's family for another day. The road was unpaved, and a small cloud of red dust rose from the ground with every step she took. In Belgium, she would walk on real roads.

Udoka heard a car behind her and stepped closer to the shoulder of the road. But then, recognizing the familiar rattling of the vehicle's engine, she glanced back. Enyinna's brown Volvo, scarred and dented, was unmistakable. Udoka quickened her pace.

"Udoka."

She walked faster, her eyes fixed ahead, ignoring the car now beside her.

"Udoka, wait!"

Udoka ran, her feet pounding the ground. When she caught sight of the mango tree that marked the entrance to her mother's compound, she ran even faster. The car's horn blared, shrill and

grating on the quiet street. Udoka pretended there was no Enyinna, no clattering hulk of metal keeping pace beside her, no neighbors following her with keen eyes.

Udoka threw open her mother's squeaky gate and stumbled through. Her mother was bent over the large water drum beside the house with a scooping bowl and a bucket. She straightened up at once.

"Udoka, what is chasing you?"

Udoka ran past her mother and into the house, bolting the front door behind her and leaning against it as she took gasping breaths. Soon enough, she heard the squeaking of the gate again, and then: "Udoka! Udoka, why are you running from me?"

"Enyinna, why do you want to bring down my roof with your screaming?" Udoka heard her mother say. With shaky limbs, she got on her knees and crept to the living room window. She lifted a corner of the frayed curtain to look outside.

Enyinna, his tone somewhat indignant, said, "Sorry, Mama. I didn't see you there."

"It's not your fault," Agatha said, "since I'm now invisible. What do you want?"

"Mama, they told me you brought your people to cancel the wedding—"

"And?"

"Is it true?"

"It is true. Did they also tell you that a doctor from Belgium is coming to marry my daughter?"

Udoka winced. Her mother's back was turned, so Udoka could not see her face. But she could decode her mother's expression from Enyinna's, like some kind of mirror in reverse. Hurt and anger on Enyinna's face, defiance and mockery on her mother's. She rubbed her wet palms over her churning stomach.

Kneeling there behind the curtain, Udoka wondered how different things might have been had her father not died. More than even her grief, it was the burden of holding the family together that had torn at her mother. Udoka's family had never been wealthy, but with her father's teacher's salary and her mother's tailoring business, they had gotten by. In the years following her father's death, her mother had grown harder, inside and out: more controlling as her hands grew callused from overworking; more critical as worry lines emerged on her forehead; more materialistic even as their house crumbled under the weight of repairs they could not afford to make.

As a teenager, Udoka had witnessed creditors accost her mother at home and in public, with curses and, in one case, a policeman. Too many times she'd had to avert her eyes or sneak away so she wouldn't have to see her mother beg for "just one more week," wouldn't have to endure her mother's attempts to reassert her authority at home by being even harder on Udoka than she already was. And so as much as she hated hurting Enyinna this way, Udoka knew the doctor from Belgium was the better choice, because her mother deserved some relief from a life of want, because Udoka herself did not want to live like this forever.

"So it's true," Enyinna said. His face was to the ground, his voice so quiet Udoka had to strain to hear. "I didn't want to believe—"

Udoka felt her throat tighten. Her mother resumed filling her bucket from the water drum.

Enyinna's voice was hoarse when he spoke next. "Mama, please—"

"Enyinna, the family and umunna have accepted Udoka's new husband. Very soon he will come and pay her bride price,

and they will do the wine carrying. You had Udoka for almost a year, yet you kept dragging your feet.”

“But Mama, it was never like that,” Enyinna said, in that high-pitched tone he used when trying to make a case. “Udoka deserves the best. I needed the time to gather enough money so I could give her a correct bride price and a fine wedding. I explained to you, Mama, and you said you understood. I am ready now. I will marry Udoka today if—”

“Enyinna,” Agatha said, her voice falsely sweet, “you know the one thing you have said today that makes sense? ‘Udoka deserves the best.’ And she has it now. Be happy for her. Let God have His way.”

“Let God have His way?” Enyinna said. “So you are saying this is God’s will because the man has more money than me.”

All the while Agatha had carried on filling her bucket. She stopped now, straightening up to look at Enyinna. “More?” Agatha’s voice was soft, and Udoka could tell her mother’s face would be wearing that look of exaggerated confusion she feigned so well. “But Enyinna, what money did you ever have in the first place?”

This was her mother’s final blow. Proud Igbo man that Enyinna was, there could be no greater gratification than seeing his family well taken care of, protected from a life of want, and no greater shame than being perceived as incapable of doing so.

Enyinna walked away without another word. Udoka listened to his matchbox car rattle down the street.

. . .

THE FIRST TIME UDOKA HEARD the snickering behind her, she was certain it wasn’t at her expense. She knew that sound well, could read the mockery in it like a book. She had made

that sound at people before, when she was, like these young women—no, girls—frivolous and immature.

Udoka liked the burden of responsibility on her soon-to-be-married shoulders. She liked that it was no longer proper for her to spend too much time with her single Umueze counterparts. With Marigold having sent word three weeks ago that Uzor had arrived in Orlu, it was important that she didn't give the gossip mongers a reason to start even the smallest rumor about her. Most of the pre-wedding matters—the official marriage proposal, the acceptance, and the checking into each family's background for deal-breakers ranging from epilepsy to serious criminal behavior—had been finalized before Uzor's arrival. All that was left was negotiating and paying the bride price, and then the wedding.

This man, Uzor, was all Udoka could think about. The lecturers' strike had ended a week ago and school had reopened, but it didn't matter now. Udoka had returned to campus merely to invite her friends to her wedding and empty out her hostel room. She knew she would not be returning.

Udoka wondered what her husband was like. He would no longer talk like an Igbo man, she was sure. Maybe he wouldn't even remember how to speak Igbo, or he would speak it with a strange accent that would make everyone smile and indulge him. Would he still eat fufu with his hands or, as she hoped, with a fork and knife? And surely, he would be a gentleman, like the men she saw in oyibo films, men who helped with housework and brought their wives breakfast in bed.

The girls giggled again, and now it took a lot of resolve for Udoka not to look in the direction of their laughter and ask what had happened. She would bide her time. She was next in the queue for the water pump. When it was her turn, she would place her bucket under the nozzle and, when she turned around

to use the hand-operated pump, she would smile at the girls and ask, with a carefully constructed air of disinterest, why they were laughing.

When Udoka got behind the pump and regarded the three laughing girls like she had planned, she was surprised at the effort they put into straightening their faces. If she'd been uncertain of her new status in Umueze, she would have felt self-conscious.

"How are you girls?" she asked.

"We girls are fine," the one called Chisom answered. Udoka recognized the other two but didn't know their names.

"What's making you laugh?" Udoka said, concentrating on raising and lowering the pump's handle to let out water.

"Nothing," said Chisom, clearly the mouthpiece of the group.

It dawned on Udoka that they realized she was no longer one of them, and that was why they were reluctant to share their gossip with her. Fair enough. She needed to make more friends from among her equals anyway.

"Nwunye Belgium," Chisom said, "when is your husband coming to Umueze?" Chisom's voice was low, her concern clearly insincere. "Or aren't you going to Belgium anymore?"

Udoka frowned. "What kind of question is that? Of course he is coming, very soon."

"Okay o," Chisom said. "I said I should ask because I visited my cousin in Orlu the other day, and I asked if she'd heard about the big wedding that's about to happen, but she was arguing with me—"

"Arguing about what?" Udoka asked.

The other girls averted their faces, but Udoka could see their shoulders tremble as they chuckled. Only then did Udoka start to wonder. The suppressed laughter, the look of exaggerated innocence and concern on Chisom's face, her tone at once

mocking and deferential. Udoka felt her grip on the pump's handle slacken. Thankfully, her bucket was full.

"Nothing, don't mind me." Chisom's voice retained its sweetness. "It's just that we have been waiting so long to see this our husband, and now people are starting to spread rumors. But we are all very happy for you. We pray for your kind of luck."

"God forbid!"

Udoka wasn't sure which of the other girls had muttered it, but it didn't matter. She needed to leave at once and find out what these girls thought they knew. She stepped from behind the pump to lift her bucket onto her head.

"No, no, no, Nwunye Belgium, let me help you," Chisom said, rushing forward. "You know we need to keep you fresh for our husband when he finally comes."

Udoka was speechless as Chisom lifted the bucket and placed it with exaggerated care on Udoka's head. Udoka walked away from the pump, her hands holding the bucket steady. The girls' laughter followed her, down the footpath and all the way home.

. . .

AGATHA WAS NOT WORRIED. She knew better than silly Udoka, who had come home from the water pump yesterday agitated by something she'd heard and demanding that Agatha immediately visit Marigold in Orlu. People could be vicious, and they would tell all kinds of lies when jealousy was eating them up. The only reason Marigold and her people hadn't shown up yet to finalize the wedding was that they were busy preparing to throw the biggest wedding party in the history of Umueze. She had told her daughter this, but Udoka had been insistent. And so here Agatha was, walking through her friend's compound to the front door.

It was when Agatha reached the threshold, wiping her soles on the foot mat, that she realized something was not quite right. Marigold's house should have been swarming with people eager to "welcome" the doctor from Belgium, in the hopes of leaving with gifts from him. There should have been extended family and neighbors offering help so they would find favor with their wealthy relative. But Agatha calmed herself with the thought that she must have arrived at a rare quiet moment, and worried instead that she might be interrupting her in-laws' rest. She knocked.

"Who is there?" Marigold's voice called from within.

"It's your in-law, Agatha."

After a minute, the door swung open and Agatha smiled at her friend. Marigold did not return the smile. Marigold's demeanor surprised Agatha, but she continued with a cheerful voice. "How are you, Marigold? I said let me come and see how my people are doing today."

"We are fine," Marigold said, stepping aside from the doorway with clear reluctance.

They walked together into the living room and sat. Marigold said nothing, so Agatha filled the silence with complaints about the bad state of the roads and the stress of the journey. All the while, Agatha wondered why her friend was acting like someone had poured cold water over her body.

After another long silence, Agatha said with an uncomfortable laugh, "Marigold, won't you offer me something to drink?"

"We have only water."

Agatha's sense of unease deepened. She forced a smile through the panic starting to rise in her throat.

"Why is your face like stone?" she asked. "If I didn't know better, I would have thought you don't want me in your house. Please, call my son-in-law so I can finally meet him."