

# The Girl with the Louding Voice



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ABI DARÉ

Abi Daré grew up in Lagos, Nigeria, where she was exposed to many households—including her own—that employed young girls as housemaids. These girls were usually brought to Lagos from small villages or other countries, and it was common for their employers to mistreat them. It was in part her experiences with these girls, their stories, and the way they used language that inspired Daré to write *The Girl with the Louding Voice*. After Daré's parents divorced, her mother raised her and her brother. Their mother instilled in Daré the importance of education and ensured that her children received the best education possible. Daré was educated at the Vivian Fowler Memorial College for Girls in Nigeria before moving to the UK in 2000 to pursue a law degree at Wolverhampton University, an MSc in International Project Management at Glasgow Caledonian University, and later, an MA in Creative Writing at Birkbeck, University of London. *The Girl with the Louding Voice* is her first novel. The unpublished manuscript that would later become the novel won the 2018 Bath Novel Award and was a finalist for the 2018 Literary Consultancy Pen Factor competition. Daré lives in Essex with her husband and two daughters. As of 2020, she oversees app development at a publishing firm.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The real-life issue of child marriage in Nigeria features prominently in Daré's novel. According to a 2018 UNICEF report, there are an estimated 22 million child brides living in Nigeria, which also has the largest number of child brides in West and Central Africa. In West and Central Africa, child marriage is more likely to affect those living in rural areas and in poverty, with the practice being over twice as common in rural areas than in urban areas. The practice has gradually declined since 1990, though many steps need to be taken to ensure that this progress continues. The Summit on Education held in Dakar in February 2018 presented the finding that education can be an effective means of preventing child marriage. Despite the passage of laws intended to protect the welfare of Nigerian children, such as the Child Rights Act of 2003, child marriage continues to occur among certain ethnic groups in the country, such as the Hausa-Fulani tribe in Northern Nigeria. There are also legal loopholes that allow child marriage to continue. For example, Section 29 of the Constitution of Nigeria states that a girl is regarded as an adult if she's married, even if she is a minor at the time of the marriage. Because the constitution ranks higher than the Child Rights Act, this section of the

constitution overrides Section 21 of the Child Rights Act, which states that marriages that occur between a minor and an adult are invalid.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

*The Girl with the Louding Voice* is a novel by a Nigerian author about a Nigerian girl, and it contains feminist themes that challenge Nigeria's cultural norms. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, whom Daré has cited as one of her inspirations, is another contemporary Nigerian author. Her books similarly focus on issues of feminism, identity, and the experiences of Nigerian women and girls. Adichie's novel [Purple Hibiscus](#) follows the story of Kambili, a young girl around Adunni's age, as she grows up amidst the political instability of postcolonial Nigeria. Another central focus of *The Girl with the Louding Voice* is Adunni's forced marriage. Khaled Hosseini's novel [A Thousand Splendid Suns](#) is set in Afghanistan and tells the stories of two young girls who are forced to marry an older, abusive man. Though not a work of fiction, Tara Westover's memoir [Educated](#) contains the themes of education, self-worth, and independence that are also central to Adunni's story in *The Girl with the Louding Voice*.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Girl with the Louding Voice
- **When Written:** 2020
- **Where Written:** London
- **When Published:** 2020
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Novel
- **Setting:** Nigeria
- **Climax:** Big Madam reveals the truth about what happened to Rebecca.
- **Antagonist:** Morufu, Big Daddy, Big Madam, Mr. Kola
- **Point of View:** First Person

### EXTRA CREDIT

**New Perspective.** Daré was inspired to write *The Girl with the Louding Voice* after her eight-year-old daughter complained about emptying the dishwasher. Daré responded that there were girls her daughter's age in Nigeria who worked as full-time housemaids.



## PLOT SUMMARY

Adunni is a teenage girl living in Ikati, a small, rural village in Nigeria. One day, Papa informs her that he has arranged for her to be sold as a wife to a much older man, Morufu. Adunni's family has fallen on hard times since Mama's death, and Morufu has agreed to pay the family's rent money and provide them with food in exchange for Adunni's hand in marriage. The news shocks Adunni—her biggest dream in life is to get an education and become a teacher, and she knows that the marriage will put her dream further out of reach. Leaving her family's compound to marry Morufu also means that she'll have to abandon her brother Kayus, with whom she is very close.

Regardless of Adunni's hesitations, the marriage proceeds, and Adunni becomes Morufu's third bride. She moves out of her family's compound and into Morufu's **house**, where she must live with her new husband and his other wives. Labake, the first wife, is cruel and antagonizes Adunni whenever she can. The second (and very pregnant) wife, Khadija, shows Adunni kindness and acts as a motherly figure. Despite Khadija's kindness, though, life in Morufu's house is traumatic. Morufu has a horrible temper, beats his children, and tyrannizes his wives. He also rapes Adunni on a regular basis, determined to impregnate her so that she can birth him a son.

Khadija grows nervous when her pregnancy begins to show signs of complications, and she confesses to Adunni that the baby is not Morufu's. The father is Bamidele, a man from Khadija's home village with whom she had a love affair before her father sold her to Morufu. She and Bamidele remained in love and eventually resumed their romance, resulting in the pregnancy. But Bamidele's family believes that they are cursed: supposedly, if a pregnant woman in the family doesn't bathe in a **river** and wash with a special soap, she and the baby will die in childbirth. Khadija believes that she and her unborn baby have fallen victim to this curse.

Khadija and Adunni sneak out to Kere village to meet Bamidele and perform the special bath. Bamidele acts concerned and helpful at first but ends up leaving them at the river in order to protect his own reputation, as he is now married and expecting a legitimate child with his wife. Khadija dies in childbirth, abandoned by her lover.

Fearing that she will be held responsible for Khadija's death, Adunni runs away. She seeks refuge with a poor, sickly woman named Iya, whom Adunni's mother used to help. Iya puts Adunni in touch with her brother, Kola, who she says will find Adunni a job in Lagos. In reality, Kola operates as a trafficker and secretly sells Adunni as an indentured servant to Big Madam, a rich businesswoman who owns a fabric shop.

Adunni works long, grueling hours as a housemaid, and Big Madam physically and mentally abuses her. Big Madam's husband, Big Daddy, is an unemployed alcoholic and a

philanderer. He repeatedly tries to coerce Adunni into a sexual relationship in exchange for his "protection" against Big Madam's beatings, though Adunni manages to avoid his advances. Adunni also befriends Big Madam's chef, Kofi, who looks out for her. Recognizing Adunni's desire for an education, Kofi tells Adunni about a scholarship for female domestic servants and urges her to apply.

Shortly after her arrival at Big Madam's, Adunni learns about Rebecca, the former housemaid who disappeared under mysterious circumstances, after discovering Rebecca's **waist beads** in her room. Nobody seems to know exactly what happened to Rebecca, though people speculate that she might have run away with a boyfriend. People seem hesitant to discuss Rebecca, and Big Madam, in particular, seems eager to change the subject whenever Rebecca comes up in conversation. Rebecca's life and disappearance fascinate Adunni, and she makes it her goal to uncover the truth.

One day, at a social event for the neighborhood wives' association hosted at Big Madam's house, Adunni meets Big Madam's neighbor Ms. Tia. Unlike Big Madam and the other women in the group, Ms. Tia is kind, genuine, and seemingly unconcerned with material wealth. She works at the Lagos Environmental Consultancy and lives with her husband, Kenneth Dada, a fertility doctor. Ms. Tia takes Adunni under her wing, agreeing to serve as a character reference for Adunni's scholarship and offering to teach her English to improve her chances of winning the scholarship.

Adunni and Ms. Tia develop a meaningful relationship over the course of their lessons together and begin to confide in each other: Adunni tells Ms. Tia about her troubled past, and Ms. Tia tells Adunni about her strained relationship with Ms. Tia's mother. Their relationship initially made Ms. Tia not want children, though now she does want to try for a baby.

When Ms. Tia and her husband have trouble conceiving a child, doctor mama (Kenneth's mother) arranges for Ms. Tia to undergo a bathing ritual that is supposed to promote fertility. The ritual, which Adunni witnesses, turns out to be incredibly violent and involves Ms. Tia being flogged with broomsticks.

One day, Adunni attends a church service with the other housemaids and learns from Chisom, the housemaid of Big Madam's friend, Caroline Bankole, that Rebecca supposedly gained weight and talked about getting married right before she disappeared. Later that day, Adunni mentions Rebecca to Abu, Big Madam's driver, and Abu tells her that he found a note hidden in the car after Rebecca disappeared. The note, written by Rebecca and left behind in the event that something happened to her, reveals that Rebecca was pregnant with Big Daddy's child, and that Big Daddy gave her something that was supposed to induce a miscarriage. Adunni now realizes the extent of Big Daddy's treachery.

Later that night, Big Daddy comes to Adunni's room and tries

to rape her. She manages to temporarily free herself, at which point Big Madam walks in on the scene. More upsetting to Big Madam than Adunni's attempted rape is the caller ID on Big Daddy's ringing phone, which reveals that Big Daddy is having an affair with Caroline Bankole.

Big Madam kicks Big Daddy out of the house and tells Adunni about her role in Rebecca's disappearance: Big Madam found out about the pregnancy and attempted miscarriage, took Rebecca to the doctor, and gave her money to leave and never return.

Shortly after these revelations come to light, Ms. Tia informs Adunni that she has won the scholarship and can stop working as a housemaid, which Big Madam allows. Ms. Tia arrives to take Adunni away from Big Madam's once for all, and Adunni feels hopeful as she walks through the iron gates of her employer's house and toward her new life of education and freedom.



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Adunni** – Adunni is the protagonist and narrator of *The Girl with the Louding Voice*. She is an intelligent, feisty, and determined 14-year-old girl from Ikati, a rural village in Nigeria. In the beginning of the novel Papa forces her to marry a much older, abusive man named Morufu in exchange for food and rent money. Papa's decision horrifies Adunni, as her life's dream is to get an education and become a teacher, values that were instilled in her by Mama, who died shortly before start of the novel. Before she died, Mama told Adunni that education would be her "voice," the thing that would give her a sense of power and self-worth that nobody could take away from her. From that day forth, Adunni vows to achieve what she calls a "louding voice," or a voice that conveys her sense of strength intelligence, and confidence. Adunni's marriage also forces her to leave her younger brother, Kayus, with whom she is very close. Despite the limitations imposed on her by her gender, class status, and lack of a formal education, Adunni does everything in her power to find her louding voice, approaching each day with curiosity and openness. She eventually escapes Morufu but is tricked into becoming an indentured servant for Big Madam and Big Daddy. Here, a kind woman named Ms. Tia gives Adunni English lessons, and Adunni also learns independently by reading books she finds in Big Madam's **house**. Other women, most notably Khadija (another one of Morufu's wives) and Ms. Tia play a critical role in supporting and encouraging Adunni to value herself, pursue her education, and find her voice. In turn, she uses her voice to bring to light the mystery of Rebecca, Big Madam's former housemaid who disappeared before Adunni's arrival. By the end of the novel, through the support of these women and her own strength,

Adunni wins the Ocean Oil scholarship, which allows her to leave her job at Big Madam's house receive the education that she has dreamed of for so many years.

**Ms. Tia/Tia Dada** – Tia Dada, whom Adunni refers to as Ms. Tia, is a wealthy woman who lives in Big Madam's neighborhood. She is from a wealthy family in Port Harcourt, was educated in the UK, and now works for the Lagos Environmental Consultancy. Ms. Tia moved to Lagos to be with her husband, Dr. Kenneth Dada, whom she met online. Adunni first meets Ms. Tia when Ms. Tia attends a function at Big Madam's **house** for the neighborhood women's association. While many of the other women at the function belittle and disrespect Adunni, Ms. Tia treats Adunni kindly and respectfully. Later on, Ms. Tia agrees to be Adunni's character reference for the Ocean Oil Secondary School Scholarship, and she also agrees to give Adunni English lessons to improve her chances of winning the scholarship. Over the course of these lessons, Ms. Tia and Adunni develop a meaningful relationship, confiding in each other about their struggles in life: Adunni tells Ms. Tia about her horrific past, and Ms. Tia tells Adunni about her troubled relationship with Ms. Tia's Mother, who is now very ill. She also explains how this relationship initially made her not want to have children, though now she knows that she wants a child. Ms. Tia's decision to have children becomes an issue when she and her husband have trouble conceiving. Ken's mother, doctor mama, forces her to undergo a violent ritual bath to cure her supposed infertility. But later in the novel, Ken admits to Ms. Tia that he has been infertile all along, which leads to some marital strife, though the couple eventually looks into adoption. Their situation illustrates the uneven responsibility that Nigerian society places on women to get pregnant and become mothers.

**Big Madam (Florence Adeoti)** – Big Madam and her husband, Big Daddy, are Adunni's employers after she is tricked into indentured servitude. Big Madam is a physically large and highly successful Nigerian businesswoman. She owns a shop, Kayla's Fabrics (named after her daughter), in Lagos, and her clientele includes governors and senators. Big Madam is cruel to her **house** staff and physically and mentally abuses Adunni. Big Madam's cruelty may be attributed, in part, to her own unhappiness: her husband, Big Daddy, is unemployed, entitled, and unfaithful to her. Big Madam endures his abuses, at least until she walks in on Big Daddy's attempted rape of Adunni and, on the same night, finds out about Big Daddy's affair with her best friend, Caroline Bankole. These revelations lead her to kick him out of the house, though it seems that she exiles him because of the affair and doesn't care much about the attempted rape. At the end of the novel, Adunni learns that Big Madam was directly involved in the disappearance of Rebecca, the former housemaid who became pregnant with Big Daddy's child. Big Madam describes to Adunni how she took Rebecca to the hospital after Big Daddy forced Rebecca to have a

miscarriage and gave her money on the condition that she leave and never return. Big Madam's reasons for helping Rebecca remain rather ambiguous: she may have genuinely wanted to help Rebecca, or she may have been motivated by bitterness toward her husband for fathering a child with another woman. Regardless, at the end of the novel, Big Madam sets Adunni free in a similar way, allowing her to quit her job and pursue her education instead.

**Big Daddy (Chief Adeoti)** – Big Daddy is Big Madam's unemployed, lecherous, alcoholic husband. According to Kofi, Big Madam's chef, Big Daddy is always away on "women business," engaging in numerous affairs with women and underage girls. At the end of the novel, Adunni learns that Big Daddy impregnated Big Madam's former housemaid, Rebecca, and promised to marry her before giving Rebecca a laced drink in an attempt to induce a miscarriage. Big Madam took Rebecca to the hospital before giving her money to leave and not come back. Over the course of Adunni's employment at Big Madam's **house**, Big Daddy repeatedly tries to manipulate her into a sexual relationship by offering her money and protection against his cruel and demanding wife. She escapes his advances on numerous occasions, though just barely. Near the end of the novel, Big Daddy almost succeeds in raping Adunni, but she escapes when Big Madam walks in on them. In the same scene, Big Madam sees her closet friend, Caroline Bankole, calling Big Daddy on his cell phone, which she sees as proof that Big Daddy has been having an affair with the woman. Due to this betrayal—seemingly *not* due Adunni's attempted rape—Big Madam kicks Big Daddy out of the house. The way Big Daddy exploits and abuses the women and girls in his life is a small-scale example of the gendered inequality and violence that pervades the society of the novel.

**Khadija** – Morufu's second wife, Khadija, was married when she was just 15 years old. Her father married her off for money after he became sick with diabetes and could no longer work, just as Papa marries Adunni off for food and rent money. Khadija is kind and compassionate, and she becomes something of a maternal figure to Adunni, secretly helping her procure a special medicine that will prevent pregnancy when Adunni tells her that she doesn't want to have Morufu's child. When Adunni first moves into Morufu's **house**, Khadija is heavily pregnant with her fourth child. Because the previous three children were all born girls, it is very important that this child is a boy. To ensure this, Khadija resumes a love affair with her former lover, Bamidele, and becomes pregnant by him. Bamidele's family apparently only gives birth to boys, but the family is apparently cursed: their pregnant women need to bathe in a **river** with a special soap, or else they and their babies will die in childbirth. Knowing this, and fearing that her unborn baby is in danger, Khadija and Adunni travel to Kere village to find Bamidele and undergo the bathing ritual. But before they can begin the ritual, Bamidele, who now has a pregnant wife of his own, abandons

Khadija to protect his own reputation. Khadija dies in childbirth, which forces Adunni to run away before she can be blamed for the death. Khadija is a tragic character who suffers and dies at the behest of an unjust, sexist culture. The fact that Khadija dies in childbirth and Bamidele gets to resume his life—even though they are equally responsible for the pregnancy—serves as a prime example of gender inequality as it relates to sexuality and childrearing.

**Morufu** – Morufu is Adunni, Khadija, and Labake's husband. He's an old man who works as a taxi driver in Adunni's village. Morufu agrees to compensate Adunni's family financially in exchange for her hand in marriage; in effect, he treats Adunni as a commodity that can be bought and sold, which is indicative of broader cultural attitudes toward women. Morufu is cruel and abusive toward Adunni, his children, and his other two wives, Labake and Khadija. Morufu expects his wives and children to be completely subservient to him. He values his wives by their ability to produce male children for him—the reason he marries Adunni in the first place is because his previous two wives have born only daughters, and he thinks that she might be able to give birth to a son. None of his children attend school, and Morufu marries off his oldest daughter, Kike (who is Adunni's age), shortly after Adunni arrives at the **household**. This reinforces Morufu's disregard for women and girls' well-being.

**Rebecca** – Rebecca is Big Madam and Big Daddy's former housemaid who disappeared under mysterious circumstances. Adunni is her replacement. Throughout the novel, characters avoid talking about Rebecca; Big Madam, in particular, is desperate to change the subject whenever Rebecca comes up in conversation. Adunni grows curious about Rebecca, especially after she finds Rebecca's **waist beads** abandoned in her old room, which is now Adunni's. So, Adunni makes it her mission to uncover the mystery of Rebecca's disappearance. Eventually, through a note that Rebecca wrote that Abu found hidden in Big Daddy's car after she disappeared, Adunni learns that Rebecca had a sexual relationship with Big Daddy, eventually becoming pregnant with his baby. Big Daddy told Rebecca that he would marry her, but then he tricked her into drinking something that would induce a miscarriage. At the end of the novel, Big Madam tells Adunni that she took Rebecca to a hospital to stop the bleeding and, afterward, gave her money to leave the **house** and never return. At the end of the novel, before Adunni leaves Big Madam's house for the last time, she writes "Adunni & Rebecca" on the wall—a symbolic gesture that documents Rebecca's life and place in history and validates her as a person.

**Mama (Idowu)** – Mama was Adunni, Kayus, and Born-boy's mother and Papa's wife. She died after a long period of illness prior to the events of the novel. Adunni turns to memories of Mama to comfort her during particularly trying moments, though sometimes grief for Mama becomes too much for

Adunni to manage. Adunni gets her love of education from Mama, who taught her that an education can give her a voice and a sense of power that nobody else can take from her. Mama didn't have the opportunity to receive an education, which robbed her of many things in life—including the chance to be with Ade, the rich, educated man she loved before her marriage to Papa. Before Mama died, she made Papa promise that he wouldn't marry off Adunni and would allow her to finish her education, though he ends up breaking both of those promises. Mama also taught Adunni to have faith in God during times of trouble, and Adunni often reads Mama's old Yoruba Bible, which is one of the few belongings that she carries with her as she moves from place to place over the course of the novel. Mama's Bible represents the importance of literacy and education, as well as the role that faith or hope plays in a person's ability to survive harrowing, traumatic situations.

**Papa** – Papa is Adunni, Kayus, and Born-boy's father who. At the beginning of the novel, he sells Adunni as a bride to Morufu, a much older man, in exchange for rent money and food. This action is a betrayal to Papa's deceased wife, who made him promise that he would not marry off Adunni and would allow her to finish her education. While Mama was alive, Papa would always yell at her and, on at least one occasion, physically beat her. He, like other men in the novel, views women and girls primarily as commodities whose value lies in how useful they are to men. Despite Papa's decision to marry off Adunni, Adunni still loves her father and hopes that she might be able to see him again one day.

**Kayus** – Kayus is Adunni and Born-boy's 11-year-old younger brother and Papa and Mama's son. He is kind and loving, and he and Adunni are very close. Kayus and Adunni are very close and loyal to each other. So, when Kayus and Papa go to Iya's home to find Adunni, who has run away in the aftermath of Khadija's death, Kayus spots Adunni hiding in the bathroom but lies to Papa, claiming that Adunni is not there. This is the last time in the novel that the siblings see each other, though Adunni maintains a hope that she will be able to reunite with her family someday. Because Adunni is the daughter in the family, she's the one forced to make large sacrifices to improve the family's financial situation. Adunni feels no bitterness toward Kayus, however, as she recognizes that it is beyond his ability to control the norms that dictate their society. Kayus is one of the only people from Adunni's village who is as upset about her forced marriage to Morufu as she is.

**Born-boy (Alao)** – Born-boy is Adunni and Kayus's older brother and Papa and Mama's son. He is 19 years old and the family's eldest child. His real name is Alao, and he works at Kassim Motors. Born-boy and Adunni are not very close. Unlike Kayus, who finds Adunni's forced marriage with Morufu horrifying, Born-boy sees nothing wrong with the situation and believes Morufu to be a "good man."

**Kola** – Kola, who Adunni refers to as Mr. Kola, is Iya's brother.

He owns a car and cell phone, which Iya proudly regards as emblematic of his financial success. Adunni turns to Kola and Iya for help when she needs to escape her village to avoid being blamed for Khadija's death. Kola finds Adunni a job working at Big Madam's **house** in Lagos, and Adunni initially believes this his intentions are good, though it becomes clear that Kola has actually sold her into domestic servitude. Although Kola initially tells Adunni that he will collect her salary for her and place it in a bank account for safekeeping, she soon realizes that he is keeping this money for himself.

**Kofi** – Kofi is the cook at Big Madam and Big Daddy's **house**. He is from Ghana and is using the money he earns working for Big Madam to finish building a house back home, where has a daughter around Adunni's age. Kofi befriends Adunni and tells her about the Ocean Oil Secondary School Scholarship, which he sees as Adunni's one chance at freedom. Kofi is one of the few male characters in the book who doesn't abuse or exploit women. He values Adunni as a person and looks out for her, warning her to be careful around Big Daddy. Kofi studied accounting in school but eventually (and much to the displeasure of his family) abandoned a well-paying field to pursue his passion of becoming a chef. Kofi used to work Ghanaian ambassador to Nigeria but lost his job when a new ambassador took over.

**Kenneth Dada/The Doctor** – Kenneth Dada is Ms. Tia's husband. Ms. Tia refers to him as Ken, and Adunni refers to him as simply "the doctor." He is fertility doctor, helping women become pregnant—a job he was inspired to do due to his own infertility, though this condition remains a secret for much of the novel. When Ken and Ms. Tia got married, they didn't want children, so Ken didn't feel the need to tell Tia about his infertility. Later, when Ms. Tia changes her mind and the couple begin to try to conceive, Ken continues to keep his infertility a secret from his wife, and it's only after Ken's mother, doctor mama, coerces Ms. Tia to undergo a violent fertility ritual that he tells Ms. Tia the truth. Ken and Ms. Tia seem to have one of the more equal marriages in the novel, but Ken's secrecy and the unfair burden placed on his wife to conceive a child and become a mother underscores the Nigerian society's double standards for men and women.

**Doctor Mama** – "Doctor mama" is Kenneth Dada's mother and Ms. Tia's mother-in-law. Adunni refers to her as simply "doctor mama." Doctor mama repeatedly shows up at the Dada **house** to pester Ms. Tia about having a baby, even before Ms. Tia and her husband decide that they want to have children. Doctor mama arranges for Ms. Tia to take a ritual **bath** administered by a prophet to help with fertility. The "bath," which doctor mama and Adunni attend along with Ms. Tia, turns out to be incredibly violent, as it involves Ms. Tia being flogged with broomsticks. The ritual's brutality horrifies doctor mama, and she apologizes to Ms. Tia afterward, explaining that she didn't know all that the bath entailed and only suggested it because she wanted Ms. Tia

to become pregnant.

**Ms. Tia's Mother** – Ms. Tia's mother lives in Port Harcourt and is terminally ill for the entirety of the novel. Ms. Tia leaves Lagos on several occasions to care for her sick mother. They have a rather strained relationship, as Ms. Tia's mother was harsh and controlling of Ms. Tia as a child. This tension is one of the factors that initially made Ms. Tia decide not to have children. Ms. Tia's mother's illness softens her personality, though, and Ms. Tia begins to wish that she had a baby to bring with her when she visits her mother, so that her mother would have something to live for.

**Labake** – Labake is Morufu's first wife. Morufu took Khadija as a second wife after Labake failed to give birth to a son, and Adunni as a third wife later on. Labake takes out her frustration at being replaced on her junior wives. Her bitterness is a misguided attempt to gain the upper hand in an oppressive, patriarchal system in which all three wives are victims of Morufu's misogyny. Labake has one daughter, Kike, who is Adunni's age, and with whom Adunni used to play in the village. Labake constantly harasses Adunni while they live together in Morufu's **house**, and in this way, she serves as a foil for the kind and motherly Khadija. Both women are victims of an unjust system in which their worth is determined by their usefulness to men. But whereas Khadija recognizes that Adunni is just another blameless victim of Morufu's tyranny and resolves to help her, Labake fails (or refuses) to make this connection and treats Adunni as the villain, thereby missing out on an opportunity to help another woman and perpetuating the very system that oppresses them both.

**Kike** – Kike is Labake and Morufu's daughter. She and Adunni used to play together in the village before Adunni was forced to marry Morufu. Kike lies for Adunni when Labake accuses Adunni of using her stove, and Adunni appreciates this small act of kindness. Shortly after this incident, Kike leaves the **house** to move in with Baba Ogun, the husband Morufu selected for her. Kike accepts the marriage, even though her real dream is to become a tailor. She reasons that if she can't be a man, the next best thing is to marry one.

**Bamidele** – Bamidele is Khadija's lover from Kere village. Khadija is pregnant with Bamidele's baby at the time of her death. Khadija and Bamidele had a relationship when they were younger but had to break it off when Khadija's father forced her to marry Morufu. The couple resumes the relationship years later, after Khadija has trouble conceiving a male child. The women in Bamidele's family only give birth to boys, apparently, so Khadija and Bamidele engage in a sexual relationship so that she can become pregnant with a boy and please Morufu. Bamidele's family also believe themselves to be cursed, and the supposed curse requires pregnant women to bathe in a **river** with a special soap to avoid dying in childbirth. Adunni and Khadija go to Kere village to find Bamidele and perform the ceremonial bath. Although Bamidele at first

appears willing to help, he ultimately abandons Khadija and leaves her to die, as he now has his own pregnant wife and doesn't want to tarnish his reputation. Bamidele's abandonment of Khadija illustrates the unequal burden that women bear in pregnancy and childrearing.

**Iya** – Iya is a poor, sickly woman living in Agan village. Iya is the Yoruba name for "old woman," and Adunni doesn't know Iya's real name. Mama would bring Iya food when she was still alive. Adunni goes to Iya for help after she needs to escape to avoid the consequences of being blamed for Khadija's death, and Iya puts Adunni in contact with her brother, Kola. Even though Iya is sincerely trying to be helpful, Kola ends up tricking Adunni into indentured servitude.

**Caroline Bankole** – Caroline Bankole is Big Madam's best friend. She is the wife of a rich oil businessman. Caroline is having an affair with Big Daddy, which Big Madam discovers at the end of the novel. The affair leads Big Madam to kick Big Daddy out of the **house**. Caroline has an unusually friendly relationship with her housemaid, Chisom, giving Chisom food, nice clothes, and telling her secrets in exchange for her discretion.

**Abu** – Abu is Big Madam's driver. Abu and Adunni don't talk much, though they are always friendly toward each other. It was Abu who found the note that Rebecca left in the car the day after she disappeared, and he keeps the discovery a secret until the day he shares it with Adunni. Keeping the note a secret for so long wears on Abu's conscience.

**The Prophet** – The prophet leads Ms. Tia's fertility **bath** ritual. As Adunni, Ms. Tia, and doctor mama are leaving the church where the bath takes place, Adunni sees the prophet leading another woman through the bath's introductory steps, suggesting that the prophet is regularly involved in such violence against women—and that he profits from this violence.

**Bamidele's Wife** – Bamidele's wife lives with Bamidele in Kere village. When Adunni and Khadija arrive in town to search for Bamidele and perform the **river** ritual, Bamidele's wife is pregnant with his legitimate child. When Adunni comes looking for Bamidele after Khadija's death, Bamidele's wife shouts that Adunni is a thief, which spurs Adunni to run away.

**Ade** – Ade, a man from a rich family in Lagos, was Mama's lover before she married Papa. Ade and Mama met when Ade was visiting his grandmother in Ikati. Ade's family forbade the marriage and sent him abroad, and Mama's family forced her to marry Papa, though she never loved him. Adunni meets Ade prior to the events of the novel, when Ade returns to Ikati to visit his grandmother's grave. Though Ade doesn't see Mama, he tells Adunni to tell Mama that he never forgot her. Mama's doomed romance with Ade mirrors Khadija's doomed romance with Bamidele, with both women being forced to give up love to enter into loveless marriages with older men.

**Enitan** – Enitan is Adunni's friend in Ikati village. Enitan loves to

do hair and wants to open a makeup business. She regards Adunni's marriage as a good thing, reasoning that it will improve Adunni and her family's quality of life. This is a point of contention between the two friends, as Adunni believes that education, not marriage, is the way to improve her life. Enitan seems resolved to conform to social norms, but Adunni wants more out of life.

**Asabi** – Asabi is a girl from Adunni's village who ran away from her husband to be with her lover, Tafa, but was caught and punished by being forced to stay alone in a single room until she learned her lesson. Adunni regards Asabi as a warning of what could happen if she runs away to avoid her marriage.

**Lamidi** – Lamidi is a farmer from Adunni's village who kills his friend in a fight. The village punishes him by flogging him in the village square until he dies. It is Lamidi's fate that convinces Adunni she must run away, fearing that she will be blamed and punished for Khadija's death.

**Big Daddy's Sisters** – Big Daddy's sisters visit Big Madam to try to convince her to let Big Daddy come **home** after the affair with Caroline Bankole. Big Madam is bitter toward Big Daddy's family because they weren't there for her when she was struggling with paying bills, managing her business, and raising her children.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Chisom** – Chisom is Caroline Bankole's housemaid. Caroline treats Chisom better than Big Madam treats Adunni—she has nice clothing, braided hair, painted nails, and plenty of food to eat. It's Chisom who fills Adunni in about Rebecca's time at Big Madam's **house**.

**Mother Tinu/Mother-in-Jerusalem Tinu** – Mother Tinu is the head of the “female birth-makers” at the church where Ms. Tia undergoes the fertility **bath** ritual.

**The Birth-Makers** – The “female birth-makers” flog Ms. Tia during the fertility **bath** ritual. The women carry out the flogging without emotion, but as they cleanse Ms. Tia's wounds afterward, they seem apologetic for their violence.

**Ruka** – Ruka is Adunni's friend in Ikati village. Like Enitan, Ruka doesn't understand Adunni's reluctance to accept her marriage to Morufu.

**Mr. Bada** – Mr. Bada is Papa's friend who occasionally comes over to talk politics and watch TV. Adunni runs into Mr. Bada as she is fleeing the village, though he doesn't suspect that she's running away.

**Katie** – Katie is Ms. Tia's friend from the UK. Ms. Tia shows Adunni Katie's picture to demonstrate how Facebook works. Adunni references Katie on a few occasions to make a point about race.

**Kemi** – Kemi is Big Madam's sister. Big Madam talks on the phone to Kemi after discovering Big Daddy's affair with

Caroline Bankole. Kemi doesn't seem to believe Big Madam, an instance of women not supporting other women and, by extension, reinforcing patriarchal oppression.

**Kayla** – Kayla is Big Madam's daughter. Big Madam's store, Kayla's Fabrics, is named after her. Kayla is engaged to Kunle, the son of a senator, which is a big bragging point for Big Madam.

**Officer Kamson** – Officer Kamson is the officer who arrives at Big Madam's **house** after she calls the police to accuse Big Daddy of being involved in Rebecca's disappearance.

**Aunty Sisi** – Aunty Sisi is Adunni's aunty.

**Kunle** – Kunle is Kayla's fiancé.

**Tafa** – Tafa is Asabi's lover. The village hangs him as punishment for stealing another man's wife.

**Alafia** – Alafia is one of Khadija's daughters with Morufu.

**Kofo** – Kofo is of Khadija's daughters with Morufu.

**Baba Ogun** – Baba Ogun is the man Kike marries.

## TERMS

**Yoruba** – The Yoruba are an ethnic group in western Africa, primarily Nigeria. Their language, also called Yoruba, is widely spoken in southwestern Nigeria (where Lagos is located).



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



### EDUCATION, EMPOWERMENT, AND SELF-WORTH

Before the events of *The Girl with the Louding Voice*, when Adunni's mother, Mama, is still alive, she teaches Adunni that “your schooling is your voice.” As a result, Adunni spends the novel searching for a “louding voice”—that is, empowerment and self-worth—through education. Adunni's quest for knowledge is challenged, though, as she's forced to marry an abusive man and later tricked into indentured servitude. But despite Adunni's dismal circumstances and the cruel people who belittle her, she refuses to stay silent and uncurious, finding little ways to educate herself and passing the power of a voice along to others. Through her journey, the novel suggests that education is uniquely empowering not only because it gives people a better understanding of the world, but because it helps them develop a “louding voice”—a sense of self-worth, confidence, and independence that they can then

use to help others.

Mama's belief in the value of education influences Adunni to acquire as much knowledge as she can, which, in turn, allows her to engage more actively and purposefully with her surroundings. Early in Adunni's time working as a housemaid for Big Madam, she stumbles on two books while cleaning the library, "the Collins" (the *Collins English Dictionary*) and *The Book of Nigerian Facts*. Adunni consults these books frequently, using the dictionary to learn new words and *The Book of Nigerian Facts* to learn more about Nigerian culture and society. The information that Adunni gleans from these books allows her to form more educated opinions about the people she interacts with and about her own situation. Many of the chapters that follow Adunni's initial encounter with *The Book of Nigerian Facts* begin with a fact about Nigeria, which gives the sense that the reader is learning these facts along with Adunni. The events in a given chapter relate to the preceding fact, with the implication that Adunni is applying the facts she learns to her own life in order to better understand herself and the world around her. For example, Chapter 49 begins with a fact about the prevalence of human trafficking of children in Nigeria. Later in this chapter, Adunni tells Kofi, Big Madam's chef, that Mr. Kola, the man who brought her to Big Madam's, is "a slave trader," and that "him and Big Madam, they are slave-trading people like me." Learning about the prevalence of human trafficking in Nigeria allows Adunni to place herself in that broader social narrative and make sense of her situation. Her knowledge gives her the power to identify Kola as an aggressor and herself as a victim.

As Adunni becomes better educated, she gains a sense of self-worth that helps her stay grounded amid her life's difficulties and constant changes. Adunni's circumstances change rapidly over the course of the novel. In period of less than a year, she loses her mother, becomes a child bride, witnesses a dear friend die in her arms, and is tricked into domestic servitude. These events deprive Adunni of any sense of permanence or reliability. They show her that life can change suddenly, and that the people she thinks she can rely on to help her—Mama, Khadija, Papa, and Mr. Kola, for example—can exit her life or betray her with little notice. But as Adunni educates herself and gain new perspective about her life and the world around her, she develops a sense of empowerment and confidence (a "louding voice") that inspires her to persevere and continue to advocate for herself. Ms. Tia, Big Madam's friendly neighbor and Adunni's mentor, affirms this when Adunni comes to her house one day to accompany her to the market. "God has given you all you need to be great, and it sits right there inside of you," she tells Adunni. "You just need to hold on to that belief and never let go. When you get up every day, I want you to remind yourself that [...] you are a person of value. That you are important." Having more knowledge makes Adunni feel more confident about who she is, and her self-worth gives her a

sense of security and permanence in an unpredictable world. This, in turn, imbues her with the strength and self-assurance she needs to move forward in the face of adversity.

Armed with the self-advocacy that education gives her, Adunni can advocate for other people who have been silenced. When Adunni arrives at Big Madam's, she learns about Rebecca, Big Madam's former housemaid who disappeared under mysterious circumstances and who nobody in the **house** seems to want to talk about. But Adunni's newfound understanding of her circumstances and of her own value allows her to see that Rebecca, too, is "a person of value," and Adunni is therefore determined to find out what happened to her. She eventually discovers that Rebecca became pregnant with Big Daddy's baby, suffered a miscarriage, and left Lagos after Big Madam gave her money to get on a bus and never return. The scandal of Rebecca's situation, combined with her lower class status and lack of education, is what led to her abuse and erasure. Near the end of the novel, before Adunni leaves Big Madam's to pursue a formal education, she writes "Adunni & Rebecca" on her bedroom wall, a symbolic gesture that demonstrates the importance of using one's education and voice to empathize with and speak up for others. In Rebecca's case, Adunni arrives too late to help in a direct way. But given that Adunni's dream is to be a teacher, it's likely that her own experience of finding her "louding voice" will lead her to ensure that her future students are granted the voice that Rebecca was denied.



## GENDER INEQUALITY AND SOLIDARITY

In the opening passage of *The Girl with the Louding Voice*, the teenager narrator, Adunni, learns that her father is forcing her to marry a much older man, Morufu, in exchange for food and rent money. Throughout the novel, it becomes clear that child marriage and other forms of gendered oppression—such as sexual objectification, violence, and lack of access to education—are pervasive problems for Nigerian women and girls, particularly those like Adunni who grow up in rural communities. And while widespread misogyny and inequality cause some female characters to tear down other women in an effort to empower themselves, there are a select few—like Mama, Khadija, and Ms. Tia—who encourage Adunni and facilitate her education. Although breaking entirely free from oppression isn't always possible, other women's support allows Adunni to resist the limitations that society places on her and eventually escape her situation. As such, the novel suggests that one of the most powerful ways for women and girls to endure (and even escape) gendered violence and inequality is to support one another and collectively reject the people and institutions that oppress them.

Adunni's experience as a child bride illustrates the oppression and objectification that many Nigerian women and girls face. Adunni's dream is to get an education and to become a teacher. But because she's female, she is forced to quit school, and her



opportunities are limited to marriage and motherhood. In contrast, Adunni's two brothers are allowed to hold jobs outside the home. When the family falls on hard times, Papa sells Adunni off to Morufu, essentially treating Adunni like a commodity rather than a person with her own interests and desires. In exchange for Adunni, Morufu will pay Papa Adunni's owo-ori, or "bride-price," which quite literally places a monetary value on Adunni's worth. Once Adunni is married, Morufu further objectifies her by raping her and affirming that her only purpose is to bear him a son. After the initial rape, Morufu proudly proclaims that Adunni is "now complete woman," which establishes that Adunni's worth is predicated on her ability to please Morufu sexually and to become pregnant and bear male children. In fact, the reason that Morufu marries Adunni in the first place is because his first two wives, Labake and Khadija, were unable to bear sons. These forms of oppression and objectification are socially accepted and common in Adunni's community and Nigeria in general. This is evidenced by the way male characters condone these practices; by other female characters' similar experiences and acceptance of those experiences; and by some of the "Nigeria Facts" that precede chapters in the latter half of the book, which make it clear that practices like child marriage are still relatively common in Nigeria.

Some female characters respond to oppression and objectification by competing or taking advantage of other women, though this fails to improve their status and only perpetuates the cycle of oppression. For instance, Labake harasses Adunni in a futile attempt to gain the upper hand in a situation where they're both powerless. When they first meet, Labake calls Adunni an *ashewo*, or "husband snatcher." Labake expresses her jealousy at being replaced by a much younger girl by mentally and physically abusing Adunni. Labake's cruelty positions Adunni as the enemy, when in reality, Adunni and Labake are both victims of a culture that allows men like Morufu to marry multiple wives and treat them poorly. Later, Big Madam takes advantage of Adunni—and before this, Rebecca—rather than treating them fairly. Big Madam accepts both girls as indentured servants, exploiting their labor, overworking them, and belittling and beating them when they fail to meet her high standards. She also doesn't defend them from Big Daddy's predatory behavior, which seems to indicate that she resents the young girls for getting her husband's attention and wants to feel more powerful and in control in the face of Big Daddy's disrespect and cruelty. Like Labake, Big Madam misguidedly positions Adunni and Rebecca as her enemies when, in fact, all three women are victims of a society that condones Big Daddy's predatory behavior and sense of entitlement. Ultimately, Big Madam's resentment doesn't improve her standing with her husband and results in more pain and suffering for all of the women in the [house](#).

By contrast, other women's support and encouragement allow

Adunni to endure her situation and eventually escape the limitations her society places on her. Adunni's first female role model is Mama, who encourages Adunni's education and makes Papa promise not to marry her off (though he later breaks this promise). Remembering Mama's encouragement is what helps Adunni persevere and respect herself, even as the people around her discourage and devalue her. In addition, Khadija is kind and protective of Adunni rather than trying to compete with her the way Labake does. Her support gives Adunni the strength to endure Morufu's abuse and eventually escape him. Later on, Ms. Tia uses her own privilege to help Adunni become educated and get the Ocean Oil scholarship, which enables her to escape indentured servitude. Unlike many of the other rich women in Big Madam's exclusive neighborhood who look down on lower-class people, Ms. Tia recognizes the importance of using her elevated social status to help Adunni escape an oppressive system and goes out of her way to help Adunni. She gives her English lessons, gives her a cell phone to use if things at Big Madam's house become unmanageable, and acts as a friend she can turn to for support and emotional nourishment. Ms. Tia's support helps Adunni pursue her education which, in turn, gives her the opportunity to realize her dream of becoming a teacher and give a voice to other girls whose voices might otherwise be silenced. Their relationship shows that when women help other women rise up in the face of systemic gender inequality, it's possible to overcome that inequality and create a chain reaction of women supporting women.



## WEALTH, POVERTY, AND CHOICE

When Big Daddy, the husband of Adunni's wealthy boss, Big Madam, is cruel to his wife, Adunni observes "how [their] money is not helping them escape from problems." But although wealth doesn't necessarily guarantee an effortless life, the novel shows that it can give a person more options to solve their problems. In contrast, poverty limits a person's choices and opportunities for self-improvement. Like Big Madam, Adunni also finds herself in an abusive (and in her case, arranged) marriage—but her options for dealing with it are comparatively limited. While Big Madam is financially secure enough to kick Big Daddy out at the end of the novel, Adunni only has two options: stay in an abusive situation or leave and risk cutting off the financial security that the marriage arrangement provides her father and siblings. *The Girl with the Louding Voice* repeatedly presents this inequality of choice, with wealthy characters having many opportunities to better themselves and impoverished characters often having to choose between bad and worse options. By contrasting the problem-solving methods available to characters from different classes, the novel suggests that while wealth doesn't eradicate all of life's problems, it can offer better ways to solve them.

Economically disadvantaged characters like Adunni are limited

in their ability to control their lives and improve their circumstances. At the beginning of the novel, Papa informs Adunni that he has arranged for her to marry Morufu, a much older man, in exchange for food and rent money. Adunni is appalled—she is only 14 years old, and marrying Morufu will put an end to her dream of returning to school and becoming a teacher. But Papa sees the marriage as necessary to support the family, so Adunni doesn't have because the option of choosing a different life path. Adunni pleads with Papa to call off the marriage, citing how it will complicate her future—but Papa holds firmly to his decision, stating, “we cannot be eating promise as food. Promise is not paying our rent.” Essentially, because the family is so poor, Papa is more concerned about their immediate future (their ability to eat and pay rent) than about Adunni's long-term goals. So, while it might be true that Adunni could eventually support her family by going to school and getting a good job, this isn't an option for her when the family has urgent financial problems to solve.

Even when Adunni gets lucky and encounters favorable circumstances that might improve her quality of life, her limited ability to make her own decisions prevents her from fully enjoying these opportunities. After Khadija (another one of Morufu's wives) dies in childbirth, Adunni runs away to avoid being blamed for the death. She then has an opportunity to escape to Lagos when Iya (a friend of Mama's) arranges for her brother, Kola, to find Adunni work as a maid in a rich woman's **house**. Despite the fact that Adunni has always wanted to see Lagos, she feels sad about this opportunity: “this is what I been wanting all my life, to leave this place and see what the world outside is looking like, but not like this. Not with a bad name following me.” Adunni can't enjoy the good things that happen to her because these events are not a matter of choice, but of desperation. She is going to Lagos to escape from an immediate threat (being severely punished for Khadija's death), not to chase new opportunities in the city.

In contrast, characters with greater financial means have more opportunities and more freedom to make decisions. Like many other female characters in the novel, Ms. Tia finds herself under immense pressure to have a baby and become a mother; she reveals to Adunni that doctor mama, Ms. Tia's mother-in-law, regularly stops by Ms. Tia and Ken's house to inquire about grandchildren. But Ms. Tia's class status and access to education give her the freedom to choose whether to have children, and to marry a man she loves—and whose opinions on childrearing are aligned with her own. Although people will stereotype Ms. Tia as nothing but “an empty barrel” if she remains childless, she still has more choice in the matter than a character like Khadija, who is forced to have children if she doesn't want to face domestic abuse, social ostracization, and poverty.

Similarly, Big Madam's wealth allows her to deal with her abusive marriage more effectively than characters like Khadija,

whose poverty forces her to stay married to Morufu. Big Madam is a businessowner and her household's breadwinner, meaning that she has more financial independence than most of the other female characters in the book. So, although Big Madam puts up with her husband's infidelity and disrespect for years, she ultimately kicks him out of the house after walking in on his attempted rape of Adunni and finding out about his affair with Caroline Bankole, Big Madam's best friend. Big Madam's wealth doesn't spare her from experiencing the trauma of an unequal, abusive marriage. It does, however, allow her to end her marriage on her own terms, without the anxiety of wondering what will become of her if she no longer has her husband's financial support. In an unjust world, nobody can eradicate suffering completely, but the novel shows that wealth certainly makes it easier to manage and overcome one's hardships.



## SURVIVAL

Though Adunni is only 14 years old, she endures a great deal of trauma before and during the events of the novel. For instance, Mama dies when she's very young, Papa forces her to marry a much older man who rapes her, and she's tricked into becoming an indentured servant for a rich businesswoman who abuses her. Despite all this, Adunni perseveres, and she and other characters she meets develop a variety of coping mechanisms in order to endure the hardships they face. Whether it be through maintaining spiritual faith, mentally blocking out the things that are too painful to face directly, or holding out hope for what the future might hold, *The Girl with the Louding Voice* shows that people will go to great lengths to survive the world's cruelties—and that there are many different ways to do so. The novel doesn't minimize the effects of trauma or injustice, but it optimistically suggests that people can be resilient and creative enough to overcome even seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

Adunni represses the things that are too hard for her to confront directly and also turns to religion for comfort. Together, these techniques create a kind of protective shield in her mind that helps her persevere. The morning after Morufu first rapes Adunni, she finds that she cannot fully recall what happened: “I cannot remember many of what happen to me last night, my head is full of a dark cloth, blocking every of the evil Morufu was doing.” While it's possible that Adunni's strategy of repressing the traumatic details of her sexual assault will have negative consequences in the long run, blocking them from her mind in the present gives her the strength she needs to make it through another day. The imagery that Adunni uses here to illustrate her repression speaks to this protective quality, with the “cloth” acting as a shield between her mind and the external forces that threaten to harm it. When Adunni cannot repress her hardships, she prays to God for a sense of comfort and control over her situation. After she finishes her prayers one

night at Big Madam's, Adunni observes that she "feel[s] a free that [she] didn't feel in a long time." Adunni's circumstances are often dictated by people who don't have her best interests at heart: Papa and Morufu devalue her because of her gender, and Big Madam devalues her because of her class status. Praying to God gives Adunni a sense of freedom because it levels the gap between herself and the people who believe her to be unimportant: in God's eyes, she has value. If Adunni can believe she has value in God's eyes, she can begin to belief in her own self-worth, which brings her closer to acquiring the "louding voice" that will enable her to advocate for herself and give her the tools she needs for survival.

Another way Adunni persists through hard times is to find creative ways to be happy and visualize her dreams (unattainable as they may seem), which helps her look forward to the future rather than succumbing to despair. After Papa could no longer afford to keep Adunni in school, she resolved to continue learning, refreshing her skills by teaching the younger children in her village basic math and language lessons. She also played make-believe, "teaching the trees and leafs in [her family's] compound." Both of these activities allowed Adunni to keep her dreams of getting an education and becoming a teacher alive, rather than wallowing in her misfortune and giving up on her goals. Adunni is similarly creative after she's forced to marry Morufu. When Adunni tells Kike (Morufu's daughter, who is her age) that she wants to be a teacher when she grows up, Kike prompts her to close her eyes and imagine teaching. Adunni follows Kike's advice, visualizing a room full of children and herself writing on a chalkboard. When she does so, she "feel[s] a rush of something free in that moment." Of course, after Kike leaves and Adunni tries this exercise again, she finds that all she can see is a "dark cloth," which reaffirms that creativity and hope are not strong enough on their own to effectively change the course of Adunni's life.

Other characters also develop creative—though not always positive—solutions for dealing with their hardships. For instance, Chisom (the housemaid of Big Madam's friend Caroline Bankole) strategically serves as her madam's confidant. Chisom keeps Caroline's secrets—namely, that Caroline is having an affair with Big Daddy—in exchange for food and nice clothing. She takes on the emotional burden of keeping Caroline's affair a secret in order to elevate her status and earn her madam's respect—which, in turn, makes her life more bearable. Another example is Kike, who alters her perspective so that she can see her marriage to Baba Ogun, a much older man, as a positive thing. She tells Adunni: "I wish I was a man, but I am not, so I do the next thing I can do. I marry a man." Although Kike isn't pleased about the marriage, she chooses to recognize it as the best option available to her, which helps her accept and endure her situation. In a similar vein, Khadija has children in order to find happiness. Though Khadija took a medicine during the early days of her marriage

to prevent pregnancy so that she would not have to bear Morufu's children, she ultimately realizes that children can provide her with an ounce of "real joy" in her otherwise miserable life at Morufu's **house**. In this way, Khadija reframes motherhood as a source of comfort and meaning rather than a source of oppression, which makes her marriage to Morufu easier to bear.

Many of the characters in the novel must resist and rise above the constraints of a cruel, unjust world—and this means that their coping methods often require them to submit to the very systems that oppress them. Still, a will to survive can also have a more positive outcome: Adunni's persistence is what allows her to win the Ocean Oil scholarship, escape indentured servitude, and begin to pursue her dream of becoming a teacher. Ultimately, the novel seems to suggest that when faced with hardship, it is always worth it to fight back, keep a positive mindset, and envision a brighter future.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



### REBECCA'S WAIST BEADS

Rebecca's waist beads symbolize the way women in Adunni's society are silenced, and the importance of giving a voice to the voiceless. Rebecca is Big Madam's former servant who mysteriously went missing, though no one in the **house** but Adunni seems to care what happened to her or to want to discuss her. When Adunni discovers Rebecca's waist beads, she's motivated to get to the bottom of Rebecca's disappearance, believing that someone must have harmed her. (Adunni eventually learns that Big Madam's husband, Big Daddy, impregnated Rebecca and then tried to force her to have a miscarriage, prompting Big Madam to send Rebecca away.) The waist beads are now the only sign that Rebecca ever lived and worked at the house, and so they symbolize the way women in the world of the novel are exploited and abused and then discarded and erased. Finding the waist beads inspires Adunni to become Rebecca's sole advocate, and in this way, the beads also come to represent Adunni's quest to develop a "louding voice" (essentially, empowerment and self-confidence) and to use her voice to stick up for those whom society silences.



### HOUSES

Houses symbolize the oppressive social and cultural norms in Adunni's society. Each time Adunni moves to a new house—which always happens out of force or necessity rather than choice—there's a new authority

figure and a new set of norms she must adapt to. In Adunni's childhood home, Papa has the final say, and so Adunni is subjected to the socially accepted practice of Papa selling her as a child bride. Then, when Adunni moves into her husband, Morufu's, house, she must adjust to the rules he sets—which means serving him and enduring his abuse. Finally, when Adunni moves to Big Madam's house, she faces an even more complex set of cultural norms. There is a class-based hierarchy in the house that intersects with gender inequality, as evidenced by the way Big Daddy tries to use Adunni's status as an impoverished woman to manipulate her into a sexual relationship. Together, all of the houses Adunni lives in represent the various forms of gendered oppression she's subjected to, and her inability to make her own decisions or pursue the life she wants.

Furthermore, the symbolism of houses contrasts with the freedom that the outdoors offers. Many of the best, most freeing events of Adunni's life occur when she is outside: for instance, her first moment of freedom as Morufu's bride occurs when Khadija gives her permission to walk to the **river** to see her friends. Later on, Adunni's first English lesson with Ms. Tia—which is instrumental in inspiring Adunni to pursue her education and eventually escape from indentured servitude—takes place outside, under a palm tree. In contrast to the strict rules and violence that characterize the indoors, the outdoors represents freedom and empowerment.



## WATER

Water symbolizes the double standards women are subjected to in the world of the novel. In traditional Yoruba religious beliefs, there's a deity called Oshun, a goddess of the river who is associated with purity, fertility, and love. But in *The Girl with the Louding Voice*, rivers (and water more generally) are associated with tragedy and violence. For example, the father of Khadija's baby, Bamidele, tells her that his family is cursed, and that their baby will die unless she bathes in a river with special soap to rid herself of the curse. But Bamidele abandons her by the river, and she dies in childbirth before she can perform the ritual. In this way, the river represents the way women are held to different standards than men: the bathing ritual frames the baby's fate as solely Khadija's responsibility, but in the end, Bamidele's negligence is what causes the baby's death.

Later on, in a scene that mirrors Khadija's experience, Ms. Tia goes to a river to undergo a special fertility bath ritual that is supposed to cleanse her of her infertility. Ms. Tia's procedure, too, is unsuccessful, as the ritual leaves her injured and traumatized. She later learns that it wasn't her supposed uncleanness that prevented her from conceiving, but her husband Ken's infertility that he hid from her. This juxtaposition of traditional beliefs about rivers and cleanliness with women's

trauma and abuse highlights this society's double standards for men and women. In both of these cases, women go to the river because their culture tells them that they are somehow dirty or broken and need to be purified, while men do not receive the same message and are excused of any responsibility. In this way, water represents the idea that women in the world of the novel are judged, controlled, and mistreated, while men are allowed to live freely and without judgment.





## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Dutton edition of *The Girl with the Louding Voice* published in 2021.

### Chapter 2 Quotes

●● I taste the salt of my tears at the memory of it all, and when I go back to my mat and close my eyes, I see Mama as a rose flower. But this rose is no more having yellow and red and purple colors with shining leaves. This flower be the brown of a wet leaf that suffer a stamping from the dirty feet of a man that forget the promise he make to his dead wife.

**Related Characters:** Adunni (speaker), Mama (Idowu), Papa, Morufu

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 10

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs shortly after Papa tells Adunni about his plans to marry her to a much older man, Morufu, in exchange for food and rent money. Adunni is shocked to hear this news, particularly because Papa had made Mama a promise shortly before she died that he would allow Adunni to continue her education and would not force her to marry.

Earlier in the chapter, Adunni compares Mama to a fresh, sweet-smelling rose flower. After Adunni has reflected on Mama and her fresh grief for her, she envisions Mama as a rose again, but this time the rose is “the brown of a wet leaf that suffer a stamping from the dirty feet of a man that forget the promise he make to his dead wife.” The transformation of Adunni's mental picture of Mama from a beautiful, live rose to a brown, dead one illustrates the harshness of Papa's decision not to honor his promise to Mama. Mama had been Adunni's protector and advocate when she was alive, and Adunni's memories of her love and support continue to live on. But as soon as she is no longer around to protect her daughter's interests, she is reduced to something as lifeless and ineffectual as a dead, flattened

rose.

This passage gives the reader an early sense of how important Mama was to Adunni, and how her ability to remain in school was largely the result of her Mama's advocacy. It also shows how fragile and tenuous this advocacy really was—how it could be dismissed and forgotten as easily as a rose can wilt. The quote positions Mama as Adunni's hero and protector and Papa as an aggressor and condoner of gendered oppression. In breaking his promising to Mama and robbing their daughter of the opportunity to improve her life through schooling, Papa shows how little respect he has for the women in his life.

## Chapter 3 Quotes

☝☝ “Adunni, you know how this is a good thing for your family. Think about how you been suffering since your mama[...]. I know it is not what you want. I know you like school, but think it well, Adunni. Think of how your family will be better because of it. Even if I beg your papa, you know he will not answer me. I swear, if I can find a man like Morufu to marry me, I will be too happy!”

**Related Characters:** Enitan (speaker), Adunni, Morufu, Papa, Mama (Idowu)

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 20

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs the week before Adunni's wedding to Morufu. Terrified at the thought of becoming a 14-year-old bride, Adunni goes to her friend Enitan's house to ask Enitan to convince Papa to cancel the wedding. Enitan's response to Adunni's request shows that, not only does their culture limit girls' opportunities, but it prohibits them from seeing their own potential. Adunni is shocked when Enitan fails to sympathize with her reservations about marrying Morufu and instead frames the marriage as an amazing opportunity. She urges Adunni to “think of how [her] family will be better because of it,” referring to the bride-price Morufu will pay Papa in exchange for Adunni's hand in marriage.

Beyond this, Enitan insists that the chance to marry Morufu is something she would be “too happy” about if it happened to her. Rather than viewing marriage as a punishment, which is how Adunni sees it, Enitan considers marrying Morufu to be something Adunni can take pride in knowing

that she has done everything in her (very limited) power to ensure her family's comfort. In a culture where women and girls are denied access to education and valued almost exclusively in terms of her youth, marriageability, and ability to have children, Morufu's bride-price is the most effective way Adunni can help her family financially. In light of these constraints, Enitan believes that the world won't offer Adunni much in this life, so she should take what she can get. The oppressive conditions of Enitan's society render her blind to the possibility of gender equality, and to Adunni's potential for self-improvement outside of marriage.

Enitan's advice is so appalling and alienating to Adunni because Mama instilled in her the importance of having a voice: of having a self-worth that exists independently of oppressive social norms, abusers, and the roadblocks that stand in the way of achieving her goals. It is Mama's advocacy that prevents Adunni from falling victim to Enitan's oppressed cynicism. Because Enitan was not taught about the importance of having a voice, she accepts the way society limits her opportunities and is blind to her own self-worth. While Enitan's advice to Adunni illustrates a practical approach to addressing the problem of her marriage (reframing her perspective so that she can see the marriage as way to improve her family's quality of life), it is a losing battle: in accepting the injustices her culture imposes on her, she becomes a bystander to her own victimhood.

## Chapter 4 Quotes

☝☝ “In this village, if you go to school, no one will be forcing you to marry any man. But if you didn't go to school, they will marry you to any man once you are reaching fifteen years old. Your schooling is your voice, child. It will be speaking for you even if you didn't open your mouth to talk. It will be speaking till the day God is calling you come.”

**Related Characters:** Mama (Idowu) (speaker), Adunni, Papa, Ade, Morufu

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 24-25

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage is a flashback in which Adunni remembers a time before Mama's death when Ade, Mama's lover from many years ago, tried to visit her when he was in town for his grandmother's funeral. Mama is out when Ade visits, but memories of Ade flood her with a sadness at what her life

could have been. She urges Adunni to get an education so that Adunni will have a better life than she has had.

Mama's words articulate the idea that education and knowledge instill in a person a sense of self-worth and respect that nothing—not poverty, not misfortune, not tragedy—can take away. Adunni's mother recognizes the oppressive forces that are up against her daughter and sees education as a way to overcome them. In Ikati village, education is the only way for a girl to guarantee that she will not be forced to marry. If Adunni can go to school, she can have a "voice," a sense of power that will protect her against gendered violence and oppression that is common in their village and in Nigeria more broadly.

When Mama says that this voice "will be speaking for you even if you didn't open your mouth to talk," she means that having a voice and an education gives Adunni an automatic advantage over being uneducated. If she is educated, it will raise her social status and give her more options in life. Mama is so insistent that Adunni gets an education because she is sad about her own life: her lack of social importance and her gender were what prohibited her from being with Ade when her family forced her to marry Papa, whom she never loved.

Mama wants her daughter to have a chance at upward mobility (increased wealth and class status), and she understands the long-term benefits that education could give Adunni. The idea that "it will be speaking till the day God is calling you come" implies that having a voice and education will help Adunni in life in the long term—it's not a quick, temporary solution like the one Papa employs when he forces Adunni to marry Morufu in exchange for rent money.

Lastly, Mama's advice to Adunni is important because it introduces the idea of a voice, from which Adunni will derive her self-coined term, a "louding voice." The hunt for the titular "louding voice" will guide her in the decisions she makes over the course of the novel.

☝ That day, I tell myself that even if I am not getting anything in this life, I will go to school. I will finish my primary and secondary and university schooling and become teacher because I don't just want to be having any kind voice...I want a louding voice.

**Related Characters:** Adunni (speaker), Mama (Idowu)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 25

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs after Adunni remembers how Mama urged her to get an education so that she could have a voice and not be limited by the oppressive social norms her society enforces on young girls. Adunni reflects on the day Mama gave her this advice, remembering it as the moment she decided that her goal in life would be to pursue an education and find her "louding voice."

In her reflection, Adunni expands on Mama's advice to suit her own goals for the future. She goes further than demanding "any kind voice." Instead, what Adunni desires is "a louding voice," one that will ensure that her dreams and sense of self-worth are heard not just by her, but by the entire world. One of the key characteristics of Adunni's conception of a louding voice is its ability to reach and influence others. It's not enough for Adunni to get an education, find her voice, and relish in her own sense of self-worth—she believes that she has an obligation to use these privileges to instill in other oppressed girls the confidence that Mama instilled in her.

Adunni's dream of using her louding voice to become a teacher reflects the critical role solidarity plays in overcoming gendered oppression. Poverty and gendered violence can prevent generations of women from realizing their full potential, but these cycles of oppression can be overcome when they are counteracted with cycles of advocacy. Adunni recognizes the way Mama's support taught her to believe in herself, and she vows to do the same for other underprivileged girls: to instill in them a thirst for knowledge and a belief in their own self-worth, so that they, too, can have the tools they need to overcome gendered violence and oppression.

☝ "There is no money for food, talk less of thirty thousand for community rent. What will becoming teacher do for you? Nothing. Only stubborn head it will give you."

**Related Characters:** Papa (speaker), Adunni, Morufu, Mama (Idowu)

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 26-27

### Explanation and Analysis

When Adunni goes to Papa to protest her arranged marriage to Morufu, she tries to tell him about his promise

to Mama. If Papa allows her not to marry and go back to school, Adunni argues, she can become a teacher and help out the family that way. Papa, however, is unfazed and stands firmly behind his decision.



Papa argues that the family needs money now: “there is no money for food, talk less of thirty thousan’ for community rent,” he insists. The financial help the family needs, they need now—not years down the line after Adunni completes her education and becomes a teacher. Beyond this, Papa also suggests that being a teacher will do Adunni more harm than good. “What will becoming teacher do for you? Only stubborn head it will give you,” he argues. Papa doesn’t explicitly come out and say anything about Adunni’s gender here, but the subtext of his argument against Adunni attending school is that girls shouldn’t be educated because it provides them with the power to resist being pushed around and controlled by men.

Beyond gender inequality, this quote also grapples with how wealth affords people access to better choices. If Adunni and her family had more money and didn’t have to worry about their imminent survival, it’s possible that Papa might be more open to Adunni attending school. However, since the family doesn’t have time to invest in Adunni’s long-term goal—an investment that would take years to pay off—it’s not an option they can afford to consider.

## Chapter 5 Quotes

☹☹ Sometimes, I want to be just like Kayus, to have no fear of marrying a man, to not have any worry in this life. All Kayus ever worry about is what food to eat and where he can kick his football. He don’t ever worry about no marriage or bride-price money. He don’t even worry about schooling because I been the one teaching him school since all this time.

**Related Characters:** Adunni (speaker), Kayus, Papa, Morufu, Labake

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 34

### Explanation and Analysis

Adunni sits in the room she shares with her brothers after Papa refuses to reconsider her marriage to Morufu. She watches her brother Kayus sleep and wishes that she could be in his shoes. Kayus is a boy, so the anxiety of being married off to a stranger he’s never met isn’t something that troubles him. In Adunni’s assessment, to be a boy in her culture is “to not have any worry in this life.” That Kayus is


able to sleep soundly while Adunni remains awake, reeling with anxiety, illustrates the gender inequality that makes Adunni’s experience so different than her brother’s.

This passage also illustrates Adunni’s commitment to her brother despite this inequality. The reason Kayus doesn’t have to worry about not being educated (even though he, too, is not in school) is because Adunni is there to teach him. This highlights Adunni’s passion for teaching, but it also shows that she does not allow her inner frustrations with gender inequality to manifest outwardly as bitterness and hostility. Adunni recognizes that it’s not Kayus’s fault that society does not afford them the same opportunities and resolves to help him in any way she can. Adunni’s kindness and compassion toward Kayus stands in stark contrast to other oppressed characters, such as Labake, who allows inequality to make her jealous, hostile, and ultimately self-destructive.

## Chapter 6 Quotes

☹☹ My wedding be like watching a movie inside the tee-vee. My eyes was watching myself as I was kneeling down in front of my father, as he was saying a prayer to be following me to my husband house, as my mouth was opening, my lips parting, my voice saying “Amen” to the prayers even though my mind was not understanding what is happening to me.

**Related Characters:** Adunni (speaker), Morufu, Papa

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 36

### Explanation and Analysis

Adunni reflects on her wedding as she rides with her new husband, Morufu, in his car to his house after the ceremony is over. When she describes her experience of her wedding as “like watching a movie inside the tee-vee,” she distances herself from the event, imagining it as though it occurred to someone else instead of to her. This idea is underscored by her statement, “my eyes was watching myself.” The out-of-body way in which Adunni depicts these events gives a surreal character to the experience: it’s bizarre to Adunni that this happened to her because she is so young, it’s not what she wanted, and it all happened so fast. It also suggests that Adunni needs to separate herself from the traumatic experience of being a child-bride in order to cope with it. If she can imagine that the wedding happened to a


young girl “in the tee-vee,” it’s almost as though it didn’t actually happen to her—that this horror is not her new reality.


When Adunni mentions at the end of the quote that her “mind was not understanding what is happening to [her],” she underscores this psychological repression: perhaps she doesn’t understand her situation because she doesn’t want to. She wants to believe that this horror didn’t—couldn’t—happen to her. But there is also a more literal reading: Adunni literally does not understand what just happened to her. This final line of the quote underscores just how young, naïve, and powerless 14-year-old Adunni is at this point in her life, completely at the mercy of an oppressive system that stretches further than she can appreciate fully.

## Chapter 7 Quotes

☝☝ “Your dead mother and me, we are age-mates. God forbid for me to share my husband with my own child. God forbid that I am waiting for you to finish with my husband before I can enter his room. Ah, you will suffer in this house. Ask Khadija, she will tell you that I am a wicked woman. That my madness is not having cure.”

**Related Characters:** Labake (speaker), Adunni, Khadija, Mama (Idowu), Morufu, Papa

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 45

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs on the night of Adunni’s wedding, after Morufu brings her to his home. Morufu has just gathered his three wives together to talk to them about how things will go now that Adunni is here. After finishing his talk, Morufu leaves the room, and Labake corners Adunni, vowing to make her life at Morufu’s house as miserable as possible.

Labake’s hostility toward Adunni stems from Labake’s jealousy about being replaced by Adunni, a girl who is young enough to be her daughter—a fact she underscores by calling Adunni’s mother and herself “age-mates.” Labake’s anger toward Adunni shows that she has misidentified Adunni as the enemy, when one might expect her to be angry at her husband for taking such a young girl as his bride. After all, it’s not as though Adunni has come here of

her own accord: Papa sold her to Morufu, and Morufu accepted the sale without hesitation. Rather than taking out her anger on the men—and the larger cultural institutions that keeps the practice of child-marriage strong—Labake lashes out at Adunni, promising to make her “suffer in this house.”

There is some truth, however, to Labake’s proclamation that she is “a wicked woman” whose “madness is not having cure.” In misidentifying her enemies and taking out her anger at Adunni, who is also a victim of gendered oppression, Labake perpetuates the very system that oppresses her and fuels her anger. Her “madness” is incurable not because of her as an individual, then, but because injustice is so ingrained in the society of the novel.

## Chapter 9 Quotes

☝☝ I cannot remember many of what happen to me last night, my head is full of a dark cloth, blocking every of the evil Morufu was doing[...].”

**Related Characters:** Adunni (speaker), Morufu, Mama (Idowu)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 54

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs the morning after Morufu rapes Adunni on her first night as his new wife. Adunni wakes up beside Morufu and tries to recall the horrendous events of the previous night, but she finds that “[her] head is full of a dark cloth, blocking every of the evil Morufu was doing[...].”

This quote introduces one of the methods Adunni employs to survive the traumas she’s forced to weather. One such way is to psychologically repress the memories that are too difficult for her to think about. This passage also emphasizes Adunni’s youth, which further demonstrates how brutal Morufu’s treatment of her is. Another reason that Adunni sees “a dark cloth” is because she likely has no context or background to explain what happened to her, because she is only 14 years old; she reveals in the previous chapter that nobody has ever seen naked besides Mama, and she has no experience or knowledge of sex. In short, Adunni’s reflections the morning after her assault emphasize the visceral terror of her experience as a child-bride and show how she has learned to repress unthinkable traumas to give herself the strength to survive.




## Chapter 10 Quotes

“When you begin to born your children, you will not be too sad again,” she say. “When I first marry Morufu, I didn’t want to born children. I was too afraid of having a baby so quick, afraid of falling sick from the load of it. So I take something, a medicine, to stop the pregnant from coming. But after two months, I say to myself, ‘Khadija, if you don’t born a baby, Morufu will send you back to your father’s house.’ So I stop the medicine and soon I born my first girl, Alafia. When I hold her in my hands for the first time, my heart was full of so much love. Now, my children make me laugh when I am not even thinking to laugh. Children are joy, Adunni. Real joy.”

**Related Characters:** Khadija (speaker), Adunni, Labake, Morufu, Alafia

**Related Themes:**    

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 59

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs as Khadija and Adunni are hanging out in the room they share on the nights when they’re not summoned to Morufu’s room to have sex with him. On these nights, they talk to and comfort each other, with Khadija rubbing Adunni’s back and Adunni singing songs to Khadija’s pregnant belly.

On this particular night, Khadija advises Adunni to get pregnant so that she can find some happiness in her life under Morufu’s roof, essentially instructing Adunni to make the best of a bad situation. Khadija cites her own journey as an example of how children can benefit Morufu’s wives, as well as the wives’ families back home, whom Morufu is supporting. Khadija strengthens her argument by explaining that she used to be like Adunni and “was too afraid of having a baby so quick, afraid of falling sick from the load of it,” even going so far as to take a medicine to prevent pregnancy, before seeing the error and unsustainability of her ways. Khadija sees her younger self in Adunni and wants the young bride to find happiness sooner than she did.

This passage demonstrates that unlike Labake, whose jealousy leads her to mistreat Adunni, Khadija wants to help her and give her advice like a mother would. Still, Khadija’s helpfulness is limited by her inability to imagine a better future for herself: her advice is predicated on the fact that sees no way out of her marriage, and no way to actually make choices that will improve her life. Instead, she shifts her perspective, prohibiting herself from imagining an alternate world in which she could finish her schooling,

marry someone she loves, and make a life of her own. Khadija’s advice to Adunni is well-meaning, but it still assumes that there is no way to escape the oppressive forces that dampen the dreams of girls like herself and Adunni.

## Chapter 12 Quotes

“She open her eyes, give me a sad smile. ‘I wish I am a man, but I am not, so I do the next thing I can do. I marry a man.’”

**Related Characters:** Kike (speaker), Adunni, Labake, Khadija, Baba Ogun, Ms. Tia/Tia Dada

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 75

### Explanation and Analysis

This quote occurs after Kike defends Adunni from Labake. Since this incident, the girls have become friendly with each other. One afternoon, Kike and Adunni are talking outside. It’s the week before Kike’s wedding to a much older man, Baba Ogun, and Kike tells Adunni that though she is not happy about the wedding, she accepts it because it is the best option available to her: “I wish I am a man, but I am not, so I do the next thing I can do. I marry a man,” Kike explains. Like Khadija’s advice to Adunni to have children (believing that this is the only way for women to find happiness), Kike’s worldview also fails to imagine a world with a lot of possibilities or opportunities for women. The limitations that social norms impose on women and girls shrink her world to the point that she really does believe that the next best thing to being born a man is to marry one.

Sadly, though, Kike’s perspective is probably true for a lot of women in the society of the novel. Adunni’s perseverance to educate herself certainly help her eventually earn her freedom and win a scholarship to attend school. But a lot of this also has to do with sheer luck: she is lucky to find a mentor in Ms. Tia after being sold into domestic servitude, lucky to win the scholarship over many other qualified applicants, and lucky to have had so many other pieces happen to fall into place. Kike’s sad conclusion about her marriage reflects a more realistic outlook for many girls in her position.

## Chapter 21 Quotes

☝ I am leaving Ikati. This is what I been wanting all my life, to leave this place and see what the world outside is looking like, but not like this. Not with a bad name following me. Not like a person that the whole village is looking for because they think she have kill a woman. Not with one half of my heart with Kayus and the other half with Khadija. I hang my head down, feeling a thick, heavy cloth as it is covering me. The thick cloth of shame, of sorrow, of heart pain.

**Related Characters:** Adunni (speaker), Kola, Iya, Khadija, Kayus

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 130

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs after Kola arrives at Iya's home to confirm that he has found a job in Lagos for Adunni, who has just been forced to run from her village to avoid being blamed and severely punished for Khadija's death. Given the fact that leaving Ikati is something Adunni has "been wanting all [her] life," this news should thrill her. However, the trauma of her present circumstances and the fact that somebody else has made these arrangements for her prevent her from fully enjoying the moment.

Because Adunni's flight to Lagos is born of necessity and desperation, she's once again denied the opportunity to make decisions about her own life. Adunni laments that although she wants nothing more than "to leave this place and see what the world outside is looking like," she wishes she could do so under happier circumstances, and of her own accord.

Under the present circumstances, she's fleeing her rural village "with a bad name following [her]," and "with one half of [her] heart with Kayus and the other half with Khadija." In other words, she is leaving her village with an identity tarnished by scandal and with a psychological state wounded by fresh grief for her recently deceased friend Khadija, and for the brother she might never see again. "The thick cloth of shame, of sorrow, of heart pain" obscures whatever positive outlook she might have had about her future in Lagos, and this metaphorical thick cloth also covers her mouth, muffling the "louding voice" she otherwise might have used to advocate for herself in this new chapter of her life.

In short, Adunni's circumstances, characterized by trauma, loss, and social ostracization, are what force her to leave town. She's not choosing to go out into the world to further her education, find a job she might love, and make new


friends. The poverty and gendered oppression that dictate where she can go and what she can become force her to make a move that, under better circumstances, she likely might have chosen for herself. However, the present situation renders Adunni powerless to make her own decisions, and she's left feeling as though she is, yet again, at the mercy a powerful man making decisions that will drastically alter the course of her life.

## Chapter 23 Quotes

☝ When she come out, she draw deep breath and her chest, wide like blackboard, is climbing up and down, up and down. It is as if this woman is using her nostrils to be collecting all the heating from the outside and making us to be catching cold. I am standing beside Mr. Kola, and his body is shaking like my own. Even the trees in the compound, the yellow, pink, blue flowers in the long flowerpot, all of them too are shaking.

**Related Characters:** Adunni (speaker), Big Madam (Florence Adeoti), Kola, Khadija, Iya, Mama (Idowu)

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 144

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs when Adunni and Mr. Kola arrive at Big Madam's house, where Adunni will work as Big Madam's housemaid. Adunni is taken aback by the grandness of Big Madam's house, but nothing can prepare her for the intimidating figure of Big Madam herself, with her enormous chest, "wide like blackboard," and a mouth that seems to drag "all the heating from the outside and making [everyone around her] to be catching cold." Big Madam's power terrifies Kola, too, and "even the trees in the compound, the yellow, pink, blue flowers in the flowerpot, all of them too are shaking" from this powerful presence.

Adunni's figurative depiction of Big Madam's ability to make everything and everyone in her wake shake with fear depicts the power Big Madam holds over the people that surround her. As a rich businesswoman, she has the financial privilege to command the respect and submission of the people she employs. Seeing a woman possess such a commanding presence is a new phenomenon for Adunni, whose life in her rural village has shown her that women, young or old, must submit to the will of the powerful men in their lives, whether they be their husbands, their fathers, or

their village chiefs.



That Big Madam's inhalations consume "all the heating," though, suggests that her power is also accompanied by coldness and cruelty. This first exposure to Big Madam likely destroys any illusions Adunni might have had about her move to Lagos drastically improving her quality of life. As Adunni soon will learn, her existence in Big Madam's house will present a new kind of misery in which Big Madam rules her household with an iron fist and seems determined to make Adunni's existence as wretched as possible, prohibiting her from singing and beating her frequently, often without provocation.


Unlike other women in Adunni's life (such as Iya, Khadija, and Mama) who use little what power they have to support and advocate for Adunni, Big Madam (at least at this point in the novel) is not interested in supporting other women. Instead, she feels that Adunni's lower class status entitles Big Madam to abuse, disrespect, and devalue her. The social norms Big Madam enforces in her household uphold the notion that girls like Adunni, with their lack of education, lack of financial support, and lack of important social connections, deserve to be mistreated and silenced.

## Chapter 28 Quotes

☝☝ I am not understanding why Kofi is always saying Nigerians are spending this and that when him too, he is using the Nigerians money to be building his house in his Ghana country. I see when the visitors of Big Madam give him money, how he will squeeze it tight and slide it inside his pocket with a big smile and a big thank you. Why didn't he refuse the money if it is thief money? He too is among the problem wrong with Nigeria.

**Related Characters:** Adunni (speaker), Kofi, Big Madam (Florence Adeoti)

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 182

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs amid preparations for a big party Big Madam is throwing for the Wellington Road Wives Association, her wealthy neighborhood's women's association. The party preparations inspire Kofi (Big Madam's cook) to criticize what he sees as Nigerians' tendency to spend their money frivolously. Previously, he

made a disparaging remark about how much of Nigeria's upper class consists of either former military figures who made their money unethically, or businesspeople like Big Madam who are obsessed with showy displays of their wealth.

Although Adunni also sees Big Madam's party as a waste of food, time, and money, she takes issues with Kofi's criticisms because she thinks he is being hypocritical when he gladly accepts and "us[es] the Nigerians money to be building his house in his Ghana country." Essentially, Adunni sees Kofi as criticizing wealthy people for obtaining and using their wealth unethically even though he, too, obtains wealth unethically when, "with a big smile and a big thank you," he pockets this supposedly dirty money. "Why didn't he refuse the money if it is thief money?" wonders Adunni, who concludes that "he too is among the problem wrong with Nigeria." While Adunni is arguably right about this, Kofi's hypocrisy also serves as an apt illustration of the ways that oppressed people—in this case, the lower classes, or financially oppressed—are often met with limited options for self-improvement, some of which might force them to be complicit in the very systems that oppress them.

In Kofi's situation, his status as a low-wage house staff member forces him to take any money he can get. If Kofi wants to finish building his house in Ghana, move back home, and eventually make a better life for himself, he must start at the bottom and accumulate his own wealth from his employer, who, in this case, happens to be a member of the ethically dubious upper-class. Because Kofi is at the mercy of the upper classes and must operate within the social norms of Big Madam's house while he is employed there, he doesn't have the freedom to make financial choices that are dictated by his personal set of ethics.

## Chapter 30 Quotes

☝☝ Honest, honest, I never hear of a adult woman not wanting childrens in my life. In my village, all the adult womens are having childrens, and if the baby is not coming, maybe because of a sickness, then their husband will marry another woman on top of them and the adult woman will be caring for another woman's baby so that she don't feel any shame.

**Related Characters:** Adunni (speaker), Ms. Tia/Tia Dada, Big Madam (Florence Adeoti), Ms. Tia's Mother

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 203

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs as Ms. Tia cares for Adunni, who has just regained consciousness after Big Madam brutally beats her for dropping a tray of food at her Wellington Road Wives Association party. As Ms. Tia and Adunni talk and get to know each other, Ms. Tia reveals that she doesn't want to have children, which stuns Adunni, who proceeds to reflect inwardly about how she's "never hear[d] of a adult woman not wanting children in [her] life." Adunni's disbelief shows how effectively the social norms of her village shape her beliefs about pregnancy, motherhood, and the essential role they play in a woman's life.

Adunni's reflection here conflates what women in her village *want* with what women in her village *must do* in order to adhere to their community's social norms. That a woman for whom "the baby is not coming, maybe because of a sickness [...] will be caring for another woman's baby so that she don't feel any shame" illustrates the pressure Adunni's community puts on women to conform to these social norms. Childless women feel "shame" because they have not been able to do what their community expects of them—not because they have failed at something they wanted for themselves.


In contrast, Ms. Tia's economic privilege, education, and access to diverse perspectives via travel and internet access enable her to construct a worldview in which not having children is a perfectly valid stance to take. Of course, as the novel later reveals, Ms. Tia's decision does not go unchallenged—she perpetually receives pressure and judgment from other women to have children, and her thoughts on motherhood are complicated by her difficult relationship with her own mother. Overall, though, Ms. Tia's relative position of privilege affords her a different vantage point from which to contemplate motherhood and its place in her life.

## Chapter 34 Quotes

💬 I didn't tell Ms. Tia that I ever marry Morufu or about all the things he did to me in the room after he drink Fire-Cracker. I didn't tell her about what happen to Khadija. I didn't tell her because I have to keep it inside one box in my mind, lock the box, and throw the key inside river of my soul. Maybe one day, I will swim inside the river, find the key.

**Related Characters:** Adunni (speaker), Ms. Tia/Tia Dada, Morufu, Khadija, Big Madam (Florence Adeoti), Big Daddy (Chief Adeoti)

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 222

## Explanation and Analysis

Adunni and Ms. Tia continue with their English lessons, opening up to each other when they aren't working on Adunni's studies. This passage occurs during one such lesson. On this day, Adunni opens up to Ms. Tia about her life, but she purposely holds back some of the most difficult, unapproachable details.

Adunni withholds the most traumatic moments of her life, such as her marriage to Morufu, the sexual abuse she suffered, and Khadija's death, because she still lacks the "louding voice" (the sense of self-worth) she needs to understand and confront these traumas on her own terms. Without the self-affirmation that accompanies a louding voice, Adunni runs the risk of being at the mercy of these traumas rather than in control of how they contribute to her sense of self. To combat this threat, she banishes these moments to a "box" in the imperceptible depths of the "river of [her] soul" so that she can maintain enough control and psychological stability to do the things she needs to do to survive at the most basic level (such as cleaning Big Madam's house so that she can keep her job and avoiding Big Daddy's inappropriate advances).



In entertaining the possibility that she might "one day [...] swim inside the river [and] find the key," she holds out hope that she might be able to confront her demons directly, bearing witness to the events and people that have wounded her so that they can become experiences from which she can grow instead of obstacles that stand in the way of self-affirmation.

Water (and rivers, more specifically) have negative associations related to gendered violence and oppression throughout the book. In this instance, the "river of [Adunni's] soul" symbolizes the gendered violence, oppression, and traumas she must "swim inside" in order to find her way back to "the key" that will unlock the "louding voice" within her that has been silenced for so long.

## Chapter 35 Quotes

💬 "She comes to ask if I am pregnant," she say. "Can you imagine that? She has come every month in the last six months to say: 'Where are my grandchildren? When will I carry my grandchildren and dance with them?' Like I've hidden them in an attic somewhere. If she wants to dance, she should go to a bloody nightclub."

**Related Characters:** Ms. Tia/Tia Dada (speaker), Adunni, Doctor Mama, Kenneth Dada/The Doctor

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 233

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs during one of Adunni’s English lessons with Ms. Tia. Ms. Tia complains to Adunni about how her mother-in-law won’t stop pestering her about having a baby, going so far as to drop by the house “every month in the last six months.” Doctor mama’s nosiness is particular grating to Ms. Tia because she and Ken have only recently decided they want to have children in the first place.

These monthly visits are stressful to the couple while they’re trying—unsuccessfully, so far—to conceive. Beyond this, the visits send the message that having children is something that Ms. Tia is obligated to do. Ms. Tia’s remark that doctor mama acts as though Ms. Tia has “hidden [her grandchildren] in an attic somewhere” shows how presumptuous doctor mama is being when she acts as though the grandchildren are a given—when, in fact, the decision to have children is something that Ms. Tia and Ken need to arrive at on their own, in their own time. Doctor mama’s behavior also insinuates that Ms. Tia is going out of her way to deny her the experience of grandchildren when, as Ms. Tia will later discover, it’s Ken’s infertility that has made it impossible for the couple to conceive.

Doctor mama’s attitude is indicative of the broader culture’s unjust and objectifying social norms surrounding women and pregnancy. The novel depicts an image of Nigeria in which women must marry young, and in which their ability to become pregnant and experience motherhood determines their worth. In pestering Ms. Tia about getting pregnancy, doctor mama perpetuates this unjust treatment of women. When she acts as though Ms. Tia has intentionally denied her the experience of having grandchildren, she positions Ms. Tia as her enemy when she should really be supporting Ms. Tia, regardless of her decision to have or not have children.

## Chapter 39 Quotes

●● How is Morufu and Big Daddy different from each other? One can speak good English, and the other doesn’t speak good English, but both of them have the same terrible sickness of the mind.

**Related Characters:** Adunni (speaker), Big Daddy (Chief

Adeoti), Big Madam (Florence Adeoti), Morufu, Ms. Tia/Tia Dada, Rebecca

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 251

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs at night, after Adunni flees from a frightening encounter with Big Daddy. Adunni accidentally overhears Big Daddy talking to a women—likely one of his girlfriends—on the phone. Threatened by what Adunni might do with this information, Big Daddy tries to intimidate Adunni by striking a deal with her. He promises to ensure that Adunni can keep her job (according to him, Big Madam is close to firing her), and that she can continue her lessons with Ms. Tia. In exchange for these two favors, he requests that Adunni let him help her, the insinuation of which is that he wants to manipulate Adunni into having a sexual relationship with him.

Adunni manages to remove herself from this situation without agreeing to Big Daddy’s manipulative terms, and she contemplates Big Daddy’s “terrible sickness of the mind,” which refers to his seeming predilection for young girls, as well as his shameless abuse of power. Adunni highlights the extremity of Big Daddy’s wretchedness by comparing him to Morufu, whose unrelenting physical and mental abuse was so bad it forced her to flee her hometown of Ikati village.

In comparing Morufu and Big Daddy’s “terrible sickness of the mind,” Adunni establishes that while access to education and wealth have the ability to improve a person’s quality of life, they don’t ensure that a person will act virtuously. In fact, in Big Daddy’s case, education and wealth enable him to abuse his intelligence and privilege to manipulate and coerce girls like Adunni—whose gender and social position render her virtually powerless. He forces girls into situations from which they are unable to escape—or, in Rebecca’s case, the consequences of which they are unable to understand.

Considering Morufu and Big Daddy’s similarities also entertains the idea that education will always mean less, or come with a set of conditions, in a society that values gender as an indication of a person’s power, worth, and status. In this instance, Morufu’s relative lack of education—his inability to “speak good English,” as well as his relatively lesser class status, do little to diminish his power. This is because social norms dictate that because he’s a man, he can possess and act on his “sickness of the mind” to control and torture girls like Adunni, who are victims of a system that privileges the male gender above all

else.

## Chapter 41 Quotes

☝ “God has given you all you need to be great, and it sits right there inside of you. [...] Right inside your mind, in your heart. You believe, I know you do. You just need to hold on to that belief and never let go. When you get up every day, I want you to remind yourself that tomorrow will be better than today. That you are a person of value. That you are important. You must believe this, regardless of what happens with the scholarship. Okay?”

**Related Characters:** Ms. Tia/Tia Dada (speaker), Adunni, Mama (Idowu)

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 264

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs when Adunni goes to Ms. Tia’s house before they will head to the market. Prompted by Ms. Tia, Adunni shares her goals of going to school, becoming a teacher, and helping other girls in her village receive their education; most importantly, she shares her dream of finding the “louding voice” that will make all these feats possible. This quote is Ms. Tia’s response to what Adunni has just shared.

Ms. Tia’s words here are important because Adunni will carry them with her during the hardships she incurs later on in the novel, using them to bolster her confidence and remind herself to persevere. Ms. Tia’s advice functions similarly to Mama’s advice to Adunni before she died, which is what first inspired Adunni to dream of receiving an education and finding a “louding voice” in the first place. Both women teach Adunni the vital importance of knowing one’s self-worth.



Ms. Tia’s instructions to “remind yourself that tomorrow will be better than today. That you are a person of value. That you are important,” mirror Mama’s earlier advice that to have an education is to have a voice that nobody—no father, no husband, no employer—can take away from her. Both women encourage Adunni to look for strength and reassurance from within, rather than looking outward and relying on the limited opportunities her patriarchal society affords her.

In drawing on the similarities between Ms. Tia and Mama, the novel establishes both women as advocates who use

what power they have to mentor Adunni and give her the confidence and resources she needs to grow. The novel positions the support of other women as one of the biggest ways girls from underprivileged backgrounds can fight their way out of poverty and oppression, and Mama and Ms. Tia are prime illustrations of this theory.

☝ I tear to pieces the paper, and throw it to the floor. Then I swim deep inside the river of my soul, find the key from where it is sitting, full of rust, at the bottom of the river, and open the lock. I kneel down beside my bed, close my eyes, turn myself into a cup, and pour the memory out of me.

**Related Characters:** Adunni (speaker), Ms. Tia/Tia Dada, Khadija

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 275

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage takes place the evening Adunni sits down to write her personal essay for the Ocean Oil scholarship. She starts to write a grammatically competent but flat, impersonal personal narrative, only to rip it up and start over. On this second draft, she considers the advice Ms. Tia gave her earlier that day, about the importance of self-worth, and keeps this in the forefront of her mind as she writes.

When Adunni follows Ms. Tia’s instructions and remembers that she has worth and that she matters, her essay takes on a different tone. Suddenly, she believes in the importance of the world knowing her story: where she comes from, the traumas she has witnessed, and the hardships she has overcome. As a result, she writes freely about things she’d previously kept bottled inside, so deep inside her soul that she couldn’t even think about them to herself: “I swim deep inside the river of myself, find the key from where it is sitting, full of rust, at the bottom of the river, and open the lock.” Evoking this river imagery forges a connection between Adunni’s sorrow and Khadija’s death next to a river. More broadly, it implies that suffering and self-doubt prevent Adunni from acknowledging and moving past her traumas in order to reclaim her life and realize the louding voice she has coveted for so long.

When Adunni “swim[s] deep inside the river of [her]self,” she actively stakes a claim to her experiences, which allows her

to present them to herself and the world as valid and important. Doing so enables her to finally “pour the memory out of [herself]” she’s been suppressing so long and use her “louding voice” to share her story and advocate for herself.

## Chapter 42 Quotes

☝☝ Fifteen years ago, I was selling cheap materials from my boot, going from place to place, looking for customers. I wasn’t born into wealth. I have worked hard for my success. I fought for it. It wasn’t easy, especially because my husband, Chief, he didn’t have a job. If you want to be like me in business, Adunni, you will need to work very hard. Rise about whatever life throws at you. And never, ever give up on your dreams. Do you understand?”

**Related Characters:** Big Madam (Florence Adeoti) (speaker), Adunni, Big Daddy (Chief Adeoti), Khadija, Mama (Idowu), Ms. Tia/Tia Dada

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 285

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs as Adunni and Big Madam drive back from Big Madam’s fabrics store. Adunni expresses genuine admiration for Big Madam’s beautiful store and astute business sense. To Adunni’s shock, Big Madam responds not with cruelty but with honest words of encouragement, sharing her own struggle to move up in the world and urging Adunni to “work very hard. Rise above whatever life throws at [her]. And never, ever give up on [her] dreams.”

For Big Madam to speak frankly with Adunni in a way that forces her to step down from her self-erected pedestal of hostility and make herself vulnerable signifies a huge shift in Big Madam as a character. For the entirety of Adunni’s time at Big Madam’s house, Big Madam has abused and demeaned Adunni, taking out her misplaced anger at Big Daddy for his disrespect and attempts to seduce Adunni, who isn’t to blame for Big Daddy’s behavior. In misidentifying Adunni as her enemy, Big Madam becomes the antithesis of women like Ms. Tia, Mama, and Khadija, who correctly identify the forces that oppress Adunni and themselves and take a stance by lifting up Adunni so she can grow and succeed.

Considering this passage within the context of Big Madam’s prior behavior is what makes the passage so important to the development of her character: it shows that Big Madam is capable of compassion and support. It also suggests that,

perhaps, she really does see Big Daddy for the villain that he is and merely chooses to lash out at Adunni because it is easier to blame a defenseless housemaid than to admit that her husband does not respect her.

A lot of Big Madam’s anger also seems to stem from the fact that she receives so much disrespect from Big Daddy that she begins to lose respect for herself. When she acknowledges what a feat it was for her to build up her business, it shows that she is aware of her personal achievements and self-worth—which, in turn, enables her to show more compassion.

## Chapter 43 Quotes

☝☝ “Why don’t you wait till we get to church so you can take the microphone and announce to the congregation that you gave your husband, the head of the family, the man in charge of your home, two hundred thousand naira for retreat, and that he spent the money? Useless woman.”

**Related Characters:** Big Daddy (Chief Adeoti) (speaker), Big Madam (Florence Adeoti), Adunni

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 288

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs as Big Daddy, Big Madam, and Adunni are on their way to a church service. Big Madam gives Big Daddy money for a church offering and mentions that the last time she did so, the church never received the money. At this point in the novel, the reader knows that Big Daddy is dishonest and greedy, so it’s highly likely that he pocketed the offering for himself to spend on alcohol or a girlfriend.

Still, Big Madam’s veiled accusation insults Big Daddy and he responds angrily, essentially accusing her of emasculating him: “why don’t you wait till we get to church so you can take the microphone and announce to the congregation that you gave your husband, the head of the family, the man in charge of your home, two hundred thousand naira for the retreat, and that he spent the money?” he goads Big Madam. Calling himself “the head of the family” and “the man in charge of [Big Madam’s] home” is ironic, as Big Madam is household’s breadwinner—not Big Daddy. It’s also ironic that Big Daddy calls Big Madam a “useless woman,” as it’s really he who is useless to her: Big Daddy provides Big Madam with no emotional support, drinks away all her money, has numerous affairs, and has


been unemployed for over a decade.

Bolstered by patriarchal social norms, Big Daddy feels entitled to Big Madam's money and respect, even though he has earned neither of these things. When he ridicules Big Madam in this passage, he is trying to put her in her place, as though to say that even her wealth and business success are not enough to make him respect her because she is a woman, and he is a man. Comments like these contribute to Big Madam's hostility and unhappiness, as they rob her of her voice and self-worth.

☝ I step inside, see about five girls sitting on the floor, their head down. They all look the same age of me: fourteen, fifteen. All are wearing dirty dress of *ankara* or plain material with shoes like wet toilet paper, tearing everywhere. Hair is rough, or low-cut to the scalp. They smell of stinking sweat, of a body that needs serious washing, and they all look sad, lost, afraid. Like me. [...] One of the girls look up then, hook her eyes on me. There is no kindness in her eyes. Nothing. Only fear. Cold fear. She say nothing, but with her eyes, she seem to be saying: *You are me. I am you. Our madams are different, but they are the same.*

**Related Characters:** Adunni (speaker)

**Related Themes:**    

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 291

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs after the church attendant escorts Adunni to the separate, small, disheveled house where housemaids attend church while their employers participate in the much grander main building. When Adunni enters the small building, she notes the other housemaids, "sitting on the floor, their head down." Adunni identifies with these girls: they look to be about her age, they're dressed the same way, "wearing dirty dress of *ankara* or plain material with shoes like wet toilet paper, tearing everywhere." The housemaids appear unkempt, their bodies "smell[ing] of stinking sweat," and they all have the same "sad, lost, afraid" look in their eyes.

When Adunni locks eyes with one girl, she notes that "there is no kindness in her eyes. Nothing. Only fear. Cold fear." The girl's vacant stare illustrates how oppression can create a fear in the oppressed that can, in turn, cause them to react with outward hostility and coldness instead of with

compassion and support. The girl's expression seems to say to Adunni, "*you are me. I am you. Our madams are different, but they are the same,*" which emphasizes the common suffering that connects them: they are all underprivileged girls at the mercy of their privileged and cruel madams.

Under more idyllic circumstances, a shared experience might inspire a group of people to join together to find comfort in their sameness and strength in numbers. But the oppression and disrespect they face as housemaids forces them into a state of perpetual "cold fear," and in an effort to survive, they become weary and untrusting of others. As a result, these girls reject the opportunity to unify in solidarity to lift one another up and, instead, remain alone in their fear and suffering.

Throughout the novel, houses symbolize social norms and their effects on a person: every time Adunni moves to a new place, she must adapt to a new set of rules. In each of these new houses, she finds herself oppressed by norms that diminish her value on account of her gender, lack of education, and class status. In this small church house, the reader observes how social norms and systems of oppression can cause the oppressed to become alienated and unable to bond together in solidarity.

## Chapter 47 Quotes

☝ But there are words in my head, many things I want to say. I want to tell Ms. Tia I am sorry I made her come here. I want to ask why the doctor didn't come too. Why didn't he come and get a beating like his wife? If it takes two people to make a baby, why only one person, the woman, is suffering when the baby is not coming? Is it because she is the one with breast and the stomach for being pregnant? Or because of what? I want to ask, to scream, why are the women in Nigeria seem to be suffering for everything more than the men?

**Related Characters:** Adunni (speaker), Ms. Tia/Tia Dada, The Birth-Makers, Doctor Mama, Kenneth Dada/The Doctor, Khadija

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 312

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs during the drive back from the Miracle Center, where Ms. Tia has just undergone a violent fertility ritual in which female "birth-makers" beat her with brooms



before cleansing her with river water. Adunni, Ms. Tia, and doctor mama, who urged Ms. Tia to undergo the ritual without knowing how brutal it would be, ride home in silence, and Adunni angrily contemplates the unfairness of Ms. Tia's beating.


Adunni contemplates the gender double standards at play in Nigeria's ideas about pregnancy and parenthood. Doctor mama arranges for Ms. Tia to undergo the ceremony because she and the doctor were having trouble conceiving, and Adunni wonders "why the doctor didn't come too [...] and get a beating like his wife," since "it takes two people to make a baby." To Adunni's mind, Ms. Tia's beating, and doctor mama's presumption that Ms. Tia and her body are to blame for her trouble conceiving, are just two examples of the ways in which Nigerian women are made "to be suffering for everything more than the men."

Adunni's observations become especially relevant later on, when Ms. Tia finds out that Ken is sterile—something he's been hiding from her since before they were married—and that this is why they've been unsuccessful in getting pregnant. Nobody—not doctor mama, nor the birth-makers who facilitate Ms. Tia's bath—thinks to cleanse or repair the would-be father, even though "it takes two people to make a baby," as Adunni concludes.

The violence inflicted on Ms. Tia affects Adunni so deeply because she sees it as part of a larger problem: when she wonders why "women in Nigeria seem to be suffering for everything more than men," she expands the injustice wrought against Ms. Tia to Nigerian women at large. After all, Ms. Tia's bath bears a striking resemblance to Khadija's death in Kere village. Like Ms. Tia, Khadija too, lay next to a river, in agony caused by pregnancy complications, and with the father of her baby nowhere to be found. Khadija's situation is obviously worse than Ms. Tia's—Ms. Tia's husband does not abandon her, and she does not lose her life. Still, Adunni's logic situates both women as victims of a society that forces women to bear all the responsibilities and pains associated with pregnancy, while the men bear close to none.

**Related Characters:** Adunni (speaker), Rebecca, Big Madam (Florence Adeoti), Ms. Tia/Tia Dada, Mama (Idowu)

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 361

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs as Adunni prepares to leave Big Madam's house once and for all. After retrieving her personal items from her room in the boys' quarters, she carves "Adunni & Rebecca" into the wall. Afterward, she reflects on her experience at Big Madam's, and on the ability of her words to affirm her and Rebecca's value and cement their place in history.

Adunni's belief that her writing on the wall will remind people that she and Rebecca "are human. Of value. Important" references Ms. Tia's earlier advice to always remember her self-worth. That Adunni borrows Ms. Tia's language to imagine the memorializing capabilities of her wall carving shows that Adunni has internalized her mentor's advice.

Adunni's wall carving is also an homage to the education she has undergone over the course of the novel. In writing "Adunni & Rebecca" on the wall, Adunni uses the voice she has acquired through education to assert herself and symbolically lift up those whom society has silenced. Whereas earlier in the novel she might have been too hesitant and afraid to assert herself so visibly, the self-worth she gains through education emboldens her to believe that she and Rebecca are worthy of being seen. The permanence of writing reflects one of a voice's most important characteristics, which is that, to paraphrase Mama's words, it will speak for Adunni and assert her worth long after she has left this earth. In this way, Adunni's wall carving is a testament to all Adunni has learned, and to the supportive women who have helped her in her quest to find her voice and assert her value.

## Chapter 55 Quotes

☛ I leave the room, closing the door on the memory of the sad and the bitter and the happy of it all, knowing that even if everybody forgets about Rebecca, or about me, the wall in the room we shared will remind them that we were here. That we are human. Of value. Important.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## CHAPTER 1

The narrator's father summons her to the parlor. She is intimidated by him, because he often looks at her as though he wants to hit her. The narrator looks at her father's emotionless face and fears he is about to tell her bad news. The last time he looked this way, it was to tell her she had to stop going to school, though at that time she was already the oldest student in her class. She remembers the day she stopped going to school as being the worst day of her life, along with the day her mama died.

The parlor is small, but the narrator's father, whom she calls Papa, asks her to move closer. He's sitting on a couch covered in the urine stains of the youngest child, Kayus. There is a TV in the parlor, which Born-boy, the oldest child, found in the trash some years ago. The TV is used primarily for decoration, to impress guests like Mr. Bada. There is also a fan in the parlor, though it is missing multiple blades.

Adunni (the narrator) notes the scent of alcohol on Papa's breath. Papa tells Adunni that the family can no longer pay rent and must leave their home. Papa tells Adunni that Morufu, the old, poor taxi driver with two wives and four children, has offered to pay the family's rent, which he will consider Adunni's "owo-ori." This news shocks Adunni, who is only 14 and whose only desire is to go to school. Papa informs Adunni that she will marry Morufu next week.

*The narrator's fear of her father suggests that he has a bad temper—possibly even a violent one. He's unapproachable, and they don't seem to have a close, equal relationship. The narrator's gender—she is female—might have something to do with this. That the novel begins with the narrator describing her father rather than herself gives the impression that her father and his opinions are more important than the narrator and her own thoughts and desires. The narrator is also grieving her mother, which might be important to consider in terms of the narrator's current mental state.*



*The dilapidated appearance and small size of the parlor suggests that the narrator's family is struggling financially. They're also class-conscious, using the old TV to make them seem wealthier than they really are.*



*That Adunni notices the scent of alcohol on Papa's breath implies that he has a drinking problem. The fact that Morufu, who is considered poor, has enough money to pay Adunni's family's rent suggests that they are even worse off than him, which underscores the direness of the family's financial situation. The ease with which Papa reveals to his teenage daughter that he will marry her off to Morufu suggests that the practice of young girls marrying much older men is common or at least accepted in their community. It also suggests that gender inequality is a deeply rooted problem in this society—a man can force his daughter to marry, and she has no power to resist.*



## CHAPTER 2

That night, Adunni rises from her sleeping mat in the room she shares with her brothers and anxiously ponders what her future will hold. She can't believe that Papa would sell her to an old man like Morufu without consulting her first, breaking the promise he made to Mama. The night sky is full of fireflies, and Adunni recalls how Mama told her that fireflies bring messages of good luck. Adunni was deeply affected by Mama's death, but she has learned to keep her sorrow inside and stay strong for Kayus and Papa. Today's news, however, tests her strength.

Adunni closes her eyes as she continues to think about Mama, imagining her as a "rose flower." Mama, who was only in her forties when she died, suffered for half a year with a horrible sickness that made her cough violently. Before she fell ill, Mama was full of energy, always busy frying puff-puffs to sell at the Ikati market. Mama saved the best puff-puffs to give to Iya, an old woman from the Agan village for whom Mama often made food, even as her sickness made her increasingly weak.

Mama looked out for Adunni. She taught Adunni to pray to God and, two days before she died, made Papa promise not to marry her off and to continue her education. Tearfully, Adunni again envisions her mother as a "rose flower," though this time the flower is "brown" and stamped on by "the dirty feet of a man that forgets the promise he make to his dead wife."

## CHAPTER 3

The next morning, Adunni lies on her mat and listens to the birds and the villagers working outside. These are the sounds she hears every morning, but today they take on an ominous tone as she thinks about her upcoming wedding. Kayus, who is 11, remains asleep, his eyelids shaking the way they have since Mama died. The siblings are close. Adunni teaches Kayus English and math, since Kayus has also had to stop going to school.

*That Adunni shares a room with her brothers reaffirms the family's poverty. The detail that Papa broke a promise to Adunni's late mother presents a gender divide in the subject of marriage: mama didn't want Adunni to be married off at a young age, but Papa is more amenable to the decision. Mama's resistance to the idea of Adunni becoming a child bride positions her as Adunni's protector and Papa as someone who doesn't have her best interests at heart. Adunni's strength as she grieves Mama's death gives the reader a sense of her character: she is resilient and tenacious amid hardship.*



*Adunni imagining Mama as a beautiful flower shows how she idealizes her mother. Mama's determination to help Iya, despite the fact that she herself was so ill, introduces the importance of women's solidarity with one another. Puff-puffs, the food Mama sold in the market, are a sweet fried dough, similar to American doughnuts.*



*Mama teaching Adunni to pray to God suggests that Mama is the person who showed Adunni how to be strong and hopeful when confronted with hardship. When Adunni changes her earlier depiction of Mama from a fresh rose to a brown, wilted rose, flattened by "the dirty feet of a man that forgets the promise he make to his dead wife," she is referring to Papa's decision to marry off Adunni in violation of his wife's dying wish. Essentially, Adunni thinks that Papa is soiling Mama's memory by breaking his promise to Mama and failing to keep Adunni safe.*



*Adunni's seems to be extra tuned-in to the sounds of her home because she knows that she'll be leaving it once she's married. The fact that Adunni teaches Kayus math is an early indicator of her passion for education. This makes it an extra harsh blow that Papa has taken her out of school. The fact that Kayus—who is a boy, and also younger than Adunni—was also taken out of school is further evidence of the family's poverty. It's likely that he had to drop out of school so he could find a job and help support the family.*



Adunni wonders who will care for Kayus once she marries Morufu. Adunni looks at her older brother, Born-boy, whose real name is Alao. Born-boy is 19 and very serious. He gets to sleep on the bed because he is the first-born child. Born-boy certainly can't take care of Kayus, because all he knows how to do is the mechanic work that he does at Kassim Motors.

*That Adunni feels responsible for taking care of Kayus shows how much she cares for him, but it also reveals the uneven burden of responsibility that Adunni's culture places on women and girls: Adunni isn't Kayus's mother, yet she still feels responsible for his well-being in a way that Born-boy, for example, does not. In contrast to Adunni, who must assume such domestic responsibilities as caring for her younger brother, Born-boy is allowed to live his own life and have a job outside of the home. The fact that Born-boy is permitted to sleep on the bed is further evidence of inequality at play in Adunni's home. Beyond this, Born-boy's nickname signifies the culture's preference toward boys: his name essentially celebrates the fact that he was born male.*



Adunni wakes Kayus, who confronts her about her marriage to Morufu. She breaks down in tears and begs her brother to tell Papa to cancel the marriage. The siblings hold each other and cry noiselessly. Kayus suggests that Adunni run away, but she refuses. She fears the village chief might catch and punish her like he punished Asabi, a girl in Ikati who ran away from her older husband to be with her lover, Tafa. Asabi was caught and beaten. Tafa, accused of "stealing another man's wife," was hung, his body dumped in the Ikati forest. Asabi's punishment was to be locked in a room until she learned her lesson. She never went outside again.

*This emotional moment between Adunni and Kayus illustrates the siblings' close bond. Adunni's memory of Asabi and Tafa gives the reader a better sense of the type of society in which Adunni lives: the consequences for going against social norms—in this case, abandoning an arranged marriage to pursue a romantic relationship—is punishable by torture (in the woman's case) or death (in the man's case). This gives the reader a greater sense of the hopelessness of Adunni's situation: if Papa says she has to marry Morufu, there isn't much she can do to avoid it. The fact that Tafa was punished for "stealing another man's wife" suggests that in Adunni's community, women are viewed as commodities, as possessions of men.*



Kayus falls back asleep, and Adunni leaves the room. She finds Papa outside, beating the radio with a rock to get it to "wake up." Adunni kneels in the sand while Papa messes with the radio. When Papa asks Adunni what she wants, she lies and tells him they are out of beans, so that she can go to her best friend Enitan's house and discuss the marriage. To Adunni's surprise, Papa presents her with two 50-naira notes. Adunni assumes the money is from Morufu and does not thank her father. Papa instructs Adunni to tell Enitan's mother that, after Adunni's marriage, he will repay her for everything she has given them. Papa continues, listing the goods he will buy for himself once his debts are paid off.

*That Adunni knows to kneel before Papa reaffirms the unequal power dynamic between the two of them. This may be seen as inherent in a parent-child relationship, but the reader might also consider that there are gender dynamics at play here too—Adunni must kneel before and be subservient to this older, male figure. Naira is the currency of Nigeria. When Papa gives Adunni money he got from Morufu, it is further evidence that the marriage turns her into a commodity—the men in her life can place a tangible, calculable value on her worth as a young woman.*



Adunni walks to Enitan's **house**, which is much nicer than her own. When Enitan sees Adunni, she addresses her friend as "the new wife," a title Adunni rejects. Enitan cannot understand why Adunni is upset about the marriage, as it will only improve her and her family's quality of life. Adunni feels frustrated that nobody understands her anxieties.

*Enitan addressing Adunni as "the new wife" suggests that Adunni's upcoming marriage to Morufu gives her a new identity—one defined by her relationship to her husband, not on her own interests and personality. Enitan's enthusiasm for the marriage reaffirms how accepted the marriage of young girls is in Adunni's village. In the novel, houses symbolize the social norms that dictate a particular region or community. Enitan's enthusiasm for the marriage suggests that her household, much like Adunni's, condones the marriage of young girls.*



Adunni recalls a time in school when another student, Jimoh, made fun of her for being the oldest in their class, not understanding why Adunni wasn't able to start school sooner. The other schoolchildren were always making fun of her, and Adunni responded to it by working harder at her studies. Even after she had to leave school, she continued to work hard, teaching the younger village children their letters.

*Adunni responds to being bullied by throwing herself into her studies and helping others, which illustrates her capacity to persevere through times of hardship. It also shows that even in times of personal strife, she finds opportunities to help others, rather than internalizing this strife and succumbing to bitterness and hopelessness.*



Adunni's thoughts return to her looming marriage. In her village, many girls, including Enitan, view marriage as a good thing. Unlike Adunni, Enitan doesn't care about education and wants only to braid hair, and maybe start a makeup business, while she waits to be married. Before the friends part ways, Enitan offers to come over later, bringing lipsticks for Adunni to try out for the wedding. She asks Adunni if she'd prefer a red or a pink lipstick. Adunni leaves without responding, thinking to herself that a lipstick that is colored "the black of a mourner" would be most appropriate.

*Enitan's positive view of marriage shows how oppression forces people to shift perspectives, accepting whatever circumstances will allow them to survive. It's possible that Enitan sees marriage in a positive light because she considers it an inevitable part of her future—she might as well accept it instead of dwelling sorrowfully on the things that she cannot change. Adunni's wry observation that a lipstick that is colored "the black of a mourner" would be more appropriate for her wedding draws a parallel between the upcoming marriage and the death of her mother, reaffirming how traumatizing the marriage will be for her.*



## CHAPTER 4

Adunni recalls a time two years before Mama died when a rich man with a black, shiny car arrived at their compound. The man approached Adunni, who was sitting under her family's mango tree, and asked to speak to her mother, Idowu. Adunni told the man that Mama was out, and he introduced himself as Ade. Ade told Adunni that he came to Ikati village to see the gravesite of his grandmother and wanted to say hello to Mama before returning home to the UK. He instructed Adunni to tell Mama that he "didn't forget her" and then drove away.

*The fact that Ade refers to Mama by her first name, and that he instructs Adunni to pass along the mysterious message that he "didn't forget her" hints that Mama and Ade had a romantic past. Ade's ability to travel back and forth between Nigeria and the UK might mean that he is wealthy, or at least more financially secure than Adunni and her family.*



When Adunni told Mama about Ade, Mama began to cry, softly, so that Papa wouldn't hear. A few weeks later, Mama explained to Adunni that she met Mr. Ade (who came from a rich family in Lagos) many years ago, when he was visiting his grandmother in Ikati. Mr. Ade bought some of the puff-puff Mama was selling, and they fell in love. Because Mama was uneducated, Mr. Ade's family forbade the marriage and sent Mr. Ade abroad. Mama's family forced her to marry Adunni's father, though she never loved him. Back in the present, Adunni reflects on how Papa is now doing the same thing to her.

*Mama's tragic romance illustrates the limitations poverty places on a person's—particularly a woman's—ability to make decisions based on their needs and desires. The lovers' very different fates offer a compelling example of gender inequality. Although Ade must also have been heartbroken that he could not marry Mama, his gender and money allow him to leave Nigeria for the UK, whereas Mama has fewer options and is forced into an unloving marriage in her native village. Mama's own experience of being married off to a man she didn't love is likely why she was so adamant about Papa not marrying Adunni off.*



The day Mama told Adunni about Mr. Ade, she also vowed to give Adunni an education so that she could have a chance at a better life. In Nigeria, learning to speak English could mean getting a better job and not being forced to marry. To Mama, education was a way for Adunni to gain a "voice." That day, Adunni vowed to finish school and become a teacher because she "want[ed] a louding voice."

*Mama urges Adunni to become educated because she sees education as a way for Adunni to break the cycle of gendered inequality. An education can also lead to a good job, which could help Adunni (and potentially her entire family) escape poverty. Beyond this, education can help Adunni find a "louding voice," or inner sense of self-worth that will allow her to make decisions based on her needs and wants—something that Mama was denied.*



Back in the present, Adunni approaches Papa, who is sitting on the sofa watching TV. She thinks about Papa's harsh nature, recalling how he would shout at—and on one occasion, beat—Mama. The beating was for interrupting him, something Mama, as a woman, was not supposed to do to a man. Adunni begs Papa to call off the marriage, but he refuses. Spit spews from his mouth as he tells Adunni that Morufu is bringing the family four goats the next day, as well as fowl, rice, and money.

*The physical violence present in Mama and Papa's marriage highlights another aspect of gendered oppression in Adunni's culture. In addition, Papa's announcement that Morufu will provide the family with animals, rice, and money puts a tangible price on Adunni's worth and shows how she is commodified by male characters.*



Adunni tries to reason with Papa, arguing that forcing her to marry Morufu would be throwing away her future. She tells him that she is smart, and if she could finish school and get a good job, this could help the family, too. Papa tells Adunni that they need the money for rent and food now, not later; what's more, Morufu has offered to pay Papa more money if Adunni's first pregnancy is a boy. Appalled, Adunni reminds Papa of his promise to Mama, but Papa refuses to reconsider the marriage.

*Adunni's argument that she can support the family after she finishes her schooling and becomes a teacher doesn't matter to Papa, because the family needs financial relief now, not years down the road. Their poverty means they don't have the privilege of making long-term investments. Beyond this, the fact that Morufu will pay Papa more money if Adunni gives birth to a son shows that the male characters don't place value on Adunni's intelligence—her worth is based on her ability to become pregnant and produce a male child, not on her personal skills or interests. Moreover, it's implied that Morufu won't pay extra if Adunni gives birth to a daughter, further demonstrating how men and boys are seen as more valuable than women and girls in this society.*



When Morufu comes by the **house** the next day to drop off the goats, Adunni refuses to come out of her room to thank him. She covers her head with Mama's wrapper and hears Papa and her future husband laughing and drinking gin in the parlor. Morufu talks about Boko Haram kidnapping schoolgirls.

*Boko Haram is a terrorist organization based in Nigeria that sparked international outrage when they kidnapped nearly 300 Nigerian schoolgirls in 2014. Overhearing Morufu talk about Boko Haram takes on a symbolic significance: in a sense, his decision to marry Adunni robs her of an education in the same way that the Boko Haram abduction denied the schoolgirls their autonomy and access to education. Both scenarios feature a patriarchal structure that robs girls of freedom and opportunities.*



## CHAPTER 5

Adunni and Enitan are behind Adunni's **house** trying on makeup for the wedding, which is tomorrow. Enitan is laughing and cheerful, but Adunni can only pretend to be. Adunni tells Enitan that she fears that Morufu will not help her finish school. Enitan tells Adunni not to worry, because school isn't important in their village—not like it is in Lagos. Adunni should focus on bearing male children for Morufu and forget about school. Also, Morufu's house isn't far away: Enitan can come over and “play with” Adunni when she isn't busy with her own work.

*Enitan's advice presents a distinction between the social norms of the girls' home of Ikati village, a rural community, and those of Lagos, which is Nigeria's most populous city and a major economic hub. Enitan's advice to not to worry about school shows that to be an educated girl in their village is the exception, not the norm. Girls in their village move up in society by marrying and having sons. Enitan's words of encouragement that Adunni can still come over to “play with” her after she is married puts into obvious and shocking terms just how young the girls are—they're still young enough to enjoy imaginative play, which makes the fact that Adunni is soon getting married against her will all the more disturbing.*



After Enitan leaves, Adunni goes to the kitchen and removes the makeup from her face. She remains in the kitchen, shucking corn and plucking the seeds into a bucket, from the afternoon until after dark. Tomorrow, Aunty Sisi will take the corn and make a sweet drink for the wedding. Adunni leaves the kitchen and finds Papa sleeping in parlor, having drunk a bottle of stout that he received as a wedding gift. Adunni is about to beg Papa to call off the wedding once more—but she thinks about the food, fowl, and goats that the family now has and leaves without saying a word.

*Adunni has no good options: she can either go through with the wedding give up her dreams of education and independence, or she can run away and put her life and her family's financial stability in jeopardy. Papa passing out from drinking the stout lends an additional tinge of hopelessness to the situation, as he doesn't seem at all troubled by his decision to sell off his daughter. His attitude further hints that child marriage is a socially accepted practice in the community.*



Adunni returns to her room and lies down beside Kayus, who appears to be sleeping peacefully. She wishes she could be like her little brother, who doesn't have to worry about such serious things. Adunni decides that if she can think of the marriage as providing money and comfort for Kayus, then she can go through with it. Adunni begins to cry, stuffing her mouth full of cloth to avoid disturbing Kayus.

*Adunni recognizes how unfair it is that she is automatically married off because she is female. Still, she doesn't hold this against Kayus and become jealous. She doesn't let the unjustness of their society turn her bitter against her brother, whom she loves and whom has no say in the matter. Adunni's decision to view the marriage as ultimately helping Kayus shows her strength and determination not to let her hardships destroy her.*



Suddenly, Kayus wakes up and runs from the room. Adunni can hear him kicking a door as he screams her name; she hears Papa threatening to beat Kayus. Later, Adunni leaves the room and finds Kayus outside, crying as he rubs his aching foot. The siblings huddle together as Kayus falls asleep on Adunni's shoulder.

*When Kayus violently protests Papa's decision to marry off Adunni, he establishes himself as one of Adunni's allies, taking on the role Mama once played in her life. Still, like Mama before him, Kayus is severely limited in how much of a difference he can make in Adunni's life: his lack of financial independence makes it impossible for him to challenge Papa in an effective way.*



## CHAPTER 6

Adunni's wedding was "like a movie"; she recalls going through the motions of kneeling and praying without understanding what was really happening. "From under the white lace cloth covering [her] face," she saw the guests huddled under the mango tree, everyone wearing blue clothing, her friends Enitan and Ruka dancing happily, and the bountiful spread of food and drink. Adunni remembers "watching herself" as Morufu pressed honey to her forehead three times, telling her that her life would be sweet like honey. Papa gave her away to Morufu, telling him to "do her anyhow you want. Use her till she useless," while the guests looked on and laughed.

*Adunni's memory of her wedding as "like a movie" suggests that she has repressed the details of it, essentially removing herself from the horrific events in which she was forced to participate. Her disassociation seems to be a coping mechanism she uses to survive the trauma of her wedding. The guests' laughter in response to Papa's invitation for Morufu to "do [Adunni] anyhow you want" (essentially, to do whatever he wants to her sexually) highlights how normal it is for young girls in this society to be married off and treated as sexual objects.*



Now, Adunni sits beside Morufu in his taxi as he drives away from the compound. She fixates on the henna Enitan drew on her hand. Morufu asks how she is feeling. Adunni stays silent and looks down, which enrages Morufu, who demands that Adunni look at him. Morufu informs Adunni that his two wives, Labake and Khadija, will be jealous of Adunni. Though Khadija "is having small sense," Labake might be mean to Adunni, and if she is, Adunni should tell Morufu so he can beat her. Adunni wonders if Morufu will beat her too, one day.

*Morufu's promise to beat Labake if she is mean to Adunni shows that Adunni is entering into the cycle of gendered violence and oppression that Mama wanted her to avoid: Adunni is now the wife of a man who, like Papa, beats his wives into submission.*



Morufu and Adunni drive for 20 minutes and arrive at a large compound with a cement **house** situated in the middle of it. This is Morufu's house, which he built himself. He gestures toward another car that sits by the house and brags to Adunni about having two cars, which is very rare in the village.

*Morufu's second car and large house are indications of his wealth compared to poorer families like Adunni's.*



Adunni steps out of the car and sees a plump woman emerge from the house. The woman's face appears white, as though covered in chalk, and she holds a candle in her hand. The woman turns to the candle and calls it a "husband snatcher" and an "Ashewo," or prostitute, before extinguishing it with her breath. Morufu tells Adunni to ignore the woman, Labake, insisting that "her head is not correct." Then, he takes Adunni's belongings from the car and orders her to follow him inside so that she can meet Khadija.

*When Labake calls Adunni a "husband snatcher," she positions Adunni as her enemy, insinuating that Adunni is purposely trying to upend Labake's marriage. In reality, Papa and Morufu arranged Adunni's marriage without her consent, which makes Adunni just as much of a victim as Labake: both women are mistreated and disrespected by the men in their lives. Labake's jealousy blinds her to the reality of the situation, though, and she takes out her anger on Adunni, who has done nothing wrong.*





## CHAPTER 7

Adunni enters Morufu's **parlor**, which contains a sofa, wooden table, TV, and kerosene lantern. There are two women in the room: Labake and another girl, who is very young and very pregnant. Four young girls, each wearing only pants with no top, sit on the floor and stare at Adunni. Adunni recognizes one of the older girls as Kike, a village girl her age with whom she used to play *ten-ten*. Morufu introduces the second of the two women as Khadija, his second wife, before sending the children upstairs so he can talk to his three wives. Morufu yawns. Adunni catches a glimpse of his rotten, crooked teeth and wonders how old he is. She suspects he is probably 55 or 60, like Papa, though he looks much older.

Morufu begins his speech. He orders Adunni to respect him, because he is "the king in this **house**." Nobody—neither the wives nor the children—can talk back to him. He instructs Adunni not to "ask question in my front." Adunni asks Morufu if he'd rather she question him "in [his] back." Khadija stifles a laugh as Morufu tells Adunni not to joke, warning her about the special cane he reserves for floggings.

Morufu fills Adunni in on the family history. He married Labake first. When Labake could not conceive, they sacrificed goats to the **water** gods, which resulted in Labake giving birth to a baby girl, Kike, a detail he relays with bitterness. Khadija, too, bore only girls for Morufu: Alafia, Kofo, and the most recent child, whose name Morufu cannot recall. If Khadija's pregnancy does not give Morufu a boy, he will return Khadija to her family and stop giving them food. Morufu wants to have two boys whom he can send to school. They will learn English, become taxi drivers, and make money. Girls, he complains, can only be married, cook, and be used for "bedroom work." Morufu reveals that he has already found Kike a husband and plans to use her "bride-price" for car repairs and to buy chickens.

Having finished catching Adunni up to speed, Morufu informs the wives of their bedroom schedule: Adunni will sleep with him on Sunday, Monday and Tuesday; Labake on Wednesday and Thursday; Khadija on Friday. On Saturday, he will rest. Adunni wonders if Morufu will make her sleep in bed with him and "do [her] the nonsense and rubbish things that adult people" do. Nobody except Mama has seen her naked, and she is afraid. She longs for her mother but tries not to cry. Morufu rises from the couch and removes his *agbada*. He is thin but has a round, hard stomach, and Adunni wonders if he has a disease. Morufu leaves to "prepare [himself]" for Adunni.

*Adunni's entrance into Morufu's house symbolically represents her entrance into a new set of rules and norms: whereas before she was subject to the law of Papa's house, now she must learn a new set of expectations set in place by Morufu. The fact that Adunni remembers playing with Kike, who is her age, and the fact that she speculates that must be as old as Papa, really emphasizes the age gap between her and her new husband.*



*All the women and girls in the house must obey and respect Morufu without question, as he is "the king of this house." Adunni's literal and somewhat cheeky response to Morufu's order not to question him behind his back shows that she is not so easily subdued by him: she still has a spark of individuality to her, despite Morufu's efforts to dominate her. Khadija's laughter suggests that she might be sympathetic toward Adunni.*



*Morufu's displeasure at Labake giving birth to a daughter reaffirms what little value Adunni's culture places on women and girls. His decision to find a new wife after Labake fails to bear him a son shows that wives are seen as commodities that can be replaced and upgraded when they do not perform to their husband's satisfaction. They are valued by their usefulness to men, whether that be in the kitchen or for "bedroom work," for sexual pleasure and reproduction. Morufu's comment about finding Kike a husband who will pay him a "bride-price" that he can use for car repairs is similar to how Papa used Adunni's bride-price to pay rent and obtain food. The similarities to the way the men treat their daughters hint that this type of behavior is widely accepted in the society of the novel.*



*Morufu's bedroom schedule reinforces that in his view, his wives have no purpose other than to fulfill Morufu's desires. Adunni's fear that Morufu will make her have sex with him ("the nonsense and rubbish things that adult people do") shows how young she is, reminding the reader that Adunni is a child who's been forced to grow up too fast. An *agbada* is a robe made of wide, flowing fabric worn by men in West Africa.*



Once Morufu is gone, Labake tells Adunni that she will not share her husband with a girl so young and plans to make Adunni's life in this **house** as miserable as possible. After Labake leaves the parlor, Khadija comforts Adunni, insisting that Labake is all talk. Adunni notices that Khadija speaks English very well and assumes she went to school before she was married. Khadija tells her that in Morufu's house they have food and water and should be thankful.

Adunni looks at Khadija's malnourished-looking face and sees a kindness in her. Adunni confides in Khadija that her father made her marry Morufu in exchange for rent money, and Khadija reveals that her own father exchanged her for a bag of rice after he lost his leg to diabetes and could no longer work. She has been Morufu's wife for the last five years, though she used to go to school. Adunni asks Khadija how old she is, and Khadija reveals that she is just 20 years old. Khadija cautions Adunni not to make Morufu angry but tells her to be happy: tonight, she will become a woman, and if she is lucky, she will soon become pregnant and give birth to a boy.

## CHAPTER 8

It's raining hard as Khadija shows Adunni around the kitchen area. Khadija and Labake each have their own stove, and Khadija offers to let Adunni use hers. Adunni smells the scent of old urine and asks about the bathroom. Khadija gestures toward the bathroom, which everyone is free to use—so long as Morufu is first, which is the rule for everything. Khadija reiterates that Morufu "is king in this **house**."

Khadija and Adunni return to the main interior of the **house** and Khadija shows Adunni to Morufu's room at the end of a hallway. She points out her room, Labake's room, and the room the children share along the way. When Adunni is not required to be with Morufu, Khadija explains, Adunni will share Khadija's room. Adunni expresses her fears about sleeping with Morufu to Khadija, who comforts Adunni and suggests that she close her eyes and picture something she likes. Adunni begins to cry and says all she wants is Mama.

*Labake and Khadija have opposite approaches to dealing with the new wife: while Labake chooses to respond with bitterness and jealousy, Khadija is compassionate and motherly toward Adunni, recognizing that she is just a girl and had no say in getting married. If Adunni is correct in her assumption that Khadija had some education before becoming Morufu's bride, this suggests that she, like Adunni, likely had her dreams quashed by an oppressive, patriarchal society.*



*Khadija and Adunni have a similar backstory: both girls have fathers who view them as commodities to be exchanged for money and material goods. They were even married at around the same age, with Khadija being about 15 when she was married and Adunni now 14. Khadija's advice to Adunni that it is best to get pregnant with a boy reflects the hopelessness of their situation: Khadija sees no way out of the marriage, so she reasons that the best Adunni can do for herself is give birth to a boy so that she can stay in Morufu's good graces.*



*Khadija's acceptance of Morufu's self-proclaimed status as "king" of the house shows that her powerless position gives her no other option but to submit to Morufu's order if she wants to keep herself fed and with a roof over her head. Like Adunni, Khadija must observe Morufu's rules while living in under his roof.*



*When Khadija tells Adunni to close her eyes and think positive thoughts while Morufu forces himself on her, she is likely passing along a technique that she uses. It's similar to the coping mechanism Adunni used during her wedding earlier in the day: distancing herself from her body in an effort to endure a traumatic experience. Adunni cries for Mama here, signifying that Mama was her protector when she was alive. It also underscores that Adunni is still a child, making the sexual encounter she will soon experience all the more disturbing.*



Morufu calls Adunni into bedroom, which contains a kerosene lamp and a bare mattress laid on the floor. Morufu, shirtless, his chest covered in gray hairs, instructs Adunni to join him on the bed. As she sits down, she spots on the floor a bottle bearing the label “Fire-Cracker Bitters. Wake Up Sleeping Manhood” and wonders what “sleeping manhood” might mean. Morufu explains that the elixir in the bottle is like “petrol is for car.”

Morufu orders Adunni to lie down, but she refuses, feeling that she will be sick. He orders her again and she relents. A flash of light enters the room, and Adunni wonders if it might be Mama’s spirit protecting her. She tries to keep the light in her line of sight, but it fades away as quickly as it appeared. Morufu rapes Adunni. Adunni realizes she has no power in the face of Morufu “behaving as if a devil is inside of him.” Morufu finishes and proclaims that Adunni is “now complete woman.” He tells her they will do this until she becomes pregnant and gives birth to a boy. He puts on his pants and leaves a crying Adunni alone in the dark room.

## CHAPTER 9

When Adunni wakes up the next morning, her “under” is in terrible pain from last night, which she tries to block from her memory. Morufu orders her to bring him food. She goes to the kitchen, where Khadija is preparing yams. Adunni spots a knife and fantasizes about sneaking the knife into the bedroom and cutting off Morufu’s genitals. Khadija asks her if she is OK. When Adunni tells her that she bled “under,” Khadija suggests *lbukun* powder for the pain.

Khadija asks Adunni if she would like anything to eat, but all Adunni wants to do is wash her body. Khadija tells Adunni to go to the bathroom—she can use her bucket of **water**. Adunni goes to the bathroom and pours the freezing water over her skin, washing the scents of Morufu from her body. After she washes, she remains in the bathroom, lying on the cold floor, wanting the time between now and her next night with Morufu to pass as slowly as possible.

*The fact that Morufu has gray hairs on his chest and must use some kind of medicine to arouse himself underscores the age gap between him and Adunni, further highlighting the uneven power dynamic between them. Adunni’s confusion about the meaning of “sleeping manhood” shows how little she understands about adult subjects like sex.*



*Mama’s spiritual protection, represented through the flash of lightning, is no match against Morufu’s physical power or the patriarchal system that emboldens him. Morufu’s declaration that Adunni is “now complete woman” after being raped by him implies that she is somehow incomplete or unimportant if she is not giving pleasure to a man.*



*Adunni represses the trauma of her rape in an effort to make it through the day, though she can’t completely block it out, as the event has physically harmed her. Rather than react jealously to the new, much younger bride having sex with her husband (as Labake might), Khadija comforts Adunni and tries to help her alleviate her pain.*



*Water takes on a conventional symbolism of cleansing and rebirth here, with Adunni both literally and figuratively washing to remove Morufu’s presence from her body. Adunni is a strong character, but even she finds the prospect of having to repeat last night’s encounter with Morufu hard to accept.*



## CHAPTER 10

Adunni has been in Morufu's **house** for almost four weeks and has witnessed many of Morufu's horrific outbursts of anger. She decides that "there is a devil inside Morufu" when he gets this way. Labake, who harasses Adunni incessantly, is also evil, though to a lesser extent. Adunni recalls a time when she was in the bathroom when Labake wanted to wash. Rather than wait for Adunni, Labake dragged Adunni's naked and dripping out of the bathroom, covering her with sand. The experience made Adunni feel shameful.

Khadija and Adunni comfort each other on the nights they share a room. Khadija tells Adunni that she should fight back physically the next time Labake assaults her. When Adunni feels sad, Khadija rubs her shoulders, and when Khadija's baby kicks too much, Adunni sings songs to Khadija's belly.

Last night, Khadija told Adunni that she won't be sad once she has children. Khadija didn't originally want children and even took a medicine to prevent pregnancy. But after Alafia was born, she learned that loving her children made life in Morufu's **house** bearable. Internally, Adunni wonders if it's fair to bring children into such a sad world—especially given that they wouldn't have a chance to go to school or have a voice.

This morning, Adunni walks into the kitchen, where she finds Khadija plucking *ewedu* leaves. Adunni asks about obtaining the medicine Khadija took to prevent pregnancy, because she has decided that wants to fight for her education instead of having a baby. Khadija tries to talk her out of it, reasoning that if she gives Morufu a son, Morufu will provide for her family back home, as well as her future children. Recognizing that Adunni's mind is made up, though, Khadija relents and tells her about a concoction of leaves she can take to prevent pregnancy. Adunni must drink the medicine before and after her period, "and every time you and Morufu are doing the thing." Most importantly, Morufu must not know that she is taking the medicine.

*Labake is jealous and threatened by Adunni's presence in the house and responds by trying to make Adunni as miserable as she is. Labake either fails or doesn't want to acknowledge that it's Morufu, not Adunni, who is the real villain here, since it was Morufu who chose to accept a child bride.*



*Adunni and Khadija make their existence at Morufu's more bearable by establishing a relationship built on mutual respect and compassion. Labake, in contrast, chooses to make enemies of the other wives and seemingly has no friends or allies.*



*Khadija readjusts her expectations in life and does what she has to do to make it through each day. While in an ideal world she might have continued her education and made a life for herself, now she must consider her limited options as Morufu's wife. She has children because they can give her happiness and meaning in an otherwise hopeless life. Adunni's thoughts extend beyond simple survival as she worries about the ethical ramifications of having a children within a society that oppresses women and marries young girls off rather than allowing them to get educations.*



*Even though Adunni risks jeopardizing her position in Morufu's house and cutting off her family's access to money and supplies, she decides that receiving an education is most important, so she decides to try preventing pregnancy by taking the medicine. Unlike Khadija, who eventually resigns herself to accepting her limited prospects in life, Adunni holds out hope that she might be able to accomplish her goals in the future.*



## CHAPTER 11

Adunni's life in Morufu's **house** is bearable when she is with Khadija: they laugh together and help each other with the children. Most of Adunni's interactions with Morufu occur in the bedroom. Morufu, who is unaware of Khadija's secret medicine, frequently asks about her physical state, wanting Adunni to become pregnant. Adunni "mak[es] herself a dead body" while Morufu rapes her and hopes that he will eventually give up on a pregnancy and send her home.

Today, Morufu and Labake are out of the **house**, so Adunni feels light and carefree. She sings a made-up song about going to school, becoming a lawyer, and wearing high heels. Adunni runs into Khadija, who asks her to take her clay pot and fetch some water from the Ikati **river**. This is a big deal, since Morufu has never let her venture this far from the compound. Adunni thanks her excitedly and leaves.

Khadija's clay pot in hand, Adunni runs to the river, where she finds Ruka and Enitan playing in the sand. Adunni runs to greet them, and the friends embrace. The girls inquire excitedly about Adunni's life as a wife. Adunni tells them about the horrible Labake and the kindly Khadija. Married life isn't wholly unbearable, she admits, but only because of Khadija, who has been like a mother to her. She tells the girls about how painful intercourse is, but Ruka thinks she is lying.

Suddenly, Enitan shouts excitedly, pointing to a boy walking their way: it's Kayus. He reaches the girls, picks Adunni up, and spins her around. It's the first time the siblings have seen each other since Adunni's marriage, and Adunni is overjoyed. Kayus tells Adunni he hasn't spoken to Papa since the marriage. He vows to start working at Kassim Motors, make lots of money, and rescue Adunni from Morufu. The siblings sit together, and Adunni tells Kayus all about her past two months.

In the afternoon, Adunni leaves the river to return to Morufu's, carrying a pot of water on her head. As she approaches the **house**, she hears a rustling in the bushes. Labake emerges, angrily accusing Adunni of using her stove. That morning, Adunni made okra soup for Khadija, who was feeling ill, but she is pretty sure she used Khadija's stove, not Labake's. Labake grows angrier and pushes Adunni. Suddenly, Kike emerges from the path and takes responsibility for the stove, claiming that she used it to boil eggs that morning. Still angry, Labake pushes Adunni, causing the pot to fall from Adunni's head and shatter. Once the two girls are alone, Adunni asks why Kike lied for her. Kike shrugs and leaves without answering.

*Adunni and Khadija's friendship gives them strength and allows them to find peace while living under Morufu's roof. When faced with a situation in which she cannot forget her troubles—such as her nights with Morufu—Adunni copes by mentally separating herself from her body, repressing the reality of her sexual assault.*



*Morufu's house isn't as bad when Morufu and Labake, the people whose actions perpetuate a cycle of sexist social norms, aren't around to enforce those norms. Khadija continues to treat Adunni kindly, granting her secret permission to escape the oppressive, stifling house and see her friends. The river here functions as something of an oasis—an escape from Adunni's unpleasant reality.*



*Adunni's friends still don't seem to grasp the horrific nature of Adunni's situation, which they demonstrate in the gleeful way they ask Adunni to share the details of her personal life. To Ruka and Enitan, Adunni's marriage is exciting, not traumatic. Ruka and Enitan seem to accept their society's norms without question, whereas Adunni refuses to do so.*



*Kayus's anger with Papa positions him as an ally and protector to Adunni, much like Mama was before she passed away. Kayus takes issue with their society's gender inequality and makes plans to try to help Adunni escape her marriage. Though his age prevents him from taking any significant action now, he plans to use his privilege as a male to make money and rescue Adunni from her situation.*



*Adunni's return to Morufu's house and her confrontation with Labake mark the end of the brief sense of freedom she had with her friends at the river. Labake's hostility toward Adunni here is a particularly extreme example of her rejection of solidarity, as she's attacking Adunni for using her stove to help Khadija in an act of solidarity. Kike stands in stark contrast to her mother when she sticks up for Adunni.*



## CHAPTER 12

Adunni and Kike treat each other more warmly after the incident with Labake. One morning, as Adunni sits on the floor in front of the kitchen grinding pepper, the girls exchange greetings, and Adunni thanks Kike for lying to Labake for her. She tells Kike she didn't want to marry Kike's father. Kike understands and tells Adunni that everyone in the village knows Adunni is smart and wants to have an education. She knows that it's Morufu who was wrong to have two additional wives after Labake couldn't conceive a boy.

Kike tells Adunni that Morufu found her a husband named Baba Ogun, and that tomorrow she will go to his **house**. Baba Ogun already has a wife, but Kike doesn't seem to mind the arrangement because she knows that Morufu will use her bride-price to fix one of his taxi cars. After a pause, Kike says she wishes she were a man and could go to go to school. She loves drawing dress designs and wants to learn to become a tailor, but Morufu won't pay for her to train. Kike decides that if she can't be a man, marrying one is "the next thing [she] can do."

Adunni shares with Kike her dream of becoming a teacher, explaining that wants to teach the children in the village and improve their lives. Sadly, though, she realizes that her marriage to Morufu makes these dreams impossible. Kike instructs Adunni to close her eyes and pretend to be a teacher in a classroom. Adunni does so, and the imagined scene makes her laugh with joy. Kike tells Adunni that if she uses her imagination, she can be anything she wants to be. Kike leaves. Adunni tries to envision the scene in her head again, but all she sees is "the dark cloth."

## CHAPTER 13

Khadija is now eight months pregnant and afraid the baby will arrive early. She asks Adunni to accompany her to the midwife, explaining that needs this baby to be strong and survive because she knows it is a boy—she did something "shame[ful]" to make sure.

*Adunni and Kike form something of a friendship after Kike makes the first move by lying for Adunni to fend off Labake. Kike understands that Adunni is not to blame for the marriage to Morufu and knows that Adunni would rather be finishing her schooling than live in Morufu's house as his third wife.*



*In arranging for Kike to marry Baba Ogun, Morufu forces Kike to enter into a situation very similar to Adunni's. Like Adunni, Kike has her own aspirations. Unlike Adunni, though, Kike feels discouraged by her circumstances and seems to have accepted that she will never be able to realize her dream of becoming a tailor. Taking after Khadija, she lowers her expectations to fit the reality of her oppressive circumstances: realizing that she had the misfortune to be born a girl in a man's world, she sees marrying a man as "the next thing [she] can do." Having a connection to someone with more power is a way for the less powerful to have a chance at some amount of upward social mobility (increased wealth and class status), however slight it might be.*



*Kike teaches Adunni a creative way to live her dream, even when her present situation makes it unlikely that she will ever realize it in reality. But Adunni fails to envision anything but a "dark cloth" after Kike leaves, which implies that even Adunni, who is usually so strong and determined, can be worn down by oppressive circumstances.*



*Khadija knows that Morufu measures her worth based on her ability to give him a son, so she goes to extreme measures to make sure she fulfill his expectations. If Khadija is ashamed of what she did to ensure that she gives birth to a boy, she must have done something drastic.*



The next day, Khadija and Adunni make plans to visit the midwife. They will tell Morufu (whom Adunni refers to as Khadija's husband, because she can't bear to call him her own husband) that they are visiting Khadija's sick mother. Khadija won't reveal why they cannot tell Morufu the truth. Adunni and Khadija find Morufu and Labake outside, waiting in front of Morufu's taxi; today is Kike's wedding, and they are preparing to bring her to her new husband's **house**. Khadija tells Morufu about their proposed trip. Labake is pleased that the other two wives won't be around to steal the spotlight from her on Kike's wedding day.

Adunni and Khadija begin the two-mile trek to the bus. Khadija is miserable and terribly ill, complaining the entire time about needing to relieve herself and sleep. Khadija's behavior worries Adunni, but she tries to comfort her friend. Khadija begins to fall asleep and tells Adunni to wake her when they get to Kere village.

## CHAPTER 14

Adunni looks out the window of the bus and sees women carrying firewood, bread, and plantains from the farm back home for cooking. She wonders why men who won't let women go to school are fine with them doing this work. The bus passes the Ikati border, and a landscape of red hills emerges.

An hour later, the bus arrives in Kere, which is a small village—maybe half the size of Ikati. Adunni has a very hard time waking Khadija. Adunni and Khadija get off the bus. Khadija sits down in the shade of a guava tree and motions toward a round house with a red door across the road. She instructs Adunni to knock on the door. If a woman answers, she should say she's selling leaves; if a man answers, she should ask for Bamidele and bring him to Khadija.

*Refusing to call Morufu her husband seems to be another way that Adunni represses and rejects the things that pain her: if she doesn't believe in her heart that Morufu is her husband, she doesn't have to feel like his property. Labake's happiness about being the center of attention, meanwhile, is at the expense of her daughter, Kike, whom she is marrying off and subjecting to her new husband's rule. Labake doesn't even show solidarity to her own daughter in this situation—it's most important to her to maintain the image of some level of power.*



*As Khadija's situation grows increasingly grim, there's a parallel between Adunni's experience with Khadija's illness and her experience with Mama's illness. Both women are the only people who stand between Adunni and the people who want to harm her. Now Khadija is seriously ill and potentially in danger of dying, which would leave Adunni without anyone to support her.*



*Adunni questions the hypocrisy behind her society's double standards for men and women. If men are okay letting women do physical labor, it's clear that they're aware of women's strength and capabilities, so it seems as though men know women are capable of lots of things and simply choose to limit their opportunities.*



*Khadija's instructions to Adunni to lie if a woman answers the door suggests that her involvement with Bamidele must be kept a secret from this woman, who might be Bamidele's wife. It's still not clear what Khadija's relationship to Bamidele is, but it seems possible that they are or were engaged in a romantic affair, and that, perhaps, this is the supposedly shameful thing she did to ensure that she gives birth to a boy. Throughout the novel, houses symbolize the ability of social norms to govern societies, lifting up and reassuring the powerful of their statuses and oppressing those in limited positions of power. The fact that Bamidele is potentially the head of a household suggests that he's used to calling the shots, and that Khadija might be at the mercy of Bamidele to get her through her pregnancy complications.*



Adunni is confused and asks where the midwife's house is, but Khadija tells her not to ask so many questions. Adunni ignores her own fears, reasoning that she should help Khadija, who has been so kind to her during her months at Morufu's **house**. Still, Adunni is fearful that if Khadija dies here, people will say that she killed her senior wife out of jealousy, and then they will kill her too—death is the penalty for theft and murder in Ikati.

Adunni obeys Khadija and approaches the **house**. She knocks twice, and a young, handsome man answers the door. The man confirms that he is Bamidele and asks what Adunni wants. Adunni tells him that he needs to help Khadija, who is unwell. Adunni and Bamidele make their way to Khadija, who is now sweaty and flailing on the ground. Bamidele kneels by Khadija, who tells him she is worried that the baby is not well, and that she and the baby will die. Bamidele comforts Khadija, touching her face and calling her “*aya mi*,” or “my wife.” Khadija reminds Bamidele of “the curse” he told her about, and the “the ritual” they must perform before the baby is brought to term. Bamidele agrees and instructs Adunni to help him carry Khadija. Adunni demands to know what's going on.

Bamidele explains that he and Khadija were in love five years ago. They wanted to marry, but Khadija's father sold her to Morufu when he fell ill. Bamidele moved to Kere to work as a welder but never forgot about Khadija. Four years later, Khadija came to him, and they resumed their love affair. Khadija's baby is Bamidele's, and he knows it's a boy because only boys are born in his family.

Bamidele explains the Khadija must perform a ritual because his family has a curse. The pregnant women in his family must wash in a **river** seven times before the baby comes, or else she and the baby will die. Adunni isn't comfortable performing the ritual and wants to find the midwife, but Khadija and Bamidele insist that the ritual is the only way to save Khadija and the baby. Adunni is terrified for Khadija and needs her to survive, so she decides to help. Bamidele says they have to walk to the river, which is a mile away, because he has a new wife and doesn't want a taxi driver to see him with a pregnant woman. Bamidele directs Adunni toward a back route, and the two of them drag Khadija toward the river.

*Khadija's refusal see the midwife seems to be connected to the mysterious actions she underwent to ensure that her pregnancy results in a son. Even though Adunni feels wary about the situation, she supports Khadija because her experiences at Morufu's house have taught her the importance of women supporting one another. Adunni's fear that the villagers will think she murdered Khadija out of jealousy shows how common competitive, toxic behavior among wives (like Labake's treatment of Khadija and Adunni) must be in the culture.*



*That Bamidele refers to Khadija as his “wife” implies a closeness between them—perhaps a romantic relationship. So far, the men that Adunni has encountered tend to disappoint and betray her, so it follows that she's wary and concerned about who Bamidele is and how he's going to help Khadija.*



*Khadija's tragic romance with Bamidele mirrors Mama's romance with Ade: both women were denied the freedom to be with the man they loved and forced to enter into arranged marriages. That Khadija would go outside her marriage and risk punishment for having sex with another man in order to have a son speaks to how desperately she wants to stay in Morufu's good graces.*



*That it's the women who are to blame and must be washed to rid themselves and their baby of a curse speaks to the culture's negative views of women. This practice implies that women need to be cleansed—that there is something evil or dirty about them. It takes two to make a baby, but Bamidele's family doesn't seem to entertain the notion that men could be to blame for the supposed “curse.”*





## CHAPTER 15

Adunni and Bamidele hold up Khadija, whose condition is rapidly deteriorating. Adunni thinks back to Mama's death and compares "Death" to a "iroko tree, with no body, no flesh, no eyes, only mouth and teeth." Adunni wonders if Death is "following Khadija," and if it will now follow her, too. Finally, Adunni, Bamidele, and Khadija reach the Kere **river**. Khadija lies down. Adunni asks to begin the ritual, but Bamidele says that first, he must leave to get the special soap. Promising that he will return soon, Bamidele turns and runs back the way they came.

Time passes, and Bamidele has yet to return. Two girls who are playing in the **river** approach Adunni to ask if Khadija is okay. Adunni tells them Khadija is sick, and the girls continue on their way. Khadija tells Adunni that the pain is leaving her. Adunni tries to cheer up Khadija by singing the lawyer song she invented earlier, but her voice is shaky with sorrow. Khadija asks when Bamidele will come back, but both she and Adunni wonder if Bamidele simply ran off, leaving Khadija to die. Adunni looks at the sky and sees "death sailing there," ready to steal Khadija away from here. Khadija tells Adunni to take care of her children. Adunni rests her face on Khadija's breast and cries as Khadija dies.

## CHAPTER 16

A fisherman makes his way down the river toward Adunni. Adunni knows that she needs to move away from Khadija's body, or else the fisherman might think it was she who killed Khadija and return her to the village chief of Ikati, who would surely punish her. She decides to find Bamidele and make him explain everything—the curse, the ritual, the pregnancy—to the village chief, Morufu, and Khadija's children.

*When Adunni imagines that Death is "following Khadija," she lends a sort of inevitability to Khadija's demise. It's as though Khadija, and Mama before her, are helpless to escape a cycle of female suffering; there's nothing any single person, like Adunni, can do to stop it. It's possible that Bamidele will actually come back with the soap, but Adunni's thoughts about "Death" infuse the narrative with an ominousness that seems to suggest that things are about to take a turn for the worse. Throughout the novel, water symbolizes Nigerian culture's double standards concerning purity and fertility. Bamidele's decision to leave Khadija at the river while she suffers through her pregnancy complications might symbolize his assumed lack of responsibility for those complications.*



*The contrast between Adunni and Khadija's situation and the two girls' is striking. At only 14 years old, Adunni should be able to play with her friends at the river like these girls, not be forced to tend to her dying friend. Bamidele's abandonment of Khadija shows how easily men are allowed to walk away from their problems. Women like Khadija, in contrast, suffer the gravest of consequences—even death. The symbolic significance of this scene unfolding at the river implies that this uneven distribution of responsibility is particularly relevant to fertility and pregnancy.*



*It speaks to Adunni's refusal to give up hope—or, perhaps, her naivete—that she believes that Bamidele might be willing to explain everything to the authorities. Given the ease with which Bamidele abandoned the dying Khadija, it's more likely that he would turn on Adunni to save himself. The fact that Adunni thinks she needs a man to vouch for her reflects the culture's unequal treatment of women and girls.*



Adunni walks for many miles but is unable to find Bamidele's **house**. She wonders what will happen to Khadija's body if it is washed away—how will she prove to anyone that Khadija is dead? Finally, Adunni sees a goat that she recognizes from earlier and finds Bamidele's house. A very pregnant woman, who is presumably Bamidele's wife, answers the door. When Adunni asks for Bamidele, Bamidele's wife insists that he is out of town. The woman tells Adunni to go away, calling her "ole," or thief. Adunni knows she must run: if the village thinks she is a thief, she will be burned. Adunni looks up and sees "Death" again and thinks of Khadija. She shouts loudly for Bamidele to come out, and the woman responds by shouting "ole" more loudly, which causes the villagers to run outside. Realizing that she has no other choice, Adunni flees.

*Bamidele's wife chooses to protect herself from the public humiliation that would ensue if Bamidele's affair with Khadija came to light. Like Labake, Bamidele's wife rejects this opportunity to help out a suffering, innocent girl, instead turning her over to the villagers. That Bamidele's wife makes this decision while standing in the doorway to Bamidele's house is symbolic—it suggests that she is acting on behalf of her husband's expectations and best interests. When Adunni sees "Death" in the sky, it's as though she sees herself in the same inevitable cycle of suffering and oppression as Mama and Khadija. She runs in an attempt to break out of this cycle, though her chances of truly escaping it seem slim.*



## CHAPTER 17

Adunni boards a motorcycle at the bus garage and asks the driver to go to Papa's **house**. Adunni arrives and, in tears, tells Papa about Khadija's death, pregnancy, curse, and relationship with Bamidele. Distraught, Papa asks if anyone saw Adunni when Khadija died. Adunni knows that everyone saw her and fears for her life if she is accused of killing Khadija. Papa tells Adunni to wait in her room; he is going to tell Morufu, the village chief, and Khadija's people everything that happened. He tells Adunni not to be afraid—nobody will kill her if he is still alive.

*Adunni wants to believe that Papa is concerned for his daughter's life, but a more cynical reading of Papa's actions is that he's really worried about what will happen to him if he stops receiving Adunni's bride-price. The fact that Adunni needs a man to vouch for her illustrates the culture's negative view of women—Adunni's insistence that she is not responsible for Khadija's death seems to count less because she's a young girl. Also, the strength of Khadija and Adunni's relationship seems irrelevant and unimportant to the public, who would rather believe that Khadija and Adunni were enemies fighting for their husband's attention.*



Adunni waits anxiously in her room for Papa to return. She pulls back the curtains to see if anyone is outside, but the compound is empty. The sun begins to set. Adunni ponders running away—after all, Papa didn't keep his earlier promises, so why should she believe that he will protect her now? She packs her few belongings in a small black bag, including Mama's Yoruba Bible, and prays to God for help. As she packs, she spots Kayus's pillow in the corner of the room and wonders if she will ever see him again.

*Given how Papa broke his promise to Mama and Bamidele broke his promise to Khadija, Adunni is skeptical of Papa's promise to help her now. Adunni puts her faith in Mama because she's one of the few people Adunni has been able to rely on. Adunni's decision to take Mama's Yoruba Bible with her when she runs away illustrates the value Adunni places on maintaining hope and faith.*



Adunni picks up the lantern and takes out the 1,000 naira she hid there before her wedding. She leaves some behind for Kayus and takes the rest. She hears Born-boy entering the compound and goes outside to meet him, bag in hand. Born-boy is surprised to see her. Adunni lies about why she is there, pretending that Morufu sent her to bring the family money. Born-boy reiterates what a good man Morufu is. Adunni lies to Born-boy again, telling him that she is going back to Morufu's **house**. After the siblings say goodbye, Born-boy goes into the house, and Adunni runs away.

*Unlike Kayus, who supports Adunni and sympathizes with the hardships she faces, Born-boy minimizes Adunni's plight when he calls Morufu a good man. He doesn't understand or take issue with the injustice of Adunni being forced to become a child bride. Born-boy's compliment follows Adunni's lie that Morufu sent her home to deliver money to the family, which suggests that Born-boy's admiration for Morufu is based on how Morufu benefits him and not on Adunni's experience with Morufu.*



## CHAPTER 18

Adunni keeps her head down as she runs through the village. She encounters Ruka and another girl on her way out and lies that she is going to the Ikati river for water. Ruka observes that Adunni doesn't have a bucket for carrying water, but the other girl urges Ruka to leave Adunni alone. Adunni tells the girls goodbye and continues her journey. It begins to rain heavily. Adunni wonders what Morufu and Papa will think when they discover that she is missing. She remembers the tragic fates of Lamidi and Tafa and wonders if she is doing the right thing.

Adunni reaches the marketplace at the village border. She hears someone call her name, looks behind her, sees Mr. Bada, and kneels to greet him. Mr. Bada buys her *akara* from a booth at the marketplace, telling the saleswoman that Adunni is "a new wife." Mr. Bada asks Adunni what she is doing in the rain, and Adunni lies and says that Morufu sent her to pick up car parts from a workshop in the next village. They part ways. Adunni takes off running and doesn't stop until she comes to a place in the next village where Iya told her to go if she ever needed help.

*There's some uncertainty or concern concerning Adunni's decision to run away and what kind of consequences it will bring for her. She recalls the unfortunate fates of others who have done things that go against community standards and wonders if it's possible for her to rebel and make it out alive.*



*Akara is a type of bean fritter. That Mr. Bada lets Adunni leave without any further questions after she mentions that Morufu sent her on an errand reaffirms the weight and validity that men's words have compared to those of women and girls. Iya is the old woman who Mama used to help. Given the help Adunni has received from other supportive women, Adunni's decision to run to Iya makes it seem like Adunni's luck might begin to turn—perhaps, with the solidarity of another woman, there is a way for her to escape her troubles.*



## CHAPTER 19

Iya lives in a single room in Agan, the village adjacent to Adunni's. It's dark by the time Adunni arrives in Agan; she knocks on Iya's door several times, but nobody answers. Adunni grows increasingly panicked and initially doesn't notice that the door has opened. She steps inside and sees Iya, looking extremely thin and ill, sitting on the floor, a walking stick beside her. Iya's unit is practically empty, with only a mattress, kerosene stove, and a few hanging cloths inside. Adunni tries not to cry as she tells Iya all about Morufu, Khadija, and Bamidele. Iya believes that Bamidele will never come clean about Khadija, for fear of being punished by the Ikati village, which is notorious "for killing people with no questions."

Iya can't allow Adunni to stay with her but offers to help in another way: she has a brother, Kola, who helps "girls like [Adunni]." Iya tells Adunni to go to sleep; they will plan Adunni's escape tomorrow. Adunni turns off the lantern and lies down. Iya coughs violently and snores, and Adunni stays awake thinking about Mama, Kayus, and Khadija. Suddenly, she hears Papa's angry voice coming from outside.

*Iya sees Bamidele's betrayal for what it is and believes Adunni's story. As such, she positions herself as someone Adunni can trust, which is more than she can say of any of the men she's encountered thus far. Iya's wary remark that the Ikati village is known "for killing people with no questions" shows how fiercely Adunni's village strives to uphold their social norms. This doesn't bode well for Adunni, who remains in danger if the villagers believe it was her who killed Khadija.*



*Adunni means well, but the introduction of Kola into the equation presents another opportunity for a man to betray Adunni. Papa's voice outside confirms Adunni's earlier fear that Papa would break his promise to help her explain Khadija's death to Morufu.*



## CHAPTER 20

Adunni is terrified that Papa will find her. Papa begins to shake the door, demanding them to open it. Iya gestures behind the mattress at a second door that leads to the bathroom. Adunni steps through the door, and Iya opens the door for Papa. Adunni walks down a narrow hallway to the bathroom, and the smell makes her want to vomit. Adunni hides in the bathroom as Papa interrogates Iya.

Iya refuses to help Papa. Papa notices the black nylon bag on the floor, which he recognizes as Adunni's. He instructs Kayus, who has accompanied him here, to look for Adunni behind the second door. Kayus quickly finds Adunni in the bathroom but lies and tells Papa that Adunni has escaped through an open window. Papa orders Kayus to leave; they will return to Morufu and the village chief, who are waiting outside. Adunni and Kayus stare at one another. Tears fill Kayus's eyes, but Adunni also detects a faint "sad smile" on her brother's face. The siblings convey with their eyes a silent final goodbye. Kayus leaves to rejoin Papa, and Adunni remains in the bathroom for a long time.

## CHAPTER 21

Adunni returns to Iya's room and finds her cooking yam porridge on the stove. Adunni stinks from hiding in the bathroom, and Iya tells her to **bathe** in a room beside the well out back. When Adunni returns from her bath, Iya tells her to be calm; Kola, who lives in nearby Idanra town, will arrive in his motorcar tomorrow. She proudly tells Adunni that Kola also has a cell phone.

The next morning, Adunni wakes to a knock at the door. Kola, a thin man with a burned-looking face and long, straight lines under each eye stands in the doorway. Kola greets Iya, and Iya thanks Kola for sending tea. Kola is impatient to leave, so Iya explains Adunni's situation to Kola. She asks if he can find a job for Adunni, being sure to mention Adunni's good English. Kola says he might be able to find Adunni a position in Lagos, which is a big city far away from her village.

*The foul smell of Iya's bathroom implies that she's just as poor as Adunni, as she seems to be lacking basic sanitation and amenities. Nevertheless, she's willing to risk everything to help Adunni escape capture.*



*Kayus stands out as a male character who remains loyal to his sister, even at the risk of disrespecting Papa or going against the social norms that dictate Morufu's right to see the return of his wife (whom he regards as his property). Kayus and Adunni's tragic parting exemplifies the sacrifices Adunni is willing to make to survive—her brother is very close to her, and it's possible she might never see him again.*



*Adunni's bath mirrors the bath she took the morning after her first night with Morufu and might serve as another attempt to cleanse herself mentally and physically of the horrors she has witnessed today. Iya's pride in Kola's cell phone, which she sees as evidence of his economic prosperity, shows how important wealth is in creating opportunity. Kola, who is wealthy enough to have a car and a phone, may be able to help Adunni escape, whereas Adunni's status as a poor woman leaves her largely powerless to change her circumstances.*



*That Adunni's good English would be a selling point for Kola is an example of how education can open up new opportunities. But given how men have betrayed Adunni thus far, it's unclear whether Kola is genuinely trying to help her.*



Kola takes out his phone, dials a number, and talks to somebody he calls “Big Madam” about “another girl. [...] Good one. Her name is Adunni. Yes. Same price.” Kola finishes his call and tells Adunni that everything is settled: he will take her to Lagos tonight. Iya is overjoyed and thanks her brother. Adunni grabs her bag but hesitates—she doesn’t know Kola well and fears that he might be a bad man. Iya is impatient and tells Adunni that she must go before her people come back looking for her. She promises Adunni that Mama’s spirit is watching over her.

*Iya is happy that Kola has found a position for Adunni, but Adunni is hesitant to go with him. After all, even Papa, who is not a stranger, broke his promise to her and put her in harm’s way. Kola’s brief mention of something costing the “same price” to the person on the other end of the line seems suspicious and implies he might have some kind of deal with this person. Still, Iya’s impatience is also warranted, as Adunni doesn’t really have an alternative to leaving with Kola, since people are still looking for her. Iya’s parting words about Mama watching over Adunni underscore Mama’s role as Adunni’s protector, and the role faith plays in Adunni’s will to survive.*



Leaving Ikati in Kola’s car, Adunni feels mixed emotions: she has always wanted to go to Lagos, but she wishes she could leave the village on her own behalf, not as a fugitive. She compares her sadness to being covered by “a thick, heavy cloth.”

*Good fortune has finally come Adunni’s way when she stumbles across a means of escaping her rural community and avoiding punishment for Khadija’s death. But the fact that she’s forced to flee rather than moving away of her own accord prevents her from enjoying this opportunity.*



## CHAPTER 22

Adunni and Mr. Kola have been driving for at least three hours. Adunni is hungry but doesn’t dare ask Kola for a snack—the man seems tense and agitated. Adunni asks Kola when they will reach Lagos and what will happen to her once they arrive. Kola tells her that she will work and that he will write her name on a forged medical result slip. Adunni wonders what else Kola might be lying about. Kola tells Adunni he won’t stay with her in her workplace but will visit in three months. Adunni asks if she can go to school, and Kola says that if she is well behaved, then Big Madam might allow her to go to school. Kola instructs Adunni not to ask any more questions for the remainder of the ride.

*The Kola’s deceitfulness regarding the forged medical documents might be an indication that this new job isn’t quite what it seems. Perhaps Adunni is heading toward yet another oppressive, dismal situation rather than a better life. Despite these potential warning signs, Adunni stays positive by fixating on her goal of finishing her education.*



Adunni sees a woman selling puff-puff on the side of the road, which reminds her of Mama. Adunni remembers a time when Mama was gravely ill and told Adunni to “sing away [her] pain.” In Mr. Kola’s car, Adunni sings a song about God’s love that Mama taught her. Kola tells her she has a very nice voice.

*Mama’s advice to “sing away [her] pain” shows how she taught Adunni to be strong and hopeful even when everything seems hopeless. That Adunni sings now suggests that she’s worried about what her future at Big Madam’s house will hold.*



Adunni eventually falls asleep. Sometime later, Mr. Kola wakes her to say that they have arrived in Lagos. Adunni opens her eyes and sees a noisy, chaotic scene of many cars squeezed onto the road and people on foot weaving their way around the traffic. She smells the scent of fruit, fresh bread, petrol, and armpits. When she tries to inhale, the air is thick and makes her cough. They pass by a young boy with vacant eyes holding a sign that reads “HUNGER. HELP PLS.” Adunni notes that in Ikati they don’t have begging children, because the girl children can be exchanged for a bride-price that can be used to feed the remaining children.

Adunni tells Mr. Kola she is hungry, and he buys her a sausage roll, which is something she has never had and doesn’t end up liking all that much. Finally, the traffic breaks up, and Mr. Kola and Adunni continue onward, driving along a long road that winds above a river. Adunni sees a sign ahead and reads it aloud so that Kola knows she can read: “Third Mainland Bridge. Victoria Island. Ikoyi.” Kola tells her they are going to Ikoyi, where Big Madam, who is very rich, has a very large **house**.

Mr. Kola continues to drive, and they enter another bustling section of town. This time, Adunni sees many giant buildings covered with windows on both sides of the road. She is amazed. Mr. Kola tells her what some of the buildings are, pointing out a hotel, the Civic Center, the bank, and the Nigerian Law School. They drive a while longer, and Mr. Kola points to shop with mannequins in the window called “Kayla’s Fabrics,” which is owned by Big Madam and named for her daughter.

Finally, Mr. Kola turns down a quiet street. He warns Adunni that she must behave at Big Madam’s: no stealing, lying, or meddling with boys. She must work hard and follow Big Madam’s rules. Finally, Mr. Kola tells her that Big Madam will pay her 10,000 naira every month, but that he will hold the money in a bank for Adunni. Adunni thinks that maybe, despite Kola’s serious demeanor and earlier lie about the medical results, he might be a good man.

They turn down one final road and approach a gate, which opens before them. A tall, gray Jeep appears behind Mr. Kola’s car, which Mr. Kola says belongs to Big Madam. Beyond the gate is a big white **house** with a red roof. The house is surrounded by palm trees and colorful flowers. Adunni thinks that Big Madam must be royalty.

*Lagos is a whole new world for Adunni, who has only known the rural village where she grew up. Adunni’s observation about girls being exchanged for a bride-price forges a connection between the novel’s themes of gender inequality and wealth and choice. Poor families might be faced with no choice but to sell their daughters to feed their other children. These desperate situations, born of financial struggle, end up perpetuating gender inequality, as girls are seen as a commodity that can be exchanged for food and other material goods.*



*Adunni is headed to Big Madam’s house, where she will likely have to adjust to a whole new set of norms, this time governed by the opportunities and customs of somebody who is very wealthy.*



*The tall, glistening buildings suggest that Lagos is a prosperous city. That Big Madam names her fabric store after her daughter Kayla seems to symbolize a mother supporting or lifting up her daughter, though on a much grander scale than Mama was able to do for Adunni.*



*Adunni’s optimism and hope lead her to trust Kola when he says he will hold her salary every month, but the reader might be a bit more suspicious of Kola, particularly given how other male characters have gone back on their promises. At any rate, Kola is Adunni’s only way out of her village, so she really has no choice but to trust him—even if his intentions are less than honorable.*



*This house is far grander than any house Adunni has set foot in thus far—that she believes Big Madam must be royalty underscores the newness of this all for Adunni. Becoming accustomed to the upper class’s rules and customs will be a learning experience for her.*



## CHAPTER 23

Big Madam parks her car in front of Mr. Kola. Mr. Kola turns off the engine and he and Adunni get out of the car. A fair-skinned man in a brown dress, whom Kola explains is Abu, Big Madam's driver, emerges from the car. Adunni sees Madam's feet emerge from the Jeep first, followed by Big Madam. Big Madam is a large woman. Adunni watches Big Madam inhale, feeling as though the large woman's breath is sucking up all the hot air, leaving everyone around her cold. Big Madam's face is painted with bright, flamboyant makeup. Mr. Kola, Adunni, and the flowerpots shake in her presence.

Big Madam greets Mr. Kola, whom she calls "Agent Kola." Adunni introduces herself to Big Madam, and she and Kola assure Big Madam that she is hardworking and intelligent. Big Madam tells Kola that "the last girl [he] brought," Rebecca, "is still missing." Adunni wonders whether something bad happened to Rebecca, and if something bad will happen to her. Mr. Kola tells Adunni to run inside while he and Big Madam talk alone.

Adunni enters the **house**, and a short man wearing a white outfit greets her. A blue cloth bearing the words "The Chef" hangs around his neck. Adunni introduces herself to the man, who is grateful that "the new housemaid" is finally there. Adunni is confused, since Mr. Kola didn't mention anything about her being a housemaid. The man introduces himself as Kofi, "the chef. The *highly educated* chef." Kofi explains that he is from Ghana, though he has lived in Nigeria for 20 years.

Adunni takes in her surroundings. She looks around the room and sees photos of Big Madam and her two children. She smells fish stew and money. She also notices that the air is cold and sees a "white box" in the window blowing cold air. There is a big bowl full of fish to Adunni's right, which Kofi calls an "aquarium," a word that's unfamiliar to Adunni. Kofi leaves to prepare dinner, and Adunni wonders if they've found Khadija's body back in Ikati. She also wonders why she isn't in Ikati being Morufu's bride, why she isn't with Mama. Finally, she wonders what she's doing here, working as a housemaid, when all she really wants to do is go to school.

*Adunni's observation about Big Madam inhaling all the warm air suggests that Big Madam is a very powerful woman. Since all the people in this scene besides Big Madam are hired help, the observation seems to suggest that Big Madam's wealth gives her power and strength at the expense of the lower classes. Still, the thick layer of makeup Big Madam plasters on her face suggests that she's hiding something—perhaps her life isn't as grand as it seems, and perhaps she isn't as in control as Adunni's observation would suggest.*



*It's interesting that Big Madam calls Kola an "Agent" and that he seemingly has a history of bringing girls like Adunni to work at Big Madam's. Suddenly, it seems as though Adunni was right to be skeptical of Kola. Perhaps this trip to Big Madam's was a good choice simply because it was Adunni's only choice. The brief mention of Rebecca is mysterious, and it hints that Adunni, too, could be in danger now that she's working for Big Madam.*



*Adunni's new life doesn't seem to be as fortuitous as it once appeared—she escaped a life of domestic work and misery at Morufu's house only to do domestic work in another house. The fact that Kofi makes a point to specify that he is "highly educated" is evidence of the cultural currency that education carries in Nigerian society.*



*Adunni takes in her new surroundings with such intensity because so many of the luxuries she sees in Big Madam's house—like air conditioning units and glass aquariums—are completely new to her. Adunni's also wonders why she's ended up in this position in the first place: the limitations that her gender and class have imposed on her make the ability to truly change one's living situation nearly impossible to fathom.*



## CHAPTER 24

Big Madam returns to the **house** without Mr. Kola and interrogates Kofi about dinner preparations. Adunni tries to ask where Mr. Kola is, but Big Madam ignores her and tells Kofi to get Adunni's uniform for her. Big Madam tells Kofi to show Adunni the laundry room and teach her how to use the iron. Adunni and Kofi head to the laundry room and Adunni asks Kofi why Big Madam didn't talk to her, but Kofi assures Adunni that speaking to Big Madam isn't a good thing.

Kofi runs back to the kitchen to turn off the stove, and Adunni catches a glimpse of herself in the glass door. Her hair is unkempt; all the beads Enitan put in it for the wedding have since fallen out. Her skin is no longer "bright," but rather "the color of spoiling tea with no milk."

*Big Madam's refusal to tell Adunni where Mr. Kola went should raise further suspicion about what's really going on with Adunni's situation, as should Kofi's advice not to talk to Big Madam. It seems as though there's something negative looming beneath all the wealth and luxury of Big Madam's house.*



*Adunni's disheveled appearance illustrates the toll her recent hardships have had on her. That her skin is now "the color of spoiling tea with no milk" reflects the extent to which her horrendous experience as Morufu's wife, grief over Khadija's death, and exile have affected her mind and body. Her skin's "spoil[ed]" appearance reflects her wounded mental state. Still, the fact that she is still alive and persevering despite what she's been through shows how determined she is to survive.*



## CHAPTER 25

There are many rooms in Big Madam's **house**, and each one serves its own purpose: one is for bathing, one is for sleeping, one is for storing shoes. Each room has a mirror on the wall. One room is just for eating, and it has a long table with over a dozen chairs, everything decorated in gold. Kofi explains that this is the dining room, which is where Big Daddy and Big Madam take their meals when they are getting along with each other.

Kofi shows Adunni another room, the library. The library is full of books, which thrills Adunni, who wishes she could read all day. She reads the titles of some of the books, one of which is *The Book of Nigerian Facts: From Past to Present*, 5th edition, 2014. Kofi explains that Big Daddy, Big Madam's husband, owns all the books. Big Daddy used to love to read, but that was before he lost his job and started drinking. Big Daddy is often away on business, explains Kofi—"woman business." Kofi then asks Adunni how old she is and is alarmed when she tells him she is 14. He cautions her to be "extra careful" with Big Daddy.

*Kofi's comment implies that Big Madam and Big Daddy are often on bad terms with each other, which suggests that money can't solve every problem—wealthy people aren't immune to troubled marriages. Big Madam's house has enough rooms for the couple to be able to inhabit their own spaces, which might symbolize that they have separate sets of personal morals or worldviews, as well.*



*The library indicates to Adunni that perhaps receiving an education is possible for her; after all, it's not just a formal education that she desires, but the ability to gain knowledge and experience in a broader sense. Kofi's mention of Big Daddy's "woman business" implies that Big Daddy has a lot of extramarital affairs. It also suggests that just because Adunni has moved into a more economically privileged house doesn't mean she won't witness more mistreatment and disrespect of women. Kofi's warning to be "extra careful" around Big Daddy implies that he is dangerous. The placement of this warning after Kofi mentions Big Daddy's affairs implies that he may try to prey on Adunni sexually, though the warning is still rather vague.*





Kofi shows Adunni the kitchen, which is grander than any kitchen Adunni has ever seen before, with a different tool to accomplish every cooking task. Adunni closes her eyes and imagines Mama cooking and singing in this kitchen, and Kayus kicking around a football out back. Kofi shows Adunni the faucet in the kitchen, which is like nothing Adunni has ever seen before—there is only one incredibly slow tap in Ikati village.

Next, Kofi shows Adunni to her room, which is in a separate small **house** on the compound called “the boys’ quarters” where the staff live. Kofi leads Adunni to a small room in the boys’ quarters. He begins to say something about how Rebecca used to sleep there but cuts himself off and vaguely suggests that maybe Rebecca ran away with her boyfriend.

Kofi then shows Adunni her uniform, which belonged to Rebecca, and tells her to get dressed. Adunni checks out the room, which contains a foam mattress, cupboard, and a table and chair. She wonders aloud if the uniform is for school, but Kofi assures her that it is just for work—Big Madam likes her staff to look professional—and that Big Madam has not once helped a housemaid attend school.

Kofi leads Adunni to a small room to teach her to iron, and Adunni struggles to move in Rebecca’s too-small uniform. Adunni promises Kofi that she will work hard and mentions Mr. Kola’s promise to bring her salary to her in three months. Kofi doubts this will happen, though, as Kola promised Rebecca the same thing, kept her salary to himself, and didn’t show up again until today.

## CHAPTER 26

Adunni pesters Kofi to say more about Rebecca, but Kofi remains secretive about the ordeal, cautioning Adunni not to ask Big Madam about Rebecca. Suddenly the door to the kitchen opens, and Big Madam walks in, though Adunni initially doesn’t recognize her without her makeup. Adunni tries to ask Big Madam about her pay, but Kofi abruptly interjects, telling Big Madam he has shown Adunni the ropes, just as she asked him to do.

*It's comforting for Adunni to imagine her family in this house because a life in such a big, grand structure implies a life free from hardship and suffering—something Adunni hasn't experienced in a long time.*



*Kofi's sudden decision not to talk about Rebecca is further evidence that something bad or mysterious happened to her. The fact that Adunni is taking over Rebecca's room could symbolically represent that Adunni is stepping into her shoes and is assuming the risk of something bad happening to her, too. Perhaps, as women, Adunni and Rebecca have a shared experience of gendered violence or oppression, though it's still unclear what happened to the former housemaid.*



*Inheriting Rebecca's uniform symbolically suggests that Adunni will inherit Rebecca's experiences while working at Big Madam's, becoming part of a cycle in which their privileged madam employs and possibly takes advantage of her undereducated, underprivileged housemaids. The fact that Adunni must don a housemaid's uniform instead of a school uniform illustrates how her disadvantaged social position and her gender rob her of an education.*



*Kofi confirms what Adunni (and the reader) might have suspected for a while now: Kola is untrustworthy, and there's a good chance Adunni will never see the salary she is owed. It seems as though Kola has sold Adunni into domestic servitude, though Adunni doesn't have the vocabulary or knowledge to realize this fully.*



*Kofi's warning not to discuss Rebecca with Big Madam suggests that the subject bothers her, though he doesn't explain (and might not even know) why this is the case. So far, Adunni seems to be the only person who wants to speak up on Rebecca's behalf. That Adunni can barely recognize Big Madam without her makeup reinforces the idea that there's more to Big Madam than what appears on the surface, and that she might be hiding something more sinister beneath her painted face.*



Big Madam orders Adunni out of the kitchen and into the parlor. She instructs Adunni to kneel every time she addresses her. Then, Big Madam verifies that Adunni can read and write and gives her a notebook, telling her that she will be in charge of making a shopping list for Abu to take to the store.

Big Madam tells Adunni a little about herself, establishing her impressive role in society: important people wear her clothes, and her store, Kayla's Fabrics, is the very best. Big Madam orders Adunni to massage her feet. While Adunni is in the middle of the massage, Big Daddy walks into the parlor. He wears a white agbada, cap, and an eyeglass, and he has white facial hair. Big Daddy asks her Adunni name, and Adunni notices that he slurs his words, like Papa.

Adunni introduces herself, to which Big Daddy responds "Adunni, dunnilicious," licking his lips. Big Daddy, whose real name is Chief Adeoti, makes Adunni feel uncomfortable. Adunni looks at Big Madam, but she's asleep. Big Daddy asks Adunni how old she is, remarking that she is "almost an adult. Not so innocent." Adunni doesn't know what "innocent" means. Suddenly, Big Madam wakes up and orders Adunni to tell Kofi to have dinner ready. Big Daddy's gaze follows Adunni as she leaves the room.

That night, as Adunni sits in her room, she's grateful to have her own room and bed even though she's sore and exhausted from cleaning all day. Still, the grief she feels from missing her loved ones makes her "feel as if [her] body is missing a part of it." As she drifts off to sleep, she remembers a time when she was five and Mama took her to see the **waterfalls** in Agan. Adunni was afraid, but Mama comforted her, urging her not to be afraid, to "listen to the music in the noise" of the churning water. Adunni feels this same fear, but tonight, there is no Mama her to comfort her. The last thing Adunni thinks about before falling asleep is Khadija, lying beside the river, begging Adunni to help her.

*That Adunni must kneel before Big Madam illustrates the role wealth plays in establishing and maintaining power dynamics. Just as male characters have used their gender to oppress Adunni, Big Madam uses her wealth and social privilege to control and exert power over Adunni.*



*Unlike many of the other women Adunni encounters, Big Madam has the power and independence that come with being wealthy and having her own career. This independence may affect her relationship with her husband, particularly compared to the other marriages Adunni has witnessed (her own included) in which the wives' lack of financial security forces them to submit to their husbands. Adunni's observation that Big Daddy slurs his words implies that he, like Papa, is a drinker.*



*Big Daddy's behaves inappropriately and suggestively. His comment about Adunni being "almost an adult. Not so innocent" seems sexual in nature, with Big Daddy implying that Adunni is almost old enough to do things that adults do, like have sex. But Adunni's limited vocabulary makes it difficult for her to recognize Big Daddy's insinuation.*



*Adunni reflects on this happy memory with Mama to comfort herself, but she's endured so much that it's hard to stay optimistic, particularly when her associations with water are tainted by her memory of Khadija's death. Water used to remind Adunni of strength and the close bond she had with Mama, but now the more recent experience of Bamidele's abandonment and Khadija's death recasts water in a more negative light. Water no longer symbolizes a close bond between women, but how the cruel actions of men can tear these relationships apart.*



## CHAPTER 27

Adunni's list of chores at Big Madam's **house** is endless: she is responsible for everything from sleeping the floors, to pulling weeds, to massaging Big Madam's feet. She is only allowed to eat once a day, in the afternoon, though sometimes Kofi sneaks her food early in the morning when Big Madam is still sleeping. Two weeks ago, Big Madam caught Adunni eating this forbidden meal and beat her. Since then, Big Madam has beaten Adunni almost every day, sometimes for a transgression as harmless as singing to herself while she works. Kofi finds Big Madam's treatment of Adunni to be exceptionally cruel and suggests that Adunni return to her village, but Adunni knows that this is impossible.

Kofi explains to Adunni that he is only working for Big Madam because he lost his distinguished job as the Ghanaian ambassador to Nigeria's personal chef and needs to make enough money to finish building his **house** back home. Since Adunni can't return to her village, Kofi advises her to stop complaining, stop singing, and stay out of Big Madam's way. Adunni heeds Kofi's advice and comes up with a plan to avoid Big Madam.

This morning, when Adunni hears Big Madam's car arrive at the compound, she heads to the library, shuts the door, and reads to herself as she cleans. She picks up one book called "the Collins" that contains words with their definitions beside them. Adunni looks up "innocent," the word that Big Daddy used when Adunni first met him. She wonders why Big Daddy would care whether she's "pure," or if she can be pure after spending so many horrendous nights with Morufu.

Adunni picks up another book, a thick volume called *The Book of Nigerian Facts*, which contains facts about Nigeria from the past until the present year of 2014. She reads, "Fact: October 1st, 1960: Nigeria's Independence Day. Nigeria gained independence from Britain." She wonders what Britain is, and when they took Nigeria's freedom. She reads another fact about students at the University of Port Harcourt who were accused of stealing and tortured and beaten by the Aluu community. Their deaths resulted in "a global outcry against jungle justice in Nigeria." She wonders if she would suffer this same "jungle justice" if she stayed behind in Agan village after Bamidele's wife called her a thief.

*It's clear that Big Madam has plenty of resources to share, so she's choosing to be cruel by not providing Adunni with adequate meals. This, and her physical abuse of Adunni, show that having wealth and a life free from hardship (on the surface, at least) isn't enough to make someone a good person. Despite the physical abuse Adunni incurs while at Big Madam's, she doesn't really have the option to leave: she could still be punished for Khadija's death if she returns to her village. Moreover, Kola is keeping Adunni's salary to himself, which leaves her with no funds to escape to some other place.*



*Kofi's professional training seems to have afforded him a wealth of opportunities to travel to different places and begin to build a life for himself back home in Ghana. In contrast, Adunni, who has very little formal education, doesn't have all these options available to her. It's for this reason that Kofi is so insistent that Adunni does everything she can to stay in Big Madam's good graces and keep her housecleaning job.*



*Ever resourceful, Adunni finds a way to educate herself, even as she finds herself in a new situation that prevents her from receiving a formal education. "The Collins" refers to the Collins English Dictionary. When Adunni learns the definition of "innocent" in the dictionary, it allows her to understand the salacious meaning behind Big Daddy's comment when she first met him. Adunni's worry that she can't be "pure" after Morufu's sexual abuse illustrates trauma's lasting impact.*



*Nigeria existed as a colony under British rule since the early 20th century but achieved independence in 1960. Adunni's curiosity regarding this fact shows how eager she is to learn more about her country and the world more broadly. The second fact Adunni reads refers to a more recent event, occurring on October 5, 2012, in which four university students were tortured and killed by members of the Aluu community after the students were falsely accused of theft. Adunni's anxiety about "jungle justice" reinforces the strong hold that social norms hold over certain communities in Nigeria.*



Adunni continues to clean the library. When she's done, she writes the shopping list, consulting the Collins to check her spelling. Big Madam calls for Adunni, and when Adunni takes too long to respond, Big Madam beats her. Big Daddy enters the room and, addressing Big Madam as Florence, scolds her for being so hard on Adunni and the other house girls. Adunni notices that Big Daddy's eyes aren't red, and his words aren't slurring today.

*Adunni's use of the Collins to perfect her shopping list shows how she's already using self-education to improve different facets of her life. Big Daddy's intervention stops Big Madam's violence, but given Big Daddy's earlier inappropriate comments and Kofi's advice to be careful of him, it seems that Adunni should remain vigilant around Big Daddy. Still, Adunni's powerlessness requires her to accept help from whomever is willing to give it to her, so she doesn't really have any choice but to be grateful that her beating is brought to an end.*



Big Madam mutters something about "prostitute-girlfriend" and leaves the room. Adunni thanks Big Daddy for his kindness, and Big Daddy tells her to come closer. He gives her a tight, long embrace and tells her he wants her to let him "protect" her against Big Madam. Adunni frees herself from Big Daddy's embrace and flees.

*Big Madam's comment about Big Daddy's "prostitute-girlfriend" echoes Labake's earlier insult toward Adunni on her first night at Morufu's house. Like Labake, it appears as though Big Madam responds to her husband's disrespect by taking out hurt and frustration on other women. Big Daddy's offer to "protect" Adunni against Big Madam is a manipulation tactic. He seems to recognize how victimized and powerless Adunni is and sees an opportunity to take advantage of her. It's not clear what Big Daddy might want from Adunni in exchange for his "protection," but given his earlier suggestive comments toward her, it's possibly something of a sexual nature.*



Adunni runs into Kofi and tells him about the scene with Big Daddy. Kofi appears concerned. In her heart, Adunni "know[s] what Big Daddy is wanting, but [she is] afraid to think it." Kofi urges Adunni not to cry. He reminds her that she must be careful around Big Daddy and promises to look out for her. When Adunni tries to sleep later that night, all she can see is Big Daddy's sharp teeth, dripping with blood.

*Adunni seems well aware of Big Daddy's ulterior motive behind helping her. The fact that she is "afraid to think" about what he wants (something of a sexual nature, most likely) suggests that she is still suffering psychologically from Morufu's sexual abuse and copes by repressing memories of her trauma.*



## CHAPTER 28

The chapter begins with a fact from *The Book of Nigerian Facts*: "Nigerians are known for their love of parties and events. In 2012 alone, Nigerians spent over \$59 million on champagne." Big Madam is having a party on Sunday, and the household has been busy with preparations. Kofi explains that the party is for the Wellington Road Wives Association, or WRWA, of which Big Madam is the president. On paper, the group is for women to do fundraising and charity work, but in reality, it's just a reason for them "to get dressed and get drunk." Adunni is in awe that the WRWA women would waste money this way.

*The fact headings that begin many chapters from this point onward correspond to the facts that Adunni reads from The Book of Nigerian Facts. Adunni applies the information she learns in this fact about Nigerians and their party expenses to form a judgmental opinion of Big Madam and her WRWA group. Her ability to apply the things she reads to real experiences demonstrates her intelligence, as well as the extent to which an education can enrich a person's life, allowing them to be more knowledgeable about the experiences they have and the people they meet.*



Kofi tells Adunni that the neighborhood is full of “former military personnel, thieves who stole Nigeria’s wealth,” and rich businesspeople—or, at least, people who like to *appear* rich. Kofi continues to criticize Nigeria’s rich population. Inwardly, Adunni thinks this is hypocritical of him, since he is using his pay—money he receives from these so-called “thieves,”—to build a **house** in Ghana. Kofi tells Adunni that the host of the most recent party was Big Madam’s good friend, Caroline Bankole, the wife of an oil businessman. According to Kofi, Big Daddy used to work at a bank that filed for bankruptcy 15 years ago. Since then, he only spends Big Madam’s money on women and alcohol.

It’s been about three months since Adunni arrived at Big Madam’s, so Kofi inquires what she plans to do about her salary. Adunni wants to ask Big Madam about the money but is afraid of another beating. Kofi offers Adunni a different solution, however, handing her a newspaper bearing the headline “Call for Applications: Ocean Oil Secondary Scholarship Scheme for Female Domestic Workers,” which advertises a scholarship that will cover tuition at the Diamond Special School. Applicants’ submissions must include an essay and a signed consent form from a Nigerian reference, all due by December.

Kofi tells Adunni that the Ocean Oil chairman is his former boss’s friend, and that he picked up the application on his way home from the market yesterday, recognizing the scholarship as Adunni’s “only chance at freedom.” He warns her that Big Daddy will hurt her if she stays here.

Later that night, Adunni lies on her bed and reviews the application. She moves to the window to read in the moonlight and spots a string of yellow, green, black, and red **beads** jammed inside the window. The beads remind her of something a few girls in Ikati would wear on their waist and recognizes the red bead’s color as something from Agan village. Adunni wonders if these waist beads could be Rebecca’s and, if they are, why she left them behind. She starts to wonder whether Rebecca actually ran away.

*Adunni’s criticism of Kofi is arguably valid, but it’s not as though Kofi—or Adunni, for that matter—have any option but to accept the money that Nigeria’s wealthy population gives them. When a person has limited money and opportunities, they are often forced to do things that might go against their personal morals. Kofi’s comment about “thieves who stole Nigeria’s wealth” might refer to the massive amount of government corruption that exists in the country. The fact that Big Daddy hasn’t had a job in 15 years sets his and Big Madam’s marriage apart from the other marriages Adunni has encountered thus far, in the fact that the wife is the household’s breadwinner, not the husband. In theory, this should give Big Madam more independence and freedom than unemployed wives, such as Khadija and Mama.*



*This scholarship is a big deal for Adunni because winning it could give her a path out of domestic servitude and poverty. Beyond this, it could give her the chance to fulfill her dream of becoming a teacher and acquire the “louding voice” that Mama encouraged her to find.*



*The importance Kofi places on the scholarship reaffirms that education and a voice are Adunni’s best means of overcoming gendered violence and financial hardship. His comments about Big Daddy basically confirm what Adunni and the reader might have suspected about Big Daddy all along, which is that he will abuse his position of power to harm Adunni one way or another.*



*Rebecca’s waist beads serve as a stand-in for Rebecca herself, and her presence in the room reinvigorates Adunni’s quest to discover the truth about what happened to the missing former housemaid. Adunni’s determination to find out what happened to Rebecca sets her apart from the other people in Big Madam’s household who seem not to want to talk about Rebecca. In a way, Adunni is acting as Rebecca’s protector, much like Khadija and Mama acted as Adunni’s protectors.*



## CHAPTER 29

*Fact: Nigeria has 250 ethnic groups and a wide variety of cuisines. Some of the most popular dishes are jollof rice, grilled meat skewers called suya, and bean fritters called akara. It's Sunday afternoon, and the compound is filled with expensive-looking cars. Big Madam instructed Adunni to pull weeds, but Kofi has his hands full and asks Adunni to serve the women "stick-meat" in the parlor, cautioning her not to speak to any of the guests.*

Adunni enters the parlor and serves the women food. Big Madam comments on Adunni being worthless, and a woman with football-shaped hair recommends a better agency Big Madam can use to find foreign help. Big Madam scoffs that foreign help is too costly with today's "exchange rate." Some of the woman mention Rebecca, but Big Madam swiftly changes the subject each time this happens.

One of the guests tells Adunni to serve the tray of meat "to the girls," which confuses Adunni. "Which girls?" she asks, "You mean the womens?" The guests laugh at Adunni's confusion, but a woman sitting behind Adunni reprimands them for their cruelty. The other women then proceed to mock this woman, whom they refer to as Tia, claiming that all she does "is complain about the ozone layer" and that "she needs to get laid and have a baby."

Big Madam warns Adunni to serve the stick-meat and be quiet. The women continue to eat and talk about all the luxury goods they look forward to buying. Someone interjects, asking if they can return to the subject of raising money for the Ikoyi orphanage, but the other women quickly redirect the conversation toward more frivolous subjects.

Adunni finally approaches Tia, who is dressed in a t-shirt and jeans. She looks younger than the other women. She is thin, her hair full of twists, and wears hardly any makeup. She smiles at Adunni and says, "we *are* women," and, in a sweet voice, thanks Adunni as she serves her food. Adunni thanks the woman for her kindness, revealing to her that nobody has said thank you to her since leaving the village.

*Kofi's instructions not to speak to the guests suggests that it's socially unacceptable for a housemaid to address these wealthy, important women.*



*The fact that Big Madam calls Adunni worthless while Adunni is in the middle of doing her job and serving the guests food suggests that Big Madam cuts Adunni down to reinforce their power dynamic. It's not necessarily that Big Madam believes that Adunni is worthless, but that she wants to maintain the power gap that exists due to her wealth and Adunni's poverty. That Big Madam appears not to want to discuss Rebecca reaffirms that something bad happened to the housemaid, and that Big Madam probably knows more about Rebecca's disappearance than she's letting on.*



*Adunni doesn't understand the slang the women use, and they mock her for her ignorance and for speaking up. Tia stands out from the crowd because she treats Adunni with respect, which Adunni has rarely experienced since her arrival at Big Madam's house. That the women ridicule Ms. Tia for "need[ing] to get laid and have a baby" suggests that even in the upper-class women are judged and objectified; the criticisms reduce Ms. Tia to her ability to get pregnant. The comment about Ms. Tia "complain[ing] about the ozone layer" seems to imply that Ms. Tia is concerned about the environment, which implies that she's educated about current events.*



*The women's obsession with material wealth and lack of concern regarding meaningful subjects, such as raising money for the Ikoyi orphanage, shows how people in positions of power have the freedom to dismiss others' suffering.*



*Ms. Tia's lack of makeup might mean that she is honest and has nothing to hide—unlike Big Madam, who wears lots of makeup and is potentially concealing something about Rebecca's disappearance. Ms. Tia's kindness aligns her with the other women who have supported Adunni throughout her life.*



Tia touches Adunni's shoulder as Adunni turns to leave, but the touch shocks Adunni, causing her to drop the tray of meat. Horrified, Adunni bends over to clean up the food, but not before Big Madam begins to beat her, viciously, with her red shoe. Adunni hears Tia shout "Florence, what the hell?" Just then, Big Madam strikes Adunni in the forehead with her shoe, and she loses consciousness.

*Big Madam's physical abuse of Adunni is an extreme overreaction to Adunni accidentally dropping food on the floor. That Big Madam feels comfortable beating her housemaid in front of guests implies that this sort of treatment is socially accepted—after all, everyone but Ms. Tia seems totally unfazed by the beating. Ms. Tia's concern further aligns her with the other women who have served as Adunni's protectors.*



## CHAPTER 30

*Fact: Nigeria's Zamfara state legalized polygamy in 2000.* Adunni wakes to the Tia's voice. Her head is throbbing, and everything around her is dark. She feels something wet and soft against her eyes. Adunni opens her eyes and finds herself lying on her back in the backyard as the woman smiles over her, moving a washcloth down her face. Adunni notices blood on the cloth and remarks that it feels "like Boko Haram is bombing inside [her] head," which makes the woman smile.

*Adunni's comment that her headache from Big Madam's beating feels "like Boko Haram is bombing inside [her] head" aligns Big Madam with the terrorist group. Both inflict violence on girls and stand in the way of them receiving an education.*



The woman tells Adunni she can call her Ms. Tia and explains that this is her second WRWA meeting; her husband wanted her to go so she could get to know the neighbors better. Ms. Tia asks Adunni how old she is and is concerned when she realizes that Big Madam has hired an "underage girl." Ms. Tia tells Adunni that she moved down the road last year, to join her husband. Before that, she lived in the UK.

*Ms. Tia's wealth is made apparent by the fact that she lived abroad before returning to join her husband in Lagos. That Ms. Tia only just started attending WRWA meetings implies that she isn't close friends with Big Madam and the other women, which explains why she doesn't seem to share their values.*



Adunni tells Ms. Tia that she has seen the UK on the news. Ms. Tia considers something inwardly and asks Adunni if she has attended school. Adunni tells her about having to quit school and about studying the Collins and *The Book of Nigerian Facts*, more recently. When Ms. Tia hears that Adunni is reading, she assumes that Big Madam is putting Adunni through school. Adunni does not correct her.

*Ms. Tia's assumption that Adunni is attending school shows how her wealth and privilege blind her to some of Adunni's hardships. Even though Ms. Tia seems to be far more compassionate than Big Madam's other wealthy guests, there's still a major difference between her experiences and Adunni's experiences, which stands in the way of them fully understanding each other.*



Adunni asks Ms. Tia if she knew Rebecca. Ms. Tia didn't but, like the others, she assumes that Rebecca probably did run away. Talking with Ms. Tia makes Adunni's pain go away, and she asks more questions to prolong their conversation. She asks Ms. Tia where she is from, and Ms. Tia reveals that she was born in Lagos and went to school here until her dad got an oil job in Port Harcourt, where she spent the rest of her days before attending university in Surrey. Ms. Tia also reveals that Ms. Tia's mother is sick. Adunni tells her about Mama's sickness, and how she still cries for her. Ms. Tia says she doesn't cry for her mother.

*Even Ms. Tia, who seems so thoughtful and respectful of Adunni, doesn't seem all that concerned about Rebecca, and Adunni remains the only person determined to uncover the truth. Ms. Tia and Adunni have some things in common: both their mothers have been sick, and both have an interest in education—though Ms. Tia's wealth affords her the opportunity to actually receive a formal education. That Ms. Tia doesn't cry for her mother suggests that there might be some tension in their relationship.*



Ms. Tia explains that she relocated to Nigeria last year because she got a job at the Lagos Environmental Consultancy, and because she fell in love with her husband, Kenneth Dada, who lives in Nigeria, and who is a doctor who helps women get pregnant. Ms. Tia says she doesn't want any children, though, which is something that Adunni finds ludicrous, since all the women in her village have children. Adunni asks Ms. Tia if her husband will marry another woman if she doesn't have any children, which makes Ms. Tia laugh. Adunni thinks back to drinking Khadija's medicine to prevent pregnancy when she was living with Morufu

Adunni tells Ms. Tia about how Mama fought for her to finish school so she could get a good job first and marry later, and about how Papa didn't have those same priorities for her. She tells Ms. Tia that she will work hard so she can go to school and marry someone who will support their own children going to school, even if the children are girls. Inwardly, Adunni hopes that Papa will one day forgive her for running away. She begins to grow sad. Adunni asks Ms. Tia why she doesn't want children since she finished school and has a good job. Ms. Tia gives her a sharp look and leaves abruptly. Adunni feels foolish for saying something stupid.

*Unlike economically disadvantaged women like Khadija and Mama who had to leave their romantic interests behind when their families forced them into loveless, arranged marriages, Ms. Tia's wealth affords her the opportunity to marry for love and chosen companionship. Ms. Tia and Adunni come from such different worlds that Adunni's sincere question about Ms. Tia's husband replacing her if she doesn't have children seems funny to Ms. Tia.*



*It speaks to the level of comfort Adunni feels in Ms. Tia's presence that she discloses so many personal details about her life. Adunni's hope that Papa will forgive her for running away speaks to her compassion and ability to resist becoming bitter in response to Papa's betrayals. When Adunni asks Ms. Tia why she doesn't want to have children, it reveals how engrained women's responsibility to become mothers is in her worldview. Even someone like Adunni, who challenges a lot of the gender norms her society thrusts on her, sees childrearing as mandatory for women. Ms. Tia's sudden departure implies that something in Adunni's innocent question struck a nerve in her.*



## CHAPTER 31

*Fact: Nollywood, Nigeria's film industry, produces over 55 films per week and is worth about \$5 billion.* The next day, Big Madam summons Adunni to the parlor, where she is watching a Yoruba movie on TV. Big Madam tells Adunni she will crack her head open the next time Adunni disobeys her orders, and that Adunni should be grateful that Tia Dada was here yesterday to come to her aid. Apparently, Ms. Tia threatened to call the police, though Big Madam finds this laughable, as she is such an important figure in society. Big Madam calls Ms. Tia an "empty barrel," because she has no children after an entire year of marriage.

Adunni is angry to hear Big Madam talking this way about Ms. Tia but keeps her mouth shut. Big Madam tells Adunni that she will be gone for two weeks next week, traveling to Switzerland and Dubai, as well as the UK, to see her kids. Big Daddy will also be gone, but if he comes back early, Adunni must not answer to him: she can only answer to Big Daddy if Big Madam is also in the **house**. Adunni tries to ask Big Madam a question about Rebecca again. Adunni's curiosity enrages Big Madam, who tries to beat Adunni with her shoe.

*Big Madam isn't worried about Ms. Tia's threat to call the police because she knows that her wealth and important position in society will prevent the police from taking any action against her. Her flippant response to Ms. Tia also suggests that beating and mistreating a housewife is seen as relatively acceptable behavior. In calling Ms. Tia an "empty barrel," Big Madam insinuates that Ms. Tia is worthless or unfulfilled because she is childless.*



*Big Madam's wealth enables her to travel not just around Nigeria but abroad, as well. The fact that Big Madam's children live abroad shows that they have inherited their mother's wealth and reap some of the benefits of a privileged life. Big Madam's warning not to answer to Big Daddy underscores his dangerousness. Her extreme response to Adunni's question about Rebecca is further evidence that something fishy is going on with the missing former housemaid. It also reminds Adunni that just because she has one ally in Ms. Tia doesn't mean Big Madam will stop abusing her.*





Adunni runs outside, where she finds Abu at the water tap. Abu and Adunni don't talk very often, but they are always friendly when they run into each other. Like Kofi—and everyone else Adunni has encountered here at Big Madam's, Big Madam included—Abu has a strange accent. But Adunni acknowledges that if they all take the time to listen, they can all understand one another. Adunni tries to ask Abu about Rebecca, but he doesn't provide any information and cautions her not to look for trouble.

*Adunni's comment about taking the time to listen and understand one another's different accents is something of a poetic musing about the good things that can be achieved when people are educated and engaged with the world around them. Learning how to understand others takes time but ultimately pays off when everyone is able to communicate effectively with one another. Abu's insinuation that to ask about Rebecca is to look for trouble heightens Adunni's suspicions and fuels her desire to learn the truth.*



## CHAPTER 32

*Fact: Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, a Nigerian feminist, fought for women's access to education.* The day after Big Madam leaves for her trip, Ms. Tia comes by the **house** to apologize to Adunni for leaving so abruptly yesterday. She explains that people ask her why she doesn't have children all the time, and it bothers her. After Adunni asked, though, she realized something for the first time. Ms. Tia hesitates before deciding not to tell Adunni the details of this realization. Ms. Tia tells Adunni good luck on her exams and turns to leave.

*Ms. Tia's privilege grants her the ability to choose not to have children, but she can't help but be affected by the social norms surrounding pregnancy. Ms. Tia's mysterious revelation might be related to her reasons for not having kids, though for whatever reason, she's keeping the details of this realization from Adunni for the time being.*



Adunni realizes that if she doesn't ask Ms. Tia for help now, she may lose her chance forever. She clarifies that she doesn't have exams, but that she can have a chance to win a scholarship to go to school if she can find a Nigerian guarantor to vouch for her character on the application.

*Recognizing Ms. Tia as an ally and knowing that the scholarship is her only chance to obtain freedom and an education, Adunni takes a chance and asks Ms. Tia to help her.*



Ms. Tia hesitates, pointing out that she doesn't know Adunni all that well and doesn't know if she can be a good reference. Adunni promises that she will do anything Ms. Tia asks during the two weeks that Big Madam is away, and that she can prove that she is deserving. Ms. Tia remains uneasy, as she and Big Madam aren't on particularly good terms. Adunni insists that she will keep Ms. Tia's role in the scholarship application a secret.

*That Ms. Tia appears unwilling to come between Big Madam and her housemaid reaffirms Big Madam's power, wealth, and importance in her social circle. Adunni remains determined to receive Ms. Tia's help because her past experiences with Mama and Khadija have taught her the power of having a strong female advocate in her corner.*



Ms. Tia talks partly to Adunni and partly to herself, making plans for which work assignments she can push forward and which things she can reschedule to make time to help. She agrees to help Adunni with her application, acting as a reference *and* as an English tutor, so that Adunni can write a successful essay. Overjoyed, Adunni wraps her arms around Ms. Tia in a warm embrace. She's surprised when Ms. Tia, a rich woman, doesn't push her away and beat her the way Big Madam does.

*Adunni's surprise at Ms. Tia not pushing her away speaks to how common it is for people to abuse and disregard her because of her class and gender.*



Ms. Tia asks Adunni what her work schedule is and is horrified to hear that Adunni usually works from dawn until 11 or midnight. Adunni tells her that since Big Madam is gone, she will only need to work until seven, and they make plans to meet then. Adunni sleeps well that night, dreaming of Mama and Khadija as birds flying through a cloudless sky.

*That Adunni dreams of Mama and Khadija after Ms. Tia agrees to teach her forges a connection between these three women, all of whom use the resources available to them to lift up Adunni. The fact that Adunni imagines Mama and Khadija as flying birds, free from the suffering that constrained them in their real lives, suggests that these women are inspiring Adunni to pursue freedom for herself.*



## CHAPTER 33

*Fact: over 50 million people in Nigeria use the internet.* It's the evening of Adunni's first lesson with Ms. Tia, and the two of them sit beneath a palm tree as the sun begins to set. Ms. Tia gives Adunni an exercise book and explains that begin their lessons with an intermediate course she found on the BBC website. Some days she'll help Adunni, and other days, Adunni can listen to free English instruction courses on the internet on her phone. Adunni doesn't know what Ms. Tia means by "internet," though she recognizes the word from *The Book of Nigerian Facts*. Ms. Tia describes the internet as something that connects people and information across the world—in fact, Ms. Tia even met her husband online, on Facebook.

*Given the rules and social norms that houses symbolize in the novel, it's important to note that Adunni's first lesson with Ms. Tia occurs outside, beneath a palm tree. This might suggest that the lessons will be freeing and honest in a way that Adunni's experiences indoors are not. Adunni's exposure to The Book of Nigerian Facts gives her a context with which to examine the world around her, as in this situation, where she recognizes the word "internet" from her reading. Access to books and technology can greatly expand a person's world, as is the case for Ms. Tia, who met her husband halfway across the world through social media.*



Ms. Tia picks up her phone to illustrate how to connect with people online. She clicks on a picture of a white woman who she says is her old roommate, Katie, who is British. Adunni says that Katie stole Nigeria's freedom and that Nigerians took it back on October 1st, 1960. Ms. Tia corrects her, reasoning that the British government is responsible for this, not individual British people.

*Adunni's comment about Katie is in reference to the Nigerian fact that preceded Chapter 27. Adunni's observation situates Katie as a stand-in for the actions of the British government. This speaks to larger issues of the lasting effects of colonization, the concept of whiteness, and the relationship between the oppressor and the oppressed, with Katie//Great Britain being the oppressor and Adunni/Nigeria being the oppressed. Adunni's observation shows that she is able to connect things she learns in books to the real world in order to make sense of history and society.*



Adunni expresses her disbelief that people who look like Ms. Tia can live "in the Abroad," because she only sees people who look like Katie on foreign TV. Ms. Tia agrees that there aren't enough Black people in positions of power, which confuses Adunni, who has never heard of people being referred to as "black" or "white."

*Living in a European country gives Ms. Tia knowledge about race that Adunni, with her comparatively sheltered life, does not have access to.*



Adunni returns the conversation to Facebook and asks Ms. Tia if she can find Bamidele on Facebook. Bamidele is a common name, so Ms. Tia asks for his surname. Adunni says "I didn't sure," which Ms. Tia corrects with "I am not sure." Then they begin their first English lesson, which will be on tenses.

*Learning English tenses will be key to Adunni writing a successful, grammatically correct essay for the scholarship education, which will give her a better chance to win the award and secure her education and freedom.*



## CHAPTER 34

*Fact: Nigerians didn't need passports to enter the UK until 1984.* Adunni struggles in her English lessons, sometimes having a hard time differentiating between the English she speaks and Ms. Tia's "correct English," but both of them look forward to the daily lessons. Sometimes, they just talk. Yesterday, Adunni filled Ms. Tia in on her past: about Papa wanting to sell her to Morufu, running away, Mr. Kola bringing her here, and Mama's death. She doesn't tell Ms. Tia that she was actually married to Morufu, that he repeatedly raped her, or about Khadija's death, because she must "keep it inside one box in [her] mind, lock the box, and throw away the key inside the river of [her] soul."

Ms. Tia tells Adunni about her own life, as well: she is close with her father, but she and Ms. Tia's mother always fight. Growing up, her mother was very demanding and didn't let her have a lot of friends. She also didn't teach Ms. Tia how to speak Yoruba, which means Ms. Tia can't communicate with her husband's family. Adunni tells her that she can teach her.

Ms. Tia also tells Adunni that she actually does want children, and even though her husband didn't used to want children, they are trying now. Adunni asks Ms. Tia what made her change her mind, but Ms. Tia changes the subject, gesturing toward her phone and instructing Adunni to complete an oral lesson in English, which Adunni dislikes because it's difficult for her to understand the fast words of the speakers on the phone. Over time, Adunni notices that Ms. Tia repeatedly shifts their focus back to an oral lesson whenever Adunni asks her a personal question.

Tonight, however, Adunni decides to press Ms. Tia for answers, inquiring again why she changed her mind about wanting children. Ms. Tia sighs, blinks, and begins to speak, explaining how Ms. Tia's mother was very hard on her, controlling every facet of her life, making her study all the time, deciding what she would be when she grew up, when she would marry, and when she would have kids. Ms. Tia decided not to have kids to rebel against her mother, and she also couldn't imagine bringing children into the world if there was a chance that she'd treat them the way her mother had treated her. Also, she was happy not to contribute to the planet's overpopulation.

*The difference between Adunni's and Ms. Tia's English results from Ms. Tia's wealth affording her the privilege of receiving a formal education; in contrast, Adunni has received much less schooling and has had to self-educate. Ms. Tia and Adunni develop a deeper, closer relationship during these lessons, which suggests that education can also foster personal growth and emotional maturity. Still, even though Adunni trusts Ms. Tia, there are some traumas, like Khadija's death, that remain too painful to acknowledge directly. Adunni is determined to survive and stay strong; she buries these traumas inside herself because to acknowledge them would be to make herself vulnerable and unable to complete the tasks she needs to do to make it through the day.*



*The reader discovers the truth behind Ms. Tia's earlier remark that she hasn't cried for her sick mother, though Ms. Tia's explanation is rather vague. Ms. Tia's response to her mother's advocacy is very different from Adunni's. Adunni's offer to teach Ms. Tia Yoruba shows that Adunni sees value in women supporting other women and wants to help Ms. Tia, just as Ms. Tia has helped her.*



*There's still a bit of a mystery to Ms. Tia. It seems as though Ms. Tia, like Adunni, isn't ready to talk about the particularly difficult, emotional details of her life. Perhaps there is more to the story about her bad relationship with her mother than she's letting on. Ms. Tia comes across as an outwardly strong person, so it's possible that, like Adunni, she knows she needs to hide the vulnerable parts of herself in order to keep up her strong, determined persona.*



*There's a sharp contrast between Ms. Tia and Adunni's responses to their mothers' advice. Adunni's mother also instructed her on what she would need to do to have a successful life, but Adunni accepted her mother's advice, whereas Ms. Tia rebelled against her mother's wishes. The difference lies in privilege: Ms. Tia had many options available to her in terms of careers and relationships, so she had the freedom to carve out her own path in life. In contrast, Adunni's social status and the norms of her village left her with fewer options: she could either be married off and forced to submit to a husband for the rest of her life, or she could listen to Mama, become educated, and have a chance at a better life.*



Last year, though, Ms. Tia's mother was diagnosed with a terminal illness, and Ms. Tia began to travel to Port Harcourt to see her more often. Her mother became less harsh, and Ms. Tia started to understand her mother's point of view a bit better. It even seemed as though her mother wanted to apologize for the way things had been. Ms. Tia began to wish that she had a baby to bring with her to give her mother something to live for. The day that Adunni told Ms. Tia that she loved Papa even though he had treated her poorly, it made Ms. Tia realize that she could choose to be a good mother.

Six nights later, Adunni sits in her room and reads the practice materials Ms. Tia gave her. She hears the door behind her creak. When she turns around, Big Daddy is standing in her room. Adunni feels his eyes on her chest. Big Daddy tells Adunni that she is a beautiful girl. He complains about Big Madam being "threatened" by all the female staff, even though she has nothing to worry about with him. Adunni folds her hand in front of her dress. Big Daddy offers Adunni "a proposal," offering to "help" her by giving her money. Adunni declines his offer and tells him to leave or she'll scream.

Just then, Kofi appears in the hallway, wearing only a cloth around his waist. Adunni thinks she's "never been so happy to see a almost naked man in [her] whole life." Kofi explains that he was sleeping but woke up when he heard noises. Big Daddy lies about hearing Adunni call for help and leaves the room. Once they are alone, Adunni thanks Kofi for coming to her rescue. Kofi reminds Adunni to prepare her essay for the scholarship application. Adunni tells Kofi that Ms. Tia is helping with her English, the mere thought of which fills her with hope.

## CHAPTER 35

*Fact: child marriage is still prevalent in northern Nigeria, though the country banned the practice in 2003.* Adunni doesn't sleep well after her frightening encounter with Big Daddy. She stays awake in bed reading Mama's Bible, practicing her English, or holding Rebecca's **waist beads**. She listens closely for Big Daddy, though he hasn't bothered her lately. Adunni decides that she will tell Ms. Tia about the incident.

*The time limitation that Ms. Tia's mother's illness imposes on their relationship functions in a way that's a bit similar to wealth's ability to widen or limit a person's opportunities. Ms. Tia feels the pressure of her mother's time running out, so she feels like she has to improve their relationship while she still has the chance. In contrast, when her mother was healthy, she wasn't pressured to fix their relationship because it might have felt as though they had all the time in the world to make things better—her situation didn't force her to act in one way or another.*



*It's clear that Big Madam really does have something to worry about, as Big Daddy has now made Adunni feel uncomfortable on numerous occasions. In saying that Big Madam is "threatened" by the female staff, Big Daddy insinuates that they are the ones sexually propositioning him, when in reality, it's obvious that Big Daddy is the aggressor. This is the type of logic employed by women like Labake, and hearing it from an abusive man like Big Daddy underscores how counterproductive it is. If Big Madam really feels threatened by the female staff, rather than her husband's actions, she's misunderstanding who the enemy really is.*



*Adunni's observation about having "never been so happy to see a almost naked man in [her] whole life" speaks to the sexual violence she's been submitted to. Kofi stands out as one of the good men in Adunni's life; his character demonstrates that men in positions of relative power can also choose to advocate for young girls.*



*Nigeria's Child Rights Act, passed in 2003, has a section that prohibits child marriage, but there are loopholes in the Nigerian Constitution that allow the practice to continue. Adunni's method of coping with the frightening encounter with Big Daddy positions faith as a way to combat fear and trauma. Rebecca's waist beads also become instrumental in Adunni's quest to find strength. The waist beads are a symbolic stand-in for Rebecca, and so this scene underscores Adunni's impulse to seek comfort and support in other women and girls. This notion is further illustrated in Adunni's decision to tell Ms. Tia about the incident with Big Daddy.*



Adunni and Ms. Tia are outside behind the kitchen when Adunni mentions the incident with Big Daddy. Adunni expresses her fear that Big Daddy “wants to rough [her].” Ms. Tia tells Adunni she should have a lock on her door. She offers to tell Big Madam about the incident with Big Daddy, but Adunni is afraid that Big Madam will beat her if she hears about it. Ms. Tia agrees not to tell Big Madam for the time being. She also expresses regret that Big Madam will be back in two days, making it harder for them to meet up for lessons. They’ll have to come up with a new excuse to meet. Ms. Tia thinks that maybe her husband, Ken, whom Big Madam respects, can ask Adunni to accompany them to the market a few times a week.

In the middle of today’s lesson, Ms. Tia stops writing and sits down, looking weak and shaken. She tells Adunni that she is tired and hopes that she might be pregnant, though not seriously, because it’s too soon for that. She tells Adunni that Ken’s mother was just at their **house**, something she does once a month to pester Ms. Tia about grandchildren. This is stressful, especially since she and Ken have only recently agreed to have children. Ms. Tia and Adunni finish the lesson, and Ms. Tia says that she will talk to Ken about going to the market.

## CHAPTER 36

*Fact: Nigerian senators make around \$1.7 million per year.* Big Madam returns from her trip and appears to be in a great mood—she’s even satisfied with how Adunni has taken care of the **house** while she’s been away. As she inspects the house, she tells Adunni that her son has a good job and her daughter Kayla is engaged to a man named Kunle, who is the son of Senator Kutu. Then, Big Madam settles down on the sofa and takes a phone call with a friend, bragging about her daughter’s marriage.

When Big Madam hangs up the phone, Adunni asks if she can have a lock installed on her door. This question catches Big Madam’s attention, and she immediately asks if Big Daddy bothered Adunni while she was gone. Adunni lies and says she wants to lock her door from a rat that was disturbing her.

*Ms. Tia and Adunni continue to meet outside, which places their lessons in an environment free from the constraining social norms in Big Madam’s house. Ms. Tia’s fear that Big Madam (who upholds these norms) will put their lessons to an end reinforces this theory: with Big Madam back in town, Adunni will have no choice but to submit to Big Madam’s rules. Ms. Tia’s theory that Big Madam might listen to Ken (presumably because he is a rich man) underscores Big Madam’s complicity in upholding unjust norms related to gender and class.*



*Ken’s mother’s monthly check-ins show that even Ms. Tia, whose social position affords her the option to opt out of having children, can’t help but escape the gender norms that govern the larger culture. These visits also position Ken’s mother as perpetuating gender inequality, as women are the ones who are pressured to have children.*



*The fact that precedes this chapter underscores Nigeria’s wide wealth gap. It also gives some context for why Big Madam is so excited about Kayla’s engagement to the son of a senator. Despite the fact that Big Madam has risen above the constraints of gender inequality to become a successful businesswoman, she remains complicit in this oppressive system, as she seems to value Kayla’s engagement to a wealthy man above her daughter’s other accomplishments. Perhaps, though, she recognizes that it’s still much harder to succeed as an independent woman, and that wealth will help Kayla overcome some of these hurdles.*



*Big Madam’s anxious response to Adunni’s request for a lock suggests that she has reason to be wary about Big Daddy—perhaps Big Daddy was preying on Rebecca, too. The fact that Big Madam doesn’t outright deny Adunni’s request for a lock suggests that she might have it within her to be compassionate and helpful to people like Adunni, who have so little power.*



That evening, Adunni heads to Big Madam’s room to scratch her hair. As she approaches the bedroom door, she hears Big Madam and Big Daddy shouting at each other. Big Madam accuses Big Daddy of messing with Adunni. She accuses him of being unfaithful to her with young University students, lavishing these young women with gifts, and being unable to leave even their young house servants alone.

*Hearing this argument confirms what Adunni already knows about Big Daddy’s likely intentions with her. It also confirms that Big Madam knows about Big Daddy’s inappropriate behavior with the young female staff and doesn’t do much to combat it. Knowing the extent of Big Daddy’s inappropriate behavior might also give Adunni insight into Rebecca’s disappearance—perhaps Big Daddy was involved in her sudden departure.*



Big Madam begs Big Daddy to love her. She says that the children haven’t visited in months because of the way that Big Daddy treats her. Adunni hears a series of slaps behind the door. She worries that she caused this intense fight by asking Big Madam for a lock, and she fears that Big Madam will send her away because of the trouble she has caused. Afraid, she runs back to her room in the boys’ quarters.

*The series of slaps Adunni hears coming from Big Madam’s room suggests that Big Daddy abuses Big Madam physically as well as mentally. Big Madam’s abusive marriage shows that money doesn’t absolve all of life’s issues.*



## CHAPTER 37

Adunni returns to her room and finds Kofi there looking for her, as they have guests to serve. Kofi tells Adunni that her “mouth will kill [her] one day,” and that it was wrong to stir up trouble by asking for a lock. He suggests that Adunni should have found a more discreet way to fight back against Big Daddy, perhaps by installing a rat trap in front of the door to injure him, thus leaving him unable to explain his injuries to Big Madam without confessing to his digressions. Adunni tells Kofi that it was Ms. Tia’s idea to ask for the lock, and Kofi retorts that Ms. Tia is married to a rich man “and has no problems in life.”

*Kofi’s comment that Adunni’s “mouth will kill her one day” discourages Adunni from trying to achieve the “louding voice” she so desperately desires. His advice encourages Adunni to physically fight back against the people who oppress her rather than trying to rise above the system as a whole. Kofi’s disgruntled response to Ms. Tia’s suggestion about the lock highlights disparity between the options for problem-solving available to the rich versus the comparatively limited options available to people like Kofi and Adunni.*



Adunni goes to the parlor and finds that the houseguests Kofi mentioned are Ms. Tia and the doctor. Ms. Tia smiles at Adunni impersonally, pretending that they are not close. She says that they have come to congratulate Big Madam and Big Daddy on the engagement. Ms. Tia introduces Adunni to her husband as the girl with whom she would like to go to the market. Ms. Tia’s husband, the doctor, is tall and wears a white button-down shirt, a gold chain with a gold cross, brown shorts, and brown slippers “smelling of rich rubber.”

*Ms. Tia has to pretend that she and Adunni are not close because Big Madam, who seems intent on making Adunni’s life as miserable as possible, might be less likely to agree to the arrangement if she knows the truth. The doctor’s clothes appear expensive and exist as an outward display of his wealth. He comes off as a strong, intimidating character and looks like a person whose wishes Big Madam would be more inclined to honor.*



When the doctor addresses Adunni, his voice is smooth, as though lubricated with oil. Adunni leaves to fetch her employers and overhears the doctor telling Ms. Tia “that there are other women, posh, well-spoken” in the neighborhood that could go the market with her. But Ms. Tia assures him that Adunni is exactly who she wants.

*Implicit in the doctor’s mention of other “posh, well-spoken” women that could go to the market with Ms. Tia is the fact that these women’s wealth makes them more valuable than Adunni, or at least worthier of Ms. Tia’s friendship. That Ms. Tia turns down the doctor’s request shows that she values Adunni despite Adunni’s underprivileged status.*



## CHAPTER 38

*Fact: many Nigerians have superstitions about pregnancy. For instance, some believe that “attaching a safety pin to a pregnant woman’s clothing will ward off evil spirits.”* Big Madam and Big Daddy sit with Ms. Tia and the doctor. The doctor talks about the success of Ms. Tia’s weekly blog, but Big Madam says it’s a waste of time to read about the environment “when there is money to be made.” Big Madam wears lots of makeup, but her face is swollen underneath. The doctor says that Ms. Tia complains about being bored, and Big Madam suggests that Ms. Tia wouldn’t be so bored if she had children. She continues, expressing disbelief that anyone would wait to have children—she claims to have been pregnant after her first night with Chief.

The doctor urges Big Madam not to pressure he and Ms. Tia about children—in fact, pressure is the worst thing, and maybe it would be good for Ms. Tia to have something to take her mind off trying to conceive. He asks if Adunni might accompany Ms. Tia to the market to teach Ms. Tia to haggle. Ms. Tia adds that, though Adunni is unfamiliar with Lagos, she is fluent in Yoruba and can be useful. Big Madam isn’t keen on the idea, but Big Daddy encourages it, arguing that Dr. Ken is a good friend, and that they should honor his wife’s wishes. Surprisingly, Big Madam agrees to the arrangement. Adunni is overjoyed.

*The fact that precedes this chapter refers to a Yoruba superstition. Big Madam’s obsession with money might stem from her belief that money is a way to achieve power and social credibility as a woman. Big Madam’s makeup obscures the bruises she incurred from Big Daddy’s recent beating; symbolically, it obscures her unhappy marriage and the gendered power imbalance that remains in spite of her wealth and social status. The importance Big Madam places on pregnancy, and the way she brags about her own fertility reinforces Big Madam’s complicity in a system of gender inequality that is only strengthened when women don’t support other women.*



*The doctor seems to be more supportive of his wife’s needs and desires than Big Madam is, which reinforces Big Madam’s perpetuation of sexist norms. The doctor’s response to Big Madam also illustrates that he and Tia treat each other as equals instead of Ms. Tia being submissive to the doctor. Big Daddy’s advocacy for the outing seems like a ploy to make Adunni indebted to him and therefore more likely to submit to his inappropriate advances. Essentially, he’s abusing his power to control the powerless.*



## CHAPTER 39

In her room that night, Adunni thanks God for letting her go with Ms. Tia. She also thanks God for her life and prays for Khadija and for Ms. Tia’s attempts at pregnancy. She doesn’t pray for Kayus, though, because thinking about him makes her too sad.

When Adunni finishes praying, she leaves her room and walks outside toward the clothesline. Through the darkness, she can see Big Daddy’s figure. He’s talking on the phone, making plans with someone he calls “baby love,” and Adunni can hear a female voice on the other end of the line. Big Daddy notices Adunni and hangs up the phone. Adunni assures him that she didn’t hear anything.

*Adunni prays to God as a source of strength to endure her circumstances. She continues to repress thoughts of Kayus because grieving the things she cannot change will make her weak and unable to do her job, which jeopardizes her livelihood.*



*Big Daddy doesn’t seem to treat Big Madam with any affection, so it’s safe to assume that the woman he calls “baby love” is one of his mistresses. Despite her lowly status as a housemaid, Adunni now poses something of a threat to Big Daddy because she overheard his secret phone call. Adunni recognizes that she must feign innocence, keep this information to herself, and not advocate for Big Madam by telling her about the conversation to avoid retaliation from Big Daddy.*



Big Daddy tells Adunni that she should be grateful to him for arranging for Adunni to continue seeing Ms. Tia. He confesses that he saw the two of them working together and knows about the secret lessons, but that he supports her education, which is more than he can say of his wife, who is very close to firing Adunni. Big Daddy says that he is a “generous” man and will allow Adunni to continue her education, but only if she allows him to “help” her and give her lots of money.

Adunni tells Big Daddy that she only wants the money she has earned and heads back to her room, thinking to herself that the only difference between Morufu and Big Daddy is that Big Daddy can speak good English and Morufu cannot: inside, they both “have the same terrible sickness of the mind.”

*Big Daddy confirms that his uncharacteristic act of kindness earlier that day was an attempt to manipulate Adunni into a sexual relationship. He manipulates Adunni further by insinuating that she’s at risk of losing her job, pitting her against Big Madam, and offering to put her through school, knowing Adunni’s fierce desire for an education.*



*Adunni remains determined not to let her vulnerable status force her to accept help from disreputable people like Big Daddy. Her observation about Morufu and Big Daddy “hav[ing] the same terrible sickness of the mind” suggests that Big Daddy’s education and higher social status don’t make him a better, more virtuous person than Morufu. Even though they belong to different social classes, both men feel entitled to undervalue and abuse women.*



## CHAPTER 40

*Fact: Nigeria has lost billions of dollars of oil revenue to corruption since the country gained its independence. It’s Saturday. Adunni rubs Big Madam’s feet while a man on TV discusses the upcoming election, asking his viewers if Nigeria will vote for “the fedora-hat-wearing man who never had shoes as a child,” or for Muhammadu Buhari. Big Madam doesn’t want Buhari to win, calling him “an enemy of progress” and claiming he will “deal with all those who benefited under Jonathan.”*

*Being forced to rub Big Madam’s feet symbolically reaffirms the uneven power dynamic between them. Muhammadu Buhari is Nigeria’s current president (as of 2021). He ended up winning the presidential election, which is what Big Madam didn’t want to happen. Big Madam’s criticisms of Buhari could stem from a number of controversies in which he has been involved. In the past, Buhari was quoted as supporting the implantation of Sharia law (Islamic religious law) in Nigeria, and has struggled to suppress the terrorist group Boko Haram. Both of these controversies could lead people, and women in particular, to see Buhari as “an enemy of progress.” The fact that proceeds this chapter is relevant because one of Buhari’s campaign promises was to fight corruption; Big Madam apparently feels threatened by this, which suggests that perhaps she became wealthy through unethical means or is afraid of losing her wealth in a general sense. Big Madam’s comments about “the fedora-hat-wearing man who never had shoes as a child” and “Jonathan” refer to Goodluck Jonathan, who would have been president in 2014, during the events of the novel. Many people regard Jonathan’s administration as be highly corrupt. Big Madam’s comment about Jonathan not having shoes growing up seems to refer to Jonathan’s trajectory from humble beginnings to wealth, education, and power, which appears to earn him Big Madam’s respect.*





Suddenly, there is a knock at the door, and Ms. Tia appears, wearing a t-shirt and jeans. Big Madam tilts her nose in the air, addressing Ms. Tia as “Mrs. Dada.” Ms. Tia asks if Adunni can accompany her to the market at two o’clock. Big Madam says no, pretending not to remember their agreement, and Adunni’s heart drops. Big Madam tells Ms. Tia that she can come back for Adunni on Monday. As Ms. Tia turns to leave, Big Madam angrily suggests that Ms. Tia should find her own maid instead of stealing hers.

On Monday, Ms. Tia arrives and brings Adunni to the Dada **house**. Adunni converses with Ms. Tia as they walk, trying to incorporate some words that she learned in the Collins, though she misuses them. They arrive at Ms. Tia’s house, which doesn’t have a gateman like Big Madam’s does. Ms. Tia’s house is white, and the pathway to the front door is lined with flowerpots. Ms. Tia says that Ken wanted them to live in a huge house, but she couldn’t bear the thought of living so unsustainably. Adunni asks about the glass squares on the roof, and Ms. Tia explains that they are solar panels. Adunni suggests that Ikati village would really benefit from having solar panels—right now, very few houses there have light, as generators are expensive. Ms. Tia loves the idea and offers to bring it up at a work meeting.

Adunni and Ms. Tia enter the **house** through the kitchen. Adunni observes that the house is white and sparsely decorated, and she wonders whether Ms. Tia has “a fear to be owning plenty things.” Ms. Tia tells Adunni that she is looking forward to their outing because she wants to take her mind off the fact that she got her period again, and that Ken’s mother wants her to go to a prophet and undergo a fertility ritual that involves taking a **bath**. Adunni recalls the way Khadija died and encourages Ms. Tia to take the bath, though Ms. Tia is skeptical, not wanting some old man to use the bath as an excuse to feel her body.

Adunni offers to accompany Ms. Tia to the **bath**, much to Ms. Tia’s delight. Ms. Tia says that Ken told her that the bath is “harmless,” and that she should go through with it, if only to get his mother off their case. Ms. Tia then changes the subject, telling Adunni that she has a surprise for her.

*Without the intimidation of Big Daddy and the doctor to put her in her place, Big Madam goes back on her decision to let Adunni go to the market with Ms. Tia. Big Madam’s accusation against Ms. Tia about stealing her housemaid positions Adunni as a commodity that can be possessed, stolen, and controlled.*



*Adunni’s efforts to practice the words she has read the dictionary illustrates her eagerness to apply the things she learns about in books to real life. Her misuse of these words establishes learning as a journey Adunni must work at consistently if she wants to grow smarter and find her “louding voice.” It also shows that part of having a louding voice means speaking up without fear of being wrong or being silenced. To have a louding voice is to take a chance, to have the confidence that what one says has value, and to not be afraid of making a mistake or being reprimanded for one’s voice. Adunni’s comments about bringing the solar panels to her village demonstrate her determination to use the things she learns to help others and give back to her community.*



*Ms. Tia’s sparsely decorated house might speak to her environmentally conscious distaste for excess and waste, but it also highlights the fact that rich people can choose a life of minimalism to suit their aesthetic preferences, whereas poor people often have scarcity forced on them. Adunni seems to want Ms. Tia to take the fertility bath because she doesn’t want to see another female protector get hurt. Ms. Tia’s thoughts on the bath forge a gap between whatever spiritual powers the bath is purported to have and the literal actions involved in the act of bathing. Her skepticism positions her as a woman whose privilege and experience allow her to prioritize personal agency over time-honored (and sometimes problematic) traditions. In other words, Ms. Tia has a “louding voice” of her own that makes her more inclined to listen to her instincts, even as Ken’s mother bullies her.*



*Ms. Tia’s husband downplays the bath because it doesn’t directly involve him. Just as wealth affords the economically privileged the freedom to entertain a wider range of opinions and choice, so too does Ken’s gender give him the freedom to dismiss the bath as mere superstition and downplay any potentially negative consequences.*



## CHAPTER 41

*Fact: Some of the earliest sculptures were made in Nigeria. The most prestigious is the Bronze Head of Ife, which was given to the British Museum in 1939.* Adunni follows Ms. Tia down a hallway and sees photos of the Dadas looking happy and in love. She wonders if she can have a relationship like theirs someday. Ms. Tia leads Adunni to the living room, which contains a white couch and a white Christmas tree. Adunni sees two drawings on the wall. One of them features a clay head with thin, long scars across its bare face, which Ms. Tia explains is the Bronze Head of Ife. Adunni remembers reading about this sculpture in *The Book of Nigerian Facts*.

Ms. Tia hands Adunni her surprise, which is a grammar book called *Better English*. The real surprise, however, is a small, thin phone for her to use that will be easy to hide from Big Madam. Ms. Tia has been concerned since Adunni told her about Big Daddy, tells Adunni that she can text her for help if anything happens again. Adunni can't believe that a village girl like her has a phone.

Adunni is so overwhelmed by Ms. Tia's kindness that she begins to cry. Ms. Tia asks Adunni what she wants most in life. Adunni decides that she would like to go to school, so that she can have what Mama called "a louding voice," become a teacher, and give back to the community by educating village girls who wouldn't otherwise have a chance at education. These girls, in turn, will grow up and raise strong, educated children of their own. Ms. Tia tells Adunni that God has given her the strength to accomplish these goals and urges her to always know that she is valuable, and to always believe "that tomorrow will be better than today."

Adunni wants to believe Ms. Tia, though the many hardships she has endured throughout her life make it difficult to do so. Adunni keeps her reservations to herself and tries to believe in Ms. Tia's optimism.

A car that Ms. Tia calls an Uber takes Ms. Tia and Adunni to the Balogun market. The driver, Michael, flirts with Ms. Tia, and Ms. Tia rolls her eyes at him, which irritates him. Michael drops them off at the market, which is bustling with customers and merchants selling food, clothing, fans, and other goods. Adunni holds tightly to Ms. Tia as they make their way through the packed streets.

*Nigeria's history under British colonial rule doesn't play a major role in the novel, but it's worth considering how the idea of British forces taking Nigerian artifacts and selling them to art collectors and museums presents an ethical conundrum. The connection Adunni makes between the print on Ms. Tia's wall and the fact she read in *The Book of Nigerian Facts* gives her a context that lets her better appreciate the art.*



*Ms. Tia uses her economic privilege to give Adunni the technology that will make her safer in Big Madam's house. Adunni's elation and surprise at receiving the gift reflects how rarely people treat her with respect and kindness. Having a phone strengthens Adunni's voice, allowing her to reach out to others and better protect herself.*



*Adunni's desire to help others is evidence of the positive impact that Ms. Tia's advocacy has had on her. She recognizes how Ms. Tia's mentorship puts her on a path toward finding her "louding voice" and, in turn, wants to help other girls find theirs. Ms. Tia's words of encouragement and optimism underscore the importance of strength, confidence, and faith in a person's ability to survive hardship.*



*It's easy for someone like Ms. Tia, who has had considerably fewer struggles in life, to dispense well-intentioned words of optimism and strength. Despite her skepticism, though, Adunni trusts Ms. Tia and recognizes that she has nothing to gain by being pessimistic.*



*Women in Nigeria (and throughout the world, for that matter) can't even drive to the market without being objectified and inconvenienced by men. The market, meanwhile, is a grand display of consumerism that seems entirely unfamiliar to Adunni.*



Ms. Tia leads Adunni to a small stall to buy authentic ankara. While at the stall, Adunni ponders the similarities between Ms. Tia and Enitan. Both friends are excited by the things they want, but while Ms. Tia can afford everything she needs and more, Enitan wouldn't have money to buy anything. Inwardly, Adunni muses that "Ms. Tia and I are friends, but not like me and Enitan."

Speaking Yoruba, Adunni haggles with the ankara saleswoman who tries to overcharge Ms. Tia when she hears her speaking English. Adunni addresses the saleswoman as "Mama," calling herself "[her] daughter-o." She promises that they will return next week to buy more fabric if the woman gives them a good price, and the woman acquiesces.

After a long, exhausting day of shopping, Adunni and Ms. Tia make their way back to Frankie's Fast Food, where the driver dropped them off earlier. Adunni says that she is "too-too hungry," and Ms. Tia corrects her English, telling her to use the word "starving." Adunni wonders how Ms. Tia could correct her now, given the hot weather and their mutual exhaustion. They go into the restaurant, and Adunni sits at a seat "that look like a rich man's bench." Ms. Tia brings back a variety of foods that Adunni has never eaten before, and Adunni wishes that Kayus and Enitan could enjoy it with her.

Ms. Tia tells Adunni that she will be traveling to Port Harcourt next week to care for Ms. Tia's mother, who is sick again, and will be there through the holidays. She reminds Adunni that the only scholarship material left to complete is the essay. Adunni admits that she is scared and intimidated by this task, but Ms. Tia tells her to simply "write [her] truth."

Suddenly, Ms. Tia spots Titi Benson, one of the women from the WRWA. Urgently, she tells Adunni to hide underneath the table. Titi approaches Ms. Tia and, seeing all of Ms. Tia's food, asks if "there is a bun in the oven." Ms. Tia changes the subject, complimenting Titi's Chanel handbag. Finally, Titi leaves, and Adunni returns to her seat. Ms. Tia acknowledges what a close call this was—it would be very bad if Big Madam learned about Ms. Tia's closeness with Adunni, or about their lessons.

*Ankara is an African fabric characterized by its often bright colors and designs. Adunni recognizes that Ms. Tia's wealth makes her experiences and perspectives vastly different from hers and Enitan's: for instance, Ms. Tia is used to getting the things she wants, while Enitan can only dream about her desires.*



*In referring to herself as the saleswoman's "daughter-o," Adunni positions she and the woman as socioeconomic equals and Ms. Tia as other, by virtue of her higher economic status. Adunni's interaction with the saleswoman shows that while she and Ms. Tia might be close, their differing class status creates distance between them.*



*The strangeness of the restaurant's food and Adunni's description of the seat "that look like a rich man's bench" emphasize the vast differences between the experiences of the rich versus the experiences of the poor, as well as the urban experience versus the rural experience. Adunni wishes her loved ones from back home could see this because she knows they would be just as surprised as she is. It seems to speak to Adunni's strengthened mental state that she can think about Kayus and Enitan while remaining strong and mentally focused.*



*The essay is a big deal for Adunni. To "write [her] truth," as Ms. Tia puts it, is to write with a "louding voice," which is something Adunni has struggled with in the face of so many people who have tried to force her to stay silent and submit.*



*Titi's assumption that Ms. Tia has so much food because "there is a bun in the oven" shows how pregnancy and motherhood are expected components of a woman's life in Nigerian society. That Ms. Tia and Adunni need to hide their friendship from Big Madam implies that Big Madam is threatened by their close relationship. It's possible that Big Madam knows she won't be able to continue to control and manipulate Adunni if, through this relationship with Ms. Tia, Adunni receives the education and support she needs to have agency over her life and acknowledge her self-worth.*



When Adunni returns to the **house** that evening, Big Madam is still at work. After finishing her chores, Adunni goes to her room to write her essay. At first, she writes generically, describing her name, age, and hometown. However, after thinking about what Ms. Tia said about writing her truth, she scraps this first attempt and instead writes about her horrific marriage to Morufu; about Khadija, about Mama, Kayus, and Born-boy; and about how urgently she needs an education. She cites a few of the facts she read in *The Book of Nigerian Facts*. When she is finished, she titles the essay: “The True Story Essay of Myself by Adunni, the Girl with the Louding Voice.” The next morning, she drops off the essay at Ms. Tia’s house.

*Adunni’s first draft of the essay might demonstrate her grammatical competence, but it doesn’t speak her truth. When she considers Ms. Tia’s advice, starts over, and writes, unedited, about her experiences, she is able to express the thoughts, feelings, and experiences she’s kept bottled up inside for so much of the novel. It’s in this moment that Adunni finds the strength to express herself in the “louding voice” she’s coveted for so long. This moment demonstrates the healing possibilities of education and one example of the positive outcomes that can happen when women support one another.*



## CHAPTER 42

*Fact: Muhammadu Buhari was head of the state of Nigeria from 1983–1985, a period defined by its “human rights abuses and restriction of press freedom.”* Christmas passes. Over the holiday season, Big Madam and Big Daddy frequently go out for food and drinks with friends. Kofi visits family in Ghana, while Adunni stays at Big Madam’s to work and feels nostalgic for happy Christmases in Ikati village.

*Some examples of the “human rights abuses and restriction of press freedom” that this fact references include arbitrary arrests and retroactive criminal laws. Since being elected president in 2015, Buhari’s administration has committed further human rights abuses, such as restricting citizens’ rights to peaceful protest. Adunni’s position as an indentured servant (and the remaining threat of being punished for Khadija’s death) prevents her from visiting home for the holidays.*



Now, it’s the first working day of 2015. Big Madam needs Adunni’s help at the shop because Glory, the shopgirl, quit. As Abu drives them to the shop, Big Madam complains over the phone to her friend Caroline about the upcoming election. She worries that Buhari will pass a law that will negatively impact her fabric business. Big Madam notices Adunni listening to her call and hits her, complaining to Caroline about her “godforsaken idiot” housemaid. Adunni knows that “forsaken” means wasted or left behind, and her eyes begin to well up. However, she remembers what Ms. Tia told her earlier and reminds herself that she is worth something, that “tomorrow will be better than today,” and begins to feel better.

*Big Madam’s complaints about the economic ramifications of Buhari’s election seem particularly materialistic and out of touch when they’re juxtaposed with the earlier mention of Buhari’s human rights abuses. Adunni’s growing vocabulary allows her to understand Big Madam’s cruel remark, but she keeps herself grounded with the help of Ms. Tia’s words, as well as her confident inner voice and sense of self-worth.*



Eventually the car arrives at Big Madam’s store, which is white, brightly lit, and full of glass shelves piled high with beautiful fabrics. Big Madam sends Adunni to the storage room to bring back a bag of fabrics. When Adunni returns to the main room, Caroline is there, wearing tight jeans and a gold belly shirt. The fabrics that Big Madam sent Adunni to retrieve are for Caroline, who is making a fancy dress for a “special person” who is not her husband. Caroline haggles with Big Madam to lower the price of the fabric, but Big Madam refuses, trying to sell Caroline additional luxury fabrics, as well. Caroline sends Adunni to her car to pick up her purse from her own housemaid, Chisom.

*This scene is full of displays of material wealth, from the impeccably clean shop lined with walls of beautiful, expensive fabrics to Caroline’s showy clothing. Caroline’s “special person” is her lover, whose identity she does not reveal to Big Madam. This seems strange, given that Big Madam and Caroline are so close. That Big Madam won’t lower the price of her fabrics for her friend shows that she is either a shrewd businesswoman or stingy—or, perhaps, that this stinginess contributes to her success.*



Adunni arrives at Caroline's Jeep. There, she finds Chisom chatting on a cell phone and eating jollof rice. Adunni observes that Chisom's clothes are much nicer than her own. Chisom hands Adunni Caroline's handbag and offers Adunni some rice when she notices how thin she is. According to Chisom, Rebecca always wanted food. Adunni's ears perk up when she hears Rebecca's name. Chisom goes on to mention that Rebecca was originally very thin but got bigger. Confused and curious, Adunni wants Chisom to elaborate, but she hears Big Madam calling for her to return with the bag and hurries back to the shop before Chisom can say more.

On the way home, Adunni compliments Big Madam's shop, calling it "just like heaven" and praising the beautiful fabrics. Adunni commends Big Madam's selling. Unexpectedly, Big Madam turns to Adunni and smiles. Laughing joyfully, she tells Adunni that she started from nothing and worked her way up to the top. She encourages Adunni to "rise above whatever life throws at [her]." Adunni feels that there is "something share between" herself and Big Madam, "like an embrace from an old friend." Suddenly, though, the moment breaks; Big Madam calls Adunni an "idiot" and demands that she stop staring at her.

*Chisom seems to have a much better quality of life than Adunni: she eats well, dresses well, and is allowed to talk openly on her cell phone. It seems as though Caroline cares more about her housemaid than Big Madam cares about hers. Chisom's cryptic remark about Rebecca getting bigger right before she left Big Madam's provides Adunni with another clue about Rebecca's disappearance and reinvigorates her quest to uncover the truth about the missing housemaid.*



*Even though Big Madam has been so cruel to her, Adunni encourages Big Madam, complimenting her on the success of her shop. This speaks to Adunni's compassion and capacity for forgiveness. It also illustrates her commitment to lifting up other women: Adunni seems to recognize that Big Madam lives an unhappy life behind the shiny exterior of her successful business, and her experiences with other supportive women have taught her what an impact solidarity and compassion can have on a person who is suffering. The sincerity with which Big Madam responds to Adunni—however brief it may be—demonstrates that Big Madam has the capacity for intimacy and understanding, too, though she often chooses hostility over compassion.*



## CHAPTER 43

*Fact: Nigeria has the largest Christian population in Africa. A single church service can record a congregation of over 200,000.* Buhari wins the election, much to the excitement of Kofi, who looks forward to the change he believes Buhari will bring. Papa liked to follow the election, and Adunni wonders what he thinks of the news. The election results enrage Big Madam, who accuses Buhari of not speaking English. Adunni muses that if a man whose English is not good can be president, maybe she can be president one day, too.

It's now the first Sunday of April, and Adunni is on her way to attend a special church service with her employers for Big Madam's Women in Business group. Adunni comes along because Big Madam needs her to carry in fabrics she will give to women in the group. Adunni hasn't attended a church service since moving to Lagos, and she is very excited. Big Madam wears a *boubou* made of a golden material and a gold *gele*. Adunni wears Rebecca's old shoes, which have since grown ragged, but she likes wearing them because they make her feel as if she knew Rebecca.

*Big Madam's criticism of Bahari's English establishes speaking the language as evidence of a person's competency. Adunni casual musing about becoming president one day shows how receiving an education and realizing her "louding voice" gives her the confidence to imagine a future of possibility and opportunity.*



*A boubou is a long, robe-like women's garment worn in West Africa. Gele is a Yoruba word meaning "head tie." Big Madam's elaborate, golden garments suggest that Lagos church services can be formal, flashy affairs. Rebecca's shoes symbolize the space Rebecca and her mysterious disappearance hold in Adunni's mind, as well as Adunni's desire to keep Rebecca's memory alive and let her voice be heard.*



Ms. Tia is still in Port Harcourt visiting her mother, who has since been admitted to a hospital, though she texted Adunni recently to let her know she will be returning to Lagos soon. Adunni's employers bicker over money for the church offering. As Big Madam hands Big Daddy money for this today's church offering and for a conference next week, she reminds him that the church never actually received the last offering that Big Daddy was supposed to bring them.

Big Daddy grabs the money from Big Madam, grumbling about how ridiculous it sounds for a woman to be upset that "the head of the family, the man in charge of [her] home" spent the money that she gave him. Big Madam begins to cry, which makes Adunni feel bad for her. Adunni watches as Big Madam covertly turns toward the window and "sniffs something up her nose."

Abu stops the car when they arrive at the church, which is a grand, round building with a big golden cross on its roof. All of the attendees wear fancy, brightly colored clothing. Adunni recalls her humble church in Ikati, whose attendees dress "like they mourn, sing like they mourn too." Big Daddy stays outside to smoke a *sigá* while Adunni and Big Madam head up the stairs to a room that leads to the auditorium. A woman wearing tight, provocative clothing and lots of makeup welcomes them to the "Celebration Arena" but informs them that housemaids are not allowed in the auditorium.

Big Madam enters the auditorium through a glass door while the attendant ushers Adunni to a gray, windowless **house** in the very back of the church. There's a foul-smelling bathroom building next to the gray house, and Adunni muses that they must have built this church "after they finish using all the money for the fine church in the front." The attendant informs Adunni that this house is for "the housemaid service."

*Big Madam's comment about the church not receiving the church offering implies that Big Daddy pocketed the money for himself. Big Daddy's response shows that he doesn't respect Big Madam and doesn't acknowledge her position as the household's breadwinner. His gender alone makes him feel that he has the right to make decisions about money he hasn't earned.*



*Again, being a man makes Big Daddy feel entitled to Big Madam's money. It allows him to see himself as "the head of the family, the man in charge of [her] home," even though it's Big Madam who supports the household financially and logistically. Adunni feels sympathy for Big Madam, recognizing that rich people can't always use their money to make their problems go away. In Big Madam's case, being a successful businesswoman isn't enough to make her husband love or respect her. That Big Madam "sniffs something up her nose" seems to suggest that she is doing some kind of drug, which underscores how hurtful Big Daddy's behavior is to her. She seemingly feels the need to self-medicate to cope with Big Daddy's abuse.*



*The golden cross on the church's roof is a visual indicator of the congregants' wealth, as is the flashy clothing the congregants wear. There's an air of falseness to the scene: it seems as though these people want to have a party and show off to one another rather than worship God. This becomes especially apparent to Adunni when she hears the attendant refer to the place of worship as the "Celebration Arena." Sigá is the Yoruba word for cigarette.*



*That the attendees make housemaids observe the service in a separate, foul-smelling building reflects their hypocrisy; surely it would be more Christ-like to welcome the poor into their main hall of worship. The housemaids' banishment to a separate building represents the way their lower social status, lack of education, and gender rob them of basic respect in society.*



Once inside the gray **house**, Adunni spots a group of other girls about her age who look equally as plain, dirty, and sad. She makes eye contact of one of the girls, who “seems to be saying: *You are me. I am you. Our madams are different, but they are the same.*” Adunni spots Chisom, who is dressed considerably nicer than the rest of the girls, in a far corner. Chisom explains that her madam doesn’t usually come to this church, and that they were both confused when Chisom wasn’t allowed to sit with her. Adunni asks Chisom why her madam is so kind to her, and Chisom explains that they “take care of” each other, behaving like sisters and sharing secrets, which is practically unheard of for madams and housemaids.

Adunni asks Chisom to clarify what she meant the other day when she said that Rebecca was “getting fat.” The pastor enters the room, cutting Chisom’s story short, though she quickly explains that Rebecca told her that she was happy because she was getting married, and that she disappeared shortly after saying so. The pastor starts the service before Chisom can say who Rebecca was supposed to marry, and Chisom’s madam, Caroline, brings her to the big auditorium midway through the service.

Big Daddy sleeps in the car on the way back from the service. When they arrive home, Adunni remains in the car, contemplating this new development in the Rebecca story. She begins to question why everybody has acted as though something bad happened to Rebecca who, apparently, had been happily engaged to be married. Adunni shifts her thoughts away from Rebecca to consider the many wounds her body bares from Big Madam’s beatings and wonders how she will make it to the end of the month, when she is due to find out about the scholarship results. She doesn’t know if she will be allowed to go to school if she wins.

As Adunni begins to cry, Abu, who she’d forgotten was still in the car, asks her what’s wrong. Adunni mentions everything that’s been running through her mind, including her past worries about Rebecca. Abu looks around to make sure that nobody is listening and tells Adunni that he has something to show her—something that he found in the car after Rebecca vanished. They make plans to meet up when Big Daddy is not around. Adunni exits the car and receives a text from Ms. Tia informing her that she will be back in Lagos tomorrow, and that Big Madam will allow them to get together, which is when she will have her “**bath**.”

*Adunni’s moment of silent connection with the other housemaid illustrates the bond they share in being denied comfort, respect, and acceptance because of their lower social status, gender, and lack of education. Chisom, apparently, is the exception to this rule, though Caroline’s good treatment of Chisom seems to be entirely conditional: Caroline treats Chisom well, but only because Chisom keeps her secrets.*



*Chisom’s admission complicates what Adunni already knows about Rebecca’s disappearance. From this new information, it seems that Rebecca really did have a boyfriend, though who he is—and whether Rebecca is with him now—remains unknown. Chisom’s arrangement with Caroline grants her the special privilege of attending the church service in the main auditorium with all the wealthy attendees.*



*Despite the many unhappy marriages Adunni has seen over the course of her young life, she still seems to connect marriage to happiness, which is why she decides Rebecca might be okay. Adunni’s assumption speaks to the power of social norms, as well as how unbearable it is to work for Big Madam; to Adunni, running away to be married seems like paradise compared to being Big Madam’s housemaid. Thinking about the scholarship contributes to Adunni’s anxiety because she sees it as her only path toward freedom. This moment also carves out what seems to be the major difference between Adunni and Rebecca: while Rebecca (apparently) reached her freedom with the help of a man, Adunni wants to earn hers on her own.*



*Abu’s admission about something mysterious he found in the car after Rebecca disappeared might bring Adunni closer to uncovering the mystery of Rebecca’s disappearance and symbolically restoring Rebecca’s voice. His grim composure suggests that perhaps Chisom’s theory about Rebecca running away to get married isn’t what really happened—perhaps Rebecca never earned her freedom, after all. Abu’s stipulation that he and Adunni must meet up when Big Daddy is not around implies that Big Daddy would be upset about whatever Abu has to show Adunni, which suggests that Big Daddy might have something to do with Rebecca’s disappearance.*



## CHAPTER 44

*Fact: the Yoruba ethnic group believes that twins are “a powerful, supernatural blessing” that bring their families “wealth and protection.”* Adunni arrives at the Dada compound and greets Ms. Tia, who is sitting under a coconut tree. Ms. Tia tells Adunni that Ms. Tia’s mother is still hanging on, and that their relationship continues to improve. She asks Adunni—as she always does—if Big Madam’s beatings and cruelty have stopped, and Adunni responds with her usual answer: no. Adunni relays a particularly horrible incident in which Big Madam forced her to remove human waste from the toilet with her bare hands.

Adunni spots an unfamiliar car parked at the compound, and Ms. Tia explains that Ken’s mother is there and will accompany them to the **bath**. Ms. Tia is skeptical of the bath, but she has been off “the Pill” for months now and is willing to try anything to get pregnant. Adunni equates “the Pill” to the medicine Khadija gave her to prevent pregnancy.

Adunni enters the unfamiliar car where Ms. Tia’s mother-in-law has been waiting, along with the driver, Moscow. Ms. Tia’s mother-in-law, whom Adunni refers to as “doctor mama,” is thin and wears an expensive-looking red dress. Doctor mama orders Moscow to go to the Miracle Center in Ikeja; she and Ms. Tia sit in the back, while Adunni sits next to Moscow. Doctor mama and Ms. Tia don’t talk to each other on the drive.

When they arrive at the Miracle Center, doctor mama hands Ms. Tia a scarf for her head and a newspaper for Adunni’s head. Doctor mama expresses irritation and disbelief that Ms. Tia would bring a neighbor’s housemaid to such a sacred place, but Ms. Tia defends Adunni, insisting that she will leave if Adunni cannot accompany them inside. She also refuses to degrade Adunni by making her wear a newspaper on her head and offers to wear the newspaper herself. The two women argue back and forth until Adunni makes light of the situation by fashioning the newspaper into a hat.

*Sitting outside (as opposed to inside a house) symbolizes Ms. Tia’s rejection of social norms. This symbolic representation of Ms. Tia’s open-mindedness will be challenged when she is forced to undergo the fertility bath, which is based in older customs and beliefs about women, pregnancy, and motherhood. On another note, forcing Adunni to perform such a disgusting act is Big Madam’s way of asserting her class-derived dominance over Adunni. Whatever moment of connection they had in the car in Chapter 42 seems to have vanished as suddenly as it appeared.*



*In relating Khadija’s medicine to Ms. Tia’s “Pill,” Adunni establishes pregnancy-related problems as a common and central part of a woman’s experience in her culture. Society’s expectations versus a woman’s desire to reproduce can be at odds with each other, no matter a woman’s social or economic class.*



*Doctor mama’s clothing implies that the doctor, like Ms. Tia, comes from a background of economic privilege.*



*Like Big Madam and many of the other women who live in her wealthy neighborhood, doctor mama doesn’t believe that housemaids deserve respect or kindness, which is why Adunni’s presence at the Miracle Center irritates her. Adunni’s decision to make light of the situation demonstrates her ability to adapt to her surroundings.*





Adunni, Ms. Tia, and doctor mama enter the Miracle Center and meet the prophet, a short, bowlegged man. He wears a long red dress and a white cap with a cross on it. The prophet welcomes them to the church, which contains many wooden benches and reminds Adunni of her old village classroom. Behind the altar at the front of the church is a picture of Jesus, who “looks hungry, with vex face too,” and who reminds Adunni of Ms. Tia’s British friend, Katie. Adunni wonders if “Jesus is from the Abroad.”

*This Miracle Center seems to belong to a type of Christianity called Aladura Christianity, which was founded in Nigeria in 1918 and borrows from elements of Pentecostalism. Many churches in Western Nigeria are Aladura churches. Aladura Christians believe in faith healing, of which Ms. Tia’s bath seems to be an example. That Ms. Tia needs to be healed implies that she’s to blame for not getting pregnant and absolves Ken of any responsibility. Adunni’s observation that Jesus looks like Katie implies that the picture depicts a Caucasian Jesus. When Adunni describes Jesus as “hungry, with a vex face too,” seems to suggest that Jesus looks troubled, which give the church a sense of foreboding and hints that this ritual may not be a positive experience for Ms. Tia.*



Adunni spots “mosquito coils” on the floor, as well as 15 red candles. The prophet greets Adunni’s group, and doctor mama begins to speak to him in Yoruba, explaining that Ms. Tia “has one evil spirit” in her that makes it impossible for her to have a baby. Doctor mama thinks that “the evil spirit needs chasing off to go back to the Abroad.” The prophet explains that the **bath** will produce a “twenty-four-hour miracle,” that Ms. Tia will leave behind the “garment of sorrow and barrenness” that she entered the church in, exchanging it for “a garment of twins.” Doctor affirms this and specifies that the twins will be two boys. Ms. Tia, doctor mama, and Adunni all kneel as the prophet prays over Ms. Tia, ringing a bell as he walks around her seven times. The prophet finishes the prayer and announces that it is time for the bath.

*The prophet’s assumption that Ms. Tia “has one evil spirit” in her places the responsibility to get pregnant on Ms. Tia alone, which is unfair, because her husband is also involved in conception. Doctor mama’s opinion that “the evil spirit needs chasing off to go back to the Abroad” implies that Ms. Tia “caught” the evil spirit when she was living in the UK, which could be an attack on any number of things, including Western culture or Ms. Tia’s education abroad. Like the prophet, doctor mama assumes that Ms. Tia is to blame for her supposed “barrenness.”*



## CHAPTER 45

*Fact: Nigeria boasts “some of the richest pastors in the world.”* The prophet leads Adunni’s group down a path lined with green plants. A thin woman wearing the same dress and cap as the prophet greets them at the end of the path. The prophet introduces this woman as Mother-in-Jerusalem Tinu, or Mother Tinu for short, and explains that she is “the head of [their] female birth-makers.” Mother Tinu will lead Adunni’s group to the river, as men are not allowed past this point. Ms. Tia wants to turn back, but Mother Tinu explains that she cannot, because the prophet has already circled her with the bell seven times. The prophet instructs them to go to the church after the **bath** so that he can give Ms. Tia a special cream to use.

*The fact about the country’s rich pastors seems to suggest that Nigerian churches might be more invested in making money than in following God. Prefacing Ms. Tia’s ritual with this fact invites the reader to regard the bath with some skepticism. It also positions the church as an industry that exploits a culture’s misogynistic beliefs, profiting at the expense of women.*



The group follows Mother Tinu to a cave made of brown rocks. Adunni hears women inside the cave moaning a sad song, and Ms. Tia grows increasingly concerned about the ritual. Mother Tinu explains that the **river** past the cave is where Ms. Tia will receive her bath. Doctor mama verifies that they have paid for the bath, which shocks Ms. Tia, who hadn't realized that it cost money. They enter the cave to find a small, dark space with a low ceiling. They stand before the river, and the scene reminds Adunni of Khadija's final hours. Four "female birth-makers" kneel before the river, tying white cloths around themselves. Ms. Tia is nervous and squeezes Adunni's hand. She begs to go back, but Mother Tinu shouts at them to be quiet as she fetches the "holy cloth and holy brooms."

Mother Tinu returns with the cloths and brooms. She instructs Ms. Tia to remove her clothes and wrap the holy cloths around her body and head. Ms. Tia shakes, but she follows Mother Tinu's orders. Mother Tinu then instructs Adunni and doctor mama to step back as she guides Ms. Tia closer to the **river**.

The four women stop moaning and take the brooms from Mother Tinu. One of the birth-makers pulls back Ms. Tia's cloth and begins to beat her naked body with the broom. Ms. Tia screams and writhes on the floor. The other three women join the first in flogging Ms. Tia, their faces devoid of all emotion. Adunni wants desperately to help Ms. Tia but finds herself unable to move. As the women whip Ms. Tia with their brooms, Adunni observes that Ms. Tia's "whole body is becoming the red of the earth."

## CHAPTER 46

After the flogging, Ms. Tia lies on the floor, bleeding and silent. Mother Tinu announces that "the evil of childlessness has been chased out." The four birth-makers gently lift Ms. Tia from the floor and pour **river** water down her wounded, bleeding back. Ms. Tia turns toward Adunni, and Adunni can see that her face, too, is covered in marks and almost looks like the mask painting hanging on the wall in Ms. Tia's house. Ms. Tia's eyes look "wild."

*The river reminds Adunni of Khadija's death. Another commonality between Khadija's death and Ms. Tia's bath is the absence of men in either scene: just as Bamidele abandoned Khadija in her hour of need, so too do the men leave the women before the bathing ritual can occur. The fact that doctor mama paid for Ms. Tia to undergo the ritual reinforces the idea that the church is profiting off the culture's beliefs surrounding women and spirituality's roles in pregnancy. Mother Tinu and her "birth-makers" assume a complicated role. On one hand, they are potentially complicit in problematic cultural ideas about women and pregnancy. On the other hand, they might sincerely believe that they're helping Ms. Tia.*



*When Mother Tinu guides Ms. Tia toward the river, she symbolically leads her away from Adunni's support and toward society's double standards regarding female fertility.*



*The violence that the birth-makers inflict on Ms. Tia during the fertility ritual might symbolize society punishing her for her inability to conceive. In a way, her gender makes her as powerless as Adunni is when Big Madam physically beats her for not completing her chores to Big Madam's liking. In this moment, not even Tia's relative privilege is enough to protect her from the way society oppresses women.*



*The ritual results in the birth-makers beating Ms. Tia into silent submission. In describing Ms. Tia's eyes as "wild," Adunni implies that it's no longer Ms. Tia behind those eyes—she's been so badly wounded and dehumanized that she doesn't seem like herself. Symbolically, it's as though this society's oppressive traditions and beliefs surrounding women and pregnancy rob Ms. Tia of her "louding voice," of her sense of self.*



Seeing her friend this way makes Adunni want to cry. Doctor mama places a hand on Adunni's shoulder, and Adunni looks up and sees that she is crying. Terribly shaken, doctor mama insists that she had no idea that the process would be so brutal—she thought it would just be a **bath**.

*Ms. Tia's flogging is another instance in which Adunni's gender and social status render her powerless to save a friend, just as she was unable to save Khadija earlier in the novel. Doctor mama seems remorseful about encouraging Ms. Tia to take part in the violent ritual, but her ignorance about the violence involved in the bath doesn't change the fact that she put Ms. Tia in harm's way to give herself grandchildren. Doctor mama places her own desires, as well as society's expectations for women to become mothers, above Ms. Tia's safety.*



As Adunni's group walks away from the center, Adunni feels like she has to vomit. Behind the church, she looks through a window and sees the prophet beginning the ceremony with another woman. She looks at the picture of Jesus and thinks that "now, he just looks tired. And sad."

*Whereas Jesus looked worried before, now he looks "tired" and "sad." This implies that the version of Christianity the prophet and the women at the church practice doesn't actually align with Christ's teachings of compassion and nonviolence.*



## CHAPTER 47

The group drives home in silence, though Adunni has many things that she wants to know, such as why the doctor didn't also receive a beating. "If it takes two people to make a baby," she wonders, why is it only the woman who is punished when there is no baby? She wonders why Nigerian women suffer so much more than Nigerian men. Doctor mama continues to apologize, insisting that she had no idea the **bath** would be so brutal. Although she wanted to stop the women, she didn't take action because she was thinking about the baby that the bath might bring. Ms. Tia stares out the window, refusing to answer doctor mama.

*Adunni thinks of the violence Ms. Tia incurs as an example of gender double standards, which she sees as a widespread problem in Nigeria. This is yet another example of how Adunni's education is helping her contextualize people and situations in her life within broader social issues. Doctor mama's apology isn't all that satisfying: she seems remorseful that Ms. Tia had to suffer but ultimately excuses the ritual on the grounds that it will be worth it if Ms. Tia can become pregnant.*



Everything is quiet when Adunni returns to the **house** that evening. She runs to the kitchen and sees Kofi, who demands to know where she has been. Kofi explains that Big Madam's sister, Kemi, has been in an accident, and that Big Madam went to be with her at the hospital. He berates Big Daddy for watching TV in the living room, demanding cupcakes, and refusing to help his wife.

*Big Daddy's disrespect for his wife extends beyond infidelity and physical abuse: he's also physically and emotionally absent during times of crisis. Big Daddy has no obligations of his own and can support his wife and her sister at the hospital; he simply chooses not to care.*



Kofi starts to show Adunni pictures of the **house** he is building in Kumasi but stops when he sees the sad look on Adunni's face. Adunni doesn't tell him about the **bath**. Kofi tells Adunni to lie down; he will cover for her if anyone asks where she is. He also mentions that Abu came looking for Adunni. Adunni is still very curious about whatever Abu will have to say about Rebecca, but tonight she doesn't want to think about anything. She tells Kofi not to send Abu to her room.

*Kumasi is a city in southern Ghana. Adunni is too overcome with sadness and confusion after Ms. Tia's beating to be care about Abu's information about Rebecca, which reflects how violence and oppression can beat people down to the point that they're too psychologically drained to advocate for others.*



## CHAPTER 48

Adunni sits in her room, unable to sleep. Her thoughts are racing, and her chest “is paining from all the things [she] saw today, from a deep longing for Mama.” She thinks about Big Daddy not helping Big Madam care for her sister and contemplates how even having lots of money can’t solve all of their problems.

The next morning, Adunni goes down to the kitchen and greets Kofi, who tells her that Big Madam is still at the hospital. Adunni tells Kofi that she is going out, not bothering to offer an excuse in case Big Madam comes back while she’s gone. Adunni makes her way to Ms. Tia’s, and Ms. Tia welcomes her inside despite the early hour. Ms. Tia looks horrible from yesterday’s beating: her face is covered in scratches, and her eyes look “red and angry.” Ms. Tia apologizes for making Adunni witness the **bath** yesterday. Adunni apologizes for not stepping in to save her, though Ms. Tia promises that there was nothing that Adunni could have done. Adunni suggests that Ms. Tia rub palm oil on her face to help the lines heal.

Adunni asks Ms. Tia what the doctor said when he saw her. Ms. Tia recounts how the doctor and doctor mama got into a huge fight that ended in him kicking her out of the **house**. Once his mother was gone, the doctor confided in Ms. Tia that the **bath** was useless: the doctor cannot get her pregnant because he is sterile, which is what motivated him to help women have babies in the first place. He didn’t tell Ms. Tia before because they’d originally agreed not to have children. Ms. Tia kicks the door and swears. She explains that the doctor hadn’t told her the truth because he was afraid that she would leave him, which frustrates her. In addition to this, she just found out that Ms. Tia’s mother has an infection again.

Adunni smiles and tells Ms. Tia that “tomorrow will be better than today.” Tia smiles back and tells Adunni that she will check the Ocean Oil office after she gets back to check on the scholarship results. Ms. Tia is adamant that she will do everything in her power to ensure that Adunni can go to school. She read Adunni’s essay and now sees the extent of the suffering that Adunni has endured throughout her life. Ms. Tia promises that even if the scholarship doesn’t pan out, she will fight to remove Adunni from Big Madam’s **house**. Ms. Tia holds Adunni’s hands as tears flow from Adunni’s eyes.

*Despite the many opportunities and choices Big Madam’s wealth affords her, it can’t guarantee her happiness, and it can’t overpower the sexist culture that fuels Big Daddy’s sense of entitlement.*



*Adunni’s choice not to offer an excuse for her absence reflects the hopelessness she feels in the aftermath of Ms. Tia’s beating: it’s immensely troubling for her to see someone with such a confident “louding voice” destroyed by society’s unfair expectations of women. Adunni feels such remorse for not being able to stop the beating because she sees Ms. Tia’s assault as eerily similar to Khadija’s death. Adunni wasn’t able to save Khadija, and she might have thought she could redeem herself by saving Ms. Tia; when she fails again, it’s almost confirmation of Adunni’s powerlessness in the face of the powerful social norms that oppress women. Ms. Tia’s “red and angry” eyes suggest she might have been crying before Adunni arrives at her house.*



*Despite the fact that Ken is infertile, meaning that he’s the reason they can’t conceive, it’s still Ms. Tia who had to suffer the consequences. Ken’s decision to keep his infertility a secret from his wife suggests that even a marriage with a strong foundation of mutual respect is vulnerable to inequality.*



*When Adunni responds to Ms. Tia with Ms. Tia’s own earlier words of optimism, she returns the confidence that her mentor passed on to her. Ms. Tia’s promise to remove Adunni from Big Madam’s house, even if the scholarship doesn’t come through, positions the support of other women as the driving force behind women’s empowerment and survival.*



## CHAPTER 49

*Fact: “a 2006 UNICEF report showed that approximately 15 million children under the age of 14, mostly girls” are victims of human trafficking in Nigeria.* Adunni returns home feeling happy and reassured by her conversation with Ms. Tia. She runs into Kofi, who tells her that Abu has been looking for her. Adunni agrees to meet Kofi in her room later that night.

Kofi notices Adunni’s cheerful demeanor and asks her if she’s found out about the scholarship, or if she has finally tracked down Kola and received her long-overdue salary. Adunni accuses Mr. Kola and Big Madam of “slave-trading people like [her],” though she proudly asserts that she is now “a slave with no chain.”

Kofi is amused by how much Adunni appears to have learned in preparation for the scholarship and asks what else she knows about the slave trade. Adunni explains that although slavery was abolished in 1833, the practice continues in modern Nigeria. She resolves to do something “to stop slave trading of the mind, not just of the body.” Impressed, Kofi smiles at Adunni and says that maybe she will be part of history. Adunni corrects him: “not his-story,” she says. “My own will be called her-story. Adunni’s story.”

*That Adunni is mentally recovered enough to meet with Abu and hear about Rebecca positions her intimate moment with Ms. Tia as a restorative experience that replenishes Adunni’s confidence and loudens her voice.*



*Adunni’s realization that Mr. Kola and Big Madam are in the business of “slave-trading people like [her]” references the Nigeria fact in the beginning of the chapter. This once again shows how reading and learning give Adunni the context to understand the reality of her situation and become something more than a powerless bystander to the atrocities she has suffered.*



*Adunni incorporates what she learns from reading The Book of Nigerian Facts into her worldview, which allows her to internalize and work through the trauma of being sold into human trafficking. When Adunni vows “to stop slave trading of the mind, not just of the body,” she forges a connection between physical enslavement and mental enslavement, which suggests that access to education can free one’s mind and give way to more opportunities. Her remarks here show how much she has grown as a result of her education and demonstrate how this education has given her the voice she needs to share her story with the world.*



## CHAPTER 50

It’s midnight and raining when Abu arrives at Adunni’s door. He enters her room quickly, and there’s a scared look on his face as he takes a folded piece of paper from his pocket and hands it to Adunni. He orders Adunni not to tell anyone that he gave it to her and begins his story: The day that Rebecca disappeared, Big Daddy asked him to clean his car. As Abu cleaned, he noticed that the front seat was wet, and nobody could explain why. It was only after reading this letter, which he found hidden in a seat belt buckle, that he understood the truth of Rebecca’s disappearance—a truth that has weighed on him ever since. Abu tells Adunni good night and leaves to fetch Big Madam from the hospital.

*Abu’s scared look, combined with the fact that he found the letter hidden in a seat belt buckle, suggests that the letter likely contains some bad news about Rebecca. Abu’s silence (despite his guilty conscience) could indicate that he hasn’t felt the same obligation as Adunni feels to share Rebecca’s story and restore her voice. Still, Abu is in a difficult position: if the letter contains information that implicates Big Daddy or Big Madam in Rebecca’s disappearance, and people were to find out that Abu had it, he could lose his job. Abu’s predicament highlights the unethical decisions people—particularly poor or otherwise oppressed people—can be forced to make to protect their themselves.*



Adunni opens the letter and sees what looks like a bloody fingerprint at the top of the paper. Her heart pounds as she reads. The letter is written by Rebecca, who tells her reader that she is a housemaid of Chief and Florence Adeoti (Big Daddy and Big Madam). According to Rebecca, Big Daddy impregnated her and told her that he would marry her if she continued to have sex with him. On the morning that Rebecca writes the letter, she explains, she is supposed to go to the doctor. She has chosen to write this letter because her stomach began to hurt after eating food that Big Daddy brought her, and now she is afraid. The letter ends mid-sentence.

Adunni folds the letter and shakes as she considers Rebecca's fate. Was Big Daddy the boyfriend that Chisom mentioned? And did Big Daddy hurt her? Adunni is so preoccupied with fear that she doesn't her the door open. At first, she thinks that Abu has returned, but when she smells alcohol, she knows it must be Big Daddy behind her. Adunni wants to slam the door in his face but knows that Big Daddy will overpower her. Adunni hides under the bed just before Big Daddy enters the room, calling for her, knowing that she is there. Big Daddy lies on the bed, his weight pushing the mattress lower onto Adunni's chest until she screams, revealing her hiding spot. Big Daddy pulls Adunni out from under the bed. Adunni screams as loud as she can.

Big Daddy tries to cover Adunni's mouth, but she knees his stomach and continues to fight back, biting and spitting at her attacker. Big Daddy pins Adunni against the ground, and Adunni hears his pants unzip. A voice inside Adunni urges her to fight, though she doesn't know how she can—Big Daddy is too strong. Inwardly, she cries for Mama to save her. Suddenly, Adunni sees a bolt of lightning flash through the sky, and she recalls the light she saw the night Morufu first raped her. Unlike that time, though, this lightning is followed by a powerful crack of thunder, and Adunni knows that Mama is there, watching out for her.

*Rebecca's letter confirms that Big Daddy manipulated Rebecca into a sexual relationship, just as he has tried to do with Adunni. To keep Rebecca happy and to prevent her from telling Big Madam about the affair (and eventual pregnancy), he lied about his intentions to marry her. Rebecca doesn't seem to know what made her stomach start hurting, but it seems plausible that Big Daddy put something in the food her gave her in an effort to harm the unborn baby. Even if Rebecca was happy about the affair, it's difficult to see the relationship as completely consensual, as Big Daddy was Rebecca's employer, and she might have felt pressured into having sex with him to keep her job.*



*The letter appears to fill in some of the blanks in Chisom's earlier story: the man Rebecca believed she was going to marry was Big Daddy, and the reason she grew bigger and bigger right before her disappearance was because she was pregnant with his child. Interestingly, Rebecca's arrangement with Big Daddy shares some similarities to Chisom's arrangement with Caroline Bankole: both housemaids keep their employers' secrets in exchange for rewards. That Big Daddy's breath smells of alcohol suggests that trouble lies ahead: so far, Big Daddy has behaved most inappropriately toward Adunni when he is intoxicated.*



*Big Daddy's hand covering Adunni's mouth symbolizes the oppressor silencing the oppressed. Throughout the novel, people have silenced Adunni because of her gender, lack of education, and social status, all of which are factors that contribute to Big Daddy and Adunni's unequal relationship. The bolt of lightning, both here and in the earlier passage in Morufu's room, symbolizes Mama's spirit and, by extension, the transformative power of women's solidarity. Although in the earlier scene Mama's spiritual support was not enough to help Adunni overpower Morufu, this time, a crack of thunder accompanies the lightning, which could symbolize Adunni's newly honed "louding voice" and reinvigorated will to survive. This indicates that she may be able to overpower her attacker this time around.*



With all the strength she can muster, Adunni bites Big Daddy's hand. Big Daddy recoils in pain, and Adunni frees herself from underneath him, picks up Mama's Bible, and whacks Big Daddy on the head. Big Daddy's phone, which has been ringing, flies out of his pocket.

*In a way, Adunni's inner "louding" voice, bolstered by the lightning bolt that she believes represents Mama's spirit, is what gives her the strength to overpower Big Daddy. That the lightning bolt is stronger and accompanied by thunder tonight, as opposed to the weaker, fleeting lightning Adunni witnessed on her first night with Morufu, symbolizes her personal growth. Before, Mama's spirit and the "louding voice" she encouraged Adunni to find could speak only in a timid whisper. But now, Adunni possesses a confident inner voice that allows her to respond to Mama's spirit and overpower her oppressors, symbolically and literally.*



Just as Big Daddy is about to pounce at Adunni, the door opens to reveal Big Madam standing in the doorway. Big Daddy zips his pants and flees. Big Madam looks vacant as she picks up Big Daddy's phone and looks at it in horror. She falls to the floor as she cries, "Chief, ha! Caroline! Baby love? No!" Adunni wants to comfort Big Madam, but Big Madam remains unreachable as she continues to weep and stare into the phone.

*Big Madam appears before Big Daddy can rape Adunni; this is the first time she has directly interfered in his inappropriate behavior. Big Madam seems to read the name "Caroline" and the words "baby love" on Big Daddy's phone, which suggests that Big Daddy is having an affair with Caroline Bankole. Caroline is likely also woman Adunni overheard Big Daddy speaking with in Chapter 39, though Adunni does not make the connection at this time.*



## CHAPTER 51

Big Madam continues to weep. Adunni makes a sound, causing Big Madam to look up, as though noticing Adunni for the first time. Big Madam runs from the room, leaving Adunni alone. Adunni can still smell Big Daddy's presence, but she thinks she can smell his fear, too.

*Despite the fact that Big Madam technically prevented Adunni from being assault, she leaves the room without checking to see if Adunni is okay. She seems more bothered by Big Daddy's affair than by his attempted rape of Adunni.*



The rain is starting to let up now. The air outside is still, but, in the distance, Adunni can make out the moan of a woman about to give birth. Adunni runs from her room to the main **house**. She finds Big Madam, her eyes red and swollen, sitting on the sofa. She doesn't look up when Adunni enters. Carefully, Adunni tells Big Madam that she has a letter from Rebecca. Big Madam takes the letter, but Adunni thinks her eyes are too swollen to read the words.

*The swollen eyes that prevent Big Madam from reading the letter symbolize her decision to let her own bitterness stand in the way of helping other women. In this case, Big Madam's emotions about the affair with Caroline literally blind her to the troubling content of Rebecca's letter.*



Big Madam sets the letter aside. After a pause, she speaks to Adunni, lamenting that “this time, [Big Daddy] went too far.” Adunni goes to the kitchen and returns with a bowl of warm **water** and a cloth. She cleans the blood and tears from Big Madam’s face and holds her hands. At first Big Madam doesn’t want to accept Adunni’s kindness, but she eventually gives in, as though to “accept that even the strongest of people can suffer a weakness.” Adunni sings a song that Mama taught her as Big Madam falls asleep.

*Big Madam’s comment about Big Daddy going “too far” is vague: it’s not clear whether she’s referring to Big Daddy’s attempted rape of their very young housemaid, or to Big Daddy’s affair with Caroline. The first situation positions Big Madam as Adunni’s advocate, whereas the second situation suggests that Big Madam’s agony is the result of Big Daddy’s betrayal and is therefore selfishly motivated. Regardless of Big Madam’s reasons for being so upset, and regardless of her cruelty toward Adunni, Adunni chooses to support and take care of her ailing madam. Tending to Big Madam with the cloth dipped in warm water allows Adunni to perform the acts of cleansing and healing she wasn’t able to give Ms. Tia and Khadija. When Big Madam receives Adunni’s care and “accept[s] that even the strongest of people can suffer a weakness,” there is a moment of vulnerability and connection between the two women, which is similar to their earlier exchange in the car driving back from Big Madam’s store. Big Madam finally allows Adunni to sing without beating her, which serves as further proof that Adunni has found her “louding voice.” Overall, this scene demonstrates Adunni’s strength, as well as her capacity for kindness and compassion in the face of hardship: she’s the one who just escaped an attempted rape, and yet she chooses to stay strong and comfort someone else who is suffering.*



## CHAPTER 52

*Fact: roughly 30 percent of Nigerian businesses are women-owned, though gender discrimination prevents further growth.* Kofi arrives at Adunni’s door the next morning. He’s seen the mess around the **house**, and Big Madam’s disheveled appearance, and demands to know what happened the night before. He explains that Big Daddy gave him the night off and encouraged him to leave the house, which he did, though he admits that he found the gesture suspicious. Concerned, Kofi asks Adunni if Big Daddy raped her. Adunni assures Kofi that Big Madam appeared before anything could happen.

*The fact at the beginning of this chapter sheds some light on the way Nigerian businesswomen like Big Madam have had to overcome more hurdles than businessmen. Big Daddy’s order that Kofi leave the house shows that his attempted rape of Adunni was calculated and premeditated. Despite Kofi’s suspicions about Big Daddy’s motives for getting him out of the house, his relative powerlessness forced him to follow his boss’s order and prevented him from staying behind to ensure Adunni’s safety.*



Curious to know how Rebecca could actually believe Big Daddy’s marriage proposal, Adunni asks Kofi if Rebecca had gone to school. Kofi recalls that, yes, Rebecca’s previous Madam sent her school. Inwardly, Adunni regards Rebecca’s naivete and decides that speaking good English doesn’t automatically make a person intelligent. Adunni wants proof that Rebecca actually wrote the letter and asks Kofi if he has a sample of Rebecca’s writing. Kofi says he’ll ask Abu, for whom Rebecca would write shopping lists. Finally, Kofi tells Adunni that he’s here because Big Madam ordered him to send Adunni to her room, which is strange, since Big Madam never lets anyone into her room. Adunni thanks Kofi and leaves to meet Big Madam.

*The realization that Rebecca had been relatively educated and still managed to fall prey to Big Daddy’s lies and manipulation also shows how powerfully factors like class and systemic oppression affect a person’s ability to make decisions for themselves. It’s possible that Rebecca might have initially been hesitant to believe Big Daddy’s talk of marriage but ultimately decided to make the best of the situation when she found out she was pregnant.*





Big Madam calls Adunni into her room and orders her to shut the door. Adunni complies and looks around the room, spotting pictures of Big Madam's children, as well as one of Big Madam as a young, slim woman with smooth skin. She spies a collection of skin bleaching creams on Big Madam's dressing tables and wonders why Big Madam would do this to herself when she looked so beautiful in the old photograph. Big Madam asks Adunni if Big Daddy raped her the night before, and Adunni assures her that he did not.

*Big Madam's drastic transformation suggests that years of suffering from Big Daddy's disrespect and abuses have worn down Big Madam, making her harsh and unforgiving. The skin bleaching creams symbolize Big Madam's attempt to compensate for her physical and emotional exhaustion: she distorts her face and assumes an air of unapproachability and hostility in an effort to conceal her weathered skin and wounded psychological state. It's also noteworthy that Big Madam is seemingly trying to lighten her skin tone, which hints at a broader social problem of colorism in Nigeria.*



Big Madam is annoyed as she informs Adunni that Ms. Tia called her yesterday to discuss Adunni's future. Apparently, the phone call went badly, ending with Ms. Tia hanging up on Big Madam, and Big Madam went to Adunni's room to "deal with" Adunni, which is how she happened upon her husband forcing himself on Adunni in the first place. Big Madam expresses disbelief that her husband could go to church and still behave this way, and Adunni quietly responds that "God is not the church."

*Big Madam didn't go to Adunni's room that night out of concern for her housemaid, but to punish her: it was only by accident that she stopped the attempted rape. What had originally seemed like an act of solidarity on Big Madam's part was really a failed attempt at cruelty. Adunni's comment that "God is not the church" implies that a person's public performance of goodness isn't always indicative of their inner goodness: people can act God-fearing in church and behave abhorrently in their private lives.*



After a pause, Big Madam returns the conversation to the subject of Ms. Tia's phone call and asks Adunni if she would take Ms. Tia up on an offer to leave this place. Adunni nods, and Big Madam asks why she wants to go. Adunni considers all the sorrows that she's incurred in her months at Big Madam's, though she only voices aloud that she'd like to go because Big Madam is unkind to her staff, and of course because of Big Daddy. Big Madam begins to talk to herself, anguishing over what she would do if she decided to leave her husband—what she would do "without Chief by [her] side."

*Adunni and Big Madam want the same thing: to leave their oppressors behind and claim their freedom. One key difference is that Big Madam's wealth and independence make this a logistic possibility, whereas Adunni's status as an indentured servant make her freedom contingent on whether Big Madam gives her permission to leave.*



Adunni responds inwardly—or so she thinks—to Big Madam's question: "He wasn't ever by your side." Big Madam demands to know what Adunni means, and Adunni pauses telling Big Madam exactly how cruel, ruthless, and physically violent Big Daddy is toward her. After Adunni is finished with her speech, she stands up and looks around the room to avoid meeting Big Madam's eyes. Adunni offers to sing for Big Madam, but Big Madam has begun to cry again and angrily orders Adunni to leave the room.

*That Adunni chooses to talk freely with Big Madam about Big Daddy is further evidence that she has found her louding voice. When Adunni tells Big Madam that "[Big Daddy] wasn't ever by [her] side," she forces Big Madam to confront the truth about her husband and their marriage, which is something she seems to have mostly suppressed until now, either out of shame, pride, or outright denial. Having to deal with the fact that her successful business and love for Big Daddy aren't enough to make him love and respect her hurts Big Madam, and this is why she angrily orders Adunni to leave.*



## CHAPTER 53

That night, Adunni hears the front gate banging and a car honking incessantly. She leaves her room and runs into Kofi, who informs her that it's Big Daddy who is making all the noise: Big Madam instructed Kofi and Abu not to let him in, which is something she's never done before, not even in the times that she's known Big Daddy has been with a lover. Usually, Big Madam just pretends like nothing is wrong. This time, however, she appears to be serious about not letting Big Daddy get away with his behavior.

Adunni follows up with her request for one of Rebecca's shopping lists, and Kofi pulls a list that Abu gave him from his pocket. Adunni looks at the list and confirms that the list-writer and the letter-writer are both Rebecca. Adunni asks Kofi if he had ever seen Rebecca and Big Daddy together, and Kofi admits that the two had seemed unusually close. Also, whenever Kofi would ask Rebecca about it, she would laugh it off and accuse him of being jealous of Big Daddy.

Big Madam stays in her room for two days, sleeping all day and hardly eating. At night, Adunni enters to rub her feet. Adunni wants to ask Big Madam about Rebecca's letter but understands that the woman is too depressed to talk. Big Daddy remains away from the **house**. On the third night of his absence, Big Madam summons Adunni to her room. Adunni arrives to find Big Madam talking to her sister Kemi on the phone, lamenting her current condition: Chief's family has been pestering her to let Chief return home. Big Madam wonders where these people were when she was struggling, many years before, to raise her family and build up her business.

Big Madam continues to talk to Kemi, explaining how Big Daddy's affair with Caroline Bankole was her breaking point. She grows frustrated as she talks to Kemi, though, exclaiming, "why are you asking me these senseless questions? What do you mean 'Are you sure?'" Listening to Big Madam's phone call, Adunni realizes that Big Madam is actually upset about Big Daddy's affair with Caroline—not his attempted rape of Adunni, as Adunni had previously believed. Eventually Big Madam hangs up the phone and instructs Adunni to rub her feet. Adunni obliges.

*Kofi's comment that Big Madam has never kicked Big Daddy out of the before, even when she knew about his affairs, leads Adunni to believe that it was the attempted rape that fueled Big Madam's decision. This implies that Big Madam is moving past her bitterness and hostility to act as an advocate for Adunni. The reader might be more skeptical, however, given their knowledge of Big Daddy's probable affair with Caroline*



*Kofi's admission reveals that Rebecca brushed off his concerns about her relationship with Big Daddy. It seems as though Rebecca thought Big Daddy actually cared for her and didn't fully understand that he was taking advantage of her, nor did she see how expendable she was to either of her employers.*



*Even though Adunni has just suffered a traumatic experience, she places her concern for Rebecca above her own needs and emotions, ever determined to raise up the missing girl's voice. Adunni's selflessness and compassion for others stands in direct contrast to Big Madam, who continues to wallow in self-pity instead of making sure Adunni is okay. But Big Madam's selfishness could be a byproduct of her own mistreatment: she's become unsupportive of others after years of others not supporting hers. Like Labake earlier in the novel, she projects her bitterness and disappointment onto the people around her.*



*Kemi chooses not to support her sister, doubting Big Madam's side of the story. The phone call confirms that Big Madam kicked Big Daddy out of the house because of the affair with Caroline, which shows that Big Madam sees herself, and not Adunni, as the main victim of Big Daddy's abuse.*



As Adunni massages Big Madam's feet, Big Madam recalls the letter that Adunni mentioned a few nights before and asks to see it, tomorrow, after she gets a good night's sleep. She orders Adunni to sing to her, which she does. As Adunni sings Big Madam to sleep, she imagines that Mama is in the room with her, that Rebecca is not missing, that Ms. Tia is pregnant, and that she doesn't feel so sad for Big Madam.

Adunni wishes she didn't feel so sad for Big Madam because Big Madam, who has done nothing but abuse and disrespect Adunni, is undeserving of Adunni's sympathy. Adunni imagines a utopian world in which everything is made right to cope with Big Madam's lack of support in the aftermath of Big Daddy's assault.



## CHAPTER 54

*Fact:* a 2003 study found that Nigerians are the world's happiest and most optimistic people. The next morning, Adunni walks to the kitchen and finds Kofi slicing a loaf of bread. He greets her excitedly, informing her that his friend at the embassy told him that the scholarship results have been posted; he promises to stop by after work to see the results. In a low voice, Kofi adds that they have guests in the **house**: Big Daddy and his two sisters have arrived to plead with Big Madam to let Big Daddy come home.

The fact that precedes this chapter positions Adunni's unceasing optimism as characteristic of Nigerian people more broadly. That Big Daddy's sisters arrive to advocate for Big Daddy illustrates yet another way in which women can be complicit in gender inequality.



Suddenly, Big Madam, appears in the kitchen. She makes sure that Adunni still has Rebecca's letter and tells her to bring it to her later. She turns to Kofi, instructing him to ensure that Big Daddy and his sisters remain in the reception, because she has called a police officer to the **house**. Big Madam leaves, and Adunni tells a confused Kofi about Rebecca's letter.

Big Madam's decision to call the police is complicated: on a positive note, it seems as though Rebecca might finally receive justice, which would give her a symbolic voice. However, it's pretty clear that Big Madam calling the police is more an act of revenge against Big Daddy for the affair than an effort to find justice for Rebecca.



Adunni sweeps in the backyard until Kofi calls her to the **house** to eavesdrop on the scene unfolding in the reception. Through the "cloudy glass" of the reception door, Adunni can see the shapes of Big Madam, Big Daddy, Big Daddy's sisters, and the police officer, Officer Kamson. Big Madam orders Officer Kamson to take Big Daddy away in connection with the disappearance of Rebecca. As Big Daddy protests, Officer Kamson asks Big Madam if she has any evidence. Big Madam mentions Big Daddy's affair with Caroline Bankole, and the room falls silent.

Big Madam brings up Big Daddy's affair with Caroline, even though it's only peripherally related to Rebecca's disappearance. This is further proof that Big Madam's calls the police because she wants to get back at Big Daddy for the affair, not because she's concerned about Rebecca.



Officer Kamson repeats his request for evidence, suggesting that if Big Madam really thought that her husband was having an affair with the housemaid, it might make Big Daddy and her suspects, which incenses Big Madam. Big Daddy and his sisters beg Officer Kamson to leave so that they can settle the matter of Big Daddy's affair within the family. Big Madam tells Officer Kamson that he can leave before ordering Big Daddy to leave and never return. Adunni fears that once Officer Kamson is gone, nobody will ever learn the truth about Rebecca. She cries "No!" and begins to bang her fists against the glass door.

Officer Kamson's accusation brings attention to Big Madam's complicity in Rebecca's disappearance. It also insinuates that Big Madam might be directly responsible for Rebecca's disappearance, which is something Adunni hasn't seriously considered. At any rate, Officer Kamson's swift departure signifies that he doesn't really care to investigate Rebecca's disappearance, which underscores the culture's pattern of undervaluing people (girls, in particular) who are poor and uneducated. Adunni's frustrated shout reinforces this: she is tired of people undervaluing and silencing girls like her.



Adunni cries outside, feeling powerless that she has managed to save neither Rebecca nor Khadija. Sometime later, Kofi emerges to announce that Big Madam, who is grumpy, needs her in the reception. As Adunni turns to enter the **house**, she feels her phone vibrate. She opens a text message from Ms. Tia informing her that she is on her way to Big Madam's house: Adunni won the scholarship, and Ms. Tia will take her away from Big Madam's house today, even if she has to fight for it. Adunni reads the text over and over again and feels a great, overpowering sense of hope.

*Ms. Tia's text is a big deal of Adunni. Even if she's failed to save Khadija and Rebecca, she might have a chance to receive an education and break the cycle of poverty, oppression, and gendered violence.*



## CHAPTER 55

Adunni finds Big Madam and Ms. Tia sitting in the reception. Adunni notices that Ms. Tia's face has healed since the flogging. Ms. Tia tells Adunni that Big Madam has given Adunni permission to leave with Ms. Tia and accept the scholarship, but that she would like a word with Adunni before she leaves. Ms. Tia leaves the room. Sternly, Big Madam orders Adunni to give her Rebecca's letter, and Adunni watches in horror as Big Madam tears the paper to pieces.

*When Big Madam destroys Rebecca's letter, she silences Rebecca's voice, as she's ensuring that no one else will read Rebecca's words and find out the truth of what happened to her.*



Adunni demands that Big Madam tell her what happened to Rebecca, and Big Madam finally reveals the truth: Big Madam was at home the day Rebecca disappeared. She went to the girl's room and found her writhing in pain. Rebecca explained to Big Madam that she became ill after drinking something Big Daddy gave her. Suspecting that Big Daddy gave Rebecca something to induce a miscarriage, Big Madam loaded Rebecca into a car and took her to the doctor, who was able to stop the bleeding. After Rebecca was discharged from the hospital, Big Madam gave Rebecca some money and told her to leave and never return. Big Madam finishes her story and tells Adunni she is free to go.

*Taking Rebecca to the hospital and giving her the money she needs to leave Lagos is Big Madam's way of facilitating Rebecca's freedom. Still, it's worth noting that Big Madam's decision to let Big Daddy remain at home and avoid facing the consequences for his actions enabled him to abuse Adunni. Ultimately, Big Madam's complicity in Big Daddy's abuse of Adunni complicates her solidarity with Rebecca. The reader might also speculate that Big Madam's hostility toward Adunni during Adunni's time as a housemaid was the result of Big Madam's unresolved feelings of jealousy and bitterness about Big Daddy's affair with Rebecca, which further complicates Big Madam's role as an advocate for women's rights.*



Adunni runs to her room, removes her uniform, and changes into her dress. She packs her bag, including Mama's Bible and Rebecca's **waist beads**. Adunni reflects nostalgically on her life, family, and friends in Ikati. When she forces herself to think about Kayus, whatever composure could muster suddenly collapses, and she breaks down and weeps. She cries for Mama; for Papa, who could not see her worth; for Big Madam, "with her big **house**, the big cage of sadness around her soul"; and for Khadija's tragic involvement with Bamidele.

*When Adunni sheds her uniform, she symbolically frees herself from indentured servitude. Bringing along Mama's Bible and Rebecca's waist beads to her new life of freedom allows Adunni to grant a kind of honorary freedom to the women who were silenced before they could experience freedom themselves. When Adunni weeps for her loved ones, it's a sign that she's healing and on the path toward confronting her trauma.*



Adunni hears someone call her name. Before leaving her room, she dries her eyes, lifts herself from the floor, and scratches the words “Adunni & Rebecca” into a space next to her bed. When she is done, closes the door behind her, feeling comfort and peace at the fact that she and Rebecca are immortalized forever in the writing on the wall.

*Carving “Adunni & Rebecca” into the wall ensures that neither girl will be forgotten. It’s a symbolic gesture that illustrates Adunni’s commitment to supporting other women and ensuring that people hear their voices.*



## CHAPTER 56

Adunni finds Kofi in the kitchen and excitedly tells him about winning the scholarship. Kofi drops the dough he is kneading to congratulate and embrace Adunni. He tells her to reach out anytime she is back in town to visit Ms. Tia. Kofi changes the subject to ask Adunni what happened with Rebecca’s letter. Adunni tells him that Big Madam destroyed the letter, and they share a moment of sadness. Adunni leaves Kofi and runs to the main **house**. Before she returns to Big Madam and Ms. Tia, she walks past the library to say “thank you” to *The Book of Nigerian Facts*, the Collins, and all the other books in which she found solace.

*Even though Adunni has resolved Rebecca’s story on a symbolic level, Big Madam’s destruction of the letter all but ensures that Big Daddy will never be brought to justice for manipulating Rebecca and causing the attempted miscarriage. Adunni thanks the books for enriching her world and allowing her to survive an otherwise unbearable existence at Big Madam’s house.*



Finally, Adunni returns to Ms. Tia and Big Madam. Big Madam wishes Adunni good luck but covertly warns her not to mention Rebecca’s letter to anyone. Adunni leaves with Ms. Tia and walks out of Big Madam’s **house** for the last time. Ms. Tia asks Adunni what she and Big Madam talked about privately, and Adunni tells her she will fill her in on everything later that night.

*It’s not totally clear why Big Madam wants Rebecca’s letter to remain secret—it could be that she doesn’t want her own role in Rebecca’s disappearance to come to light, and possible that she plans to forgive Big Daddy and wants to protect him from legal action.*



Ms. Tia updates Adunni on her own struggles: she and the doctor have decided to pursue adoption. She reiterates her earlier sentiment of optimism, asking Adunni to agree with her that “tomorrow will be better than today.” Adunni pauses for a moment before answering Ms. Tia. She feels very hopeful today—but she also imagines a future where she can return to Ikati and see her family, where she will be a teacher and her voice will be heard, and where she can help out her family and her village. Adunni considers all of these things and finally nods her head at Ms. Tia, inwardly affirming all the prospects the future will hold.

*The Dadas’ social status gives them the freedom to pursue other options besides biological children. Before, Adunni’s optimism was mostly a coping mechanism: she had to stay strong if she wanted to survive. Now, however, as she leaves behind a life of indentured servitude, abuse, and suffering to pursue the education she’s always dreamed of, the idea that “tomorrow will be better than today” is a real possibility.*



Adunni and Ms. Tia begin their walk to the Dada **house**, and Adunni passes effortlessly through the iron gates of Big Madam’s house that she used to clean daily. When they reach Ms. Tia’s compound, Adunni spots the sunlight glistening on the house’s mirror-like solar panels, as though it is saying to her “Adunni, welcome to your new free.”

*Leaving behind Big Madam’s house symbolizes Adunni’s escape from the sexist and classist social norms that have oppressed her during her time there. That Adunni leaves Big Madam’s house in the company of Ms. Tia, her mentor, positions female friendship and solidarity as an integral part of Adunni’s path toward freedom.*





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