

FICTION

# The thing around your neck

In the halfway house of migration, will love allow you to slip the noose of home?

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You thought everybody in America had a car and a gun, your uncles and aunts thought so too. After you won the American visa lottery, your uncles and aunts and cousins told you, in a month you will have a big car. Soon, a big house. But don't buy a gun like those Americans.

They trooped into the shantytown house in Lagos, standing beside the nail-studded zinc walls because the chairs did not go round, to say goodbye in loud voices and tell you with lowered voices what they wanted you to send them. In comparison to the big car and house (and possibly gun), the things they wanted were minor - handbags and shoes and perfumes and clothes. You said OK, no problem.

Your uncle in America said you could live with him until you got on your feet. He picked you up at the airport and bought you a big hot dog with yellow mustard that nauseated you. Introduction to America, he said with a laugh. He lived in a small white town in Maine, in a house by a lake. He told you that the company he worked for had offered him a few thousand more, plus stocks, because they were trying to look diverse. They included him in every brochure, even those that had nothing to do with engineering. He grinned and said the job was good, was worth living in an all-white town for, even though his wife had to drive an hour to find a hair salon that did black hair. The trick was to understand America, to know that America was give and take. You gave up a lot but gained a lot too.

He showed you how to apply for a cashier's job in the gas station on Main Street and he enrolled you in a community college, where the girls gawked at your hair. Does it stand up when you take the braids out? All of it stands up? How? Why? Do you use a comb?

You smiled tightly when they asked those questions. Your uncle told you to expect it; a mixture of ignorance and arrogance, he called it. Then he told you how the neighbours said, a few months after he moved into his house, that the squirrels had started to disappear. They had heard Africans ate all kinds of wild animals.

You laughed with your uncle and felt at home in his house, his wife called you nwanne, sister, and his two school-age children called you auntie. They spoke Igbo and ate garri for lunch and it was like home. Until your uncle came into the cramped basement where you slept with old boxes and books and pulled your breasts, as though he were plucking mangoes from a tree, moaning. He wasn't really your uncle; he was a distant cousin of your aunt's husband, not related by blood.

As you packed your bags that night, he sat on your bed and smiled and said you had nowhere to go. If you let him, he would do many things for you. Smart women did it all the time. How did you think those women back home in Lagos with well-paying jobs made it? Even women in New York City?

You locked yourself in the bathroom and the next morning you left, walking the long windy road, smelling the baby fish in the lake. You saw him drive past, he had always dropped you off at Main Street, and he didn't honk. You wondered what he would tell his wife, why you had left. And you remembered what he had said, that America was give and take.

You ended up in Connecticut, in another little town, because it was the last stop of the bus you got on. You walked into the restaurant nearby and said you would work for two dollars less than the other waitresses. The owner, Juan, had inky black hair and smiled to show a bright yellow tooth. He said he had never had a Nigerian employee but all immigrants worked hard. He knew, he'd been there. He'd pay you a dollar less, but under the table, he didn't like all the taxes they were making him pay.

You could not afford to go to school, because now you paid rent for the tiny room with the stained carpet. Besides, the small Connecticut town didn't have a community college and a credit in the state university cost too much. So you went to the public library, you looked up course syllabuses on school websites and read some of the books. Sometimes you sat on the lumpy mattress of your twin bed and thought about home, your parents, your uncles and aunts, your cousins, your friends. The people who never broke a profit from the mangos and akara they hawked, whose houses - zinc sheets precariously held together by nails - fell apart in the rainy season. The people who came out to say goodbye, to rejoice because you won the American visa lottery, to confess their envy. The people who sent their children to the secondary school where teachers gave an A when someone slipped them brown envelopes.

You had never needed to pay for an A, never slipped a brown envelope to a teacher in secondary school. Still, you chose long brown envelopes to send half your month's earnings to your parents; you always used the notes that Juan gave you because those were crisp, unlike the tips. You didn't write a letter. There was nothing to write about.

The little weeks you wanted to write though, because you had stories to tell. You wanted to write about the surprising openness of people in America, how eagerly they told you about their mother fighting cancer, about their sister-in-law's premature baby - things people should hide, should reveal only to the family members who wished them well. You wanted to write about the way people left so much food on their plates and crumpled a few dollar bills down, as though it was an offering, expiation for the wasted food. You wanted to write about the child who started to cry and pull at her blonde hair and instead of the parents making her shut up, they pleaded with her and then they all got up and left.

You wanted to write about the rich Americans who wore shabby clothes and tattered sneakers, who looked like the nightwatchmen in front of the large compounds in Lagos. You wanted to write about the poor people who were fat and the rich people who were thin. And you wanted to write that everybody in America did not have a big house and car, though you still weren't sure about the guns because they might have them inside their bags and pockets.

It wasn't just your parents you wanted to write to, it was your friends and cousins and aunts and uncles. But you could never afford enough perfume and clothes and handbags to go around and still pay your rent on the waitressing job, so you wrote to nobody.

Nobody knew where you were because you told no one. Sometimes you felt invisible and tried to walk through the wall of your room into the hallway and when you bumped into the wall, it left bruises on your arms. Once, Juan asked if you had a man that hit you because he would take care of him and you laughed a mysterious laugh. At nights, something wrapped itself around your neck, something that very nearly choked you before you woke up.

Some people thought you were from Jamaica because they thought that every black person with an accent was Jamaican. Or some who guessed that you were African asked if you knew so and so from Kenya or so and so from Zimbabwe because they thought Africa was a country where everyone knew everyone else.

So when he asked you, in the dimness of the restaurant after you recited the daily specials, what African country you were from, you said Nigeria and expected him to ask if you knew a friend he had made in Senegal or Botswana. But he asked if you were Yoruba or Igbo, because you didn't have a Fulani face. You were surprised - you thought he must be a professor of anthropology, a little young but who was to say? Igbo, you said. He asked your name and said Akunna was pretty. He did not ask what it meant, fortunately, because you were sick of how people said, Father's Wealth? You mean, like, your father will actually sell you to a husband?

He had been to Ghana and Kenya and Tanzania, he had read about all the other African countries, their histories, their complexities. You wanted to feel disdain, to show it as you brought his order, because white people who liked Africa too much and who liked Africa too little were the same - condescending. But he didn't act like he knew too much, didn't shake his head in the superior way a professor back in the Maine community college once did as he talked about Angola, didn't show any condescension. He came in the next day and sat at the same table and when you asked if the chicken was OK, he asked you something about Lagos. He came in the third day and talked for so long - asking you often if you didn't think Mobutu and Idi Amin were similar - you had to tell him it was against restaurant policy. He brushed your hand when you placed the coffee down. The fourth day, you told Juan you didn't want that table anymore.

After your shift that day, he was waiting outside, leaning by a pole, asking you to go out with him because your name rhymed with hakuna matata and The Lion King was the only maudlin movie he'd ever liked. You didn't know what The Lion King was. You looked at him in the bright light and realised that his eyes were the colour of extra virgin olive oil, a greenish gold. Extra virgin olive oil was the only thing you loved, truly loved, in America.

He was a senior at the state university. He told you how old he was and you asked why he had not graduated yet. This was America, after all, it was not like back home where universities closed so often that people added three years to their normal course of study and lecturers went on strike after strike and were still not paid. He said he had taken time off, a couple of years after high school, to discover himself and travel, mostly to Africa and Asia. You asked him where he ended up finding himself and he laughed. You did not laugh. You did not know that people could simply choose not to go to school, that people could dictate to life. You were used to accepting what life gave, writing down what life dictated.

You said no the following three days, to going out with him, because you didn't think it was right, because you were uncomfortable with the way he looked into your eyes, the way you laughed so easily at what he said. And then the fourth night, you panicked when he was not standing at the door after your shift. You prayed for the first time in a long time and when he came up behind you and said, hey, you said yes you would go out with him even before he asked.

The next day, he took you to Chang's and your fortune cookie had two strips of paper. Both were blank.

You knew you had become comfortable with him when you told him the real reason you asked Juan for a different table - Jeopardy. When you watched Jeopardy on the restaurant TV, you rooted for the following, in this order: women of colour, black men, white women, before finally, white men, which meant you never rooted for the white men. He laughed and told you he was used to not being rooted for, his mother taught women's studies.

And you knew you had become close when you told him that your father was really not a schoolteacher in Lagos, that he was a taxi driver. And you told him about that day in Lagos traffic in your father's car, it was raining and your seat was wet because of the rust-eaten hole in the roof. The traffic was heavy, the traffic was always heavy in Lagos, and when it rained it was chaos. The roads were so badly drained some cars would get stuck in muddy potholes and some of your cousins got paid to push the cars out. The rain and the swampy road - you thought - made your father step on the brakes too late that day. You heard the bump before you felt it. The car your father rammed into was wide, foreign and dark green, with yellow headlights like the eyes of a cat. Your father started to cry and beg even before he got out of the car and laid himself flat on the road, stopping the traffic. Sorry sir, sorry sir, if you sell me and my family you cannot even buy one tyre in your car, he chanted. Sorry sir.

The big man seated at the back did not come out, his driver did, examining the damage, looking at your father's sprawled form from the corner of his eye as though the pleading was a song he was ashamed to admit he liked. Finally, he let your father go. Waved him away. The other cars honked and drivers cursed. When your father got back in the car, you refused to look at him because he was just like the pigs that waddled in the marshes around the market. Your father looked like nsi. Shit.

After you told him this, he held your hand and said he understood. You shook your hand free, annoyed, because he thought the world was, or ought to be, full of people like him. You told him there was nothing to understand, it was just the way it was.

He didn't eat meat, because he thought it was wrong the way they killed animals, he said they released fear toxins into the animals and the fear toxins made people paranoid. Back home, the meat pieces you ate, when there was meat, were the size of half your finger. But you did not tell him that. You did not tell him either that the dawadawa cubes your mother cooked everything with, because curry and thyme were too expensive, had MSG, were MSG. He said MSG caused cancer, it was the reason he liked Chang's; Chang didn't cook with MSG.

Once, at Chang's, he told the waiter he had lived in Shanghai for a year, that he spoke some Mandarin. The waiter warmed up and told him what soup was best and then asked him, you have girlfriend in Shanghai? And he smiled and said nothing.

You lost your appetite, the region beneath your breasts felt clogged, inside. That night, you didn't moan when he was inside you, you bit your lips and pretended that you didn't come because you knew he would worry. Finally you told him why you were upset, that the Chinese man assumed you could not possibly be his girlfriend, and that he had smiled and said nothing. Before he apologised, he gazed at you blankly and you knew that he did not understand.

He bought you presents and when you objected about the cost, he said he had a trust fund, it was OK. His presents mystified you. A fist-sized ball that you shook to watch snow fall on a tiny house, or watch a plastic ballerina in pink spin around. A shiny rock. An expensive scarf hand-painted in Mexico that you could never wear because of the colour. Finally you told him, your voice stretched in irony, that in the third world presents should be useful. The rock, for instance, would work if you could grind things with it, or wear it. He laughed long and hard, but you did not laugh. You realised that in his life, he could buy presents that were just presents and nothing else. When he started to buy you shoes and clothes and books, you asked him not to, you didn't want any presents at all.

Still, you did not fight. Not really. You argued and then you made up and made love and ran your hands through each other's hair, his soft and yellow like the swinging tassels of growing corncobs, yours dark and bouncy like the filling of a pillow. You felt safe in his arms, the same safeness you felt back home in the shantytown house of zinc, the same safeness you felt when he got too much sun and his skin turned the colour of a ripe watermelon and you kissed portions of his back before you rubbed lotion on it. He found the African store in the Hartford Yellow Pages and drove you there. The store owner, a Ghanaian, asked him if he was African, like the white Kenyans or South Africans and he laughed and said yes, but he'd been in America for a long time, had missed the food of his childhood. He didn't tell the store owner that he was just joking. You cooked for him; he liked jollof rice but after he ate garri and onugbu soup, he threw up in your sink. You didn't mind, though, because now you could cook onugbu soup with meat.

The thing that wrapped itself around your neck, that nearly always choked you before you fell asleep, started to loosen, to let go.

You knew by people's reactions that you were abnormal - the way the nasty ones were too nasty and the nice ones too nice. The old white women who muttered and glared at him, the black men who shook their heads at you, the black women whose eyes bemoaned your lack of self-esteem. Or the black women who smiled swift secret solidarity smiles, the black men who tried too hard to forgive you, saying a too obvious hi to him, the white women who said, what a good looking pair, too loudly, as if to prove their own tolerance to themselves.

But his parents were different; they almost made you think it was normal. His mother told you that he had never brought a girl to meet them, except for his high school prom date and he smiled stiffly and held your hand. The tablecloth shielded your clasped hands. He squeezed your hand and you squeezed back and wondered why he was so stiff, why his extra virgin olive oil eyes darkened as he spoke to his parents. His mother asked if those were real cowries strung through your braids and if you'd read Simone de Beauvoir and Nawal El Saadawi. His father asked how similar Indian food was to Nigerian food and teased you about paying when the check came. You looked at them and felt grateful that they did not examine you like an exotic trophy, an ivory tusk.

He told you about his issues with his parents later, how they portioned out love like a birthday cake, how they would give him a bigger slice if only he'd go to law school. You wanted to sympathise. But instead you were angry.

You were angrier when he told you he had refused to go up to Canada with them for a week or two, to their summer cottage in the Quebec countryside. They had even asked him to bring you. He showed you pictures of the cottage and you wondered why it was called a cottage because the buildings that big around your neighbourhood back home were banks and churches. You dropped a glass and it shattered on the hardwood of his apartment floor and he asked what was wrong and you said nothing, although you thought a lot was wrong. Your worlds were wrong.

Later, in the shower, you started to cry, you watched the water dilute your tears and you didn't know why you were crying.

You wrote home finally, when the thing around your neck had almost completely let go. Almost. A short letter to your parents and brothers and sisters, slipped in between the crisp dollar bills, and you included your address. You got a reply only days later, by courier. Your mother wrote the letter herself, you knew from the spidery penmanship, from the misspelled words.

Your father was dead; he had slumped over the steering wheel of his taxi. It had happened five months ago, she wrote, and offered to use some of the money you sent to give him a nice funeral. They killed a goat for the guests and buried him in a real coffin, not just planks of wood.

You curled up in bed, pressed your knees tight to your chest and cried. He held you while you cried, smoothed your hair, and offered to go with you, back home to Nigeria. You said no, you needed to go alone. He asked if you would come back and you reminded him that you had a green card and you would lose it if you did not come back in one year. He said you knew what he meant. Would you come back, come back?

You turned away and said nothing and when he drove you to the airport, you hugged him tight, clutching at the muscles of his back, until your ribs hurt. And you said thank you.

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