

## **Praise for *The Bead Collector***

“*The Bead Collector* is centered around a dialogue between two women, but radiates out through family and society and the political realm in Nigeria to form a vast, rich dialogue, one, ultimately, between tradition and progress. Sefi Atta has crafted yet another stunning novel, a deeply compelling, illuminating story of personal and national identity in a time of great transition.”

**Gayle Brandeis**

“In *The Bead Collector* through Atta’s deliciously irreverent and precise prose we encounter a nuanced world of deftly crafted characters, a narrative distinct for its social and political complexity and a biting humour. The beauty of the story rests in its deceptively steady pace and the carefully placed details that create a sense of mounting suspense and ultimately a deeply enjoyable reading experience.”

**Yewande Omotoso**

“*The Bead Collector* offers a brilliant evocation of Lagos in the tense months before the coup attempt of 1976, through the eyes of Remi Lawal, a wife, mother and budding businesswoman who befriends a potentially suspicious American traveler. Sefi Atta brings to exhilarating life the textures, rhythms and byzantine subtexts of this complex society. It’s been a long time since I felt so powerfully immersed in a novel.”

**Claire Messud**

“A Nigerian woman befriends an American woman and their short friendship and peregrinations around the Ikoyi-Victoria axis provide the backdrop for a wickedly delicious expose of Nigeria’s political and business elite on the cusp of a bloody coup and monumental change. This is the bonfire of Nigerian vanities in full display. *The Bead Collector* is an era defining novel told with devastating wit and literary aplomb.”

**Toni Kan**

“Atta is a seasoned and masterful storyteller.”

**Lola Shoneyin**

“With a penetrating appreciation for the universal beliefs and behaviors that have the potential to unite disparate groups, Atta digs deep into the multifaceted layers of Nigerian history and traditions in this keen and nuanced examination of her country’s tumultuous past.”

***Booklist***

“A glimpse into the insular world of upper-class Nigeria during the mid-1970s... [a] fascinating combination of post-civil war Nigeria and good gossip.”

***Kirkus Reviews***

“Compelling... this is a thought-provoking examination of the effects of colonialism, tradition, and fear on human interactions.”

***Publishers Weekly***

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COLLECTOR

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*“In fact, the bourgeois phase in  
the history of underdeveloped countries  
is a completely useless phase.”*

—Frantz Fanon

Also by Sefi Atta

*Everything Good Will Come*

*News From Home*

*Swallow*

*A Bit of Difference*

*Sefi Atta: Selected Plays*

JANUARY





January 10, 1976

The invitation stated that the exhibition would begin at six o'clock, but by seven-thirty that evening, Tunde and I were the only Nigerian guests who had shown up. At first, I put it down to the usual disregard for punctuality in Lagos. Then I thought perhaps it was due to the rumor, which began at Christmas and spread by way of alleged confirmation, that another military coup was imminent.

Still, Tunde and I were not completely alone among foreigners. The artist, a bead painter, was Nigerian. The poor fellow was sweating away in his *dashiki* as he tried to explain postmodernism to those of us who were present. His works were hung up at one end of the hall at the Kuramo Hotel. Oyinda, our host for the evening as president of the Cultural Society of Lagos, was also Nigerian, though neither her appearance nor her demeanor would suggest that. She wore a black strapless dress that kept sliding down, so once in a while she lifted her arms in a sort of flourish. She spoke in a hoity-toity English accent, as if she had a hot potato in her mouth.

At one point in the evening, she was talking to Tunde, and I was by the table of canapés, eating an olive. She leaned over to pat Tunde's arm, and he threw his head back to laugh at what she had said. They got so loud I wasn't the only one in the hall taking notice of them. Tunde only ever laughed like that when he played with our dog, Duchess, and normally he could not be bothered with Oyinda. But he was just beginning to demonstrate how much in need of attention he was. For a moment I imagined what would happen should his neck lock in that position, which was enough to amuse me until Oyinda accidentally elbowed a waiter. A dish of tomato sauce crashed to the floor. People gasped and stepped back. The

waiter apologized as Oyinda called for soda water. An expatriate appeared on the scene to advise on how to remove stains. Tunde brushed the cocktail sticks from his French suit, and Oyinda pulled what looked like a shrimp out from her cleavage.

I wasn't about to offer my assistance. I got rid of the olive pit in my mouth and stepped out of the hall into the evening air. A woman in the corridor noticed me dabbing my tears with a handkerchief. She initially looked concerned, then she realized I was laughing, not crying.

She was Frances Cooke, an American. She mistook me for a Northerner because of my surname, Lawal. She had just returned from the North, where she had visited Kaduna and Kano.

"I'm from the South," I said. "Born and raised in Lagos."

"You must be Yoruba, then."

"Yes."

"Muslim?"

"No, no. My father was an Anglican priest, actually."

"Is that the same as Episcopalian?"

"We say Church of England over here."

We walked down the corridor and sat on a bench that faced a courtyard with an ixora hedge. To our right was the hotel's swimming pool, which was closed for the day. The lamps on the brick wall surrounding us were on, and the smell of chlorine was overwhelming.

"What do you think of the exhibition?" I asked.

The artist had used far too much glue and varnish. Oyinda had advertised him as an Osogbo-trained bead painter, but I doubted his credentials.

"I'm not sure," Frances said, rubbing her bare arms, "but apparently his work needs to be stored below zero degrees."

"You're not used to the cold?"

"I'm not used to air conditioning."

“How long have you been in Nigeria?”

“Ten days.”

The air conditioning in the hall had been on full blast, but I'd only ever heard foreigners complain about the heat in Nigeria. We were in the middle of harmattan, and in the mornings and evenings the air was cool enough to keep mosquitoes away.

She had a simple chin-length bob and no earrings or makeup, but she was an attractive woman and could afford to take her looks for granted. As if she were vain about appearing knowledgeable, she described her car route to the North in precise detail, complete with hand gestures. I explained that there was a minority of Christians there, as there was a minority of Muslims down south. Lawal, my marital name, was indeed Muslim, but Tunde had attended Christian missionary schools, which wasn't terribly unusual.

“He's from Kwara State in the Middle Belt region,” I said. “Nigeria's womb. The rivers Niger and Benue are like Fallopian tubes on the map.”

“It's funny how a country can be a motherland or a fatherland.”

“Do you have any children?”

“Never been married, never planned to have any. And you?”

“A girl and boy, Rolari and Rotimi, eleven and thirteen.”

Americans had a reputation for being unfriendly. They kept to themselves, unlike the Europeans, Asians and Middle Easterners we were used to. The Lebanese had been around for so long they were practically a local tribe, and the British were unavoidable. Americans didn't seem to belong, and were well known for being unable to disguise their frustrations with Nigeria. They were loud, impatient and immature, people said. It was stranger still how an entire country could be branded with negative character traits. Arrogant would be ours in Nigeria. Arrogant and corrupt.

“There’s not much of a turnout tonight,” she said.

“It’s coup season,” I said.

She may not have been aware of the shrimp incident in the hall. We were not far from there, but had our backs to the entrance.

Oyinda was usually able to draw a crowd to her Cultural Society events. The “who’s who,” as she described the mix of expatriates and Nigerians that normally showed up. I’d never really considered myself part of her circle, but was familiar with most of the people around. Oyinda was determined to keep our little association going. Her previous event had been a classical-music recital. On that occasion, she’d hosted some snooty pianist who had the temerity to ask that the audience not cough during his performance. He was halfway through a Mozart sonata when a rat ran across the stage. I didn’t know where to look until the rat had disappeared under the curtain. Then, for the rest of the recital, I kept waiting for it to reemerge.

“What was the coup like last year?” Frances asked.

“Bloodless, thankfully.”

General Murtala Muhammed was in power; General Yakubu Gowon was in exile in England. The reality was that we were expecting a counter coup. We had good reason to, after the coups of January and July of 1966 that preceded the Civil War. Last year’s coup had occurred in July. Five months had passed, but there was still no sign of retaliation.

“Are things much different since the reforms?” she asked.

“Oh, yes.”

“I hear a lot of people were affected.”

“We all were.”

I hoped she would sense my reticence. She needn’t know the details. From his first address, General Muhammed had denounced General Gowon’s regime. He was unknowingly speaking on behalf of the people. We were all somewhat fatigued.

Gowon had been around for almost a decade and had made public his reluctance to hand over to the civilians. Inflation was out of control, and there had been several workers' strikes.

General Gowon was regarded as a stooge for the British, who seemed to suffer a lack of imagination when it came to managing their former colonies. They had supported his regime because he was a Northerner and a Christian—their assumption being that his hybrid background made him capable of uniting the country. In Lagos, we had welcomed General Muhammed's takeover and subsequent reforms, even after he retired members of the armed forces, military governors and federal commissioners. Then the second wave of dismissals began: judges, lecturers, diplomats and directors of national corporations. Our friends and us.

"They say General Muhammed has improved the civil service," Frances said.

"It depends who you ask."

"What do you think?"

"He's young. They all are."

It was my standard response. One had to be careful. Tunde was retired from the Ministry of Finance, where he had been in charge of internal budgets, but he was not one of those facing the investigative panels on corruption charges. He had made phone calls to people he knew in commerce, and Community Bank offered him a directorship. He was forty-five. General Muhammed was not yet forty, and General Gowon was barely thirty when he became head of state.

Frances pointed at the beads around my neck. "Your lapis are pretty."

"Thanks."

They were part of a set that included a bracelet and ring I had not worn. If Frances' accent hadn't given her away as an American, her disregard for Oyinda's formal dress code

would have. She wore a black T-shirt, white trousers and red Hausa slippers. Her watch was chunky, with aged leather straps. She looked accustomed to traveling and was something of an enigma. Had she shown any characteristics expected of Americans, I would have excused myself.

“Were you involved in organizing the exhibition?” she asked, sitting back.

“I did the invitations. Did you get one?”

“I’m staying at the hotel. That is how I got to hear about it.”

“You’re a guest here?”

“In one of the chalets.”

The chalets were more like suites for long-stay guests, separate from the main hotel. The Kuramo had been extended a few times over the years. The swimming pool and Golden Dragon restaurant were on this side of the lobby; the car park and crafts bazaar were on the other side, and there was a row of shops by the chalets.

“You must know our hostess fairly well,” Frances said.

“Yes. She ordered her invitations from my shop, Occasions Unlimited. We’re at the new shopping center at Falomo. We have postcards at a better price than you will get here. All the tourists stop by.”

I knew most of my customers well enough to receive an invitation now and then, and when it came to my business, I never hesitated to advertise. Tunde would rather I didn’t solicit people in that way, but the trick was to take pleasure in giving information.

“I’ll bear that in mind,” she said.

“And you,” I asked. “What do you do?”

She was a bead collector, and was in Lagos to buy West African trade beads—millefiori and chevron. They were manufactured in the fifteenth century in Venice and brought over by Dutch merchants.

“Your chiefs wear them,” she said.

“Yes, yes. I know the ones you mean.”

I’d never given a thought to the history of the beads. Traditional rulers in general had been undermined over the years, by the colonials and by the civilian and military governments after independence. I was surprised their beads were not yet as devalued as they were. More so, that they would stoop so low as to hawk their beads to foreigners.

My business was dull in comparison to hers. Whenever I traveled to London, I bought greeting and invitation cards from department stores like John Lewis and Dickins & Jones and packed them in my luggage, to avoid paying import duties. The markup on my imported cards could be higher, but retailers had to have reasonable caps these days. General Muhammed’s regime was clamping down on inflation.

“Queen Bee,” someone called out from behind us.

It was Ade Balogun, who stood at the entrance of the hall in a white *agbada* and an embroidered navy cap tilted to one side.

“Ade boy,” I said. “You’re here?”

He walked down the corridor as if he were about to receive an award. That was Ade’s normal gait. He had his own personal invisible crowd clapping and cheering for him wherever he went. I introduced him to Frances.

“He is responsible for the term ‘African timing,’” I said.

“Slander,” he warned.

We shook hands, putting on a charade. I had not seen Ade in a while and was still upset about the way he’d handled his recent separation from his wife, Moji.

“How are the children?” I asked.

“Wonderful,” he said.

“And Moji?”

“She’s well, she’s well,” he said, attempting a neutral expression.

I had not seen Moji since their separation, but I bumped into Ade occasionally. He would walk up to me and call me Queen Bee, as if he could possibly charm me, then he would hurry off somewhere. His guilt was chasing him, as far as I was concerned, and it suited me fine because Tunde couldn't stand him.

"Where's Mr. Lawal?" he asked.

"In the hall with Oyinda," I said.

"She won't forgive me for coming this late."

"Oh, I'm sure she will."

Ade was Oyinda's lawyer and had represented her in court cases involving her estate. I suspected she'd wanted to be more than his client. She wouldn't mind a Nigerian man like him—any man who could complement her cosmopolitan lifestyle.

"She's keeping Tunde occupied," I explained.

"Lucky man," Ade said, raising his eyebrows.

Oyinda and I had known each other for years, from when we were both students at Methodist Girls' High School. She went by her middle name, Harriet, back then. We traveled to England in the same year, 1952. She studied music while I got my bachelor's degree in sociology and postgraduate diploma in education. She never actually finished her degree. She dropped out to model for a while, then got married to an English chap, Alan, who died of a heart attack. They didn't have any children, and she had inherited quite a large estate from her parents, as their sole heir. Now, instead of finding something useful to do with her life, she was calling herself a patron of the arts and sharing other people's husbands.

Her need for male companionship was bordering on chronic. I'd seen her in action, attaching herself to one expatriate fellow or another and following him around until he finally gave in. She had just ended a long-term affair with a Frenchman, whom she referred to as her *inamorato*, and whose wife didn't seem



to mind. Tunde called them Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. They would sit with Oyinda at parties, drink wine and chain-smoke as if they were eccentric aristocrats and the rest of us were pedestrian bourgeoisie. To me, they were the most bizarre threesome, but the rumor was that the woman was in early menopause and would rather be left alone. People excused her and her husband because they were French. Oyinda was also forgiven because she was an oddball, and a widow.

When we were students in England, she only went out with Englishmen. Some of our friends thought she was degrading herself; I thought she was playing up to a dusky-siren image that degraded us all. I actually told her that, because we were fairly close, having sailed to England together. To her credit, she never asked me to mind my own business. She just said, “But Nigerian chaps don’t like me.”

Her hair was natural and low cut. She had good bones—or so the photographer who introduced her to modeling in London said. To Nigerian men, she was underweight and her jaw was too square. She was too boyish-looking for their taste.

We returned to Nigeria and grew apart because her “been to” affectations began to wear me down. It was awful when Alan died, though. He had come to Lagos with her and was willing to stay. He was an architect and ran a successful practice. He was also a bit of a fuddy-duddy who always seemed to be staring at the bridge of his nose, yet he might pluck a hibiscus and plant it in her hair. Ade would never measure up to that standard.

He bowed his head at Frances. “Pleasure to meet you.”

“You, too,” she said.

“Queen Bee,” he said, turning to me.

“Ade boy,” I responded. “Tell my husband to remember we have two children waiting at home.”

“I will,” he said, and left.

I hoped he would deliver my message word for word.

His beard was showing signs of gray. He was quite dashing. I sometimes said that to annoy Tunde, who would respond, “‘Dashing’ my arse.” “‘Dashing’” was the sort of word my mother would use whenever she sized up my suitors, but Ade was more like an adopted brother.

When I was a girl, I sympathized with him because he was always in trouble with his mother. They lived in a shotgun house near ours. She would stand in her doorway waiting for him with a cane if he stayed out too late with his gang of Campos Square boys. The moment she caught sight of him, she would chase him down the street, brandishing her cane. My mother was about the only mother in the neighborhood who wasn’t strict in that way. Ade’s was the choir mistress in my father’s church. As for his father, I didn’t know who he was, but from my parents’ Protestant whispers managed to find out that he came from one of those conservative Catholic families that called children born out of wedlock bastards.

Ade was initially my brother Deji’s friend, not mine. We got to know each other when Deji was at the University of London, studying law. Deji lived in a flat in Paddington, where I spent my weekends. I would come from Reading, and Ade, once in a while, all the way from Durham. My father was a surrogate father to him, as he was to many children who attended his church, Saint John’s.

“He’s an old friend,” I said to Frances.

“Yes?” she said, glancing over her shoulder.

She showed no interest in him, and we began to talk about traveling. I admitted I had not been beyond cities like New York, Paris and Rome and had no desire to go anywhere provincial overseas. I needed running water, electricity, shops and full-service hotels. Museums and relics were fine, if they had guided tours. She thought I was pulling her leg. I told her no. I could barely tolerate Kaduna for more than two weeks,

after which I would miss Lagos. We began to argue when she said Old Kano was beautiful.

“What is beautiful about a city of mud huts?” I asked.

She laughed. “Old Kano is beautiful!”

“I beg of you.”

“You know what they say. ‘What you don’t have...’”

We had fun going back and forth like that over her interpretations of what she had seen of Nigeria. I insisted that Old Kano was just another town in dire need of development, despite its history. The clay pots, calabashes and other artifacts she had come across on her road trip were simply for storing food and water. She had tried *suya* and fried plantains, which I said were the equivalent of hotdogs and fries. Mangoes, pawpaws and pineapples were regular fruit. I found apples more exotic because they were biblical and sinful. I suppose I was challenging her perception of Nigeria, and in her own way she let me know I need not patronize her.

“Okay,” she asked, cheerfully, “so why does every woman I meet here ask if I’m married or have any children?”

I didn’t apologize for doing that. In the absence of husbands and children, how else could women of our age begin a conversation? Perhaps, as an American, her views on marriage and motherhood were different from mine, but that was her concern.

She promised to come to my shop, and I said I looked forward to seeing her there. We must have been sitting for another five minutes when Tunde came out of the hall.

“I was wondering who had kidnapped my wife,” he said.

His French suit was now free of stains. He was bordering on chubby and was also beginning to go bald but, for some strange reason, I still saw him as he was when we first met and I’d been so smitten I thought he could pass for Sidney Poitier.

In his usual formal manner, he mentioned the former United

States ambassador and the present one. Frances said she didn't know either man. We shook hands before parting ways, and by the time Tunde and I reached the car park she was no longer on my mind. I was thinking about Oyinda, and waiting to hear what he had to say about their conversation. Instead, he turned around and asked, "Who was that woman?"

As I recounted my exchange with Frances, he laughed.

"What is amusing you?" I asked.

"I leave you alone for one second and you're spilling state secrets. These Americans, they come here and think they can take us for fools."

He suspected every American in Lagos of working for the CIA. They didn't necessarily have to be part of the diplomatic community.

"She wouldn't dare," I said.

"They can't help themselves."

"Why would she stay here?"

He drew a circle in the air. "She has access to everyone she needs within a five-mile radius of this place."

"Wouldn't it be more convenient for her to stay at the ambassador's residence?"

"Which Nigerians would she meet there? She is here to pick our brains, to find out what is going on so she can go back and report to her people."

"They could have rented her a flat."

"Maybe she's not staying long enough."

We were approaching his car, a Volvo that no one but he was permitted to drive. We used it at night. During the day, his office car and driver were at his disposal. I had my Volkswagen Kombi van, which our children found hilarious because it was bright orange with *Occasions Unlimited* painted on both sides.

"Why was she not mingling?" I asked. "She would have been mingling at the reception if she were a spy."

“How would you know? Have you met a spy before?”

There was a guard at the car park. Tunde ignored the man’s hand signals and asked me to watch my side of the road.

The idea of Frances being a spy was, above all, embarrassing. I kept picturing her as we drove out of the hotel. Where were the clues? How did spies go about their business? She must have come to the exhibition because she was interested in beads. She had asked about the coup, but I had brought up the subject. She changed topics as soon as she realized I was not keen to volunteer more information. Americans were supposed to be nosy, yet I was the one who had started off asking personal questions. If she just happened to be here after a coup, that could be a coincidence. To me, she’d seemed harmless, though I was unlikely to befriend her, let alone divulge national secrets to her.

Tunde turned into Kingsway Road which, despite its name, was no more impressive than others. It had the same weary electricity poles that leaned over and sandy paths that passed for sidewalks. The road divided Ikoyi into two. On either side were roads named after notable men like Lord Lugard, Obafemi Awolowo, Raymond Njoku and Maitama Sule. It was dusk and we passed a block of Public Works Department houses with no lights on, which meant there had been another power cut in the neighborhood. The streetlights were also out.

“You know Muhammed is supporting Neto,” Tunde said.

I was surprised. He had not mentioned General Muhammed in a while. In fact, we deliberately omitted his name from our conversations. It was difficult to do so outside, because people talked about him all the time, and with such respect. But that was the Nigerian way, to revere authority, even when we criticized our leaders, and General Muhammed had not been around long enough for the public to turn on him. In six months he had set up his anti-inflation task force, canceled the

1973 census that was so unpopular, and seemed to be making real plans for a transition to civilian rule. The common opinion was that his corruption panels had developed into witch hunts, as a few civil servants like Tunde had been unjustly retired, but they had also weeded out crooked and incompetent public officials. These days, there was hope that he might do something about the petrol shortages.

We passed a Texaco station and I thought it was best to sound indifferent, even though I was in favor of General Muhammed's support of Agostinho Neto.

"That's not enough to encourage espionage," I said.

"He snubbed Kissinger," Tunde said. "The Americans are not happy about that. They may be nervous about where he is going, especially now that he's fallen out with them over Angola."

"The Americans didn't start the war there."

"Well, they're behind most of the trouble."

"What are they looking for in Angola?"

"Their Cold War for one, oil for another."

I threw up my hand. "Always something with the Americans."

Now that they'd finally had the sense to withdraw from Vietnam, they had to find other countries on which to enforce their policy of freedom. But we were in no danger of being influenced by leftist ideologies in Nigeria. The Angolan Civil War was inevitable after the Portuguese left, anyhow. The Nigerian press was blaming it on the Cold War, as if the political parties were pawns who couldn't think for themselves. Neto's party was Marxist, and Cuba and the Soviets were backing him. The United States was behind the opposition parties. South Africa had invaded Angola with its assistance. It was the same old story of Africa, and I was sick and tired of hearing it.

My thoughts soon turned to Ade and Moji's marriage, which had thrown Ikoyi into its own civil war of sorts, with

their respective friends on either side. Regardless of what was happening in the rest of the world, Lagos society was absorbed with the Baloguns' impending divorce. Their separation itself was a mess. Moji had asked me to talk Ade out of an affair he was having with her friend. I'd made the mistake of agreeing to, for the sake of their children. The next thing I knew, Ade was giving me details about Moji's affairs, though he never actually confessed to his. I eventually stopped trying to mediate, but had since learned that he'd had one mistress after another before the affair with her friend, and she'd slept with his colleagues to get revenge.

Moji was an interior designer and had clients in the military, powerful men, yet Ade had managed to throw her out of their house, and all four children were now living with him. The latest I heard was that she was drinking too much, popping Valium pills and losing her mind. There was an incident at the Yoruba Tennis Club, where she had threatened to slap him. I may not have reacted the way she had, but I wasn't the type to sit there smiling, either. I would have left Ade after his second peccadillo, at least. If he wanted our children, he could keep them. The law gave him that right—as Moji knew when she decided to sue him for custody. Why waste her time and energy? That, I still didn't understand. A sole-custody arrangement wouldn't be ideal, but she could always visit their children. Knowing Ade, he would soon get tired of taking care of them.

“Ade was late tonight,” I said.

“He's always late,” Tunde said.

“Oyinda didn't seem to mind.”

“He's a twerp.”

I smiled. He must have delivered my message verbatim.

Tunde leaned forward to get a clearer view of the road ahead. How many times had I told him to have his eyes checked? We were approaching Falomo, and the lights of Victoria Island were

visible across Five Cowries Creek. There had been some talk about building a bridge in the area, but nothing had come of it.

“I ought to visit Moji,” I said. “I think of her every time I see him.”

She moved to Victoria Island after their separation. I could understand her withdrawal from the social scene. By now, every one of Ade’s friends would be a potential betrayer, and every woman a rival. It would be naïve to consider myself above that.

“What were you and Oyinda talking about?”

“Oyinda?”

“Yes. What was she saying to you all night?”

He checked the rearview mirror. “She needs funding.”

“For what?”

“She wants the bank to sponsor an exhibition.”

Jealousy was such a childish emotion, and primal. It was humbling to be constantly reminded that I had neither grown up nor evolved fully.

When we arrived at the exhibition, Oyinda had asked, “Where’ve you two been hiding?” I’d said it was a struggle to get Tunde to leave the house, which was honest. I’d practically had to beg him to come with me. I’d slighted her effort to show sympathy about his retirement, but the truth was that General Muhammed’s reforms had shaken those of us who lived in government houses in Ikoyi. Ours had been in constant need of repair and so spacious that it was tricky to explain to Tunde’s elder sister why she had to return to their hometown so soon each time she visited us. In a way, I was glad we had moved into a more manageable home, though it was a little too small.

“Is that all you were talking about?” I asked.

“She wanted to have an auction,” he said. “I didn’t think she would have much success with one. No one buys art in that way over here.”

“That was it?”



“That was it.”

I was still very much in the protective mode I had slipped into after his retirement and paid special attention to my intuition, which flared up under the slightest threat. The exhibition was an overdue outing for me as well, but I’d been less hesitant than he was to reenter the social scene.

“Here we go again,” he said.

There was a power cut at the shopping center, which meant that we probably had one at home. Our house was within walking distance. At home, we had works by Buraimoh and Twins Seven-Seven, who were of the Osogbo school. Tunde had commissioned a bead painting from Buraimoh. He fancied himself an art collector. He and Oyinda had that in common. I could admire works of art without needing to acquire them or rub shoulders with artists.

Our night watchman was asleep in his cement cubicle by our gate. The fellow had just started his shift. It took several honks to wake him up, then he began to fumble with the padlock for what seemed like another thirty minutes, by which time we were complaining about how lazy he was.

I was merely giving Tunde a friendly warning. He had never given me cause to suspect him of infidelity. He was the most decent man I knew, despite his occasional grumpiness.

We walked indoors arm in arm so as not to trip in the dark. Rolari and Rotimi were waiting for us in the sitting room, which was lit by a battery-operated lantern. The house was still somewhat cool from the air conditioning. I made sure all the windows were secured and laid a towel at the foot of the fridge in case it began to leak overnight. Tunde padlocked the front and back doors, and we all went to bed before the walls heated up and mosquitoes began to surface.

*“I didn’t regret leaving the Ministry of Education. I only regretted not having a career.”*

*“What career would you have wanted?”*

*“Oh, it’s not important.”*

*“No. If you had a chance to do it again, what career would you have chosen?”*

*“It’s silly to talk about that now.”*

*“Go on.”*

*“All right. I wouldn’t have minded being an ambassador.”*

*“A diplomat?”*

*“I considered the idea when the Nigerian foreign service started recruiting, but they weren’t recruiting women, so my best bet at the time would have been to marry one.”*

*“Hah!”*

*“It’s the Ministry of External Affairs now, and we still don’t have any women ambassadors.”*

*“We haven’t had many in the United States. You must enjoy what you do, though.”*

*“I do. I really do. I get to meet visitors like you, and introduce them to Lagos.”*

*“Hey, you’re a diplomat!”*

*“Without the immunity. I have enough experience. I’m constantly settling quarrels at home and elsewhere. And you? What career would you have chosen?”*

*“I wanted to be a journalist.”*

*“Why didn’t you become one?”*

*“I just didn’t.”*

*“You must have had opportunities to.”*

*“I did.”*

*“So?”*

*“I didn’t think I was good enough.”*

*“But you’re doing what a journalist does now.”*

*“Well, kind of.”*