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Half of a Yellow Sun

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Extract

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PART ONE

The Early Sixties

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Master was a little crazy; he had spent too many years reading books overseas, talked to himself in his office, did not always return greetings, and had too much hair. Ugwu's aunty said this in a low voice as they walked on the path. 'But he is a good man,' she added. 'And as long as you work well, you will eat well. You will even eat meat every day.' She stopped to spit; the saliva left her mouth with a sucking sound and landed on the grass.

Ugwu did not believe that anybody, not even this master he was going to live with, ate meat *every day*. He did not disagree with his aunty, though, because he was too choked with expectation, too busy imagining his new life away from the village. They had been walking for a while now, since they got off the lorry at the motor park, and the afternoon sun burned the back of his neck. But he did not mind. He was prepared to walk hours more in even hotter sun. He had never seen anything like the streets that appeared after they went past the university gates, streets so smooth and tarred that he itched to lay his cheek down on them. He would never be able to describe to his sister Anulika how the bungalows here were painted the colour of the sky and sat side by side like polite, well-dressed men, how the hedges separating them were trimmed so flat on top that they looked like tables wrapped with leaves.

His aunty walked faster, her slippers making *slap-slap* sounds that echoed in the silent street. Ugwu wondered if she, too, could feel the coal tar getting hotter underneath, through her thin soles. They went past a sign, ODIM STREET, and Ugwu mouthed *street*, as he did whenever he saw an English word that was not too long. He smelt something sweet, heady, as they walked into a compound, and was sure it came from the white flowers clustered on the bushes at the

entrance. The bushes were shaped like slender hills. The lawn glistened. Butterflies hovered above.

'I told Master you will learn everything fast, *osiso-osiso*,' his aunty said. Ugwu nodded attentively although she had already told him this many times, as often as she told him the story of how his good fortune came about: While she was sweeping the corridor in the Mathematics Department a week ago, she heard Master say that he needed a houseboy to do his cleaning, and she immediately said she could help, speaking before his typist or office messenger could offer to bring someone.

'I will learn fast, Aunty,' Ugwu said. He was staring at the car in the garage; a strip of metal ran around its blue body like a necklace.

'Remember, what you will answer whenever he calls you is *Yes, sah!*'

'Yes, sah!' Ugwu repeated.

They were standing before the glass door. Ugwu held back from reaching out to touch the cement wall, to see how different it would feel from the mud walls of his mother's hut that still bore the faint patterns of moulding fingers. For a brief moment, he wished he were back there now, in his mother's hut, under the dim coolness of the thatch roof; or in his aunty's hut, the only one in the village with a corrugated-iron roof.

His aunty tapped on the glass. Ugwu could see the white curtains behind the door. A voice said, in English, 'Yes? Come in.'

They took off their slippers before walking in. Ugwu had never seen a room so wide. Despite the brown sofas arranged in a semicircle, the side tables between them, the shelves crammed with books, and the centre table with a vase of red and white plastic flowers, the room still seemed to have too much space. Master sat in an armchair, wearing a singlet and a pair of shorts. He was not sitting upright but slanted, a book covering his face, as though oblivious that he had just asked people in.

'Good afternoon, sah! This is the child,' Ugwu's aunty said.

Master looked up. His complexion was very dark, like old bark, and the hair that covered his chest and legs was a lustrous, darker shade. He pulled off his glasses. 'The child?'

'The houseboy, sah.'

'Oh, yes, you have brought the houseboy. *I kpotago ya.*' Master's Igbo felt feathery in Ugwu's ears. It was Igbo coloured by the sliding sounds of English, the Igbo of one who spoke English often.

'He will work hard,' his aunty said. 'He is a very good boy. Just tell him what he should do. Thank, sah!'

Master grunted in response, watching Ugwu and his aunty with a faintly distracted expression, as if their presence made it difficult for him to remember something important. Ugwu's aunty patted Ugwu's shoulder, whispered that he should do well, and turned to the door. After she left, Master put his glasses back on and faced his book, relaxing further into a slanting position, legs stretched out. Even when he turned the pages he did so with his eyes on the book.

Ugwu stood by the door, waiting. Sunlight streamed in through the windows, and from time to time, a gentle breeze lifted the curtains. The room was silent except for the rustle of Master's page turning. Ugwu stood for a while before he began to edge closer and closer to the bookshelf, as though to hide in it, and then, after a while, he sank down to the floor, cradling his raffia bag between his knees. He looked up at the ceiling, so high up, so piercingly white. He closed his eyes and tried to reimagine this spacious room with the alien furniture, but he couldn't. He opened his eyes, overcome by a new wonder, and looked around to make sure it was all real. To think that he would sit on these sofas, polish this slippery-smooth floor, wash these gauzy curtains.

'*Kedu afa gi?* What's your name?' Master asked, startling him.

Ugwu stood up.

'What's your name?' Master asked again and sat up straight. He filled the armchair, his thick hair that stood high on his head, his muscled arms, his broad shoulders; Ugwu had imagined an older man, somebody frail, and now he felt a sudden fear that he might not please this master who looked so youthfully capable, who looked as if he needed nothing.

'Ugwu, sah.'

'Ugwu. And you've come from Obukpa?'

'From Opi, sah.'

'You could be anything from twelve to thirty.' Master narrowed his eyes. 'Probably thirteen.' He said *thirteen* in English.

'Yes, sah.'

Master turned back to his book. Ugwu stood there. Master flipped past some pages and looked up. '*Ngwa*, go to the kitchen; there should be something you can eat in the fridge.'

'Yes, sah.'

Ugwu entered the kitchen cautiously, placing one foot slowly after

the other. When he saw the white thing, almost as tall as he was, he knew it was the fridge. His aunty had told him about it. A cold barn, she had said, that kept food from going off. He opened it and gasped as the cool air rushed into his face. Oranges, bread, beer, soft drinks: many things in packets and cans were arranged on different levels and, at the top, a roasted, shimmering chicken, whole but for a leg. Ugwu reached out and touched the chicken. The fridge breathed heavily in his ears. He touched the chicken again and licked his finger before he yanked the other leg off, eating it until he had only the cracked, sucked pieces of bones left in his hand. Next, he broke off some bread, a chunk that he would have been excited to share with his siblings if a relative had visited and brought it as a gift. He ate quickly, before Master could come in and change his mind. He had finished eating and was standing by the sink, trying to remember what his aunty had told him about opening it to have water gush out like a spring, when Master walked in. He had put on a print shirt and a pair of trousers. His toes, which peeked through leather slippers, seemed feminine, perhaps because they were so clean; they belonged to feet that always wore shoes.

'What is it?' Master asked.

'Sah?' Ugwu gestured to the sink.

Master came over and turned the metal tap. 'You should look around the house and put your bag in the first room on the corridor. I'm going for a walk, to clear my head, *i nugo?*'

'Yes, sah.' Ugwu watched him leave through the back door. He was not tall. His walk was brisk, energetic, and he looked like Ezeagu, the man who held the wrestling record in Ugwu's village.

Ugwu turned off the tap, turned it on again, then off. On and off and on and off until he was laughing at the magic of the running water and the chicken and bread that lay balmy in his stomach. He went past the living room and into the corridor. There were books piled on the shelves and tables in the three bedrooms, on the sink and cabinets in the bathroom, stacked from floor to ceiling in the study, and in the storeroom, old journals were stacked next to crates of Coke and cartons of Premier beer. Some of the books were placed face down, open, as though Master had not yet finished reading them but had hastily gone on to another. Ugwu tried to read the titles, but most were too long, too difficult. *Non-Parametric Methods. An African Survey. The Great Chain of Being. The Norman Impact Upon England.*

He walked on tiptoe from room to room, because his feet felt dirty, and as he did so he grew increasingly determined to please Master, to stay in this house of meat and cool floors. He was examining the toilet, running his hand over the black plastic seat, when he heard Master's voice.

'Where are you, my good man?' He said *my good man* in English.

Ugwu dashed out to the living room. 'Yes, sah!'

'What's your name again?'

'Ugwu, sah.'

'Yes, Ugwu. Look here, *nee anya*, do you know what that is?' Master pointed, and Ugwu looked at the metal box studded with dangerous-looking knobs.

'No, sah,' Ugwu said.

'It's a radiogram. It's new and very good. It's not like those old gramophones that you have to wind and wind. You have to be very careful around it, very careful. You must never let water touch it.'

'Yes, sah.'

'I'm off to play tennis, and then I'll go on to the staff club.' Master picked up a few books from the table. 'I may be back late. So get settled and have a rest.'

'Yes, sah.'

After Ugwu watched Master drive out of the compound, he went and stood beside the radiogram and looked at it carefully, without touching it. Then he walked around the house, up and down, touching books and curtains and furniture and plates, and when it got dark, he turned the light on and marvelled at how bright the bulb that dangled from the ceiling was, how it did not cast long shadows on the wall like the palm oil lamps back home. His mother would be preparing the evening meal now, pounding *akpu* in the mortar, the pestle grasped tightly with both hands. Chioke, the junior wife, would be tending the pot of watery soup balanced on three stones over the fire. The children would have come back from the stream and would be taunting and chasing one another under the breadfruit tree. Perhaps Anulika would be watching them. She was the oldest child in the household now, and as they all sat around the fire to eat, she would break up the fights when the younger ones struggled over the strips of dried fish in the soup. She would wait until all the *akpu* was eaten and then divide the fish so that each child had a piece, and she would keep the biggest for herself, as he had always done.

Ugwu opened the fridge and ate some more bread and chicken, quickly stuffing the food in his mouth while his heart beat as if he were running; then he dug out extra chunks of meat and pulled out the wings. He slipped the pieces into his shorts' pockets before going to the bedroom. He would keep them until his aunty visited and he would ask her to give them to Anulika. Perhaps he could ask her to give some to Nnesinachi too. That might make Nnesinachi finally notice him. He had never been sure exactly how he and Nnesinachi were related, but he knew they were from the same *umunna* and therefore could never marry. Yet he wished that his mother would not keep referring to Nnesinachi as his sister, saying things like, 'Please take this palm oil down to Mama Nnesinachi, and if she is not in, leave it with your sister.'

Nnesinachi always spoke to him in a vague voice, her eyes unfocused, as if his presence made no difference to her either way. Sometimes she called him Chiejina, the name of his cousin who looked nothing at all like him, and when he said, 'It's me', she would say, 'Forgive me, Ugwu my brother,' with a distant formality that meant she had no wish to make further conversation. But he liked going on errands to her house. They were opportunities to find her bent over, fanning the firewood or chopping *ugu* leaves for her mother's soup pot, or just sitting outside looking after her younger siblings, her wrapper hanging low enough for him to see the tops of her breasts. Ever since they started to push out, those pointy breasts, he had wondered if they would feel mushy-soft or hard like the unripe fruit from the *ube* tree. He often wished that Anulika wasn't so flat-chested – he wondered what was taking her so long anyway, since she and Nnesinachi were about the same age – so that he could feel her breasts. Anulika would slap his hand away, of course, and perhaps even slap his face as well, but he would do it quickly – squeeze and run – and that way he would at least have an idea and know what to expect when he finally touched Nnesinachi's.

But he was worried that he might never get to touch them, now that her uncle had asked her to come and learn a trade in Kano. She would be leaving for the North by the end of the year, when her mother's last child, whom she was carrying, began to walk. Ugwu wanted to be as pleased and grateful as the rest of the family. There was, after all, a fortune to be made in the North; he knew of people who had gone up there to trade and came home to tear down huts

and build houses with corrugated-iron roofs. He feared, though, that one of those pot-bellied traders in the North would take one look at her, and the next thing he knew somebody would bring palm wine to her father and he would never get to touch those breasts. They – her breasts – were the images saved for last on the many nights when he touched himself, slowly at first and then vigorously, until a muffled moan escaped him. He always started with her face, the fullness of her cheeks and the ivory tone of her teeth, and then he imagined her arms around him, her body moulded to his. Finally, he let her breasts form; sometimes they felt hard, tempting him to bite into them, and other times they were so soft he was afraid his imaginary squeezing caused her pain.

For a moment, he considered thinking of her tonight. He decided not to. Not on his first night in Master's house, on this bed that was nothing like his hand-woven raffia mat. First, he pressed his hands into the springy softness of the mattress. Then, he examined the layers of cloth on top of it, unsure whether to sleep on them or to remove them and put them away before sleeping. Finally, he climbed up and lay on top of the layers of cloth, his body curled in a tight knot.

He dreamed that Master was calling him – *Ugwu, my good man!* – and when he woke up Master was standing at the door, watching him. Perhaps it had not been a dream. He scrambled out of bed and glanced at the windows with the drawn curtains, in confusion. Was it late? Had that soft bed deceived him and made him oversleep? He usually woke with the first cockcrows.

'Good morning, sah!'

'There is a strong roasted-chicken smell here.'

'Sorry, sah.'

'Where is the chicken?'

Ugwu fumbled in his shorts' pockets and brought out the chicken pieces.

'Do your people eat while they sleep?' Master asked. He was wearing something that looked like a woman's coat and was absently twirling the rope tied round his waist.

'Sah?'

'Did you want to eat the chicken while in bed?'

'No, sah.'

'Food will stay in the dining room and the kitchen.'

'Yes, sah.'

'The kitchen and bathroom will have to be cleaned today.'

'Yes, sah.'

Master turned and left. Ugwu stood trembling in the middle of the room, still holding the chicken pieces with his hand outstretched. He wished he did not have to walk past the dining room to get to the kitchen. Finally, he put the chicken back in his pockets, took a deep breath, and left the room. Master was at the dining table, the teacup in front of him placed on a pile of books.

'You know who really killed Lumumba?' Master said, looking up from a magazine. 'It was the Americans and the Belgians. It had nothing to do with Katanga.'

'Yes, sah,' Ugwu said. He wanted Master to keep talking, so he could listen to the sonorous voice, the musical blend of English words in his Igbo sentences.

'You are my houseboy,' Master said. 'If I order you to go outside and beat a woman walking on the street with a stick, and you then give her a bloody wound on her leg, who is responsible for the wound, you or me?'

Ugwu stared at Master, shaking his head, wondering if Master was referring to the chicken pieces in some roundabout way.

'Lumumba was prime minister of Congo. Do you know where Congo is?' Master asked.

'No, sah.'

Master got up quickly and went into the study. Ugwu's confused fear made his eyelids quiver. Would Master send him home because he did not speak English well, kept chicken in his pocket overnight, did not know the strange places Master named? Master came back with a wide piece of paper that he unfolded and laid out on the dining table, pushing aside books and magazines. He pointed with his pen. 'This is our world, although the people who drew this map decided to put their own land on top of ours. There is no top or bottom, you see.' Master picked up the paper and folded it, so that one edge touched the other, leaving a hollow between. 'Our world is round, it never ends. *Nee anya*, this is all water, the seas and oceans, and here's Europe and here's our own continent, Africa, and the Congo is in the middle. Farther up here is Nigeria, and Nsukka is here, in the south-east; this is where we are.' He tapped with his pen.

'Yes, sah.'

'Did you go to school?'

'Standard two, sah. But I learn everything fast.'

'Standard two? How long ago?'

'Many years now, sah. But I learn everything very fast!'

'Why did you stop school?'

'My father's crops failed, sah.'

Master nodded slowly. 'Why didn't your father find somebody to lend him your school fees?'

'Sah?'

'Your father should have borrowed!' Master snapped, and then, in English, 'Education is a priority! How can we resist exploitation if we don't have the tools to understand exploitation?'

'Yes, sah!' Ugwu nodded vigorously. He was determined to appear as alert as he could, because of the wild shine that had appeared in Master's eyes.

'I will enrol you in the staff primary school,' Master said, still tapping on the piece of paper with his pen.

Ugwu's aunty had told him that if he served well for a few years, Master would send him to commercial school where he would learn typing and shorthand. She had mentioned the staff primary school, but only to tell him that it was for the children of the lecturers, who wore blue uniforms and white socks so intricately trimmed with wisps of lace that you wondered why anybody had wasted so much time on mere socks.

'Yes, sah,' he said. 'Thank, sah.'

'I suppose you will be the oldest in class, starting in standard three at your age,' Master said. 'And the only way you can get their respect is to be the best. Do you understand?'

'Yes, sah!'

'Sit down, my good man.'

Ugwu chose the chair farthest from Master, awkwardly placing his feet close together. He preferred to stand.

'There are two answers to the things they will teach you about our land: the real answer and the answer you give in school to pass. You must read books and learn both answers. I will give you books, excellent books.' Master stopped to sip his tea. 'They will teach you that a white man called Mungo Park discovered River Niger. That is rubbish. Our people fished in the Niger long before Mungo Park's grandfather was born. But in your exam, write that it was Mungo Park.'

'Yes, sah.' Ugwu wished that this person called Mungo Park had not offended Master so much.

'Can't you say anything else?'

'Sah?'

'Sing me a song.'

'Sah?'

'Sing me a song. What songs do you know? Sing!' Master pulled his glasses off. His eyebrows were furrowed, serious. Ugwu began to sing an old song he had learned on his father's farm. His heart hit his chest painfully. '*Nzogbo nzogbu enyimba, enyi . . .*'

He sang in a low voice at first, but Master tapped his pen on the table and said 'Louder!' so he raised his voice, and Master kept saying 'Louder!' until he was screaming. After singing over and over a few times, Master asked him to stop. 'Good, good,' he said. 'Can you make tea?'

'No, sah. But I learn fast,' Ugwu said. The singing had loosened something inside him, he was breathing easily and his heart no longer pounded. And he was convinced that Master was mad.

'I eat mostly at the staff club. I suppose I shall have to bring more food home now that you are here.'

'Sah, I can cook.'

'You cook?'

Ugwu nodded. He had spent many evenings watching his mother cook. He had started the fire for her, or fanned the embers when it started to die out. He had peeled and pounded yams and cassava, blown out the husks in rice, picked out the weevils from beans, peeled onions, and ground peppers. Often, when his mother was sick with the coughing, he wished that he, and not Anulika, would cook. He had never told anyone this, not even Anulika; she had already told him he spent too much time around women cooking, and he might never grow a beard if he kept doing that.

'Well, you can cook your own food then,' Master said. 'Write a list of what you'll need.'

'Yes, sah.'

'You wouldn't know how to get to the market, would you? I'll ask Jomo to show you.'

'Jomo, sah?'

'Jomo takes care of the compound. He comes in three times a week. Funny man, I've seen him talking to the croton plant.' Master paused. 'Anyway, he'll be here tomorrow.'

Later, Ugwu wrote a list of food items and gave it to Master.

Master stared at the list for a while. 'Remarkable blend,' he said in English. 'I suppose they'll teach you to use more vowels in school.'

Ugwu disliked the amusement in Master's face. 'We need wood, sah,' he said.

'Wood?'

'For your books, sah. So that I can arrange them.'

'Oh, yes, *shelves*. I suppose we could fit more shelves somewhere, perhaps in the corridor. I will speak to somebody at the Works Department.'

'Yes, sah.'

'Odenigbo. Call me Odenigbo.'

Ugwu stared at him doubtfully. 'Sah?'

'My name is not Sah. Call me Odenigbo.'

'Yes, sah.'

'Odenigbo will always be my name. *Sir* is arbitrary. You could be the *sir* tomorrow.'

'Yes, sah – Odenigbo.'

Ugwu really preferred *sah*, the crisp power behind the word, and when two men from the Works Department came a few days later to install shelves in the corridor, he told them that they would have to wait for Sah to come home; he himself could not sign the white paper with typewritten words. He said *Sah* proudly.

'He's one of these village houseboys,' one of the men said dismissively, and Ugwu looked at the man's face and murmured a curse about acute diarrhoea following him and all of his offspring for life. As he arranged Master's books, he promised himself, stopping short of speaking aloud, that he would learn how to sign forms.

In the following weeks, the weeks when he examined every corner of the bungalow, when he discovered that a beehive was lodged in the cashew tree and that the butterflies converged in the front yard when the sun was brightest, he was just as careful in learning the rhythms of Master's life. Every morning, he picked up the *Daily Times* and *Renaissance* that the vendor dropped off at the door and folded them on the table next to Master's tea and bread. He had the Opel washed before Master finished breakfast, and when Master came back from work and was taking a siesta, he dusted the car over again, before Master left for the tennis courts. He moved around silently on the days that Master retired to the study for hours. When Master paced the corridor talking in a loud voice, he made sure that there was hot

water ready for tea. He scrubbed the floors daily. He wiped the louvres until they sparkled in the afternoon sunlight, paid attention to the tiny cracks in the bathtub, polished the saucers that he used to serve kola nut to Master's friends. There were at least two visitors in the living room each day, the radiogram turned on low to strange flutelike music, low enough for the talking and laughing and glass clinking to come clearly to Ugwu in the kitchen or in the corridor as he ironed Master's clothes.

He wanted to do more, wanted to give Master every reason to keep him, and so one morning, he ironed Master's socks. They didn't look rumpled, the black ribbed socks, but he thought they would look even better straightened. The hot iron hissed and when he raised it, he saw that half of the sock was glued to it. He froze. Master was at the dining table, finishing up breakfast, and would come in any minute now to pull on his socks and shoes and take the files on the shelf and leave for work. Ugwu wanted to hide the sock under the chair and dash to the drawer for a new pair but his legs would not move. He stood there with the burnt sock, knowing Master would find him that way.

'You've ironed my socks, haven't you?' Master asked. 'You stupid ignoramus.' *Stupid ignoramus* slid out of his mouth like music.

'Sorry, sah! Sorry, sah!'

'I told you not to call me sir.' Master picked up a file from the shelf. 'I'm late.'

'Sah? Should I bring another pair?' Ugwu asked. But Master had already slipped on his shoes, without socks, and hurried out. Ugwu heard him bang the car door and drive away. His chest felt weighty; he did not know why he had ironed the socks, why he had not simply done the safari suit. Evil spirits, that was it. The evil spirits had made him do it. They lurked everywhere, after all. Whenever he was ill with the fever, or once when he fell from a tree, his mother would rub his body with *okwuma*, all the while muttering, 'We shall defeat them, they will not win.'

He went out to the front yard, past stones placed side by side around the manicured lawn. The evil spirits would not win. He would not let them defeat him. There was a round, grassless patch in the middle of the lawn, like an island in a green sea, where a thin palm tree stood. Ugwu had never seen any palm tree that short, or one with leaves that flared out so perfectly. It did not look strong

enough to bear fruit, did not look useful at all, like most of the plants here. He picked up a stone and threw it into the distance. So much wasted space. In his village, people farmed the tiniest plots outside their homes and planted useful vegetables and herbs. His grandmother had not needed to grow her favourite herb, *arigbe*, because it grew wild everywhere. She used to say that *arigbe* softened a man's heart. She was the second of three wives and did not have the special position that came with being the first or the last, so before she asked her husband for anything, she told Ugwu, she cooked him spicy yam porridge with *arigbe*. It had worked, always. Perhaps it would work with Master.

Ugwu walked around in search of *arigbe*. He looked among the pink flowers, under the cashew tree with the spongy beehive lodged on a branch, the lemon tree that had black soldier ants crawling up and down the trunk, and the pawpaw trees whose ripening fruits were dotted with fat, bird-burrowed holes. But the ground was clean, no herbs; Jomo's weeding was thorough and careful, and nothing that was not wanted was allowed to be.

The first time they met, Ugwu had greeted Jomo and Jomo nodded and continued to work, saying nothing. He was a small man with a tough, shrivelled body that Ugwu felt needed a watering more than the plants that he targeted with his metal can. Finally, Jomo looked up at Ugwu. '*Afa m bu Jomo*,' he announced, as if Ugwu did not know his name. 'Some people call me Kenyatta, after the great man in Kenya. I am a hunter.'

Ugwu did not know what to say in return because Jomo was staring right into his eyes, as though expecting to hear something remarkable that Ugwu did.

'What kind of animals do you kill?' Ugwu asked. Jomo beamed, as if this was exactly the question he had wanted, and began to talk about his hunting. Ugwu sat on the steps that led to the backyard and listened. From the first day, he did not believe Jomo's stories – of fighting off a leopard barehanded, of killing two baboons with a single shot – but he liked listening to them and he put off washing Master's clothes to the days Jomo came so he could sit outside while Jomo worked. Jomo moved with a slow deliberateness. His raking, watering, and planting all somehow seemed filled with solemn wisdom. He would look up in the middle of trimming a hedge and say, 'That is good meat,' and then walk to the goatskin bag tied behind

his bicycle to rummage for his catapult. Once, he shot a bush pigeon down from the cashew tree with a small stone, wrapped it in leaves, and put it into his bag.

'Don't go to that bag unless I am around,' he told Ugwu. 'You might find a human head there.'

Ugwu laughed but had not entirely doubted Jomo. He wished so much that Jomo had come to work today. Jomo would have been the best person to ask about *arigbe* – indeed, to ask for advice on how best to placate Master.

He walked out of the compound, to the street, and looked through the plants on the roadside until he saw the rumpled leaves close to the root of a whistling pine. He had never smelt anything like the spicy sharpness of *arigbe* in the bland food Master brought back from the staff club; he would cook a stew with it, and offer Master some with rice, and afterwards plead with him. *Please don't send me back home, sah. I will work extra for the burnt sock. I will earn the money to replace it.* He did not know exactly what he could do to earn money for the sock, but he planned to tell Master that anyway.

If the *arigbe* softened Master's heart, perhaps he could grow it and some other herbs in the backyard. He would tell Master that the garden was something to do until he started school, since the headmistress at the staff school had told Master that he could not start midterm. He might be hoping for too much, though. What was the point of thinking about a herb garden if Master asked him to leave, if Master would not forgive the burnt sock? He walked quickly into the kitchen, laid the *arigbe* down on the counter, and measured out some rice.

Hours later, he felt a tautness in his stomach when he heard Master's car: the crunch of gravel and the hum of the engine before it stopped in the garage. He stood by the pot of stew, stirring, holding the ladle as tightly as the cramps in his stomach felt. Would Master ask him to leave before he had a chance to offer him the food? What would he tell his people?

'Good afternoon, sah – Odenigbo,' he said, even before Master had come into the kitchen.

'Yes, yes,' Master said. He was holding books to his chest with one hand and his briefcase with the other. Ugwu rushed over to help with the books. 'Sah? You will eat?' he asked in English.

'Eat what?'

Ugwu's stomach got tighter. He feared it might snap as he bent to place the books on the dining table. 'Stew, sah.'

'Stew?'

'Yes, sah. Very good stew, sah.'

'I'll try some, then.'

'Yes, sah!'

'Call me Odenigbo!' Master snapped before going in to take an afternoon bath.

After Ugwu served the food, he stood by the kitchen door, watching as Master took a first forkful of rice and stew, took another, and then called out, 'Excellent, my good man.'

Ugwu appeared from behind the door. 'Sah? I can plant the herbs in a small garden. To cook more stews like this.'

'A garden?' Master stopped to sip some water and turn a journal page. 'No, no, no. Outside is Jomo's territory, and inside is yours. Division of labour, my good man. If we need herbs, we'll ask Jomo to take care of it.' Ugwu loved the sound of *Division of labour, my good man*, spoken in English.

'Yes, sah,' he said, although he was already thinking of what spot would be best for the herb garden: near the Boys' Quarters where Master never went. He could not trust Jomo with the herb garden and would tend it himself when Master was out, and this way, his *arigbe*, his herb of forgiveness, would never run out. It was only later in the evening that he realized Master must have forgotten about the burnt sock long before coming home.

Ugwu came to realize other things. He was not a normal houseboy; Dr Okeke's houseboy next door did not sleep on a bed in a room, he slept on the kitchen floor. The houseboy at the end of the street with whom Ugwu went to the market did not decide what would be cooked, he cooked whatever he was ordered to. And they did not have masters or madams who gave them books, saying, 'This one is excellent, just excellent.'

Ugwu did not understand most of the sentences in the books, but he made a show of reading them. Nor did he entirely understand the conversations of Master and his friends but listened anyway and heard that the world had to do more about the black people killed in Sharpeville, that the spy plane shot down in Russia served the Americans right, that De Gaulle was being clumsy in Algeria, that the United Nations would never get rid of Tshombe in Katanga. Once in

a while, Master would stand up and raise his glass and his voice – 'To that brave black American led into the University of Mississippi!' 'To Ceylon and to the world's first woman prime minister!' 'To Cuba for beating the Americans at their own game!' – and Ugwu would enjoy the clink of beer bottles against glasses, glasses against glasses, bottles against bottles.

More friends visited on weekends, and when Ugwu came out to serve their drinks, Master would sometimes introduce him – in English, of course. 'Ugwu helps me around the house. Very clever boy.' Ugwu would continue to uncork bottles of beer and Coke silently, while feeling the warm glow of pride spread up from the tips of his toes. He especially liked it when Master introduced him to foreigners, like Mr Johnson, who was from the Caribbean and stammered when he spoke, or Professor Lehman, the nasal white man from America who had eyes that were the piercing green of a fresh leaf. Ugwu was vaguely frightened the first time he saw him because he had always imagined that only evil spirits had grass-coloured eyes.

He soon knew the regular guests and brought out their drinks before Master asked him to. There was Dr Patel, the Indian man who drank Golden Guinea beer mixed with Coke. Master called him *Doc*. Whenever Ugwu brought out the kola nut, Master would say, 'Doc, you know the kola nut does not understand English,' before going on to bless the kola nut in Igbo. Dr Patel laughed each time, with great pleasure, leaning back on the sofa and throwing his short legs up as if it were a joke he had never heard before. After Master broke the kola nut and passed the saucer around, Dr Patel always took a lobe and put it into his shirt pocket; Ugwu had never seen him eat one.

There was tall, skinny Professor Ezeka, with a voice so hoarse he sounded as if he spoke in whispers. He always picked up his glass and held it up against the light, to make sure Ugwu had washed it well. Sometimes, he brought his own bottle of gin. Other times, he asked for tea and then went on to examine the sugar bowl and the tin of milk, muttering, 'The capabilities of bacteria are quite extraordinary.'

There was Okeoma, who came most often and stayed the longest. He looked younger than the other guests, always wore a pair of shorts, and had bushy hair with a parting at the side that stood higher than Master's. It looked rough and tangled, unlike Master's, as if Okeoma did not like to comb it. Okeoma drank Fanta. He read his poetry aloud on some evenings, holding a sheaf of papers, and

Ugwu would look through the kitchen door to see all the guests watching him, their faces half frozen, as if they did not dare breathe. Afterwards, Master would clap and say, in his loud voice, 'The voice of our generation!' and the clapping would go on until Okeoma said sharply, 'That's enough!'

And there was Miss Adebayo, who drank brandy like Master and was nothing like Ugwu had expected a university woman to be. His aunty had told him a little about university women. She would know, because she worked as a cleaner at the Faculty of Sciences during the day and as a waitress at the staff club in the evenings; sometimes, too, the lecturers paid her to come in and clean their homes. She said university women kept framed photos of their student days in Ibadan and Britain and America on their shelves. For breakfast, they had eggs that were not cooked well, so that the yolk danced around, and they wore bouncy, straight-hair wigs and maxi-dresses that grazed their ankles. She told a story once about a couple at a cocktail party in the staff club who climbed out of a nice Peugeot 404, the man in an elegant cream suit, the woman in a green dress. Everybody turned to watch them, walking hand in hand, and then the wind blew the woman's wig off her head. She was bald. They used hot combs to straighten their hair, his aunty had said, because they wanted to look like white people, although the combs ended up burning their hair off.

Ugwu had imagined the bald woman: beautiful, with a nose that stood up, not the sitting-down, flattened noses that he was used to. He imagined quietness, delicacy, the kind of woman whose sneeze, whose laugh and talk, would be soft as the under feathers closest to a chicken's skin. But the women who visited Master, the ones he saw at the supermarket and on the streets, were different. Most of them did wear wigs (a few had their hair plaited or braided with thread), but they were not delicate stalks of grass. They were loud. The loudest was Miss Adebayo. She was not an Igbo woman; Ugwu could tell from her name, even if he had not once run into her and her housegirl at the market and heard them both speaking rapid, incomprehensible Yoruba. She had asked him to wait so that she could give him a ride back to the campus, but he thanked her and said he still had many things left to buy and would take a taxi, although he had finished shopping. He did not want to ride in her car, did not like how her voice rose above Master's in the living room, challenging and arguing. He often fought the urge to raise his own voice from behind the kitchen door and tell her to shut up, especially when she called

Master a sophist. He did not know what *sophist* meant, but he did not like that she called Master that. Nor did he like the way she looked at Master. Even when somebody else was speaking and she was supposed to be focused on that person, her eyes would be on Master. One Saturday night, Okeoma dropped a glass and Ugwu came in to clean up the shards that lay on the floor. He took his time cleaning. The conversation was clearer from here and it was easier to make out what Professor Ezeka said. It was almost impossible to hear the man from the kitchen.

'We should have a bigger pan-African response to what is happening in the American South really – ' Professor Ezeka said.

Master cut him short. 'You know, pan-Africanism is fundamentally a European notion.'

'You are digressing,' Professor Ezeka said, and shook his head in his usual superior manner.

'Maybe it *is* a European notion,' Miss Adebayo said, 'but in the bigger picture, we are all one race.'

'What bigger picture?' Master asked. 'The bigger picture of the white man! Can't you see that we are not all alike except to white eyes?' Master's voice rose easily, Ugwu had noticed, and by his third glass of brandy, he would start to gesture with his glass, leaning forwards until he was seated on the very edge of his armchair. Late at night, after Master was in bed, Ugwu would sit on the same chair and imagine himself speaking swift English, talking to rapt imaginary guests, using words like *decolonize* and *pan-African*, moulding his voice after Master's, and he would shift and shift until he too was on the edge of the chair.

'Of course we are all alike, we all have white oppression in common,' Miss Adebayo said dryly. 'Pan-Africanism is simply the most sensible response.'

'Of course, of course, but my point is that the only authentic identity for the African is the tribe,' Master said. 'I am Nigerian because a white man created Nigeria and gave me that identity. I am black because the white man constructed *black* to be as different as possible from his *white*. But I was Igbo before the white man came.'

Professor Ezeka snorted and shook his head, thin legs crossed. 'But you became aware that you were Igbo because of the white man. The pan-Igbo idea itself came only in the face of white domination. You must see that tribe as it is today is as colonial a product as nation and race.' Professor Ezeka recrossed his legs.

'The pan-Igbo idea existed long before the white man!' Master shouted. 'Go and ask the elders in your village about your history.'

'The problem is that Odenigbo is a hopeless tribalist, we need to keep him quiet,' Miss Adebayo said.

Then she did what startled Ugwu: she got up laughing and went over to Master and pressed his lips close together. She stood there for what seemed a long time, her hand to his mouth. Ugwu imagined Master's brandy-diluted saliva touching her fingers. He stiffened as he picked up the shattered glass. He wished that Master would not sit there shaking his head as if the whole thing were very funny.

Miss Adebayo became a threat after that. She began to look more and more like a fruit bat, with her pinched face and cloudy complexion and print dresses that billowed around her body like wings. Ugwu served her drink last and wasted long minutes drying his hands on a dishcloth before he opened the door to let her in. He worried that she would marry Master and bring her Yoruba-speaking housegirl into the house and destroy his herb garden and tell him what he could and could not cook. Until he heard Master and Okeoma talking.

'She did not look as if she wanted to go home today,' Okeoma said. '*Nwoke m*, are you sure you are not planning to do something with her?'

'Don't talk rubbish.'

'If you did, nobody in London would know.'

'Look, look – '

'I know you're not interested in her like that, but what still puzzles me is what these women see in you.'

Okeoma laughed and Ugwu was relieved. He did not want Miss Adebayo – or any woman – coming in to intrude and disrupt their lives. Some evenings, when the visitors left early, he would sit on the floor of the living room and listen to Master talk. Master mostly talked about things Ugwu did not understand, as if the brandy made him forget that Ugwu was not one of his visitors. But it didn't matter. All Ugwu needed was the deep voice, the melody of the English-inflected Igbo, the glint of the thick eyeglasses.

He had been with Master for four months when Master told him, 'A special woman is coming for the weekend. Very special. You make sure the house is clean. I'll order the food from the staff club.'

'But, sah, I can cook,' Ugwu said, with a sad premonition.

'She's just come back from London, my good man, and she likes her rice a certain way. Fried rice, I think. I'm not sure you could make something suitable.' Master turned to walk away.

'I can make that, sah,' Ugwu said quickly, although he had no idea what fried rice was. 'Let me make the rice, and you get the chicken from the staff club.'

'Artful negotiation,' Master said in English. 'All right, then. You make the rice.'

'Yes, sah,' Ugwu said. Later, he cleaned the rooms and scrubbed the toilet carefully, as he always did, but Master looked at them and said they were not clean enough and went out and bought another jar of Vim powder and asked, sharply, why Ugwu didn't clean the spaces between the tiles. Ugwu cleaned them again. He scrubbed until sweat crawled down the sides of his face, until his arm ached. And on Saturday, he bristled as he cooked. Master had never complained about his work before. It was this woman's fault, this woman that Master considered too special even for him to cook for. Just come back from London, indeed.

When the doorbell rang, he muttered a curse under his breath about her stomach swelling from eating faeces. He heard Master's raised voice, excited and childlike, followed by a long silence and he imagined their hug, and her ugly body pressed to Master's. Then he heard her voice. He stood still. He had always thought that Master's English could not be compared to anybody's, not Professor Ezeka, whose English one could hardly hear, or Okeoma, who spoke English as if he were speaking Igbo, with the same cadences and pauses, or Patel, whose English was a faded lilt. Not even the white man Professor Lehman, with his words forced out through his nose, sounded as dignified as Master. Master's English was music, but what Ugwu was hearing now, from this woman, was magic. Here was a superior tongue, a luminous language, the kind of English he heard on Master's radio, rolling out with clipped precision. It reminded him of slicing a yam with a newly sharpened knife, the easy perfection in every slice.

'Ugwu!' Master called. 'Bring Coke!'

Ugwu walked out to the living room. She smelt of coconuts. He greeted her, his 'Good afternoon' a mumble, his eyes on the floor.

'*Kedu?*' she asked.

'I'm well, mah.' He still did not look at her. As he uncorked the bottle, she laughed at something Master said. Ugwu was about to pour the cold Coke into her glass when she touched his hand and said, '*Rapuba*, don't worry about that.'

Her hand was lightly moist. 'Yes, mah.'

'Your master has told me how well you take care of him, Ugwu,' she said. Her Igbo words were softer than her English, and he was disappointed at how easily they came out. He wished she would stumble in her Igbo; he had not expected English that perfect to sit beside equally perfect Igbo.

'Yes, mah,' he mumbled. His eyes were still focused on the floor.

'What have you cooked us, my good man?' Master asked, as if he did not know. He sounded annoyingly jaunty.

'I serve now, sah,' Ugwu said, in English, and then wished he had said *I am serving now*, because it sounded better, because it would impress her more. As he set the table, he kept from glancing at the living room, although he could hear her laughter and Master's voice, with its irritating new timbre.

He finally looked at her as she and Master sat down at the table. Her oval face was smooth like an egg, the lush colour of rain-drenched earth, and her eyes were large and slanted and she looked like she was not supposed to be walking and talking like everyone else; she should be in a glass case like the one in Master's study, where people could admire her curvy, fleshy body, where she would be preserved untainted. Her hair was long; each of the plaits that hung down to her neck ended in a soft fuzz. She smiled easily; her teeth were the same bright white of her eyes. He did not know how long he stood staring at her until Master said, 'Ugwu usually does a lot better than this. He makes a fantastic stew.'

'It's quite tasteless, which is better than bad-tasting, of course,' she said, and smiled at Master before turning to Ugwu. 'I'll show you how to cook rice properly, Ugwu, without using so much oil.'

'Yes, mah,' Ugwu said. He had invented what he imagined was fried rice, frying the rice in groundnut oil, and had half-hoped it would send them both to the toilet in a hurry. Now, though, he wanted to cook a perfect meal, a savoury *jollof* rice or his special stew with *arigbe*, to show her how well he could cook. He delayed washing up so that the running water would not drown out her voice. When he served them tea, he took his time rearranging the biscuits on the

saucer so that he could linger and listen to her, until Master said, 'That's quite all right, my good man.' Her name was Olanna. But Master said it only once; he mostly called her *nkem*, my own. They talked about the quarrel between the Sardauna and the premier of the Western Region, and then Master said something about waiting until she moved to Nsukka and how it was only a few weeks away after all. Ugwu held his breath to make sure he had heard clearly. Master was laughing now, saying, 'But we will live here together, *nkem*, and you can keep the Elias Avenue flat as well.'

She would move to Nsukka. She would live in this house. Ugwu walked away from the door and stared at the pot on the stove. His life would change. He would learn to cook fried rice and he would have to use less oil and he would take orders from her. He felt sad, and yet his sadness was incomplete; he felt expectant, too, an excitement he did not entirely understand.

That evening, he was washing Master's linen in the backyard, near the lemon tree, when he looked up from the basin of soapy water and saw her standing by the back door, watching him. At first, he was sure it was his imagination, because the people he thought the most about often appeared to him in visions. He had imaginary conversations with Anulika all the time, and, right after he touched himself at night, Nnesinachi would appear briefly with a mysterious smile on her face. But Olanna was really at the door. She was walking across the yard towards him. She had only a wrapper tied around her chest, and as she walked, he imagined that she was a yellow cashew, shapely and ripe.

'Mah? You want anything?' he asked. He knew that if he reached out and touched her face, it would feel like butter, the kind Master unwrapped from a paper packet and spread on his bread.

'Let me help you with that.' She pointed at the bedsheet he was rinsing, and slowly he took the dripping sheet out. She held one end and moved back. 'Turn yours that way,' she said.

He twisted his end of the sheet to his right while she twisted to her right, and they watched as the water was squeezed out. The sheet was slippery.

'Thank, mah,' he said.

She smiled. Her smile made him feel taller. 'Oh, look, those pawpaws are almost ripe. *Lotekwa*, don't forget to pluck them.'

There was something polished about her voice, about her; she was like the stone that lay right below a gushing spring, rubbed smooth

by years and years of sparkling water, and looking at her was similar to finding that stone, knowing that there were so few like it. He watched her walk back indoors.

He did not want to share the job of caring for Master with anyone, did not want to disrupt the balance of his life with Master, and yet it was suddenly unbearable to think of not seeing her again. Later, after dinner, he tiptoed to Master's bedroom and rested his ear on the door. She was moaning loudly, sounds that seemed so unlike her, so uncontrolled and stirring and throaty. He stood there for a long time, until the moans stopped, and then he went back to his room.