THE ARRANGERS OF MARRIAGE

My new husband carried the suitcase out of the taxi and led the way into the brownstone, up a flight of brooding stairs, down an airless hallway with frayed carpeting, and stopped at a door. The number 2B, unevenly fashioned from yellowish metal, was plastered on it.

"We're here," he said. He had used the word "house" when he told me about our home. I had imagined a smooth driveway snaking between cucumber-colored lawns, a door leading into a hallway, walls with sedate paintings. A house like those of the white newlyweds in the American films that NTA showed on Saturday nights.

He turned on the light in the living room, where a beige couch sat alone in the middle, slanted, as though dropped there by accident. The room was hot; old, musty smells hung heavy in the air.

"I'll show you around," he said.

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

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

"Okay," I said. I felt light-headed. The ten-hour flight from Lagos to New York and the interminable wait while the American customs officer raked through my suitcase had left me woozy, stuffed my head full of cotton wool. The officer had examined my foodstuffs as if they were spiders, her gloved fingers poking at the waterproof bags of ground *egusi* and dried *onugbu* leaves and *uziza* seeds, until she seized my *uziza* seeds. She feared I would grow them on American soil. It didn't matter that the seeds had been sun-dried for weeks and were as hard as a bicycle helmet.

"Ike agwum," I said, placing my handbag down on the bedroom floor.

"Yes, I'm exhausted, too," he said. "We should get to bed."

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

My husband woke me up by settling his heavy body on top of mine. His chest flattened my breasts.

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

"Wait—" I said, so that I could take the nightdress off, so it would not seem so hasty. But he had crushed his mouth down on mine. Another thing the arrangers of marriage failed to mention—mouths that told the story of sleep, that felt clammy like old chewing gum, that smelled like the rubbish dumps at Ogbete Market. His breathing rasped as he moved, as if his nostrils were too narrow for the air that had to be let out. When he finally stopped thrusting, he rested his entire weight on me, even the weight of his legs. I did not move until he climbed off me to go into the bathroom. I pulled my nightdress down, straightened it over my hips.

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

"*Ezi okwu?* All that?"

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

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

The phone line crackled with static, reaching out across the Atlantic. I knew Uncle Ike and Aunty Ada would sound warm, they would ask what I had eaten, what the weather in America was like. But none of my responses would register; they would ask just to ask. Uncle Ike would probably smile into the phone, the same kind of smile that had loosened his face when he told me that the perfect husband had been found for me. The same smile I had last seen on him months before when the Super Eagles won the soccer gold medal at the Atlanta Olympics.

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

"Yes, Uncle."

"He will be home in early June," Aunty Ada had said. "You will have plenty of time to get to know each other before the wedding."

"Yes, Aunty." "Plenty of time" was two weeks.

"What have we not done for you? We raise you as our own and then we find you an *ezigbo di*! A doctor in America! It is like we won a lottery for you!" Aunty Ada said. She had a few strands of hair growing on her chin and she tugged at one of them as she spoke.

I had thanked them both for everything—finding me a husband, taking me into their home, buying me a new pair of shoes every two years. It was the only way to avoid being called ungrateful. I did not remind them that I wanted to take the JAMB exam again and try for the university, that while going to secondary school I had sold more bread in Aunty Ada's bakery than all the other bakeries in Enugu sold, that the furniture and floors in the house shone because of me.

"Did you get through?" my new husband asked.

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

"Busy. Americans say busy, not engaged," he said. "We'll try later. Let's have breakfast."

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

"Boil some water for tea," he said

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

"Americans don't drink their tea with milk and sugar."

"*Ezi okwu*? Don't you drink yours with milk and sugar?"

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

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

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

"Hi, Shirley. Thanks so much for keeping my mail," he said.

"Not a problem at all. How did your wedding go? Is your wife here?"

"Yes, come and say hello."

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

"I'm Shirley from 3A. Nice to meet you," she said, shaking my hand. She had the nasal voice of someone battling a cold.

"You are welcome," I said.

Shirley paused, as though surprised. "Well, I'll let you get back to breakfast," she said. "I'll come down and visit with you when you've settled in."

Shirley shuffled out. My new husband shut the door. One of the dining table legs was shorter than the rest, and so the table rocked, like a seesaw, when he leaned on it and said, "You should say 'Hi' to people here, not 'You're welcome.'"

"She's not my age mate."

"It doesn't work that way here. Everybody says hi."

"*O di mma*. Okay."

"I'm not called Ofodile here, by the way. I go by Dave," he said, looking down at the pile of envelopes Shirley had given him. Many of them had lines of writing on the envelope itself, above the address, as though the sender had remembered to add something only after the envelope was sealed.

"Dave?" I knew he didn't have an English name. The invitation cards to our wedding had read *Ofodile Emeka Udenwa and Chinaza Agatha Okafor*.

"The last name I use here is different, too. Americans have a hard time with Udenwa, so I changed it."

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

"It's Bell."

"Bell!" I had heard about a Waturuocha that changed to Waturu in America, a Chikelugo that took the more American-friendly Chikel, but from Udenwa to Bell? "That's not even close to Udenwa," I said.

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

"I never have, my English name is just something on my birth certificate. I've been Chinaza Okafor my whole life."

"You'll get used to it, baby," he said, reaching out to caress my cheek. "You'll see."

When he filled out a Social Security number application for me the next day, the name he entered in bold letters was AGATHA BELL.

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

"Look around, don't lower your eyes like that. Look around. You get used to things faster that way," he said.

I turned my head from side to side so he would see that I was following his advice. Dark restaurant windows promised the BEST CARIBBEAN AND AMERICAN FOOD in lopsided print, a car wash across the street advertised $3.50 washes on a chalkboard nestled among Coke cans and bits of paper. The sidewalk was chipped away at the edges, like something nibbled at by mice.

Inside the air-conditioned bus, he showed me where to pour in the coins, how to press the tape on the wall to signal my stop.

"This is not like Nigeria, where you shout out to the conductor," he said, sneering, as though he was the one who had invented the superior American system.

Inside Key Food, we walked from aisle to aisle slowly. I was wary when he put a beef pack in the cart. I wished I could touch the meat, to examine its redness, as I often did at Ogbete Market, where the butcher held up fresh-cut slabs buzzing with flies.

"Can we buy those biscuits?" I asked. The blue packets of Burton's Rich Tea were familiar; I did not want to eat biscuits but I wanted something familiar in the cart.

"Cookies. Americans call them cookies," he said.

I reached out for the biscuits (cookies).

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

"Okay," I said. I no longer wanted the biscuits, but I put the store brand in the cart and stared at the blue packet on the shelf, at the familiar grain-embossed Burton's logo, until we left the aisle.

"When I become an Attending, we will stop buying store brands, but for now we have to; these things may seem cheap but they add up," he said.

"When you become a Consultant?"

"Yes, but it's called an Attending here, an Attending Physician."

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

"Interns are paid twenty-eight thousand a year but work about eighty hours a week. It's like three dollars an hour," he had said. "Can you believe it? Three dollars an hour!"

I did not know if three dollars an hour was very good or very bad—I was leaning toward very good—until he added that even high school students working part-time made much more.

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

"Oh," I said. What did it matter that you could or could not take the carts out? The point was, there *were* carts.

"Look at the people who shop here; they are the ones who immigrate and continue to act as if they are back in their countries." He gestured, dismissively, toward a woman and her two children, who were speaking Spanish. "They will never move forward unless they adapt to America. They will always be doomed to supermarkets like this."

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

My new husband took me to the mall; he wanted to show me as much as he could before he started work on Monday. His car rattled as he drove, as though there were many parts that had come loose—a sound similar to shaking a tin full of nails. It stalled at a traffic light and he turned the key a few times before it started.

"I'll buy a new car after my residency," he said.

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

"We'll get pizza first," he said. "It's one thing you have to like in America."

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

"Two pepperoni and sausage. Is your combo deal better?" my new husband asked. He sounded different when he spoke to Americans: his *r* was overpronounced and his *t* was under-pronounced. And he smiled, the eager smile of a person who wanted to be liked.

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

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

"The tomatoes are not cooked well."

"We overcook food back home and that is why we lose all the nutrients. Americans cook things right. See how healthy they all look?"

I nodded, looking around. At the next table, a black woman with a body as wide as a pillow held sideways smiled at me. I smiled back and took another pizza bite, tightening my stomach so it would not eject anything.

We went into Macy's afterwards. My new husband led the way toward a sliding staircase; its movement was rubbery-smooth and I knew I would fall down the moment I stepped on it.

"*Biko,* don't they have a lift instead?" I asked. At least I had once ridden in the creaky one in the local government office, the one that quivered for a full minute before the doors rolled open.

"Speak English. There are people behind you," he whispered, pulling me away, toward a glass counter full of twinkling jewelry. "It's an elevator, not a lift. Americans say elevator."

"Okay."

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

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

"Thank you."

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

"*Ezi okwu?*" I said, then hastily added, "Really?"

"Let's take a walk around the mall. There are some other wonders of America here."

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

Before we left, he led the way to McDonald's. The restaurant was nestled near the rear of the mall; a yellow and red M the size of a car stood at its entrance. My husband did not look at the menu board that hovered overhead as he ordered two large Number 2 meals.

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

"I like to eat this once in a while," he said. He held the hamburger with both hands and chewed with a concentration that furrowed his eyebrows, tightened his jaw, and made him look even more unfamiliar.

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

came home. He wore what looked like a uniform, a girlish-looking blue top tucked into a pair of blue trousers that was tied at the waist.

"Nno," I said. "Did you work well?"

"You have to speak English at home, too, baby. So you can get used to it." He brushed his lips against my cheek just as the doorbell rang. It was Shirley, her body wrapped in the same pink robe. She twirled the belt at her waist.

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

"Coconut rice," I said.

"A recipe from your country?"

"Yes."

"It smells really good. The problem with us here is we have no culture, no culture at all." She turned to my new husband, as if she wanted him to agree with her, but he simply smiled. "Would you come take a look at my air conditioner, Dave?" She asked. "It's acting up again and it's so hot today."

"Sure," my new husband said.

Before they left, Shirley waved at me and said, "Smells *really* good," and I wanted to invite her to have some rice. My new husband came back half an hour later and ate the fragrant meal I placed before him, even smacking his lips like Uncle Ike sometimes did to show Aunty Ada how pleased he was with her cooking. But the next day, he came back with a *Good Housekeeping All-American Cookbook*, thick as a Bible.

"I don't want us to be known as the people who fill the building with smells of foreign food," he said.

I took the cookbook, ran my hand over the cover, over the picture of something that looked like a flower but was probably food.

"I know you'll soon master how to cook American food," he said, gently pulling me close. That night, I thought of the cookbook as he lay heavily on top of me, grunting and rasping. Another thing the arrangers of marriage did not tell you—the struggle to brown beef in oil and dredge skinless chicken in flour. I had always cooked beef in its own juices. Chicken I had always poached with its skin intact. In the following days, I was pleased that my husband left for work at six in the morning and did not come back until eight in the evening so that I had time to throw away pieces of half-cooked, clammy chicken and start again.

. . .

The first time I saw Nia, who lived in 2D, I thought she was the kind of woman Aunty Ada would disapprove of. Aunty Ada would call her an *ashawo*, because of the see-through top she wore so that her bra, a mismatched shade, glared through. Or Aunty Ada would base her prostitute judgment on Nia's lipstick, a shimmery orange, and the eye shadow—similar to the shade of the lipstick—that clung to her heavy lids.

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

"Thanks. I'm Chinaza… Agatha."

Nia was watching me carefully. "What was the first thing you said?"

"My Nigerian name."

"It's an Igbo name, isn't it?" She pronounced it "E-boo."

"Yes."

"What does it mean?"

"God answers prayers."

"It's really pretty. You know, Nia is a Swahili name. I changed my name when I was eighteen. I spent three years in Tanzania. It was fucking amazing."

"Oh," I said and shook my head; she, a black American, had chosen an African name, while my husband made me change mine to an English one.

"You must be bored to death in that apartment; I know Dave gets back pretty late," she said. "Come have a Coke with me."

I hesitated, but Nia was already walking to the stairs. I followed her. Her living room had a spare elegance: a red sofa, a slender potted plant, a huge wooden mask hanging on the wall. She gave me a Diet Coke served in a tall glass with ice, asked how I was adjusting to life in America, offered to show me around Brooklyn.

"It would have to be a Monday, though," she said. "I don't work Mondays."

"What do you do?"

"I own a hair salon."

"Your hair is beautiful," I said, and she touched it and said, "Oh, this," as if she did not think anything of it. It was not just her hair, held up on top of her head in a natural Afro puff, that I found beautiful, though, it was her skin the color of roasted groundnuts, her mysterious and heavy-lidded eyes, her curved hips. She played her music a little too loud, so we had to raise our voices as we spoke.

"You know, my sister's a manager at Macy's," she said. "They're hiring entry-level salespeople in the women's department, so if you're interested I can put in a word for you and you're pretty much hired. She owes me one."

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

"I don't have my work permit yet," I said.

"But Dave has filed for you?"

"Yes."

"It shouldn't take long; at least you should have it before winter. I have a friend from Haiti who just got hers. So let me know as soon as you do."

"Thank you." I wanted to hug Nia. "Thank you."

That evening I told my new husband about Nia. His eyes were sunken in with fatigue, after so many hours at work, and he said, "Nia?" as though he did not know who I meant, before he added, "She's okay, but be careful because she can be a bad influence."

Nia began stopping by to see me after work, drinking from a can of diet soda she brought with her and watching me cook. I turned the air conditioner off and opened the window to let in the hot air, so that she could smoke. She talked about the women at her hair salon and the men she went out with. She sprinkled her everyday conversation with words like the noun "clitoris" and the verb "fuck." I liked to listen to her. I liked the way she smiled to show a tooth that was chipped neatly, a perfect triangle missing at the edge. She always left before my new husband came home.

Winter sneaked up on me. One morning I stepped out of the apartment building and gasped. It was as though God was shredding tufts of white tissue and flinging them down. I stood staring at my first snow, at the swirling flakes, for a long, long time before turning to go back into the apartment. I scrubbed the kitchen floor again, cut out more coupons from the Key Food catalog that came in the mail, and then sat by the window, watching God's shredding become frenzied. Winter had come and I was still unemployed. When my husband came home in the evening, I placed his french fries and fried chicken before him and said, "I thought I would have my work permit by now."

He ate a few pieces of oily-fried potatoes before responding. We spoke only English now; he did not know that I spoke Igbo to myself while I cooked, that I had taught Nia how to say "I'm hungry" and "See you tomorrow" in Igbo.

"The American woman I married to get a green card is making trouble," he said, and slowly tore a piece of chicken in two. The area under his eyes was puffy. "Our divorce was almost final, but not completely, before I married you in Nigeria. Just a minor thing, but she found out about it and now she's threatening to report me to Immigration. She wants more money."

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

"Would you pass that, please?" he asked, pointing to the lemonade I had made earlier.

"The jug?"

"Pitcher. Americans say pitcher, not jug."

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

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

I pulled the pile of coupons toward me and started to rip them in two, one after the other. "Ofodile, you should have let me know this before now."

He shrugged. "I was going to tell you."

"I deserved to know before we got married." I sank down on the chair opposite him, slowly, as if the chair would crack if I didn't.

"It wouldn't have made a difference. Your uncle and aunt had decided. Were you going to say no to people who have taken care of you since your parents died?"

I stared at him in silence, shredding the coupons into smaller and smaller bits; broken-up pictures of detergents and meat packs and paper towels fell to the floor.

"Besides, with the way things are messed up back home, what would you have done?" he asked. "Aren't people with master's degrees roaming the streets, jobless?" His voice was flat.

"Why did you marry me?" I asked.

"I wanted a Nigerian wife and my mother said you were a good girl, quiet. She said you might even be a virgin." He smiled. He looked even more tired when he smiled. "I probably should tell her how wrong she was."

I threw more coupons on the floor, clasped my hands together, and dug my nails into my skin.

"I was happy when I saw your picture," he said, smacking his lips. "You were light-skinned. I had to think about my children's looks. Light-skinned blacks fare better in America."

I watched him eat the rest of the batter-covered chicken, and I noticed that he did not finish chewing before he took a sip of water.

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

Nia made me tea, with milk and sugar, and sat with me at her round dining table that had three tall stools around it.

"If you want to call your family back home, you can call them from here. Stay as long as you want; I'll get on a payment plan with Bell Atlantic."

"There's nobody to talk to at home," I said, staring at the pear-shaped face of the sculpture on the wooden shelf. It's hollow eyes stared back at me.

"How about your aunt?" Nia asked.

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

"He should have told you about the marriage, but it wasn't a real marriage, Chinaza," Nia said. "I read a book that says we don't fall in love, we climb up to love. Maybe if you gave it time—"

"It's not about that."

"I know," Nia said with a sigh. "Just trying to be fucking positive here. Was there someone back home?"

“There was once, but he was too young and he had no money.”

“Sounds really fucked-up.”

I stirred my tea although it did not need stirring. “I wonder why my husband had to find a wife in Nigeria.”

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

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

“Did you ever meet the woman he married? Or did you know any of his girlfriends?” I asked.

Nia looked away. The kind of dramatic turning of head that speaks, that intends to speak, volumes. The silence stretched out between us.

“Nia?” I asked finally.

“I fucked him, almost two years ago, when he first moved in. I fucked him and after a week it was over. We never dated. I never saw him date anybody.”

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

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

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

“You can wait until you get your papers and then leave,” Nia said. “You can apply for benefits while you get your shit together, and then you’ll get a job and find a place and support yourself and start afresh. This is the U.S. of fucking A., for God’s sake.”

Nia came and stood beside me, by the window. She was right, I could not leave yet. I went back across the hall the next evening. I rang the doorbell and he opened the door, stood aside, and let me pass.