THE THING AROUND YOUR NECK

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JUMPING MONKEY HILL

The cabins all had thatch roofs. Names like Baboon Lodge and Porcupine Place were hand-painted beside the wooden doors that led out to cobblestone paths, and the windows were left open so that guests woke up to the rustling of the jacaranda leaves and the steady calming crash of the sea's waves. The wicker trays held a selection of fine teas. At midmorning, discreet black maids made the bed, cleaned the elegant bathtub, vacuumed the carpet, and left wildflowers in handcrafted vases. Ujunwa found it odd that the African Writers Workshop was held here, at Jumping Monkey Hill, outside Cape Town. The name itself was incongruous, and the resort had the complacence of the well-fed about it, the kind of place where she imagined affluent foreign tourists would dart around taking pictures of lizards and then return home still mostly unaware that there were more black people than red-capped lizards in South Africa. Later, she would learn that Edward Campbell had chosen the resort; he had spent weekends there when he was a lecturer at the University of Cape Town years ago.

But she didn't know this the afternoon Edward—an old man

in a summer hat who smiled to show two front teeth the color of mildew—picked her up at the airport. He kissed her on both cheeks. He asked if she had had any trouble with her prepaid ticket in Lagos, if she minded waiting for the Ugandan whose flight would come soon, if she was hungry. He told her that his wife, Isabel, had already picked up most of the other workshop participants and that their friends Simon and Hermione, who had come with them from London as paid staff, were arranging a welcome lunch back at the resort. He and Ujunwa sat down on a bench in Arrivals. He balanced the sign with the Ugandan's name on his shoulder and told her how humid Cape Town was at this time of the year, how pleased he was about the workshop arrangements. He lengthened his words. His accent was what the British called "posh," the kind some rich Nigerians tried to mimic and ended up sounding unintentionally funny. Ujunwa wondered if he was the one who had selected her for the workshop. Probably not; it was the British Council that had made the call for entries and then selected the best.

Edward had moved a little and sat closer to her. He was asking what she did back home in Nigeria. Ujunwa faked a wide yawn and hoped he would stop talking. He repeated his question and asked whether she had taken leave from her job to attend the workshop. He was watching her intently. He could have been anything from sixty-five to ninety. She could not tell his age from his face; it was pleasant but unformed, as though God, having created him, had slapped him flat against a wall and smeared his features all over his face. She smiled vaguely and said that she had lost her job just before she left Lagos—a job in banking—and so there had been no need to take leave. She yawned again. He seemed keen to know more and she did

not want to say more, and so when she looked up and saw the Ugandan walking toward them, she was relieved.

The Ugandan looked sleepy. He was in his early thirties, square-faced and dark-skinned, with uncombed hair that had tightened into kinky balls. He bowed as he shook Edward's hand with both of his and then turned and mumbled a hello to Ujunwa. He sat in the front seat of the Renault. The drive to the resort was long, on roads haphazardly chiseled into steep hills, and Ujunwa worried that Edward was too old to drive so fast. She held her breath until they arrived at the cluster of thatch roofs and manicured paths. A smiling blond woman showed her to her cabin, Zebra Lair, which had a four-poster bed and linen that smelled of lavender. Ujunwa sat on the bed for a moment and then got up to unpack, looking out of the window from time to time to search the canopy of trees for lurking monkeys.

There were none, unfortunately, Edward told the participants later, as they ate lunch under pink umbrellas on the terrace, their tables pushed close to the railing so that they could look down at the turquoise sea. He pointed at each person and did the introductions. The white South African woman was from Durban, while the black man came from Johannesburg. The Tanzanian man came from Arusha, the Ugandan man from Entebbe, the Zimbabwean woman from Bulawayo, the Kenyan man from Nairobi, and the Senegalese woman, the youngest at twenty-three, had flown in from Paris, where she attended university.

Edward introduced Ujunwa last: "Ujunwa Ogundu is our Nigerian participant and she lives in Lagos." Ujunwa looked around the table and wondered with whom she would get along. The Senegalese woman was the most promising, with

the irreverent sparkle in her eyes and the Francophone accent and the streaks of silver in her fat dreadlocks. The Zimbabwean woman had longer, thinner dreadlocks, and the cowries in them clinked as she moved her head from side to side. She seemed hyper, overactive, and Ujunwa thought she might like her, but only the way she liked alcohol—in small amounts. The Kenyan and the Tanzanian looked ordinary, almost indistinguishable—tall men with wide foreheads who were wearing tattered beards and short-sleeved patterned shirts. She thought she would like them in the uninvested way that one likes nonthreatening people. She wasn't sure about the South Africans: the white woman had a too-earnest face, humorless and free of makeup, and the black man looked patiently pious, like a Jehovah's Witness who went from door to door and smiled when each was shut in his face. As for the Ugandan, Ujunwa had disliked him from the airport, and did so even more now because of his toadying answers to Edward's questions, the way he leaned forward to speak only to Edward and ignored the other participants. They, in turn, said little to him. They all knew he was the winner of the last Lipton African Writers' Prize, with an award of fifteen thousand pounds. They didn't include him in the polite talk about their flights.

After they ate the creamy chicken prettied with herbs, after they drank the sparkling water that came in glossy bottles, Edward stood up to give the welcoming address. He squinted as he spoke, and his thin hair fluttered in the breeze that smelled of the sea. He started by telling them what they already knew—that the workshop would be for two weeks; that it was his idea but of course funded graciously by the Chamberlain Arts Foundation, just as the Lipton African Writers' Prize had been his idea and funded also by the good people at the foundation; that they were all expected to produce one story for

possible publication in the *Oratory;* that laptops would be provided in the cabins; that they would write during the first week and review each participant's work during the second week; and that the Ugandan would be workshop leader. Then he talked about himself, how African literature had been his cause for forty years, a lifelong passion that started at Oxford. He glanced often at the Ugandan. The Ugandan nodded eagerly to acknowledge each glance. Finally Edward introduced his wife, Isabel, although they had all met her. He told them she was an animal rights activist, an old Africa hand who had spent her teenage years in Botswana. He looked proud when she stood up, as if her tall and lean gracefulness made up for what he lacked in appearance. Her hair was a muted red, cut so that wisps framed her face. She patted it as she said, "Edward, really, an introduction." Ujunwa imagined, though, that Isabel had wanted that introduction, that perhaps she had even reminded Edward of it, saying, Now, dear, remember to introduce me properly at lunch. Her tone would have been delicate.

The next day at breakfast, Isabel used just such a tone when she sat next to Ujunwa and said that surely, with that exquisite bone structure, Ujunwa had to come from Nigerian royal stock. The first thing that came to Ujunwa's mind was to ask if Isabel ever needed royal blood to explain the good looks of friends back in London. She did not ask that but instead said—because she could not resist—that she was indeed a princess and came from an ancient lineage and that one of her forebears had captured a Portuguese trader in the seventeenth century and kept him, pampered and oiled, in a royal cage. She stopped to sip her cranberry juice and smile into her glass. Isabel said, brightly, that she could always spot royal blood and she hoped Ujunwa would support her antipoaching campaign and it was just horrible, horrible, how many endangered apes people were

killing and they didn't even eat them, never mind all that talk about bush meat, they just used the private parts for charms.

After breakfast, Ujunwa called her mother and told her about the resort and about Isabel and was pleased when her mother chuckled. She hung up and sat in front of her laptop and thought about how long it had been since her mother had really laughed. She sat there for a long time, moving the mouse from side to side, trying to decide whether to name her character something common, like Chioma, or something exotic, like Ibari.

> Chioma lives with her mother in Lagos. She has a degree in economics from Nsukka, has recently finished her National Youth Service, and every Thursday she buys *The Guardian* and scours the employment section and sends out her CV in brown manila envelopes. She hears nothing for weeks. Finally she gets a phone call inviting her to an interview. After the first few questions, the man says he will hire her and then walks across and stands behind her and reaches over her shoulders to squeeze her breasts. She hisses, "Stupid man! You cannot respect yourself!" and leaves. Weeks of silence follow. She helps out at her mother's boutique. She sends out more envelopes. At the next interview, the woman, speaking in the fakest, silliest accent Chioma has ever heard, tells her she wants somebody foreign-educated, and Chioma almost laughs as she leaves. More weeks of silence. Chioma has not seen her father in months, but she decides to go to his new office in Victoria Island to ask if he can help her find a job. Their meeting is tense. "Why have you not come since, eh?" he asks, pretending to be angry, because she knows it is easier for him to be angry, it is easier to be angry with people after you have hurt them. He makes some calls. He gives her a thin roll of two-hundred-naira notes. He does not ask about her mother. She notices that the Yellow Woman's photo is on his desk. Her mother had described her well: "She is very fair, she looks mixed, and the thing is that she is not even pretty, she has a face like an overripe yellow pawpaw."

The chandelier in the main dining room of Jumping Monkey Hill hung so low that Ujunwa could extend her hand and touch it. Edward sat at one end of the long, white-covered table, Isabel at the other, and the participants in between. The hardwood floors thumped noisily as waiters walked around and handed out menus. Ostrich medallions. Smoked salmon. Chicken in orange sauce. Edward urged everyone to eat the ostrich. It was simply *mah*-ve-lous. Ujunwa did not like the idea of eating an ostrich, did not even know that people ate ostriches, and when she said so, Edward laughed good-naturedly and said that of course ostrich was an African staple. Everyone else ordered the ostrich, and when Ujunwa's chicken, too citrusy, came, she wondered if perhaps she should have had the ostrich. It looked like beef, anyway. She drank more alcohol than she had ever drunk in her life, two glasses of wine, and she felt mellowed and chatted with the Senegalese about the best ways to care for natural black hair: no silicone products, lots of shea butter, combing only when wet. She overheard snatches as Edward talked about wine: Chardonnay was horribly boring.

Afterwards, the participants gathered in the gazebo—except for the Ugandan, who sat away with Edward and Isabel. They

slapped at flying insects and drank wine and laughed and teased one another: You Kenyans are too submissive! You Nigerians are too aggressive! You Tanzanians have no fashion sense! You Senegalese are too brainwashed by the French! They talked about the war in the Sudan, about the decline of the African Writers Series, about books and writers. They agreed that Dambudzo Marechera was astonishing, that Alan Paton was patronizing, that Isak Dinesen was unforgivable. The Kenyan put on a generic European accent and, between drags at his cigarette, recited what Isak Dinesen had said about all Kikuyu children becoming mentally retarded at the age of nine. They laughed. The Zimbabwean said Achebe was boring and did nothing with style, and the Kenyan said that was a sacrilege and snatched at the Zimbabwean's wineglass, until she recanted, laughing, saying of course Achebe was sublime. The Senegalese said she nearly vomited when a professor at the Sorbonne told her that Conrad was really on *her side,* as if she could not decide for herself who was on her side. Ujunwa began to jump up and down, babbling nonsense to mimic Conrad's Africans, feeling the sweet lightness of wine in her head. The Zimbabwean staggered and fell into the water fountain and climbed out spluttering, her dreadlocks wet, saying she had felt some fish wriggling around in there. The Kenyan said he would use that for his story—fish in the fancy resort fountain—since he really had no idea what he was going to write about. The Senegalese said her story was really *her* story, about how she mourned her girlfriend and how her grieving had emboldened her to come out to her parents although they now treated her being a lesbian as a mild joke and continued to speak of the families of suitable young men. The black South African looked alarmed when he heard "lesbian." He got up and walked away. The Kenyan said the black South African reminded him of his

father, who attended a Holy Spirit Revival church and didn't speak to people on the street because they were not saved. The Zimbabwean, Tanzanian, white South African, and Senegalese all spoke about their fathers.

They looked at Ujunwa and she realized that she was the only one who had said nothing, and for a moment the wine no longer fogged her mind. She shrugged and mumbled that there was really little to say about her father. He was a normal person. "Is he in your life?" the Senegalese asked, with the soft tone that meant she assumed he was not, and for the first time her Francophone accent irritated Ujunwa. "He is in my life," Ujunwa said with a quiet force. "He was the one who bought me books when I was a child and the one who read my early poems and stories." She paused, and everyone was looking at her and she added, "He did something that surprised me. It hurt me, too, but mostly it surprised me." The Senegalese looked as if she wanted to ask more but changed her mind and said she wanted more wine. "Are you writing about your father?" the Kenyan asked and Ujunwa answered with an emphatic *NO* because she had never believed in fiction as therapy. The Tanzanian told her that all fiction was therapy, some sort of therapy, no matter what anybody said.

That evening, Ujunwa tried to write, but her eyeballs were swimming and her head was aching and so she went to bed. After breakfast, she sat before the laptop and cradled a cup of tea.

Chioma gets a call from Merchant Trust bank, one of the places her father contacted. He knows the chairman of the board. She is hopeful; all the bank people she knows drive nice secondhand Jettas and have nice flats in Gba-

gada. The deputy manager interviews her. He is dark and good-looking and his glasses have an elegant designer logo on the frames and, as he speaks to her, she desperately wishes he would notice her. He doesn't. He tells her that they would like to hire her to do marketing, which will mean going out and bringing in new accounts. She will be working with Yinka. If she can bring in ten million naira during her trial period, she will be guaranteed a permanent position. She nods as he speaks. She is used to men's attention and is sulky that he does not look at her as a man looks at a woman, and she does not quite understand what he means by going out to get new accounts until she starts the job two weeks later. A uniformed driver takes her and Yinka in an air-conditioned official Jeep—she runs her hand over the smooth leather seat, is reluctant to climb out—to the home of an alhaji in Ikoyi. The alhaji is avuncular and expansive with his smile, his hand gestures, his laughter. Yinka has already come to see him a few times before and he hugs her and says something that makes her laugh. He looks at Chioma. "This one is too fine," he says. A steward serves frosted glasses of chapman. The alhaji speaks to Yinka but looks often at Chioma. Then he asks Yinka to come closer and explain the high-interest savings accounts to him and then he asks her to sit on his lap and doesn't she think he's strong enough to carry her? Yinka says of course he is and sits on his lap, smiling a serene smile. Yinka is small and fair; she reminds Chioma of the Yellow Woman.

What Chioma knows of the Yellow Woman is what her mother told her. One slow afternoon, the Yellow Woman had walked into her mother's boutique on Adeniran Ogunsanya Street. Her mother knew who the Yellow

Woman was, knew the relationship with her husband had been on for a year, knew that he had paid for the Yellow Woman's Honda Accord and her flat in Ilupeju. But what drove her mother crazy was the insult of this: the Yellow Woman coming to her boutique, looking at shoes and planning to pay for them with money that really belonged to her husband. So her mother yanked at the Yellow Woman's weave-on that hung to her back and screamed "Husband snatcher!" and the salesgirls joined in, slapping and beating the Yellow Woman until she ran out to her car. When Chioma's father heard of it, he shouted at her mother and said she had acted like one of those wild women from the street, had disgraced him, herself, and an innocent woman for nothing. Then he left the house. Chioma came back from National Youth Service and noticed that her father's wardrobe was empty. Aunty Elohor, Aunty Rose, and Aunty Uche had all come and said to her mother, "We are prepared to go with you and beg him to come back home or we will go and beg on your behalf." Chioma's mother said, "Never, not in this world. I am not going to beg him. It is enough." Aunty Funmi came and said the Yellow Woman had tied him up with medicine and she knew a good *babalawo* who could untie him. Chioma's mother said, "No, I am not going." Her boutique was failing, because Chioma's father had always helped her import shoes from Dubai. So she lowered prices, advertised in *Joy* and *City People*, and started stocking shoes made in Aba. Chioma is wearing a pair of those shoes the morning she sits in the alhaji's sitting room and watches Yinka, perched on the expansive lap, talking about the benefits of a savings account with Merchant Trust Bank.

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At first, Ujunwa tried not to notice that Edward often stared at her body, that his eyes were never on her face but always lower. The workshop days had taken on a routine of breakfast at eight and lunch at one and dinner at six in the grand dining room. On the sixth day, a blisteringly hot day, Edward handed out copies of the first story to be reviewed, written by the Zimbabwean. The participants were all seated on the terrace, and after he handed out the papers, Ujunwa saw that all the seats under the umbrellas were occupied.

"I don't mind sitting in the sun," she said, already getting up. "Would you like me to stand up for you, Edward?"

"I'd rather like you to lie down for me," he said. The moment was humid, thick; a bird cawed from far away. Edward was grinning. Only the Ugandan and the Tanzanian had heard him. Then the Ugandan laughed. And Ujunwa laughed, because it was funny and witty, she told herself, when you really thought about it. After lunch, she took a walk with the Zimbabwean and as they stopped to pick up shells by the sea, Ujunwa wanted to tell her what Edward had said. But the Zimbabwean seemed distracted, less chatty than usual; she was probably anxious about her story. Ujunwa read it that evening. She thought the writing had too many flourishes, but she liked the story and wrote appreciations and careful suggestions in the margins. It was familiar and funny, about a Harare secondary schoolteacher whose Pentecostal minister tells him that he and his wife will not have a child until they get a confession from the witches who have tied up his wife's womb. They become convinced that the witches are their next-door neighbors, and every morning they pray loudly, throwing verbal Holy Ghost bombs over the fence.

After the Zimbabwean read an excerpt the next day, there was a short silence around the dining table. Then the Ugandan spoke and said there was much energy in the prose. The white South African nodded enthusiastically. The Kenyan disagreed. Some of the sentences tried so hard to be literary that they didn't make sense, he said, and he read one such sentence. The Tanzanian man said a story had to be looked at as a whole and not in parts. Yes, the Kenyan agreed, but each part had to make sense in order to form a whole that made sense. Then Edward spoke. The writing was certainly ambitious, but the story itself begged the question "So what?" There was something terribly passé about it when one considered all the other things happening in Zimbabwe under the horrible Mugabe. Ujunwa stared at Edward. What did he mean by "passé"? How could a story so true be passé? But she did not ask what Edward meant and the Kenyan did not ask and the Ugandan did not ask and all the Zimbabwean did was shove her dreadlocks away from her face, cowries clinking. Everyone else remained silent. Soon they all began to yawn and say good night and walk to their cabins.

The next day, they did not talk about the previous evening. They talked about how fluffy the scrambled eggs were and how eerie the jacaranda leaves that rustled against their windows at night were. After dinner, the Senegalese read from her story. It was a windy night and they shut the door to keep out the sound of the whirling trees. The smoke from Edward's pipe hung over the room. The Senegalese read two pages of a funeral scene, stopping often to sip some water, her accent thickening as she became more emotional, each *t* sounding like a *z*. Afterwards, everyone turned to Edward, even the Ugandan, who seemed to have forgotten that he was workshop leader. Edward chewed at his pipe thoughtfully before he said that

homosexual stories of this sort weren't reflective of Africa, really.

"Which Africa?" Ujunwa blurted out.

The black South African shifted on his seat. Edward chewed further at his pipe. Then he looked at Ujunwa in the way one would look at a child who refused to keep still in church and said that he wasn't speaking as an Oxford-trained Africanist, but as one who was keen on the real Africa and not the imposing of Western ideas on African venues. The Zimbabwean and Tanzanian and white South African began to shake their heads as Edward was speaking.

"This may indeed be the year 2000, but how African is it for a person to tell her family that she is homosexual?" Edward asked.

The Senegalese burst out in incomprehensible French and then, a minute of fluid speech later, said, "*I* am Senegalese! *I* am Senegalese!" Edward responded in equally swift French and then said in English, with a soft smile, "I think she had too much of that excellent Bordeaux," and some of the participants chuckled.

Ujunwa was the first to leave. She was close to her cabin when she heard somebody call her and she stopped. It was the Kenyan. The Zimbabwean and the white South African were with him. "Let's go to the bar," the Kenyan said. She wondered where the Senegalese was. In the bar, she drank a glass of wine and listened to them talk about how the other guests at Jumping Monkey Hill—all of whom were white—looked at the participants suspiciously. The Kenyan said a youngish couple had stopped and stepped back a little as he approached them on the path from the swimming pool the day before. The white South African said she got suspicious looks, too, perhaps because she wore only kente-print caftans. Sitting there, staring

out into the black night, listening to the drink-softened voices around her, Ujunwa felt a self-loathing burst open in the bottom of her stomach. She should not have laughed when Edward said "I'd rather like you to lie down for me." It had not been funny. It had not been funny at all. She had hated it, hated the grin on his face and the glimpse of greenish teeth and the way he always looked at her chest rather than her face, the way his eyes climbed all over her, and yet she had made herself laugh like a deranged hyena. She put down her half-finished glass of wine and said, "Edward is always looking at my body." The Kenyan and the white South African and Zimbabwean stared at her. Ujunwa repeated, "Edward is always looking at my body." The Kenyan said it was clear from the first day that the man would be climbing on top of that flat stick of a wife and wishing it were Ujunwa; the Zimbabwean said Edward's eyes were always leering when he looked at Ujunwa; the white South African said Edward would never look at a white woman like that because what he felt for Ujunwa was a fancy without respect.

"You all noticed?" Ujunwa asked them. "You all noticed?" She felt strangely betrayed. She got up and went to her cabin. She called her mother, but the metallic voice kept saying "The number you are calling is not available at the moment, please try later," and so she hung up. She could not write. She lay in bed and stayed awake for so long that when she finally fell asleep, it was dawn.

That evening, the Tanzanian read an excerpt of his story about the killings in the Congo, from the point of view of a militiaman, a man full of prurient violence. Edward said it would be the lead story in the *Oratory,* that it was urgent and relevant, that it brought news. Ujunwa thought it read like a piece from *The Economist* with cartoon characters painted in.

But she didn't say that. She went back to her cabin and, although she had a stomachache, she turned on her laptop.

As Chioma sits and stares at Yinka, settled on the alhaji's lap, she feels as if she is acting a play. She wrote plays in secondary school. Her class staged one during the school's anniversary celebration and, at the end, there was a standing ovation and the principal said, "Chioma is our future star!" Her father was there, sitting next to her mother, clapping and smiling. But when she said she wanted to study literature in university, he told her it was not viable. His word, "viable." He said she had to study something else and could always write on the side. The alhaji is lightly running a finger over Yinka's arm and saying, "But you know Savanna Union Bank sent people to me last week." Yinka is still smiling and Chioma wonders whether her cheeks are aching. She thinks about the stories in a metal box under her bed. Her father read them all and sometimes he wrote in the margins: *Excellent! Cliché! Very good! Unclear!* It was he who had bought novels for her; her mother thought novels a waste of time and felt that all Chioma needed were her textbooks.

Yinka says, "Chioma!" and she looks up. The alhaji is talking to her. He looks almost shy and his eyes do not meet hers. There is a tentativeness toward her that he does not show toward Yinka. "I am saying you are too fine. Why is it that a Big Man has not married you?" Chioma smiles and says nothing. The alhaji says, "I have agreed that I will do business with Merchant Trust but you will be my personal contact." Chioma is uncertain what to say.

"Of course," Yinka says. "She will be your contact. We will take care of you. Ah, thank you, sir!"

The alhaji gets up and says, "Come, come, I have some nice perfumes from my last trip to London. Let me give you something to take home." He starts to walk inside and then turns. "Come, come, you two." Yinka follows. Chioma gets up. The alhaji turns again toward her, to wait for her to follow. But she does not follow. She turns to the door and opens it and walks out into the bright sunlight and past the Jeep in which the driver is sitting with the door hanging open, listening to the radio. "Aunty? Aunty, something happen?" he calls. She does not answer. She walks and walks, past the high gates and out to the street where she gets in a taxi and goes to the office to clear out her almost-empty desk.

Ujunwa woke up to the crashing sound of the sea, to a nervous clutch in her belly. She did not want to read her story tonight. She did not want to go to breakfast, either, but she went anyway and said a general good morning with a general smile. She sat next to the Kenyan and he leaned toward her and whispered that Edward had just told the Senegalese that he had dreamed of her naked navel. Naked navel. Ujunwa watched the Senegalese, delicately raising her teacup to her lips, sanguine, looking out at the sea. Ujunwa envied her confident calm. She felt upset, too, to hear that Edward was making suggestive remarks to someone else, and she wondered what her pique meant. Had she come to see his ogling as her due? She was uncomfortable thinking about this, about reading that night, and so in the afternoon, lingering over lunch, she asked the Senegalese what she had said when Edward spoke of her naked navel.

The Senegalese shrugged and said no matter how many dreams the old man had, she would still remain a happy lesbian and there was no need to say anything to him.

"But why do we say nothing?" Ujunwa asked. She raised her voice and looked at the others. "Why do we always say nothing?"

They looked at one another. The Kenyan told the waiter that the water was getting warm and could he please get some more ice. The Tanzanian asked the waiter where in Malawi he was from. The Kenyan asked him if the cooks, too, were from Malawi as all the waiters seemed to be. Then the Zimbabwean said she did not care where the cooks were from because the food at Jumping Monkey Hill was simply sickening, all that meat and cream. Other words tumbled out and Ujunwa was not sure who said what. Imagine an African gathering with no rice and why should beer be banned at the dinner table just because Edward thought wine was proper and breakfast at eight was too early, never mind that Edward said it was the "right" time and the smell of his pipe was nauseating and he had to decide which he liked to smoke, anyway, and stop rolling cigarettes halfway through a pipe.

Only the black South African remained silent. He looked bereft, hands clasped in his lap, before he said that Edward was just an old man who meant no harm. Ujunwa shouted at him, "This kind of attitude is why they could kill you and herd you into townships and require passes from you before you could walk on your own land!" Then she stopped herself and apologized. She should not have said that. She had not meant to raise her voice. The Black South African shrugged, as if he understood that the devil would always do his work. The Kenyan was watching Ujunwa. He told her, in a low voice, that she was

angry about more than just Edward and she looked away and wondered if "angry" was the right word.

Later, she went to the souvenir shop with the Kenyan and the Senegalese and the Tanzanian and tried on jewelry made of faux ivory. They teased the Tanzanian about his interest in jewelry—perhaps *he* was gay, too? He laughed and said his possibilities were limitless. Then he said, more seriously, that Edward was connected and could find them a London agent; there was no need to antagonize the man, no need to close doors to opportunity. He, for one, didn't want to end up at that dull teaching job in Arusha. He was speaking as though to everyone, but his eyes were on Ujunwa.

Ujunwa bought a necklace and put it on and liked the look of the white, tooth-shaped pendant against her throat. That evening Isabel smiled when she saw it. "I wish people would see how faux ivory looks real and leave the animals alone," she said. Ujunwa beamed and said that it was in fact real ivory and wondered whether to add that she had killed the elephant herself during a royal hunt. Isabel looked startled, then pained. Ujunwa fingered the plastic. She needed to be relaxed, and she said this to herself over and over, as she started to read from her story. Afterwards, the Ugandan spoke first, saying how strong a story it was, how believable, his confident tone surprising Ujunwa even more than his words. The Tanzanian said she captured Lagos well, the smells and sounds, and it was incredible how similar Third World cities were. The white South African said she hated that term, Third World, but had loved the realistic portrayal of what women were going through in Nigeria. Edward leaned back and said, "It's never quite like that in real life, is it? Women are never victims in that sort of crude way and certainly not in Nigeria. Nigeria has

women in high positions. The most powerful cabinet minister today is a woman."

The Kenyan cut in and said he liked the story but didn't believe Chioma would give up the job; she was, after all, a woman with no other choices, and so he thought the ending was implausible.

"The whole thing is implausible," Edward said. "This is agenda writing, it isn't a real story of real people."

Inside Ujunwa, something shrank. Edward was still speaking. Of course one had to admire the writing itself, which was quite *mah*-ve-lous. He was watching her, and it was the victory in his eyes that made her stand up and start to laugh. The participants stared at her. She laughed and laughed and they watched her and then she picked up her papers. "A real story of real people?" she said, with her eyes on Edward's face. "The only thing I didn't add in the story is that after I left my coworker and walked out of the alhaji's house, I got into the Jeep and insisted that the driver take me home because I knew it was the last time I would be riding in it."

There were other things Ujunwa wanted to say, but she did not say them. There were tears crowding up in her eyes but she did not let them out. She was looking forward to calling her mother, and as she walked back to her cabin, she wondered whether this ending, in a story, would be considered plausible.