**Checking Out** By [Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie](https://www.newyorker.com/contributors/chimamanda-ngozi-adichie)

In London, night came too soon. It hung in the morning air like a threat and then in the afternoon a blue-gray dusk descended, and the Victorian buildings all wore a mournful face. In those first weeks, the weightless menace of the cold startled Obinze, drying his nostrils, deepening his anxieties, making him urinate too often. He would walk fast, his hands swallowed up by the sleeves of the gray wool coat his cousin had lent him. Sometimes he would stop outside a tube station, often by a flower or a newspaper vender, and watch the people brushing past. They walked so quickly, as if they had an important destination, a purpose to their lives. His eyes would follow them, with a lost longing, and he would think, You can work, you are legal, you are visible, and you don’t even know how fortunate you are.

It was at a tube station that he met the Angolans who would arrange his marriage, exactly two years and three days after he had arrived in England; he kept count.

“We’ll talk in the car,” one of them had said over the phone. Their old black Mercedes was fussily maintained, the floor mats wavy from vacuuming, the leather seats shiny with polish. The two Angolans looked alike, with thick eyebrows that almost touched, and they were dressed alike, too, in leather jackets and long gold chains. Their tabletop hair, which sat on their heads like tall hats, surprised him, but perhaps having retro haircuts was part of their hip image. They spoke to him with the authority of people who had done this before, and also with a slight condescension; his fate, after all, was in their hands.

“We decided on Newcastle because we know people there and London is too hot right now—too many marriages happening in London, yeah?—so we don’t want trouble,” one of them said. “Everything is going to work out. Just make sure you keep a low profile, yeah? Don’t attract any attention to yourself until the marriage is done. Don’t fight in the pub, yeah?”

“I’ve never been a very good fighter,” Obinze said dryly, but the Angolans did not smile.

“You have the money?” the other one asked.

Obinze handed over two hundred pounds, all in twenty-pound notes that he had taken out of the cash machine over two days. It was a deposit, to prove that he was serious. Later, after he met the girl, he would pay two thousand pounds.

“The rest has to be up front, yeah? We’ll use some of it to do the running around and the rest goes to the girl. Man, you know we’re not making anything from this. We usually ask for much more, but we’re doing this for your cousin,” the first one said.

Obinze did not believe them, even then. He met the girl, Cleotilde, a few days later, at a shopping center, in a McDonald’s whose windows looked out onto the dank entrance of a tube station across the street. He sat at a table with the Angolans and watched people hurry past, wondering if one of them was she, while the Angolans whispered into their phones; perhaps they were arranging other marriages.

“Hello there!” she said.

She surprised him. He had expected someone with pockmarks smothered under heavy makeup, someone tough and knowing. But here she was, dewy and fresh, bespectacled, olive-skinned, almost childlike, smiling shyly at him and sucking a milkshake through a straw. She looked like a university freshman who was innocent or dumb, or both.

“I just want to be sure that you’re sure about doing this,” he told her. Then, worried that he might frighten her away, he added, “I’m very grateful, and it won’t take too much from you—in a year I’ll have my papers and we’ll do the divorce. But I just wanted to meet you first and make sure you are O.K. to do this.”

“Yes,” she said.

He watched her, expecting more. She played with her straw, not meeting his eyes, and it took him a while to realize that she was reacting more to him than to the situation. She was attracted to him.

“I want to help my mom out. Things are tight at home,” she said, a trace of a non-British accent underlining her words.

“She’s with us, yeah,” one of the Angolans said impatiently.

“Show him your details, Cleo,” the other Angolan said.

His calling her Cleo rang false; Obinze sensed this from the slight surprise on her face. It was a forced intimacy: the Angolan had never called her Cleo before. Obinze wondered how the Angolans knew her. Did they have a list of young women with European Union passports who needed money? Cleotilde pushed at her hair, a mass of tight coils, and adjusted her glasses, as though preparing herself, then presented her passport and license. Obinze examined them. He would have thought her younger than twenty-three.

“Can I have your number?” Obinze asked.

“Just call us for anything,” the Angolans said, almost at the same time. But Obinze wrote his number on a napkin and pushed it across to Cleotilde. The Angolans gave him a sly look.

The next day, on the phone, she told him that she had been living in London for six years, and was saving money to go to fashion school; the Angolans had told him that she lived in Portugal.

“Would you like to meet again?” he asked. “It will be much easier if we try to get to know each other a little.”

“Yes,” she said without hesitation.

They ate fish-and-chips in a pub, a thin crust of grime on the sides of the wooden table, while she talked about her love of fashion and asked him about Nigerian traditional dress. She seemed a little more mature this time; he noticed the shimmer on her cheeks, the more defined curl of her hair, and knew that she had made an effort with her appearance.

“What will you do after you get your papers?” she asked him. “Will you bring your girlfriend from Nigeria?”

He was touched by her obviousness. “I don’t have a girlfriend.”

“I’ve never been to Africa. I’d love to go.” She said “Africa” wistfully, like an admiring foreigner, loading the word with exotic excitement. Her black Angolan father had left her white Portuguese mother when she was three, she told him, and she had not seen him since, nor had she ever been to Angola. She said this with a shrug and a cynical raise of her eyebrows, as though it had never bothered her, an effort so out of character, so jarring, that it showed him just how deeply it did bother her. There were difficulties in her life that he wanted to know more about, parts of her thick, shapely body that he longed to touch, but he was wary of complicating things. He would wait until after the wedding, until the business side of their relationship was finished. She seemed to understand this without their talking about it. And so, as they met in the following weeks, sometimes practicing how they would answer questions during their immigration interview and other times just talking about football, there was, between them, the growing urgency of restrained desire. It was there in how close they stood, not touching, as they waited at the tube station, and in their teasing each other about his support of Arsenal and her support of Manchester United. After he paid the Angolans the additional two thousand pounds, she told him that they had given her only five hundred.

“I’m just telling you. I know you don’t have any more money. I want to do this for you,” she said.

He wanted to kiss her, her upper lip pinker and shinier with lip gloss than the lower, to hold her, to tell her how deeply, irrepressibly grateful he was. She would never flaunt her power over him. One Eastern European woman, Iloba had told him, had asked a Nigerian man, an hour before their wedding, to give her a thousand pounds extra not to walk away. In a panic, the man had had to call all of his friends to raise the money.

When Obinze asked the Angolans how much they had given Cleotilde, they said, “Man, we gave you a good deal,” in the tone of people who knew how much they were needed. It was they, after all, who took him to a lawyer, a low-voiced Nigerian in a swivel chair, who slid backward to reach a file cabinet as he said, “You can still get married, even though your visa is expired. In fact, getting married is now your only choice.” It was they who provided water and gas bills, going back six months, with his name and a Newcastle address. And it was they who found a man who would “sort out” his driver’s license, a man called Brown. Obinze met Brown at the train station in Barking; he stood near the gate, amid the bustle of people, looking around and waiting for his phone to ring, since Brown had refused to give him a phone number.

“Are you waiting for somebody?” Brown asked, when he appeared. He was a slight man, his winter hat pulled down to his eyebrows.

“Yes. I’m Obinze,” he said, feeling like a character in a spy novel. Brown led him to a quiet corner, handed over an envelope, and there it was, his license, with his photo. It had the genuine, slightly worn look of something owned for a year. A small plastic card, but it weighed down his pocket. A few days later, he walked with it into a London building that looked like a church, steepled and grave from the outside, but inside was shabby, harried, knotted with people. Signs were scrawled on whiteboards:

Births and deaths this way. Marriage registration this way.

Obinze, his expression carefully frozen in neutrality, handed the license over to the registrar behind the desk.

A woman was walking toward the door, talking loudly to her companion. “Look how crowded this place is,” she said. “It’s all sham marriages, all of them, now that Blunkett is after them.”

Perhaps she had come to register a death, and her words were merely the lonely lashings-out of grief, but he felt the familiar tightening of panic in his chest. The registrar was examining his license, taking too long. The seconds lengthened and curdled. “*All sham marriages, all of them,”* rang in Obinze’s head. Finally, the registrar looked up and pushed across a form.

“Getting married, are we? Congratulations!” The words came out with the mechanical good cheer of frequent repetition.

“Thank you,” Obinze said, and tried to unfreeze his face.

Behind the desk, a whiteboard was propped against a wall, with venues and dates of intended marriages scrawled in blue; a name at the bottom caught his eye. Okoli Okafor and Crystal Smith. Okoli Okafor had been his classmate in secondary school and at university, a quiet boy who had been teased for having a surname for a first name, who later joined a vicious cult at university, and then left Nigeria during one of the long strikes.

The memory, clear as a beam of light, took Obinze back to a time when he still believed the universe would bend according to his will. Once, during his final year at university, the year that people danced in the streets because General Abacha had died, his mother had said, “One day, I will look up and all the people I know will be dead or abroad.” For a moment, he felt as if he had betrayed her by having his own plan: to get a postgraduate degree in America, to work in America, to live in America. Of course, he knew how unreasonable the American Consulate could be—the vice-chancellor, of all people, had once been refused a visa to attend a conference—but he had never doubted his plan. He would wonder, later, why he had been so sure. Perhaps it was because he had never just wanted to go abroad, as many others did; some people were now even going to South Africa, which amused him. It had always been America, only America. A longing nurtured and nursed over many years. An advertisement on NTA for “Andrew Checking Out,” which he had watched as a child, had given shape to his longings. “Men, I’m checkin’ out,” the character Andrew had said, staring cockily at the camera. “No good roads, no light, no water. Men, you can’t even get a common bottle of soft drink!” While Andrew was checking out, General Buhari’s soldiers were flogging adults in the streets, lecturers were striking for better pay, and Obinze’s mother decided that he could no longer have Fanta whenever he wanted but only on Sundays. America became a place where bottles of Fanta could be had without permission. Obinze would stand in front of the mirror and repeat Andrew’s words: “Men, I’m checkin’ out!” Later, when he sought out magazines and books and films and secondhand stories about America, his longing took on a minor mystical quality. He saw himself walking the streets of Harlem, discussing the merits of Mark Twain with his American friends, gazing at Mt. Rushmore. Days after he graduated from university, bloated with knowledge about America, he applied for a visa at the Consulate in Lagos.

He already knew that the best interviewer was the man with the blond beard, and, as the line moved forward, he hoped that he would not be interviewed by the horror story, a pretty white woman famous for screaming into her microphone and insulting even grandmothers. Finally, it was his turn, and the blond-bearded man said, “Next person!” Obinze walked up and slid his forms underneath the glass. The man glanced at the forms and said, kindly, “Sorry, you don’t qualify. Next person!” Obinze was stunned. He went three more times in the next few months. Each time, he was told, with barely a glance at his documents, “Sorry, you don’t qualify,” and each time he emerged from the air-conditioned cool of the Consulate into the harsh sunlight stunned and unbelieving.

“It’s the terrorism fears,” his mother said. “The Americans are now averse to foreign young men.”

She told him to find a job and try again in a year. But his job applications yielded nothing. He travelled to Lagos and to Port Harcourt and to Abuja to take assessment tests, which he found easy, and then attended interviews, answering questions fluidly, but only long silences followed. Some of his friends got jobs, people who did not have his second-class upper degree and who did not speak as well as he did. He wondered if employers could smell his America-pining on his breath, or sense how obsessively he still looked at the Web sites of American universities.

One day, his mother left him a note on the bathroom sink: “I have been invited to an academic conference in London. We should speak.” He was puzzled. When she came home from her lecture, he was in the living room waiting for her.

“Mummy, *nno*,” he said.

She acknowledged his greeting with a nod. “I’m going to put your name on my British visa application as my research assistant,” she said quietly. “That should get you a six-month visa. You can stay with Nicholas in London. See what you can do with your life. Maybe you can get to America from there. I know that your mind is no longer here.”

He stared at her.

“I understand this sort of thing is done nowadays,” she said, sitting down on the sofa beside him, and trying to sound offhand, but in the uncommon briskness of her words he sensed her discomfort. She was a woman who asked no favors, who would not lie, who would not accept even a Christmas card from her students, because it might compromise her. Yet here she was, behaving as though truth-telling were a luxury that they could no longer afford. She had lied for him. If anyone else had lied for him, it would not have mattered as much or even at all, but she lied for him and he got a six-month visa to the United Kingdom. He felt, even before he left, like a failure. He did not contact her for months, while he stayed with his cousin Nicholas, in Essex. He did not contact her because there was nothing to tell and he wanted to wait until he had something to tell. Throughout his stay in England, he had spoken to her only a few times, strained conversations during which he felt her wondering why he had made nothing of himself. But she never asked for details; she only waited to hear what he was willing to tell.

Everyone joked about people who went abroad to clean toilets, and so Obinze approached his first job with irony: he was indeed abroad cleaning toilets, wearing rubber gloves and carrying a pail, in an estate agent’s office on the second floor of a London building. Each time he opened the swinging door of a stall, it seemed to sigh. The beautiful woman who cleaned the ladies’ toilet was Ghanaian, about his age, with the shiniest dark skin he had ever seen. He sensed, in the way she spoke and carried herself, that she came from a background similar to his, a childhood cushioned by family, regular meals, and dreams in which there was no conception of cleaning toilets in London. She ignored his friendly gestures, saying only “Good evening” as formally as she could, but she was friendly with the Polish woman who cleaned the offices upstairs, and once he saw them in a deserted café, drinking tea and talking in low tones. He stood watching them for a while, a great grievance exploding in his mind. He was too close to what she was; he knew her nuances, while with the Polish woman she was free to reinvent herself, to be whoever she wanted to be.

The toilets were not bad—some urine outside the urinal, some unfinished flushing. So he was shocked, one evening, to walk into a stall and discover a mound of shit on the toilet lid, solid, tapering, centered as though it had been carefully arranged. It looked like a puppy curled on a mat. It was a performance. He thought about the famed repression of the English. There was, in this performance, something of an unbuttoning. A person who had been fired? Denied a promotion? Obinze stared at that mound of shit for a long time, feeling smaller and smaller as he did so, until it became a personal affront, a punch to his jaw. And all for three quid an hour. He took off his gloves, placed them next to the mound of shit, and left the building.

Obinze had not remembered that Iloba now lived in London; he had last seen him days before graduation. Iloba was merely from his mother’s home town, but he had been so enthusiastic about their kinship that everyone on campus assumed that they were cousins. Iloba would often pull up a chair, smiling and uninvited, and join Obinze and his friends at a roadside bar, or appear at Obinze’s door on Sunday afternoons. Once, Iloba had stopped Obinze on the General Studies quad, cheerfully calling out “Kinsman!” and then giving him a rundown of marriages and deaths of people from his mother’s home town whom he hardly knew. “Udoakpuanyi died some weeks ago. Don’t you know him? Their homestead is next to your mother’s.” Obinze nodded and made appropriate sounds, humoring Iloba, because Iloba’s demeanor was always so pleasant and oblivious, his trousers always too tight and too short, showing his bony ankles; they had earned him the nickname Iloba Jump Up.

Obinze got his phone number from Nicholas and called him.

“The Zed! Kinsman! You did not tell me you were coming to London!” Iloba said, using Obinze’s old nickname. “How is your mother? What of your uncle, the one who married from Abagana? How is Nicholas?” Iloba sounded full of a simple happiness. There were people who were born with an inability to be tangled up in dark emotions, in complications, and Iloba was one of them. With such people, Obinze felt both admiration and boredom. When Obinze asked if Iloba might be able to help him find a National Insurance number, he would have understood a little resentment, a little churlishness—after all, he was contacting Iloba only because he needed something—but it surprised him how sincerely eager to help Iloba was.

“I would let you use mine, but I am working with it and it is risky,” Iloba said.

“Where do you work?”

“In central London. Security. It’s not easy, this country is not easy, but we are managing. I like the night shifts, because it gives me time to read for my course. I’m doing a master’s in management at Birkbeck College.” Iloba paused. “The Zed, don’t worry, we will put our heads together. Let me ask around and let you know.”

Iloba called back two weeks later to say that he had found somebody. “His name is Vincent Obi. He is from Abia State. A friend of mine did the connection. He wants to meet you tomorrow evening.”

They met in Iloba’s flat. A claustrophobic feel pervaded the concrete neighborhood with scarred walls and no trees. Everything seemed too small, too tight.

“Nice place,” Obinze said, not because the flat was nice but because Iloba had a flat in London.

“I would have told you to come and stay with me, the Zed, but I live with two of my cousins.” Iloba placed bottles of beer and a small plate of fried chin-chin on the table. The ritual of hospitality raised a sharp homesickness in Obinze. He was reminded of going back to his mother’s village with her at Christmas, aunties offering him plates of chin-chin.

Vincent Obi was a small round man, submerged in a large pair of jeans and an ungainly coat. As he and Obinze shook hands, they sized each other up. From the set of Vincent’s shoulders and the abrasiveness of his manner, Obinze sensed that he had learned early on, as a matter of necessity, to solve his own problems. Obinze imagined Vincent’s Nigerian life: a community secondary school full of barefoot children; a polytechnic paid for with the help of a number of uncles; a family of many children; and a crowd of dependents in his home town who, whenever he visited, would expect large loaves of bread and pocket money carefully distributed to each of them. Obinze saw himself through Vincent’s eyes: a university staff child who grew up eating butter and now needed his help. At first, Vincent affected a British accent, saying “innit” too many times.

“This is business, innit, but I’m helping you. You can use my N.I. number and pay me forty per cent of what you make,” Vincent said. “It’s business, innit. If I don’t get what we agree on, I will report you.”

“My brother,” Obinze said. “That’s a little too much. You know my situation. I don’t have anything. Please try and come down.”

“Thirty-five per cent is the best I can do. This is business.” He lost his accent and now spoke Nigerian English. “Let me tell you, there are many people in your situation.”

Iloba spoke in Igbo: “Vincent, my brother here is trying to save money and do his papers. Thirty-five is too much. Please just try and help us.”

“You know that some people take half. Yes, he is in a situation, but all of us are in a situation. I am helping him, but this is business.” Vincent’s Igbo had a rural accent. He put the National Insurance card on the table and started to write his bank-account number on a piece of paper. That evening, as dusk fell, the sky muting to a pale violet, Obinze became Vincent.

The warehouse chief looked like the archetype of an Englishman that Obinze carried in his mind: tall and spare, sandy-haired and blue-eyed. But he was a smiling man, and in Obinze’s imagination Englishmen were not smiling men. His name was Roy Snell. He vigorously shook Obinze’s hand.

“So, Vincent, you’re from Africa?” he asked, as he took Obinze around the warehouse, which was the size of a football field and alive with trucks being loaded, flattened cardboard boxes being folded into a deep pit, and men talking.

“Yes. I was born in Birmingham and went back to Nigeria when I was six.” It was the story that he and Iloba had agreed was most convincing.

“Why did you come back? How bad are things in Nigeria?”

“I just wanted to see if I could have a better life here.”

Roy Snell nodded. He seemed like a person for whom the word “jolly” would always be apt. “You’ll work with Nigel today—he’s our youngest,” he said, gesturing toward a man with a pale doughy body, spiky dark hair, and an almost cherubic face. “I think you’ll like working here, Vinny Boy!” It had taken him five minutes to go from Vincent to Vinny Boy and, in the following months, when they played table tennis during lunch break, Roy would tell the men, “I’ve got to beat Vinny Boy for once!” And they would titter and repeat “Vinny Boy.”

It amused Obinze how keenly the men flipped through their newspapers every morning, stopping at the photo of the big-breasted woman, examining it as though it were an article of great interest, different from the photo on that same page the previous day, the previous week. Their conversations, as they waited for their trucks to be loaded up, were always about cars and football and, most of all, women, each man telling stories that sounded similar to stories told the day before, the week before. Each time they mentioned knickers—“the bird flashed her knickers”—Obinze was even more amused, because knickers, in Nigerian English, were shorts rather than underwear, and he imagined these nubile women in ill-fitting khaki shorts, the kind he had worn as a junior student in secondary school.

Roy Snell’s greeting every morning was a jab to his belly. “Vinny Boy! You all right? You all right?” he would ask. He always put Obinze’s name up for the outside work that paid better, always asked if he wanted to work weekends, which was double time, always asked about girls. It was as if Roy held a special affection for him, which was both protective and kind.

“You haven’t had a shag since you came to the U.K., have you, Vinny Boy? I could give you this bird’s number,” he said once.

“I have a girlfriend back home,” Obinze said.

“So what’s wrong with a little shag, then?”

A few men nearby laughed.

“My girlfriend has magical powers,” Obinze said.

Roy found this funnier than Obinze thought it was. He laughed and laughed. “She’s into witchcraft, is she? All right, then, no shags for you. I’ve always wanted to go to Africa, Vinny Boy. I think I’ll take a holiday and go to Nigeria when you’re back there for a visit. You can show me around, find me some Nigerian birds, Vinny Boy, but no witchcraft!”

“Yes, I could do that.”

“Oh, I know you could! You look like you know what to do with the birds,” Roy said, with another jab at Obinze’s belly.

Roy often assigned Obinze to work with Nigel, perhaps because they were the youngest men in the warehouse. That first morning, Obinze noticed that the other men, drinking coffee from paper cups and checking the board to see who would be working with whom, were laughing at Nigel. Nigel had no eyebrows; the patches of slightly pink skin where his eyebrows should have been gave his plump face an unfinished, ghostly look.

“I got pissed at the pub and my mates shaved off my eyebrows,” Nigel told Obinze, almost apologetically, as they shook hands.

“No shagging for you until you grow your eyebrows back, mate,” one of the men called out as Nigel and Obinze headed for the truck. Obinze secured the washing machines at the back, tightening the straps until they were snug, and then climbed in and studied the map to find the shortest routes to their delivery addresses. Nigel took bends sharply and muttered about how people drove these days. At a traffic light, he brought out a bottle of cologne from a bag he had placed at his feet, sprayed it on his neck, and then offered it to Obinze.

“No, thanks,” Obinze said. Nigel shrugged. Days later, he offered it again. The truck interior was dense with the scent of his cologne and, from time to time, Obinze would take deep gulps of fresh air through the open window.

“You’re just new from Africa. You haven’t seen the London sights, have you, mate?” Nigel asked.

“No,” Obinze said.

And so, after early deliveries in central London, Nigel would take him for a drive, showing him Buckingham Palace, the Houses of Parliament, Tower Bridge, all the while talking about his mother’s arthritis, and about his girlfriend Haley’s knockers. It took a while for Obinze to completely understand what Nigel said, because of his accent, each word twisted and stretched. Once Nigel said “male” and Obinze thought he had said “mile,” and, when Obinze finally understood what Nigel meant, Nigel laughed and said, “You talk kind of posh, don’t you? African posh.”

One day, months into his job, after they had delivered a fridge to an address in Kensington, Nigel said, of the elderly man who had come into the kitchen while they were installing it, “He’s a real gent, he is.” Nigel’s tone was admiring, slightly cowed. The man had looked dishevelled and hungover, his hair tousled, his robe open at the chest, and he had said, archly, “You do know how to put it all together,” as though he did not think they did. It amazed Obinze that, because Nigel thought the man was a “real gent,” he did not complain about the dirty kitchen, as he ordinarily would have done. If the man had spoken with a different accent, Nigel would have called him miserly for not giving them a tip.

They were approaching their next delivery address, in South London, and Obinze had just called the homeowner to say that they were almost there, when Nigel blurted out, “What do you say to a girl you like?”

“What do you mean?” Obinze asked.

“Truth is, I’m not really shagging Haley. I like her, but I don’t know how to tell her. The other day, I went round her house and there was another bloke there.” Nigel paused. Obinze tried to keep his face expressionless. “You look like you know what to say to the birds, mate,” Nigel added.

“Just tell her you like her,” Obinze said, thinking how seamlessly Nigel, at the warehouse with the other men, contributed stories about shagging Haley, and, once, about shagging her friend while Haley was away on holiday. “No games and no lines. Just say, ‘Look, I like you and I think you’re beautiful.’ ”

Nigel gave him a wounded glance. It was as if he had convinced himself that Obinze was skilled in the art of women; he expected some profundity, which Obinze wished, as he loaded a dishwasher onto a trolley and wheeled it to the door, that he had. An Indian woman opened the door, a portly, kindly housewife, who offered them tea. Many people offered tea or water. A sad-looking woman had once offered Obinze a small pot of homemade jam, and he had hesitated, but he sensed that whatever deep unhappiness she had would be compounded if he said no, and so he had taken the jam home, where it was still languishing in the fridge, unopened.

“Thank you, thank you,” the Indian woman said, as Obinze and Nigel installed the new dishwasher and rolled away the old one.

At the door, she gave Nigel a tip. Nigel was the only driver who split the tips down the middle with Obinze; the others pretended not to remember to share. Once, when Obinze was working with another driver, an old Jamaican woman pushed ten pounds into his pocket when the driver wasn’t looking. “Thank you, brother,” she said, and it made him want to call his mother in Nsukka and tell her about it.

One morning in early summer, Obinze arrived at the warehouse and knew right away that something was amiss. The men avoided his eyes, and Nigel turned swiftly—too swiftly—toward the toilet when he saw Obinze. They knew. They had somehow found out. They saw the headlines about asylum seekers draining the National Health Service, they thought of the hordes further crowding a crowded island, and now they knew that he was one of the damned, working with a name that was not his. Where was Roy Snell? Had he gone to call the police? Was it the police that you called? Obinze tried to remember details from the stories of people who had been caught and deported, but his mind was numb. He felt naked. He wanted to turn and run, but his body kept moving, against his will, toward the loading area. Then he sensed a movement behind him, quick and violent and too close, and, before he could turn around, a paper hat was pushed onto his head. It was Nigel, and with him a crowd of grinning men.

“Happy birthday, Vinny Boy!” they all said.

Obinze froze, frightened by the complete blankness of his mind. Then he realized what it was. Vincent’s birthday. Roy must have told the men. Even he had not remembered to remember Vincent’s date of birth.

“Oh!” was all he said, nauseated with relief.

Nigel asked him to come into the coffee room, where all the men were trooping in, passing around the muffins and Coke they had bought with their own money in honor of a birthday they believed was his. A realization brought tears to his eyes: he felt safe.

Obinze was mildly surprised when Vincent called him that night, because he had called him only once before, months ago, when he changed his bank and wanted to give him the new account number. He wondered whether to say “Happy birthday” to Vincent, whether the call was indeed related to his birthday.

“Vincent, *kedu*?” he said.

“I want a raise.”

Had Vincent learned that from a film? The words sounded contrived and comical. “I want forty-five per cent. I know you are working more now.”

“Vincent, ahn-ahn. How much am I making? You know I am saving money to do this marriage thing.”

“Forty-five per cent,” Vincent said, and hung up.

Obinze decided to ignore him. He knew Vincent’s type; he would push to see how far he could go and then he would retreat. If Obinze called back and tried to negotiate, it might embolden Vincent to make more demands. But he would not risk losing Obinze’s regular weekly deposit entirely.

And so when, a week later, in the morning bustle of drivers and trucks, Roy said, “Vinny Boy, step into my office for a minute,” Obinze thought nothing of it. On Roy’s desk was a newspaper, folded at the page with the photo of the big-breasted woman. Roy slowly put his cup of coffee on top of the newspaper. He seemed uncomfortable, and wouldn’t look directly at Obinze.

“Somebody called yesterday,” he told Obinze. “Said you’re not who you say you are—that you’re illegal and working with a Brit’s name.” There was a pause. Obinze was stung with surprise. Roy picked up the coffee cup again. “Why don’t you just bring in your passport tomorrow and we’ll clear it up, all right?”

Obinze mumbled the first words that came to him. “O.K. I’ll bring my passport tomorrow.” He walked out of the office knowing that he would never feel again what he had felt moments ago. Was Roy merely asking him to bring in his passport to make the dismissal easier for him, to give him an exit, or did Roy really believe that the caller had been lying? Why would anybody call about such a thing unless it was true? Obinze had never made as much of an effort as he did the rest of the day to seem normal, to tame the rage that was engulfing him. It was not the thought of the power that Vincent had over him that infuriated him but the recklessness with which Vincent had exercised it. He left the warehouse that evening for the final time, wishing more than anything that he had told Nigel and Roy his real name.

The Angolans told him that things had “gone up,” or were “tough,” opaque words that were supposed to explain each new request for more money.

“This is not what we agreed to,” Obinze would say, or “I don’t have any extra cash right now,” and they would reply, “Things have gone up, yeah,” in a tone that he imagined was accompanied by a shrug. A silence would follow, a wordlessness over the phone line that told him that it was his problem, not theirs. “I’ll pay it in by Friday,” he would say, finally, before hanging up.

Nicholas gave Obinze a suit for the wedding. “It’s a good Italian suit,” he said. “It’s small for me, so it should fit you.” The trousers were big, and they bunched up when Obinze tightened his belt, but the jacket, also big, shielded the unsightly pleat of cloth at his waist. Not that he minded. He was so focussed on finally beginning his life that he would have swaddled his lower parts in a baby’s napkin if it had been required. He and Iloba met Cleotilde near City Center. She was standing under a tree with some friends, her hair pushed back with a white band, her eyes boldly lined in black; she looked like an older, sexier person. Her ivory dress was tight at the hips. He had paid for the dress. “I haven’t got any proper going-out dress,” she had said, in apology, when she called to tell him that she had nothing that looked convincingly bridal.

She hugged him. She looked nervous, and he tried to deflect his own nervousness by thinking about them together after this—how, in less than an hour, he would be free to walk with surer steps on Britain’s streets, and free to kiss her.

“You have the rings?” Iloba asked her.

“Yes,” Cleotilde said.

She and Obinze had bought them the week before, plain, cheap matching rings from a side-street shop, and she had looked so delighted, laughingly slipping different rings on and off her finger, that he wondered if she wished it were a real wedding.

“Fifteen minutes to go,” Iloba said. He took pictures, his digital camera held away from his face, saying, “Move closer! O.K., one more!” His sprightly good spirits annoyed Obinze. On the train up to Newcastle the previous day, while Obinze had spent his time looking out the window, unable even to read, Iloba had talked and talked, until his voice became a distant murmur, perhaps because he was trying to keep Obinze from worrying too much. Now he talked to Cleotilde’s friends with easy friendliness about the new Chelsea manager, about “Big Brother,” as if they were all there for something ordinary and normal.

“Time to go,” Iloba said. They walked toward the civic center. The afternoon was bright with sunshine. Obinze opened the door and stood aside for the others to go ahead, into the sterile hallway, where they paused to get their bearings, to be sure which way the registry office was. Two policemen stood behind the door, watching them with stony eyes. Obinze quieted his panic. There was nothing to worry about, nothing at all, he told himself; the civic center probably had policemen present as a matter of routine. But he sensed in the sudden smallness of the hallway, the sudden thickening of doom in the air, that something was wrong. Then another man approached him, his shirtsleeves rolled up, his cheeks so red that he looked as though he were wearing terrible makeup.

“Are you Obinze Maduewesi?” the red-cheeked man asked. In his hands was a sheaf of papers in which Obinze could see a photocopy of his passport.

“Yes,” Obinze said quietly, and that word was an acknowledgment to the red-cheeked immigration officer, to Iloba, to Cleotilde, and to himself that it was over.

“Your visa is expired and you are not allowed to be present in the U.K.,” the man said.

One of the policemen clamped handcuffs around his wrists. He felt himself watching the scene from far away, watching himself walk to the police car outside, and sink into the too-soft seat in the back. There had been so many times in the past when he had feared that this would happen, so many moments that had become one single blur of panic, and now it felt like the dull echo of an aftermath. Cleotilde flung herself on the ground and began to cry. She may never have visited her father’s country, but he was convinced at that moment of her Africanness; how else would she have been able to fling herself to the ground with that perfect dramatic flourish? He wondered if her tears were for him or for herself, or for what might have been between them. She had no need to worry; the policemen barely glanced at her. It was he who felt the heaviness of the handcuffs during the drive to the police station, he who silently handed over his watch and his belt and his wallet and his phone. Nicholas’s large trousers were slipping down his hips.

“Your shoes, too. Take off your shoes,” the policeman said.

He took off his shoes. He was led to a cell. It was small, with brown walls, and metal bars so thick that his hand could not get around one. It reminded him of the chimpanzee cage at Nsukka’s dismal, forgotten zoo. From the high ceiling, a single bulb burned. There was an emptying, echoing vastness in the tiny cell.

“Were you aware that your visa had expired?”

“Yes,” Obinze said.

“Were you about to have a sham marriage?”

“No. Cleotilde and I have been dating for a while.”

“I can arrange for a lawyer for you, but it’s obvious you’ll be deported,” the immigration officer said evenly.

When the lawyer came, puffy-faced, dark arcs under his eyes, Obinze thought of all the films in which the state lawyer is distracted and exhausted. He came with a bag but did not open it, and he sat across from Obinze, holding nothing—no file, no paper, no pen. He was pleasant and sympathetic.

“The government has a strong case. We can appeal, but, to be honest, it will only delay the case. You will eventually be removed from the U.K.,” he said, with the air of a man who had said those same words, in the same tone, more times than he wished to, or could, remember.

“I’m willing to go back to Nigeria,” Obinze said. The last shred of his dignity was like a wrapper slipping off his waist that he was desperate to retie.

The lawyer looked surprised. “O.K., then,” he said, and got up a little too hastily, as though grateful that his job had been made easier. Obinze watched him leave. He was going to check a box on a form that said that his client was willing to be removed. Removed. The word made Obinze feel inanimate. A thing to be removed. A thing without breath and mind. A thing. ♦

* Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has published three novels, including “Americanah,” which is being made into a ﬁlm.