Behold the Dreamers

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF IMBOLO MBUE

Imbolo Mbue immigrated to the United States from her native Cameroon in the late-1990s in pursuit of a better education. She enrolled at Rutgers University, where she received a Bachelor's degree in business administration. She later received a Master's in education from the Teacher's College at Columbia University. After earning her advanced degree, Mbue landed a job working in market research at a media company in New York City. In 2008, in the midst of the financial crisis, Mbue lost her job. Around this time, the seeds of her debut novel, *Behold the Dreamers*, were planted. While walking past the Time Warner Center in Columbus Circle, she observed that there were numerous black chauffeurs waiting for their white employers, who were usually executives. Though Mbue had no professional background in writing and had only dabbled in the craft, she started work on a novel around this time, based on this initial observation. *Behold the Dreamers* earned Mbue a seven-figure advance and was an instant hit. Both *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* named it one of the most notable books of 2016, and NPR declared it one of the best books of the year. The novel won the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction and was selected in 2017 for Oprah Winfrey's famed Book Club. It has been translated into twelve languages and adapted into an opera. Book-It Repertory Theater is turning the novel into a stage play, and the work has also been optioned for a film. Mbue currently resides in New York City.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Behold the Dreamers takes place between 2006 and 2008 and chronicles the eve and the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, when the subprime mortgage bubble finally burst. Subprime mortgages—that is, mortgages lent to borrowers with lower credit ratings—have been identified as the leading cause of the massive recession that impacted not only the United States, but the global economy from 2007 to 2010. Barack Obama was also elected president in 2008. The son of a Kenyan immigrant and a white woman from Kansas, he became the first black man ever to hold the office. President Obama's election, which was characterized by its uplifting message of "hope and change," offered Americans a respite from the miseries inflicted by an unregulated finance industry, such as record foreclosures and high rates of unemployment.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Behold the Dreamers is one of numerous recent works that has attempted to grapple with the moral meaning of the 2008 financial crisis. Jay McInerney, one of the best-known chroniclers of Manhattan's upper-class, published *Bright, Precious Days* (2016), the third book in his Calloway trilogy, in the same year in which *Behold the Dreamers* was released. Cynthia D'Aprix Sweeney's *The Nest* deals with a group of siblings' over-reliance on a promised inheritance to solve an array of financial problems. Mbue's work also stands alongside numerous novels that deal specifically with the experiences of Africans in the West, particularly in the United States. Such works include Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) and Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* (2016).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Behold the Dreamers: A Novel
- **When Written:** 2008-2015
- **Where Written:** New York City
- **When Published:** 2016
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Contemporary Fiction; Contemporary Realism
- **Setting:** Manhattan, New York; Southampton, Long Island; Limbe, Cameroon
- **Climax:** Lehman Brothers collapses
- **Antagonist:** Greed; the American Dream
- **Point of View:** Third-person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

Lehman Brothers. On September 15, 2008, Lehman Brothers—the fourth-largest investment bank in the U.S—filed for bankruptcy. Its loss of over six hundred billion dollars in assets makes it the largest bankruptcy ever filed in American history. Lehman's collapse was due to the firm's large investment in mortgage securities, causing it to suffer from the housing market crash. The firm is still in the process of dissolving, as it works to settle lawsuits and outstanding claims.

President Paul Biya. While recalling a friend's bogus story, designed to help him gain political asylum, Winston mentions President Paul Biya, who has held office in Cameroon since November 6, 1982. Biya won his seventh term in office on October 22, 2018 in an election in which only half of the voting-age population took part. At eighty-five, Biya is the oldest leader in sub-Saharan Africa.

PLOT SUMMARY

Jende Jonga enters Clark Edwards's office at the renowned investment bank, Lehman Brothers, to interview for a job as a chauffeur. Jende gets the job, which pays thirty-five thousand dollars per year—far more than he earned when he was working as a dishwasher or driving livery cabs in the Bronx during his first couple of years in New York. Jende has been living in the United States since 2004, when he obtained a three-month visitor's visa from the U.S. embassy in his native Cameroon, with the intention of getting a green card. In his first two years in the U.S., living as an undocumented immigrant, Jende saves up enough money to bring over his girlfriend, Neni, on a student visa, along with their son, Liomi, in 2006. That same year, he and Neni marry.

Jende and Neni are grateful to be in America, where they feel that they have something to look forward to each day. With the help of his attorney, Bubakar, Jende applies for asylum. Bubakar assures him that his prospects of getting it will be good, despite the cockamamie story that he instructs Jende to tell about Neni's father trying to kill him.

Neni works as a home health aide to the elderly and studies chemistry at community college, with the hopes of becoming a pharmacist. Jende is certain that his assignment with Clark will lead to him one day being able to save for his own home, preferably in a New York suburb. After he gets the job, Clark asks him to sign a confidentiality agreement, meaning that Jende will not reveal a word of what he overhears Clark say while driving him around—not to anyone.

Jende's work days usually involve driving Clark to work, shuttling his youngest son, Mighty, to school and to various extracurricular activities in the company of his nanny, Stacy, and taking Clark's wife, Cindy, to beauty and lunch appointments. While chauffeuring the Edwardses around Manhattan, Jende learns the intimate details of their lives. He learns that Clark and Cindy's eldest son, Vince, plans to leave Columbia School of Law and move to India, in an effort to distance himself from what he perceives as his parents' shallow, materialistic values. He learns that Clark is overworked and desperate to avert a looming crisis at Lehman Brothers. He also learns how desperate Cindy is to keep her family happy and together, and how eager she is to maintain her place within her upscale Manhattan social circle.

Neni forms her own relationship with the Edwardses, particularly with Mighty, and also becomes a witness to the mess which lurks beneath the surface of the family's sumptuous lifestyle. When she agrees to substitute for their regular maid, Anna, during their summer sojourn in Southampton, she finds out about Cindy's abuse of alcohol and painkillers after one day finding Cindy passed out in the bed of her guest bedroom. The next day, during a late breakfast by the pool, Cindy provides some context to the insecurity that fuels her self-destructive behavior. She tells Neni that she came from a poor family and, therefore, feels compelled to fight very hard to keep everything that she has. Cindy asks Neni never to tell anyone about the condition in which she saw Cindy the night before. In exchange, she gives Neni bundles of her old clothes and some of Mighty's discarded clothes and toys, which she offers for Liomi.

Later that night, Neni overhears an argument between Clark and Cindy regarding their frustration with Vince's plans to quit law school. After Clark leaves the house and Cindy is left to cry alone in the kitchen, Neni emerges from her room and goes to comfort Cindy, who's drunk off of wine and slurring words of frustration over how everyone in her life mistreats her. Neni learns, to her shock, that Cindy was a product of rape and grew up being resented by her mother.

Meanwhile, Clark becomes increasingly stressed about his work. Jende notices that, regardless of the time of day, Clark spends much of his time on the phone, angrily shouting orders to someone. These moments are punctuated only by the three hours of sleep that he gets per night, sometimes in his office, and the hour-long appointments that he starts having at the Chelsea Hotel on some evenings. Anna becomes concerned about Cindy's drug and alcohol abuse, and particularly about how it may affect Anna's job security. She relates this concern to Neni while they're catering a Sunday brunch at the family's Upper East Side Manhattan apartment. Neni admits that she noticed Cindy's drug and alcohol abuse in the Hamptons. With this confirmation that she is, indeed, not "crazy," Anna insists that they confront Clark about Cindy's problem. Neni agrees to talk to him. She walks toward Clark, who's standing alone, looking out of the window in his living room. Then, Neni bows out, afraid of what Jende will think of her meddling in the affairs of the family whom they rely on for everything—to have enough money to send home to struggling relatives, to plan for their future, and to survive in New York.

Shortly thereafter, Neni and Jende host a farewell dinner for Vince, on the eve of his departure to India. For Mighty, it's an evening filled with the happiness and laughter that have been amiss in his life. He departs that evening against his will, dreading what awaits him at home.

Two weeks before Lehman Brothers' collapse is announced, Jende has a dream in which his friend Bosco appears and curses **the doublers** for cheating his mother out of his school fees. While the news of Lehman's failure unfolds, Jende worries, briefly, that he'll be out of a job. During a phone call, Cindy assures him that the family will still need his services. In fact, Clark has Jende drive him to the Chelsea Hotel "at least a dozen times in the first five weeks after Lehman [falls]."

One evening, in early November, Cindy speaks to Jende privately. It's been three days since Barack Obama was elected president, a day after Clark announced that Jende would get a

two-thousand-dollar raise for being "an exceptional employee for one full year," and shortly after Clark forgot his tie during one of his appointments at the Chelsea Hotel. Cindy asks Jende to write down everything that Clark does in a journal and to bring it back to her to read. Jende is reluctant to do this, afraid of dishonoring his confidentiality agreement. Cindy assures him that he won't lose his job, as long he tells her what she wants to know.

When Jende tells Clark what Cindy has asked of him, Clark advises him to comply with Cindy's wishes but to leave out everything about the Chelsea Hotel. This solution pleases Jende, who figures that he can't lose if he satisfies both Mr. and Mrs. Edwards's wishes. Then, Clark's long-time secretary, Leah, tells Jende about an escort who published a story, saying that numerous executives at Lehman Brothers bought her services, supposedly using government bailout money, and that Clark is among her clients. Initially, Cindy expresses no displeasure toward Jende. Then, one day, while he's comforting Mighty over the distressing prospect of his parents' divorce, the boy tells Jende that he overheard Cindy demanding that Clark "get rid of him" or she'll "do something." Soon thereafter, Clark tells Jende that he must let him go.

Jende sadly returns to his former job as a restaurant dishwasher, but Neni isn't ready to accept Mr. Edwards's decision. She visits Cindy and, initially, begs Cindy for Jende's job back, to no avail. Then, Neni pulls out a photo that she took of Cindy when she was passed out, drunk and drugged, in her guest bedroom at the Hamptons house. Cindy is outraged, but she finally agrees to Neni's demand for money to keep the photo out of the hands of a tabloid journalist. She gives Neni ten thousand dollars in a paper bag and angrily demands that she leave her apartment. Neni goes back to Harlem, satisfied with how how capable of rectifying a situation without Jende's help. Jende has been plunged in depression since losing his job. Though Neni thinks that the sight of the money will cheer him up, Jende becomes outraged that Neni would bribe the Edwardses after all they've done for the Jongas. Neni, however, refuses to feel guilty, believing that Cindy was wrong to have Jende fired so cavalierly, and that people like the Edwardses believe that people like the Jongas are dispensable because they're African.

Frustrated with his inability to find another job due to his undocumented status, Jende decides that the Jongas will return to Cameroon. He learns that his request for asylum has been declined and it's far too expensive for him to appeal. He opts for "voluntary departure," meaning that he'll buy a plane ticket home and announce to an immigration judge that he's willing to leave the country of his own accord. He's tired from his dishwashing job, which earns him only a small fraction of what he earned working for the Edwardses, despite working twice as hard.

Neni, on the other hand, isn't willing to relinquish her American dream. She considers her friend Betty's idea of divorcing Jende and then marrying her cousin, an American citizen, for a green card, which infuriates Jende. One night, they fight so badly that Jende slaps Neni. Neni accepts defeat, both at the hands of her husband and when she realizes that her membership in the Phi Theta Kappa society will not earn her a scholarship to pharmacology school, due to her dean of students, Dean Flipkins, refusing to nominate her.

Around this time, the Jongas learn that Cindy has died, as a result of choking on her vomit during another episode in which she was passed out from consuming drugs and alcohol. Jende sees Clark once again. Clark gives Jende two thousand dollars and tells him that he and Mighty plan to move to Cindy's hometown in Virginia so that they can be closer to family. Clark's parents will also be moving from California to be near their son and grandson. Vince returned home briefly for his mother's funeral but is content in India, where he hopes to open a retreat center for executives. Clark has shifted his focus from working as an investment banker to working as a lobbyist for credit unions. During his visit to Clark's new office, Jende mentions Leah and how he feels sorry for her, due to her inability to find work. Clark assures Jende that she'll be fine, despite the difficulties that a sixty-year-old woman faces in the job market.

On a sweltering day in late-August, nearly five years after Jende's first arrival, the Jongas bid New York goodbye. When they arrive at the Douala airport, Jende's brother, Moto, picks them up from the airport and drives them toward Limbe, where "the red and white sign above the highway" welcomes them home.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Jende Jonga – A Cameroonian immigrant to the United States who settles in Harlem, New York while awaiting the approval of his application for asylum. This makes Jende an undocumented immigrant. Jende was born in 1970 and comes from the coastal town of Limbe, where most of his relatives still reside. His father, Pa Jonga, is a farmer and his mother, Ma Jonga, is a trader and pig breeder. He has four brothers, including Tanga, who has five children, and his middle brother, Moto. In his hometown, Jende worked as a farmer, and then as a street cleaner for the Limbe Urban Council. Jende comes from a poor family that lived in a two-room *caraboat* house. His poverty is partly the reason why the father of his wife, Neni, didn't initially approve of their marriage. Jende attended CBC Main School for primary school and ended his secondary school education after he first impregnated Neni in 1990. Their daughter died of yellow fever at one-month old. Neni's father had Jende sent to prison for impregnating his daughter, where Jende spent four

months before his child was born. Jende moves to the United States in the summer of 2004 and first lives with his cousin, Winston, for one month. He works in Manhattan as a dishwasher, then as a livery cab driver in the Bronx. While living in the Bronx, he shared a two-bedroom basement apartment with six other men. After saving enough money, Jende sends for Neni and their son, Liomi and moves with them into a Harlem apartment. He and Neni marry in May 2006. Through Winston, he secures a job making thirty-five thousand dollars per year as the personal driver for the Edwards family. Jende is an honest, trusting, and obedient employee. He is also discreet and never divulges what he hears during his employer Clark Edwards's phone conversations. Jende is also loyal to his family in Cameroon, offering them financial assistance, while still remaining careful to save. With his family in Harlem, he is usually loving, but occasionally harsh, domineering, and inclined to take out his frustrations related to his immigration status and his work on his family.

Neni Jonga – A thirty-three year old Cameroonian immigrant and Jende's wife. When the novel begins, Neni has been in the United States for a year-and-a-half, living with Jende and their son, Liomi. Neni works as a home health aide through an agency that pays her in cash because she does not yet have a green card. In the summer of 2006, she is four-months pregnant and takes a four-week job working as Cindy Edwards's maid and Mighty Edwards's nanny at the Edwardses home in the Hamptons. Neni and Mighty form a close bond as a result. Neni is also studying chemistry at Borough of Manhattan Community College on a student visa and hopes to be a pharmacist. She decides on the profession based on the respect that was always bestowed on pharmacists in her hometown of Limbe, where she met her husband. Jende and Neni's first child, a daughter, was born in 1990 but died of yellow fever when she was one-month old. Neni's family had a bit more money than the Jongas, and her father later refused to allow Neni to marry Jende, even after Liomi was born, until Jende could pay Neni's bride-price. Neni loves New York and feels that her life can progress in America in a way that it couldn't in Cameroon. She is very hard-working and focused on her studies, and she demands the same from her son. Her dedication to scholarship earns her membership into the honor society, Phi Theta Kappa. In Limbe, she had not made it as far as high school, but she did complete a year of evening computer classes. Before moving to the United States, Neni had never been more than forty miles outside of Limbe. Living and working in the U.S., however, makes her increasingly self-reliant and skeptical of her husband's dominance over her.

Liomi Jonga – Jende and Neni's six-year-old son, who will soon be turning seven. He is a good student and an affable boy. His mother puts a great deal of pressure on him to be successful and well-mannered, which sometimes leaves little room for Liomi to simply be a kid. He admires his father so much that he claims that he wants to be a chauffeur when he grows up, though his mother insists that he become a doctor or a lawyer. Liomi develops a friendship with Mighty.

Winston Avera – Jende's cousin. His late father came from "a wealthy Banso clan," which afforded him the ability to send Winston to Baptist High School in Buea, a boarding school. He gained American citizenship by joining the army, and also once worked as a grocery store cashier in Chicago. After going to law school and training to become a corporate lawyer, Winston now works as an associate at Dustin, Connors, and Solomon—a firm on Wall Street. Jende lived with him for a month after his arrival in New York, and it is Winston who recommends Jende for his job as Clark Edwards's chauffeur. He has a girlfriend named Jenny, but he has earned a reputation among his relatives as a playboy. Later in the novel, he begins pursuing a romance with Maami, whom he convinces to move to New York then impregnates. Until Maami moves in with him, Winston lives alone "in a seven-hundred-square-foot one bedroom apartment in a building with a doorman." He has younger sisters at Buea University whom he will probably help come to the U.S.

Neni's Father – A father of five who worked as a customs officer at the seaport in Douala in the eighties and early nineties, which allowed him to profit from the gratuities left by merchants (though he is adamant about having never taken any bribes). As a result of his job's benefits, his family was rich by Cameroonian standards. He bought a brick house with clean running water, and also owned a blue Peugeot and a television set. Neni's father lost his job when he was forced out of it "by a Bamileke boss who wanted his tribesmen to take Neni's father's job." He ended up "transferred to a far less lucrative position at the Treasury Department in Limbe." Six months later, his widowed sister died, leaving behind three children whom he had to care for alongside his own. Around this time, he impregnated a teenager, despite his 24-year marriage to Neni's mother. People in his community still regard him with respect, but they no longer depend on him for additional income. When Jende impregnated Neni in 1990, Neni's father had Jende imprisoned for four months. He also refused to allow Neni and his grandson, Liomi, to move to the United States, where Jende awaited them, until Jende could afford to pay Neni's bride price. Neni's father demanded goats, pigs, chickens, palm oil, bags of rice, salt, cloth, bottles of wine, and an envelope of cash. In regard to the money, Jende provided double what his father-in-law asked for.

Clark Edwards – Jende's employer, Clark is a workaholic, matter-of-fact, and authoritative investment banker at Lehman Brothers. Clark is the husband of Cindy Edwards and the father of Vince and Mighty. Clark has worked at Lehman Brothers for twenty-two years. He grew up in Evanston, Illinois, though his family briefly lived in Arlington, Virginia before going west, and has a twin sister named Ceci. His father was a professor at

Northwestern University. At the time in which the novel takes place, his father is recently celebrating his eightieth birthday. Clark's parents live in California, while his sister, Ceci, lives in Seattle with her children. Clark attended Stanford University and spent a year abroad studying in Paris. He entered Stanford as a physics major, wanting to become a professor like his father. He changed his mind, however, when he realized how much more an investment banker makes compared to an academic. He still writes poetry to comfort himself. After his wife's death, Clark decides to move to Virginia with Mighty and work on forging stronger familial bonds. In Virginia, he will head a firm that lobbies for credit unions. His parents are also moving from California to be closer to him and Mighty.

Cindy Edwards – Clark Edwards's wife and the mother of Vince and Mighty. The fifty-year-old Cindy is described as blond, slim, and very attractive, with Jende noting that she strongly resembles the actress Annette Bening. Jende spends the day driving her to and from beauty appointments and lunch dates with her friends. It's suggested that she works occasionally as a nutritionist for models and actresses. She is also a high-strung, anorexic, and paranoid woman who is determined to keep her family together in an effort to make up for her upsetting upbringing; Cindy was born as a result of rape, and her mother was abusive toward her daughter despite Cindy's constant efforts to ingratiate herself. The adult Cindy is also at once entitled, narcissistic, and lacking in self-esteem. She is eager to keep her place in the elite social world in which she has entrenched herself and frets over any possible damage to her reputation. Cindy's mother died in 2003 or 2004, while her rapist father has been dead for two decades. Cindy has a half-sister, born as a result of their mother's marriage, who lives in Falls Church, Virginia—Cindy's hometown. She removes herself from Cindy's life after their mother dies. Cindy is very close to Clark's family, but becomes distant from friends and family after learning about Clark's infidelity through the press. She becomes increasingly unstable, socially withdrawn, and more dependent on wine and Vicodin. Eventually, she dies in March 2009 as a result of asphyxiation due to vomit.

Vince Edwards – Clark and Cindy Edwards's eldest son and Mighty's older brother. He is a student at Columbia University School of Law. Previously, he attended the Dalton School and New York University. Jende notes that he strongly resembles his father—"bearing the same six-foot frame, slender build, and wavy hair." Vince seeks to distance himself from his parents, whom he regards as shallow and materialistic. He refuses to follow the corporate path that his father has set and turns down the offer of an internship with Skadden, an international law firm. Instead, he plans to go live on a reservation in Arizona for a month. He confides in Jende regarding his disillusionment with American values and his desire to find truth. Vince tells Jende that he doesn't plan to return to law school in the fall and will move to India instead. While in India, he considers building a retreat center for American executives. If this doesn't work out, he plans to move to Bolivia.

Mighty Edwards – Clark and Cindy Edwards's younger son, who is nine when the novel begins. His parents have him enrolled in a range of activities, including piano lessons and hockey. He is close to his older brother Vince and becomes lonely and withdrawn as a result of his parents' narcissism and neglect. When Neni spends a summer working as his nanny, she becomes a surrogate mother figure for him. Mighty also develops a close relationship with Liomi. Mighty attends the Dalton School. At the end of the novel, he prepares to move to Virginia with his father.

Bubakar – Bubakar is "a fast-talking Nigerian" immigration lawyer with a practice in Flatbush, Brooklyn who helps Jende navigate the American immigration system. Bubakar maintains an "ultraclean and perfectly organized office" and has a law diploma from a school in Nebraska affixed to the wall. Winston distrusts his competence, though Bubakar has hundreds of African clients residing all over the United States. He helps them and Jende invent stories to apply successfully for asylum. Bubakar is described as a small man with "extra-long hair flying out of his perpetually flared nostrils." He has a house in Canarsie, New York. One of his daughters is in medical school, while another is enrolled at Brooklyn College. His son is a civil engineer in New Jersey.

Leah – Clark Edwards's secretary at Lehman Brothers. She is friendly with Jende and uses their friendship to try to get information out of him about what he hears during Clark's frequent phone conversations in his car. She is an affable woman with a "high-pitched honeyed voice" and a girlish manner that causes her to giggle at ordinary things. Sixty years old, Leah is also described as wide, round, and tall—standing a head above many other women. She wears her hair in a curly bob and covers the signs of middle-age on her face in what Jende thinks might be "half a dozen layers of makeup." She has worked for Clark for fifteen years, and though Jende fears for her employment prospects as an older woman on the job market after the market collapses, Clark insists she will be fine.

Jerry – Neni's precalculus instructor at Borough of Manhattan Community College. He is described as tall and handsome with long hair. He is nearly forty years old and a PhD student in mathematics at the Graduate Center, CUNY. He is teaching for both the additional income and the career-related experience. His father was in the military, causing Jerry's family to move all over the United States and Europe. Jerry says that he enjoyed Germany the most because the Germans seemed to love Americans. Jerry is gay and has a boyfriend with whom he is trying to adopt a child. During a moment of desperation, Neni confides in Natasha about an idea that she has to get Jerry to adopt Liomi so that the boy can remain in the United States.

Arkamo – A friend of Jende's from Limbe who arrived in the United States around the same time as Jende. He works at a

department store and lives in a gated community in Phoenix, Arizona. Arkamo tells Jende how it's possible to get "a zero-down-payment mortgage on a sweet mini-mansion." Arkamo lives in a four-bedroom house that he eventually loses in the mortgage crisis. Arkamo becomes a U.S. citizen through his sister, who already had citizenship and "filed for him." He and his family remain in Phoenix after the financial crisis, but they end up living in his sister's basement.

Anna – The Edwards family's regular maid. As of 2008, she has been working for the family for twenty-two years. Neni fills in for her once as Cindy Edwards's maid and Mighty Edwards's nanny while Anna is on summer break. Anna talks to Neni about Cindy's alcoholism and emotional weakness, fearing how both leave her compromised. She lives in Peekskill, New York with her family. Anna has a daughter in college and an older son with a construction business that is floundering due to the financial crisis. He, his wife, and three children move in with Anna. It is Anna who discovers Cindy's dead body.

Pa Ikola Jonga – Jende's father, Neni's father-in-law, Ma Jonga's husband, and Liomi and Timba's grandfather. He still resides in Limbe at the start of the novel, where he spent his life working as a farmer. He falls ill from either a particularly bad case of malaria or typhoid fever and dies in May of 2009.

Ma Jonga – Papa Jonga's wife, Jende's mother, Neni's mother-in-law, and Liomi and Timba's grandmother. She is "a staunch card-carrying parishioner" of the Mizpah Baptist Church and a member of its Kakane women's group. Even after Pa Jonga's death in May 2009, she continues to work as a pig breeder, while also farming and selling goods in the market.

Betty – A close friend of Neni's who works as a certified nursing assistant at nursing homes and has been enrolled in nursing school for more than seven years. She has been in the U.S. since 1978, when she arrived with her parents. She got her first immigration documents through them and has been a citizen for over a decade. The only description of Betty's physical appearance is that "her gap tooth divided her mouth into two equally beautiful halves." In terms of character, Betty is determined, independent, and tireless in her will to succeed in America. She is married to a man named Alphonse and has an American cousin whom she encourages Neni to marry for a green card.

Dean Flipkins – The associate dean of students at Borough of Manhattan Community College who nominates students for scholarships. He is a young white man "with a head of thick brown hair" and wears "geek-chic black-framed glasses." Neni estimates that he's around her age. He is racist and classist and tries to dissuade Neni from achieving her goal of becoming a pharmacist, thinking that it isn't "achievable" for "students like [her]."

Bosco – An old friend of Jende's from Limbe. Jende recalls that he was shaped like "a tree trunk." However, in a dream that Jende has about **doublers** on the eve of Lehman Brothers' collapse, Bosco appears slender and tall. Bosco once asked Jende for money to pay for his wife to go to a specialist "for pain and swelling in her right breast." Jende promised to provide the money but didn't and feels guilty about it.

Natasha – The pastor at Judson Memorial Church in Greenwich Village. She has long, gray hair and wears red-framed glasses. Neni confides in Natasha regarding Jende's troubles with immigration and Natasha pledges that the Jongas will have the church's support. She starts a collection fund on their behalf that amounts to fourteen hundred dollars.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Sapeur – A friend of Jende's from Limbe. He arrived in the United States around the same time as Jende and lives in Houston, Texas. He gets citizenship by marrying an American single mother.

Fatou – Neni's close friend. She is also a Cameroonian immigrant in New York. She has seven children with her husband, Ousmane. Three of her children are in their twenties and four are teenagers; all of them are American. Her two brothers and octogenarian parents are still living in Cameroon.

Jenny – Winston's girlfriend. To Neni, who meets her at Winston's birthday party at the Hudson Hotel, she looks no older than twenty-six. She is a white woman with curly, dark hair who works alongside Winston as an associate at the Wall Street corporate law firm Dustin, Connors, and Solomon.

Tom – The CEO of Lehman Brothers. Jende notices how "genial" his voice sounds, compared to Clark Edwards's authoritative one. Tom is determined not to expose the financial services firm for fraudulent activity, despite Clark's desire to "[come] clean."

Cheri – Cindy Edwards's best friend. She's a frequent traveler who spends her time in various places, including San Francisco and Florence, Italy, for both work and pleasure. Her mother lives in a nursing home in Stamford, Connecticut. She is married to a man named Sean.

Stacy – Mighty Edwards's nanny. Later in the novel, she plans to move to Portland, which prompts Vince to ask Neni if she would be willing to take over Stacy's duties.

Maami – Winston's girlfriend from high school. He finds her on Facebook and looks to rekindle a relationship with her, though she lives in Houston, Texas. She has a boyfriend there and works in accounting. Winston eventually lures her to New York, starts a relationship with her, and gets her pregnant.

Amatimba "Timba" Monyengi Jonga – Jende and Neni's daughter and Liomi's younger sister. She is born on December 10, 2008 at Harlem Hospital. She is the only member of the Jonga family who is a natural-born American citizen.

Mr. Jones – The owner of the livery cabs in the Bronx and

Jende's former employer.

Frank Dawson – Winston's co-worker. He recommends Jende to Clark Edwards when the latter is seeking applications for a chauffeur. He is married to a woman named Mimi and has a daughter named Nora. Both he and Mimi are friends with the Edwardses.

Mimi Dawson – Frank's wife and a good friend of the Edwards family. She expresses concern for Cindy Edwards when she notices her friend going through a severe depression. She and Frank have a daughter, Nora, who is Cindy's goddaughter.

June – One of Cindy Edwards's best friends, along with Cheri.

Olu – A friend of Neni's from community college who later befriends other members of the Jonga family. She is from Nigeria and lives in New York.

Moto – Jende's middle brother. He drives the Jongas from the airport in Douala, Cameroon back to their hometown of Limbe.

Ceci - Clark Edwards's twin sister. She grew up with him in Evanston, Illinois, where their father was a professor of physics at Northwestern University. She currently lives in Seattle with her daughter, Keila.

TERMS

Fufu – A mash of yams that is served to accompany meat or vegetable stews in Cameroonian cuisine. The mash is formed into a ball with an indentation in the middle, which can help one scoop up the contents of a stew. **Neni** wonders if she should have cooked this, along with eru, for **Winston**'s birthday instead of attending his party.

Eru – A Cameroonian stew made with dark, leafy green vegetables, such as spinach, as well as meat or smoked fish. It's usually accompanied with fufu. **Neni** wishes that she had cooked this as **Winston**'s birthday gift, instead of attending his birthday party, where she feels out of place.

Attiéké – A side dish in West African cuisine made from fermented or dried grated cassava. **Jende** is eating it with his meal at an African restaurant near the 116th Street subway station when **Liomi** asks him if it's true that the Jongas will soon return to Cameroon.

Thiebou Djeun – Senegalese rice and fish stew. While **Jende** scolds **Liomi** for thinking that the Jongas are going back to Cameroon, a man sitting nearby observes their exchange while eating the dish.

Puff-Puff – A West African snack or breakfast of deep-fried dough, sometimes served with powdered sugar. **Neni** makes **Mighty** puff-puff for breakfast when she serves as his nanny in the Hamptons, and it becomes a food that he associates with her maternal love and care.

Egusi Stew – A West African stew or soup made with *egusi*—or the dried and ground seeds of melon, squash, or gourd plants—that are then combined with vegetables and smoked turkey or beef (the other ingredients in the stew may vary according to country or village). This is one of the dishes that **Neni** prepares for **Vince**'s farewell dinner.

Garri – A Hausa word that means "grain." It is processed from cassava. It is a staple in the okra soup that **Neni** prepares for **Vince**'s farewell dinner.

Jollof Rice – A one-pot spicy rice dish made with vegetables and sometimes meat. It is one of the dishes that **Neni** prepares for **Vince**'s farewell dinner.

Ekwang – A traditional Nigerian dish that is also enjoyed in Cameroon, it is a stew made with dried fish, crayfish, and vegetables, including cocoyam. It is one of the dishes that **Neni** prepares for **Vince**'s farewell dinner.

Cocoyam – A root vegetable that is also known as "taro."

Maggi – An international brand of seasonings, bouillons, soups, and sauces that originated in Switzerland in the late-nineteenth century. **Neni** adds it to the ekwang that she prepares as part of **Vince**'s farewell dinner.

Strong Kanda – A kind of fish that is a commonly sold commodity at Cameroonian street markets. In **Jende**'s dream about the doublers, he notices that the singing gamblers are not positioned near the women who sell strong kanda, as they usually are.

Agbada – A flowing, wide-sleeved robe that is normally worn by men in West Africa. The garment comes in a range of colors and is similar to a *dashiki*. **Jende** notices, in his dream about the doublers, that there are no singing gamblers where agbadas.

Kaba – A traditional dress, sometimes designed with Kente cloth, that is worn by African women. **Neni** gives **Natasha** some of her unworn kabas before she departs for Cameroon.

Fufu – A staple food in West Africa, made with any kind of starchy food, such as cassava, plantains, or taro. The dish is served during the Jonga family's farewell dinner.

SEC – The Securities and Exchange Commission, or SEC, is an independent agency of the federal government that operates to protect investors; maintain fair, efficient, and orderly markets; and promote a financial market that the public can trust. The agency was created by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt on June 6, 1934, when he signed the Securities Exchange Act of 1934, as part of the New Deal. The agency was designed to restore public trust in capital markets after the financial crash of 1929. **Clark Edwards** tells his CEO, **Tom**, that the SEC has been complicit with Lehman Brothers' fiscal irresponsibility by "playing dumb."

Kwacoco and Banga Soup – A Cameroonian dish consisting of grated and steamed cocoyams, fresh palm nut, hot peppers, crayfish, and fish. When **Jende** returns home after his meeting with **Cindy Edwards**, during which she asks him to record

Clark's movements, he walks in to see **Winston** eating the dish that **Neni** prepared for dinner.

Chin-Chin – A crunchy, fried Cameroonian dessert or snack served on Christmas. It is sweetened with orange zest, sugar, and nutmeg. **Neni** prepares it during the Jongas' first Christmas together in the United States.

Ndolé – A Cameroonian soup consisting of stewed nuts, spinach or other bitter leaves, and fish or beef. **Jende** imagines that his mother, **Ma Jonga**, would have prepared such a dish during his first Christmas away from Limbe.

Nyama Ngowa – A variation on a beef stew that is popular in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly Zimbabwe. **Jende** imagines that his mother, **Ma Jonga**, would have prepared such a dish during his first Christmas away from Limbe.

ICE – Immigration and Customs Enforcement. This federal agency enforces immigration laws and is tasked with investigating the criminal or terrorist activity of foreign nationals residing in the United States. They also apprehend, process, detain, and deport illegal immigrants. When **Jende** appears for his deportation hearing, his attorney, **Bubakar**, defends him against a lawyer who represents ICE.

Masepo – Medicinal leaves used to treat respiratory illnesses, malaria, abdominal pain, cholera, dysentery, and typhoid. It's also used as a mosquito repellent. **Pa Jonga**'s wife and children boil masepo and fever grass for him as part of his treatment for either malaria or typhoid fever.

Poulet DG – *Poulet* is French for "chicken," while 'DG' stands for "director general." Poulet DG is made with chicken thighs, fried plantains, and vegetables, including green beans, carrots, tomatoes, and onions. It is one of the dishes that someone brings over for the Jongas' farewell party.

Moi Moi – Also known as *moin-moin*, it is a pudding made with black-eyed peas, or *koki* beans, and wrapped in banana leaves. The dish is popular in both Cameroon and Nigeria and is often accompanied with fried plantains. It is one of the dishes that someone brings over for the Jongas' farewell party.

Soya – Marinated beef that is skewered and grilled. It is one of the dishes that someone brings over for the Jongas' farewell party.

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.

THE SUSTAINABILITY OF THE AMERICAN DREAM

Behold the Dreamers takes a critical look at the American Dream—that is, the idea that anyone who is willing to work hard can become prosperous in the United States. For each of the novel's characters, prosperity means something different. For Jende Jonga, it means earning a good living and eventually moving his family out of their roach-infested Harlem apartment and into a comfortable home. For his wife, Neni, it means fulfilling her dream of becoming a pharmacist. However, for those who are already financially prosperous, such as the Jonga's employers, money and career status still don't bring happiness. Cindy Edwards's dream is centered on having a close-knit, loving family, while her husband Clark's dream becomes a quest for integrity and satisfaction in a profession that has become increasingly unethical. By exploring the hunger and unfulfillment that fester in her main characters' lives, Imbolo Mbue illustrates how the aspirational concept of the American Dream, which is often rooted in materialism, is misleading and elusive, leaving people grasping toward a happiness that always remains just out of reach.

Like many foreigners from less advantaged countries, Cameroonian immigrants Jende and Neni regard the United States as a promised land. This feeling of promise comes undone, however, when they realize that class and race are major barriers standing in the way of their dreams of success. Neni's achievement in gaining entry to the Phi Theta Kappa society becomes bittersweet when she realizes that Dean Flipkins will not nominate her for a scholarship and expresses skepticism toward her ambition of becoming a pharmacist. He hides his bias in a pretense of sympathy, arguing that he tries to be steer "students like [Neni]" toward more "realistic" goals. Though she resists the dean's assumptions by reasserting her ambition, she realizes that she doesn't live in a country in which everyone is regarded as equally capable or worthy of success.

Similarly, Jende, as the Edwards's chauffer, learns how unreliable his good fortune is when Cindy arranges for him to be fired for not informing her about Clark's infidelities. Jende realizes that his good work and loyalty to the family, including his reservations about betraying Clark's confidence and the non-disclosure agreement that he signed, cannot protect him from upper class whims. Cindy regards Jende as a dispensable servant whose financial concerns, including the expenses related to the impending birth of Jende and Neni's daughter, Timba, matter less than the fulfillment of Cindy's immediate needs. When Jende is forced to take on work as a restaurant dishwasher as a result of his firing, working constantly for little money, his American Dream evaporates in response to experiencing how easily people like Cindy can determine the outcome of his life, for better or worse. Despite its promise of equal opportunity, then, the American Dream is shown to be

rooted in classist and racist hierarchies.

Jende's friends, fellow Cameroonian immigrants Arkamo and Sapeur, initially appear to have figured out how to make it in America. Each man attains the key marker of American success: property. However, when the subprime mortgage industry devastates the American economy, Jende hears about how their dreams and those of other Cameroonian immigrants also evaporate amidst the crisis.

Jende looks at pictures of his friends' "spacious houses and gargantuan SUVs" and envies them. All have incomes similar to his but live in "three-bedroom ranch-style houses" and "four-bedroom townhouses with backyards." He figures that those among his friends who have green cards will cope with "the high-interest loans that would take thirty or more years to pay off." Mbue uses these anecdotes to illustrate how unsuspecting newcomers were seduced into embracing an illusion of prosperity in the U.S. They overlooked the fact that they would probably never be able to pay off the mortgages for their houses and would likely pass on their debts to their children. These details illustrate how financers preyed on those who had blind faith in the American Dream, and how that dream became unsustainable due to unchecked greed.

Arkamo lives in Phoenix, Arizona, one of several American cities that quickly expanded as a result of the property boom. Arkamo regales Jende with stories about how he lives in a four-bedroom "mini-mansion" in a gated community and was able to attain the property with "a zero-down payment mortgage." To Jende this sounds like a dream come true, epitomizing his initial belief that anyone can become prosperous in the United States. Due to his naïveté, the offer of property to someone with no credit history who works as a stockroom associate at a department store never strikes him as strange until Arkamo loses his property and ends up living with his family in his sister's basement. Arkamo's story fosters Jende's disillusionment with his new country. It's a story in which good fortune is quickly gained and then reversed, like a cruel hat-trick; it also serves as further proof for Jende that material gains in America are short-lived.

The Jonga family realizes that its ideas about the United States were largely constructed from lies and myths. But while this truth is disappointing, it does not destroy them. The family ultimately returns home with far more money than they would have gained had they stayed in Cameroon, which indicates that the U.S. does offer some unique financial opportunities. Yet the pursuit of those opportunities, the story suggests, shouldn't outweigh the importance of family or personal integrity. The Edwardses also come to this realization after Cindy's death. Both families realize that the single-minded pursuit of material wealth cannot bring happiness. Furthermore, the cost of this pursuit, which is endless and can only bring satisfaction in the short-term, can sometimes outweigh the benefits. The American Dream is thus only sustainable when it's rooted in non-materialistic values.

THE MODERN IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE

Jende Jonga enters the United States in the summer of 2004 on a three-month visitor's visa with the hope that, within his allotted time, he can get a green card or an American passport. He's determined to escape from the "future of poverty and despondency" that characterizes his life in Cameroon in favor of "[claiming] his share of the milk, honey, and liberty flowing in the paradise-for-strivers called America." Jende's dream of making it in America is reflective of that of many immigrants who arrive in the United States with no intention other than to work hard and make better lives for themselves. However, this dream is often foiled when newcomers become trapped in a confusing immigration system that takes advantage of people's hopes without offering them any real chance of fulfilling them. Mbue uses Jende's story to illustrate how a nation that was partly built by immigrants now seems set up to work against them.

Jende relies on the help of a Nigerian lawyer named Bubakar who works with undocumented African immigrants throughout the United States. Bubakar specializes in concocting stories that will result in his clients gaining asylum or that, at the very least, will keep the immigration authorities at bay for years until his clients find other ways, usually through marriage, to remain in the country more permanently. Meanwhile, Bubakar profits financially from his clients remaining in this state of limbo. His relationship with Jende exposes how the condition of undocumented immigrants results in an industry in which Americans profit from a hopeful immigrant's exploitation. What's interesting is that Bubakar, a naturalized citizen, is also willing to profit from Jende's hopes, despite being aware of the Jonga family's very limited financial resources. Bubakar's greed and his forgetting of what it was like to be in Jende's situation makes him a less sympathetic character, and also suggests that the pressure to succeed in American pits immigrants against each other instead of forming a promised melting pot of camaraderie.

Jende's cousin, Winston, who's also an attorney, is skeptical of Bubakar's competence. Though a diploma on Bubakar's wall proves that he attended "some law school in Nebraska," Winston is more concerned with Bubakar's crude mannerisms, which suggest that "he'd gotten his real education via online immigration forums." Winston's perception of Bubakar facilitates the reader's sense that he's more of a schemer than a sound legal counselor. Winston's dismissal of Bubakar's law degree suggests that it doesn't come from a prestigious school, and that, in Winston's view, Bubakar only obtained the minimal requirement for appearing professional. Yet, with limited means and rights, Jende has few other options for representation.

When Bubakar suggests that Jende apply for asylum by telling

a judge that Neni's father is trying to kill him for impregnating Neni back in 1990, Bubakar now doesn't even appear to be a competent schemer. His suggestion comes from a presumption that an American judge will have prejudices about Africa—that it is a war-torn place in which women are routinely regarded as property—and that these prejudices will work in Jende's favor. An asylum application takes time to process, given the need for new appeals. The story offers an arrangement that will financially benefit Bubakar indefinitely while Jende remains in a state of uncertainty about his future.

After Jende's dreams of making it in America are dashed, he agrees to what Bubakar calls "voluntary departure," meaning that Jende will "leave quietly" within ninety days and pay his own airfare back home. While Jende is finally relieved from the stress of worrying over his immigration status, he remains concerned about how it will impact his future chances of returning to the United States, as well his family's possible goals in the country.

Bubakar alerts Jende to the possibility that it may not be as easy for him to acquire another visa from the American embassy in Cameroon. He assures Jende that he'll not be "banned," but that any future chance of returning to the U.S. will be dubious. Thus, even after voluntarily giving up on his asylum application, Jende may still face the prospect of being unwelcome as a visitor. Jende, thus, learns that entry to the U.S. is often decided arbitrarily and that his record as a valuable worker will make little difference in changing his prospects.

Aside from concerns about himself, Jende worries about the impact of voluntary departure on his family. Though Timba needn't ever worry, as she is the only member of the family who is a natural-born U.S. citizen, and Neni will likely have the chance to apply for another student visa in the future, Liomi is in the same "hot soup" as his father. Bubakar explains how the U.S. government is indifferent to children who have arrived illegally with their parents. Though Jende insists that Liomi isn't at fault for the decision that Jende made for his family, Bubakar enlightens him to the callousness of the U.S. immigration system, which never would have offered Liomi citizenship, even if his parents had remained in the country, undocumented, for decades.

Yet another dream evaporates when Jende learns how difficult it is to become an American citizen. In the end, he sees that it isn't as simple as telling a couple of lies to gain entry to the country and then working hard to earn one's place in society. Instead, the system seems designed to profit from his presence while offering him little in return. Bubakar builds his coffers as a result of Jende paying attorney's fees for a case that may be hopeless; and Jende and Neni toil away at menial jobs that profit off of their labor without having to offer the couple the same benefits as documented workers. Jende's journey through the American system of immigration helps him realize that there seems to be no viable pathway to citizenship for someone with his background, despite America's promise to welcome everyone to its shores.

CLASS AND INTERDEPENDENCY

If the American economy is a food chain in which benefits "trickle down" from the upper classes to those on the bottom rungs, then *Behold the Dreamers* explores how the lower classes depend on the generosity of those in the upper-class who employ them. Those who hold and control the most capital thus have the power to improve people's lives as easily as they can worsen them. When the economy crashes, the wealthy Edwards family remains unaffected, while those who work for them are afraid of ending up unemployed in the long-term and, eventually, impoverished. Mbue illustrates how the American class system nearly always places the working-class at a disadvantage, as they are always the first to suffer as a result of the whims and excesses of those on whom they depend.

Leah has worked as Clark Edwards's secretary at Lehman Brothers for fifteen years, but senses that the company is going to collapse and will soon be laying off "the little people." Her warning to Jende foreshadows his own dismissal from his job as the Edwards's chauffeur. Though the reason for Jende's firing is not economic, it is related to a persistent belief among some members of the upper-class that those on the lower rungs are dispensable.

While Jende believes that Leah's good work and loyalty to Clark will help her keep her job, she insists that the executives at Lehman are untrustworthy and will keep the company's troubles a secret from its lower-level employees until it's too late. Jende's trust in the value of hard work contrasts with Leah's awareness that hard work doesn't matter to those who are willing to risk others' jobs in order to maximize their own financial gains. Leah provides Jende with a warning about how the American economic system offers little protection to the working-class.

When Lehman Brothers finally collapses, Leah, along with other laid-off employees at the investment bank, sends out résumés to no avail. While Jende worries about how she has "no job prospect" and "diminishing savings," Clark insists that "she'll be fine" due to slight upticks in the economy. Jende can identify with Leah's economic uncertainty, while Clark remains protected by his wealth. His assuring words seem to be less for Leah than they are an attempt to assuage his own guilt for relegating a sixty-year-old woman to a hostile job market, as a result of his unwillingness to "come clean" about Lehman Brothers' immoral practices.

The financial collapse also impacts domestic workers. As Cindy Edwards's behavior becomes increasingly erratic, her housekeeper, Anna, frets over losing her job. Like Leah, Anna is a long-term employee of the Edwards family—she has worked

for them for twenty-two years. Her concern for Cindy's alcoholism and drug abuse is probably genuine, but it is also connected to the prospect of her employer dying and no longer needing her services. Anna's concern for Cindy is, therefore, largely the result of concern for herself and the fear of having to search for domestic work in an economy of austerity.

Unlike Leah, Anna needs the income from housekeeping to support a family that has become increasingly dependent on her. She has a daughter in college and a son whose construction business is suffering due to the decline in the housing market. He and his family are living with Anna in her Peekskill, New York home. Without her job with the Edwards family, which, indeed, comes to an end after Cindy dies, Anna is unable to support the children and grandchildren who have come to depend on the little bit of income that sustains them.

Leah and Anna's vulnerability in the face of the financial collapse exposes how the working-class in the United States barely manages to get by, while those who occupy the upper-class often have not only enough money to sustain them through the worst events, but enough to sustain future generations. Mbue underscores a system of inequality in which people like Anna and Leah are at a perpetual disadvantage, not only due to the excesses of their employers but also due to a lack of systemic protections that could make all the difference between surviving an economic crash and ending up on the street.

PARENTAL EXPECTATIONS VS. PERSONAL AMBITIONS

Both the Edwardses and the Jongas place pressure on their sons to have lucrative, prestigious jobs. Both also expect their sons to play active, professional roles in American society—an ambition that may have been less pronounced if Clark Edwards's and Jende Jonga's eldest children were girls instead of boys. Vince Edwards and Liomi Jonga become mirrors onto which their parents project their own ideas about what makes a man successful. Mbue uses Vince and Liomi's experiences to illustrate how children are sometimes crushed under the force of their parents' expectations, which can deprive them of the ability to learn who they are and define success on their own terms.

Though Liomi is still too young to know what he wants out of life, Neni Jonga tells her son that she expects him to grow up to be a doctor or a lawyer. These expectations cause her to put too much pressure on Liomi, which affects his ability to have a normal childhood in New York. For example, when Neni hears from Liomi's teacher that he socializes too actively with a boy named Billy during class time, she becomes angry, believing that Liomi is wasting his opportunity to acquire an education. It doesn't matter to her that part of going to school is learning how to develop social relationships. She regards his laughter as "noise" and his friendliness as "nonsense." His development of a social life, which is also key to success, is regarded as a deterrent to his academic success, which is the only kind of achievement that Neni recognizes for someone her son's age. In this regard, Neni is unknowingly depriving Liomi of the opportunity to form social networks outside of his family and to develop a personality.

Eschewing the importance of socializing, Neni emphasizes to Liomi that school means "everything" for people "like [them]." In this instance, she's imposing her own fears about being unable to enroll in pharmacy school. Neni perceives education as the only escape from the stagnancy that characterized her life in Cameroon. She believes that, if her son can transcend that stagnancy, he can become "a lawyer like Uncle Winston," "a doctor like Dr. Tobias," or a "big man on Wall Street like Mr. Edwards." These men have set the examples for success and wealth that she expects her son to attain, though Neni is unaware of or disregards other factors—for example, Clark Edwards's middle-class background and Winston's enlistment in the U.S. Army—that contributed to their success.

Vince Edwards provides the template for the path that Neni would like Liomi to follow. He attended the prestigious Dalton School, obtained a degree from New York University, then enrolled as a student at Columbia School of Law. His parents expected that he would enter the corporate arena, like his father Clark. When Vince diverts from the path that his parents have set for him, Clark, particularly, registers strong disapproval. Like Neni, he measures success in money and status, while his son measures it in terms of the good that he can do in the world.

When Vince turns down an internship at the international law firm, Skadden, in favor of spending a month on a reservation in Arizona, Clark Edwards makes no pretense of hiding his distaste for the decision. He tells his son that he's not sure what his thinking is, as though the idea of turning down the internship makes no logical sense. He also describes Vince's wish to try out an alternative lifestyle in Arizona as "[sitting] around." Clark describes it as the stagnancy that Neni fears and that Clark perceives as failure. Clark's reaction also trivializes Vince's desires without first trying to understand them. He views Vince's choice as a "major [decision]" that can adversely impact Vince's life, due to it falling outside of the traditional narrative of American success.

The Edwardses are further frustrated by Vince's decision to leave law school to go to India. While Cindy Edwards rightly perceives Vince's decision as a manifestation of his unhappiness with the example that his parents have set for him, Clark merely thinks that his son is being "an idiot" and "[throwing] away a perfectly good life." The irony in Clark's statement comes from the fact that he's making it whilst angrily arguing with his wife, who is desperate for his attention, and immersing himself in a job that makes him lots of money but

brings him little personal fulfillment. He is, therefore, proving his son's point about the futility of orienting one's life goals around social preeminence and the attainment of wealth.

In the end, Clark realizes that his son is right to pursue something beyond money and social prestige, neither of which brought Vince's parents any personal fulfillment or emotional security. Clark even grows to admire Vince for having the courage to set his own path instead of orienting his life goals around his father's ideas of success. Ironically, it is Vince who ends up setting an example for his father. Clark later chooses to reorient his life around family and sound financial values by taking on a new job as a lobbyist for credit unions. Though Neni never exactly relinquishes her belief in the importance of education as a pathway to success, she realizes that her singular focus on education blinded her to the complexity of achievement in the United States. As a result of watching the Edwards family unravel, she sees that becoming a doctor, lawyer, or investment banker will not protect her son from pain or hardship.

FAMILY AND BELONGING

What both the Edwards and Jonga families have in common is a mutual need to feel a sense of belonging, as well as their reliance on family to foster that sensibility. The Jongas remain anchored in an unfamiliar land by remaining closely connected to friends and family from Cameroon, particularly Jende's cousin, Winston. Conversely, Cindy Edwards exhibits increasingly erratic and unstable behavior as her family drifts apart, starting with her eldest son, Vince's decision to leave for India, and culminating in her discovery of her husband Clark's infidelities with prostitutes. In *Behold the Dreamers*, family is key in facilitating some feeling of security among the Jongas, even when they are at their lowest points, while the absence of family ties results in unease, and even destruction, among the privileged Edwards family.

Cindy Edwards's obsession with keeping her family together arises from her need to create and sustain the family she never had. Cindy was born as a result of rape; knowing that she was the result of her mother's trauma, which included being forced to carry Cindy to term, Cindy tried, unsuccessfully, to get her mother to love and accept her. Instead, her mother projected her anger and hurt onto Cindy, who, resembling her mother's rapist, became an easy target for her wrath. Cindy's fruitless attempts to forge bonds with her mother and her half-sister, who was born as a result of their mother's marriage, reveal the need to have a sense of family, even in circumstances in which once ostracism has been predetermined.

Cindy's inability to repair the fault of her birth results in her trying to create the life and the family that she always wanted. She lifts herself out of poverty by marrying Clark and legitimizes her existence by dedicating herself to marriage and the rearing of children. When Vince leaves and Clark commits infidelity, she regards their actions as signs of her own failure to create a meaningful life. She is once again relegated to feeling as though her efforts to create a new family were just as futile as her initial efforts to love her mother and sister. Cindy's death is a direct result of drug and alcohol abuse, but it is an indirect result of feeling powerless to generate the life that she wants.

Cindy's pain reverberates to her son, Mighty, who finds the love and care that he needs among the Jongas. During the Edwards's summer vacation in the Hamptons, Neni Jonga serves as Mighty's nanny and, as a result, becomes a surrogate maternal figure for the ten-year-old boy. It's at the Hamptons house where Neni overhears Cindy and Clark arguing about Clark's seeming indifference toward his family. It is also where Neni first notices that Cindy abuses substances to cope with her feelings of alienation. Cindy insists that she's been "a perfectly good mother," though, ironically, it is Neni who spends the most time with Mighty in the Hamptons—"playing video games with him, and tucking him in bed."

Neni and Jende not only provide Mighty with emotional succor but introduce him to their culture through cuisine. Neni makes *puff-puff*, or fried dough, for him that summer and later, in the city, when Mighty visits the Jonga's home for Vince's farewell dinner, he forges a friendship with Liomi. In the Jonga household, food is a source of connection, while, for the Edwardses, it's another marker of social status. Mighty's ability to form a kind of informal brotherhood with Liomi, a boy his own age, offers him companionship which, along with Neni and Jende's care, help him to feel less neglected.

The novel shows that, despite the Edwardses ability to purchase every necessity and privilege, the need for a strong familial bond still eludes Cindy. It isn't until her death—which could be regarded as a sacrifice, due to its ability to refocus Clark's energy on his sons and to discourage Vince's urge to distance himself from his living parent—that her husband recognizes the importance of family and pursues closer relationships with his children. For the Jongas, their pursuit of the kind of life that they imagine that the Edwards live, nearly causes their family to unravel. The travails of both families become exemplary of the ways in which materialism and status-seeking can cause people to lose sight of the relationships and markers of identity that are most important.

SYMBOLS

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

THE STATUE OF CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS

The statue, which stands in Columbus Circle in Manhattan, symbolizes the Jonga family's search for a land of prosperity and riches—not unlike the purpose of Columbus's journey. Jende Jonga is the "explorer" who leads his family in this search and who, like Columbus, realizes that the land where he disembarks is not what he expected. Just as Columbus eventually realized that he had not arrived in India, Jende realizes that America is not his true home.

Jende designates Columbus Circle the "center of the world," due to the circle's place in the center of Manhattan, the borough's place as the center of New York, New York as "the center of America," and America as "the center of the world." Jende considers Columbus Circle to be "the best place in the whole city" because it is where he found comfort during the lonely days before Neni and Liomi arrived in New York. Like Columbus, Jende is exploring and trying to prove to himself and to those back home that the world is not as small or as static as it seems in Cameroon. Though his time in New York does not produce the result that he expected, he learns more about the United States and about himself than he would have had he never set out on his journey of discovery.

THE DOUBLERS

The doublers are parallel figures to Wall Street stockbrokers and investment bankers, signifying the possibility of corruption and exploitation anywhere. Two weeks before the world learns about the collapse of Lehman Brothers, Jende Jonga has a dream in which his old friend, Bosco, reappears. Bosco expresses his hatred for the "money doublers"—that is, swindlers who take money from people with the promise to double their sum. In the dream, Bosco recalls how his mother gave the doublers his school fees so that she could double the sum and use the second half to pay for Bosco's sister's school fees. Bosco wails with grief while telling Jende about how the doublers ran off with all the money, leaving no money at all to pay for school fees. The author uses the dream to foreshadow the financial doom that will await the world when Jende wakes up. Though the doublers are street criminals in Cameroon, far removed from the elite, privileged world that the Wall Street brokers inhabit, both are linked by their immoral willingness to exploit people's dreams to enrich themselves.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin edition of *Behold the Dreamers* published in 2016.

Chapter 11 Quotes

"Listen to me," Bubakar said, somewhat impatiently. "As far as Immigration is concerned, there are many things that are illegal and many that are gray, and by 'gray' I mean the things that are illegal but which the government doesn't want to spend time worrying about. You understand me, *abi*? My advice to someone like you is to always stay close to the gray area and keep yourself and your family safe. Stay away from any place where you can run into police—that's the advice I give to you and to all young black men in this country. The police is for the protection of white people, my brother. Maybe black women and black children sometimes, but not black men. Never black men. Black men and police are palm oil and water. You understand me, eh?"

Related Characters: Bubakar (speaker), Jende Jonga

Related Themes:

Page Number: 73-74

Explanation and Analysis

Bubakar has just notified Jende that he probably won't stand before an immigration judge, who will determine whether or not he'll be deported, for another six months to a year. Jende is relieved but wonders what will happen if someone, particularly a police officer, finds out that his work permit has expired. Bubakar responds to Jende's questions "impatiently," probably because he's been asked many similar questions before, and maybe also because he expects Jende to know that it's important for him to avoid being found out. He gives Jende a brief lesson on how illegal immigrants live without being found out, but their lives are as "gray" as the laws that they must circumvent. Bubakar suggests that Jende can live contentedly. However, it's difficult to remain content while living in secret and always being concerned about the possibility of deportation, which is the risk that Jende faces.

Bubakar's brief illustration of the racism that is rampant in many police departments instructs Jende in how he's not only vulnerable due to his immigration status, but also due to his race. Bubakar highlights that the police are especially hostile to black men, due to the racism that associates them with criminality. Bubakar's lessons are somewhat contradictory because Jende's status as an illegal technically makes him criminal in the eyes of the law, while Bubakar tells him that he'd perceived as criminal anyway, even with legal status.

Chapter 14 Quotes

❝ Winston had friends of all races, she knew, but she had no idea he had so many white friends […] It was one thing to be in the same class with them, work for them, smile at them on the bus; it was a whole other thing to laugh and chat with them for hours, making sure she enunciated every word so they wouldn't say her accent was too difficult to understand. No way could she spend time with a white woman and be herself the way she was with Betty or Fatou […] And the people in the bar […] they were mostly associates at the firm where Winston worked, so she had to be careful not to embarrass him. Nothing shamed her more than black people embarrassing themselves in front of white people by behaving the way white people expect them to behave.

Related Characters: Fatou, Betty, Winston Avera, Neni Jonga

Related Themes:

Page Number: 90-91

Explanation and Analysis

Neni is attending Winston's birthday party at the Hudson Hotel's bar. She feels uncomfortable in the predominately white setting but is also eager to appear as though she belongs, which was why she changed her clothes many times before arriving at the party. It's strange to her that Winston interacts so easily with white people, and she contrasts his comfort with white people with her own reserved distance toward them. Neni's insecurity is largely borne out of a class difference. In contrast, Winston is accustomed to dealing with white Americans, due to having attended a university and also through his work as a corporate lawyer. He has assimilated into American life in a way that Neni believes she can't, figuring that she'll never lose her accent or other signs of her foreignness. Neni alludes to how self-conscious she is around white people, and that this self-consciousness makes it impossible for her to relax around them as she would with her Cameroonian friends. She worries about appearing to them according to stereotype and contrasts her aversion to this behavior with black people who seem to lack self-consciousness. Though Neni is an African and not an African-American, her concerns reflect the concept of "double-consciousness"—a phrase coined by W.E.B. DuBois. This means that Neni is conscious of who she actually is but must also be simultaneously conscious of how whites will perceive her. She's aware of how this compromises her integrity and, therefore, avoids white people altogether.

❝ She was noticing something for the first time […] On both sides of the street […] she saw people walking with their kind: a white man holding hands with a white woman; a black teenager giggling with other black (or Latino) teenagers; a white mother pushing a stroller alongside another white mother; a black woman chatting with a black woman […] Even in New York City […] men and women, young and old, rich and poor, preferred their kind when it came to those they kept closest. And why shouldn't they? It was far easier to do so than to spend one's limited energy trying to blend into a world one was never meant to be a part of […] She had her world in Harlem and never again would she try to wriggle her way into a world in midtown, not even for just an hour.

Related Characters: Winston Avera, Jende Jonga, Neni Jonga

Related Themes:

Page Number: 94-95

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Neni is walking to Columbus Circle alongside Jende after leaving Winston's birthday party, where she felt self-conscious about being the only African woman in a crowd of mostly-white people. On the street, however, she notices that her preference for friendships with other West Africans isn't unique. Momentarily, Neni becomes hyperconscious of the uniformity all around her and realizes that this preference isn't particularly strange, though it may be limiting. Her vision of "people walking with their kind" has biblical underpinnings, as it's reminiscent of two of each animal marching into Noah's ark. Neni's language—"their kind"—suggests that she bases what draws people together on surface appearances and uses the social interactions that she sees around her as justification for sticking with what she knows. Having never ventured more than a few miles out of Limbe, she carries with her a similar reluctance to engage with the unfamiliar in New York. She defines her life and those of others as "worlds," indicating a vastness between them that can never be broached, like the space between planets. The narrator's uses of the verbs "blend" and "wriggle" to depict the merging of worlds suggests the merging, sometimes forceful, of things that might not otherwise go together. Neni's vision of her "world" as Harlem—a place that was predominately black at this time, but which still harbored ethnic diversity—will change later in the novel when she unexpectedly finds a community among a white congregation in Greenwich Village.

In his first days in America, it was here he came every night to take in the city. It was here he often sat to call her when he got so lonely and homesick that the only balm that worked was the sound of her voice. During those calls, he would ask her how Liomi was doing, what she was wearing, what her plans for the weekend were, and she would tell him everything, leaving him even more wistful for the beauty of her smile, the hearth in his mother's kitchen, the light breeze at Down Beach, the tightness of Liomi's hug, the coarse jokes and laughter of his friends as they drank Guinness at a drinking spot; leaving him craving everything he wished he hadn't left behind. During those times, he told her, he often wondered if leaving home in search of something as fleeting as fortune was ever worthwhile.

Related Characters: Liomi Jonga, Neni Jonga, Jende Jonga

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 95-96

Explanation and Analysis

Neni and Jende are sitting near the statue of Christopher Columbus in Columbus Circle. This was where Jende would call Neni when he was feeling lonely and homesick. It is also the place where he "[took] in the city"—that is, where he went to feel that he was a part of the city's energy and action and to remind himself of the desire for excitement that pushed him to leave Cameroon. When the city wasn't enough to put him at ease, Neni's voice worked as a "balm," or the thing that soothed his aches from loneliness and homesickness. The calls triggered Jende's sensorial memories, which are his only connection to home. The narrator uses a catalogue of feelings, sights, tastes, smells, and sounds to reinforce the notion that one's connection to home is largely fostered by experiences with loved ones. These memories, which are etched in Jende's mind, are contrasted with "fleeting" fortune. The last line shows that Jende knows that money isn't more valuable than his connections with family and friends. This suggests that his choice to leave home was about more than the prospect of financial gain. It was also about expanding his prospects and testing his potential, both of which were limited by circumstances in Cameroon.

Chapter 15 Quotes

"Because right now we're pulling these tricks and the SEC's playing dumb, but you know as well as I do that if this shit falls apart and the chaos starts spreading they're going to throw us out for the public to crucify, by claiming they didn't know a damn thing, and we all know it's a lie."

Related Characters: Clark Edwards (speaker), Jende Jonga, Tom

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 100

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Clark is having a conversation with Lehman Brothers' CEO, Tom, while Jende is driving him to a golf course in Westchester. Jende overhears the conversation in which he learns that Lehman Brothers is in trouble. His becoming privy to such important information reveals how thin the class divide is—that is, though Jende occupies a servile position, he learns, before the rest of the world does, that the firm is in trouble and he also learns why. Clark describes a system that is riddled with corruption. Lehman Brothers isn't engaged in fiscal responsibility but, instead "[pulls] these tricks." Though his use of the demonstrative "these" doesn't specifically express what they're doing, the metaphor likens them to a group of magicians. The SEC, whose job it is to reign in corporate greed, is aware of the firm's misbehavior but feigns ignorance, indicating an indifference toward its own ethics. Clark expresses concern for how his reputation will suffer in response to a financial crisis, comparing the punishment that he'll face to crucifixion. His choice of language is dramatic and hyperbolic, particularly in lieu of the fact that those who caused the financial crisis suffered the least in its aftermath.

Chapter 21 Quotes

"First it was my father…he thought he had the right, you know?" Cindy said.

"Drag my mother into that abandoned house…force her… do it to her by force…don't give a shit about…not care for a second about what would happen to the child…"

She sniffled, took another sip of wine, and wept.

"And the government…our government," she moaned, slurring, tears running down her cheeks, snot running down her nose. "They had the right, too. Force my mother to carry the child of a stranger. Force her to give birth to the child because…because…I don't know why!"

Related Characters: Cindy Edwards (speaker), Vince Edwards, Clark Edwards, Neni Jonga

Related Themes:

Page Number: 135

Explanation and Analysis

Cindy is crying in this passage because her eldest son Vince has recently announced that he's dropping out of law school to move to India. She and Clark have had an argument about it, and Clark has just walked out of the house, leaving Cindy to cry alone and drunk on the kitchen floor. Neni walks in to offer kind words, if not physical comfort, due to fears of overstepping her bounds. Cindy reveals to Neni that she was the product of rape. She drunkenly narrates the tragic circumstances of her life, to Neni's shock, as a sequence of injustices. The injustices against her began with her conception. Despite her anger with her mother over the abuse that she experienced as a child, Cindy still empathizes with her mother, due to her being forced to carry the pregnancy that resulted from her rape to term. Cindy uses possessive pronouns—"my father," "my mother," "our government"—to reinforce how the people and institutions that others are supposed to trust constantly disappoint. Incapable of dealing with the disappointment, she finds succor in wine because drugs and alcohol consistently offer her comfort, whereas no one and nothing else in her life does.

Chapter 23 Quotes

"At his age, all I wanted was the life that I have right now. This exact life, this was what I wanted."

"It is a good life, sir. A very good life."

"Sometimes. But I can understand why Vince doesn't want it. Because these days I don't want it, either. All this shit going on at Lehman, all this stuff we would never have done twenty years ago because we stood for something more, and now really dirty shit is becoming the norm. All over the Street. But try to show good sense, talk of consequences, have a far-long-term outlook, and they look at you as if you've lost your marbles […]"

"And I know Vince has got a point, but the problem is not some system. It is us. Each of us. We've got to fix ourselves before we can fix a whole damn country […]"

Related Characters: Jende Jonga, Clark Edwards (speaker), Vince Edwards

Related Themes:

Page Number: 146

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Jende and Clark are in a park, watching the sun set over the Hudson River. Clark is telling Jende that he admires Vince's willingness to step away from a life of privilege in favor of going to India. Clark's revelation that he has exactly the life that he wanted at Vince's age is ironic because Clark is constantly stressed and feels overwhelmed by both work and personal responsibilities. The circumstances of his life are indications that the lives that people imagine, particularly when they're constructed around the desire to earn a lot of money, can differ from the reality. In Clark's case, the exactness of the life that he imagined is marred by his inability to satisfy his work and familial demands, which causes him to feel an incompetence that frustrates him. Worse, he knows that he's a participant in practices that he deems unethical and can't reason with his colleagues to change this. While Vince would argue that this is a systemic problem, Clark asserts that it's people who create the faults that exist in the system.

Chapter 26 Quotes

By all accounts, no one in Limbe had ever given money to a money doubler and gotten the money doubled […] And yet people continued to give to them, falling into the trap of crafty young men who walked up to them on the street and visited them in their homes, promising quick and high returns on their money through incomprehensible means. One woman at Sapa Road had been so enraptured by the two charming men in suits who visited her at home that she'd given them all of her life's savings for double the money in three months' time. Her hope, the story around Limbe went, was that she would use the doubled money to buy a ticket for her only son to move to America. But the doublers did not return on the appointed day. Or the day after. Or the month after. Destroyed, the woman had eaten rat poison and died, leaving the son to bury her.

Related Characters: Bosco, Jende Jonga

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 169-170

Explanation and Analysis

Two weeks before Lehman Brothers collapses, Jende has a dream about the doublers, in which his old friend Bosco appears. Bosco is on his mind because Jende was unable to fulfill on his promise to give Bosco money for his wife to go to a specialist who could address a painful cyst in her breast. Jende justifies his inability to keep his word by assuming that he wouldn't have been able to provide enough money anyway to pay for an expensive specialist. Jende's guilt over his inability to keep his promise is woven into the guilt that he believes the doublers should feel for lying to those whose money they promise to double. In the dream, it's not Jende but his friend Bosco who cries, which may be Jende projecting his feelings onto someone else due to discomfort with dealing with his fears about never fulfilling his American Dream.

The trust that people have in the doublers mirrors the trust that investors have in stock brokers, for no other reason than that the promise of "quick and high returns" is irresistible. The doublers' methods are just as nebulous as the inner workings of financial markets. The doublers, like the brokers, present themselves as neat and trustworthy ("two charming men in suits"). The tragedy of the woman at Sapa Road will not be unlike those of many Americans who would see retirement savings evaporate and home mortgages increase to astronomical values, causing them to lose the existences which they worked hard to maintain. In both instances, an American Dream fades into nothingness due to the greed of swindlers who play carelessly with people's lives.

Many would be convinced that the plague that had descended on the homes of former Lehman employees was only a few blocks from theirs. Restaurateurs, artists, private tutors, magazine publishers, foundation directors, limousine drivers, nannies, housekeepers, employment agencies, virtually everyone who stood along the path where money flowed to and from the Street fretted and panicked that day. For some, the fears were justified: Their bread and wine would indeed disappear, along with the billions of dollars that vanished the day Lehman died.

Related Characters: Clark Edwards, Cindy Edwards, Neni Jonga, Jende Jonga

Related Themes:

Page Number: 174

Explanation and Analysis

The news has just broken that Lehman Brothers has collapsed—the first sign of the financial crisis of 2008. In this passage, Jende and Neni are watching the news. They figure that Clark will no longer have a job, which makes them wonder of Jende will still have his job as a chauffeur. The Jongas, like other employees who depend on the need for services among executives and their families, are a part of a financial food chain that is crumbling. The financial crisis is described as a "plague" because the problem of insolvency, which has started at Lehman Brothers, will spread throughout the city, impacting people in the middle and working classes. This passage highlights that it's not only employees within the firm who will lose their livelihoods; the prosperity that buoyed the investment firm during the boom years that preceded the recession also lulled others into believing that the years of prosperity would never end ("bread and wine"). The disappearance of "billions of dollars" along with the "bread and wine" underscores how money can be lost as easily as it's gained.

Chapter 27 Quotes

"Everything's going to be all right, Cindy [...] Sean has to constantly remind me, too. He says I have to stop checking our portfolios twenty times a day, but I can't help it. I woke up every morning in Florence panicking about losing everything [....]"

Cindy did not immediately respond; she seemed lost in a maze of a hundred thoughts. "I wish I had Sean's calmness," she finally said. "Nothing ever seems to unravel him."

"Yeah, but you won't believe what he suggested to me yesterday," Cheri said [...]

"He thinks maybe we should get rid of Rosa for a few months, to save" [...]

"Yeah, that's exactly what we need now, right?" Cindy said. "To be cooking and cleaning and doing laundry while we're losing money and sleep [...]"

"But it's scary how bad this could get," Cheri said, her tone turning serious as their laughter ebbed. "When people start talking about flying coach and selling vacation homes..."

Related Characters: Cheri, Cindy Edwards (speaker), Jende Jonga

Related Themes:

Page Number: 180

Explanation and Analysis

Cindy and Cheri are talking about how the financial crisis is impacting them and their friends, while Jende is driving them to Stamford, Connecticut, to visit Cheri's mother. The women's expressed fears of losing the comforts of their privilege—maids, less valuable financial portfolios, the losses of additional homes, and the inability to travel in first-class—is sharply juxtaposed with Jende's unexpressed incomprehension about how the crisis will impact him. Cheri's idea of "losing everything" is far removed from the kind of loss that Jende feared when he heard the news about Lehman Brothers' collapse: the loss of his job, the loss of the income that he needs to keep his family afloat and to help his relatives back home, and the loss of any chance of obtaining a green card. Cheri's idea of what is "scary" is incompatible with Jende's fear about being forced to return to Cameroon.

Cindy's aversion to "cooking and cleaning and doing laundry while losing money and sleep" reminds the reader of how upper-class women, even those who don't work regularly (and Cindy doesn't) are liberated from performing the household chores that women of lower classes must perform due to being unable to afford help. Her aversion to performing such tasks contrasts with Neni's performance of these chores, while also working and attending school. The conversation between Cindy and Cheri examines how wealth can make some people, even those who grew up poor, like Cindy, forget how privileged they are. The Edwardses and the Jongas have very different concepts of suffering, which are determined primarily by class.

"What are you going to do now?" he asked her.

"Something really great," she said, sounding more upbeat than she had in the morning. "I've got over twenty years of experience, honey. I'm not worried. I'm going to take a month and relax before I start a job search."

"You should do that."

"I will, maybe go see my sister in Florida. That's the good thing about a life with no husband or children—no one to hold me back, make me feel as if I can't go where I want, whenever I want, do what I want. I'm going to enjoy myself in Sarasota, and when I come back, I'll dust off the old résumé."

"You will get a new job very fast when you return," Jende said. "Mr. Edwards will surely tell everyone that you were a good secretary."

Related Characters: Leah, Jende Jonga (speaker), Clark Edwards

Related Themes:

Page Number: 183

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Jende is calling Leah at the Lehman Brothers office. She announces that she's been laid off, but she doesn't take the news poorly, despite Jende's concern about how she'll cope with her health problems in the aftermath of losing her job and benefits. Leah's "upbeat" tone is a sign of optimism that could be characterized as typically American—that is, an expression of the tireless belief that one can improve one's circumstances with hard work and faith. Leah's beliefs that her job loss is only a temporary setback and, even, signs that she should take a vacation and visit family are both indicators of a tireless optimism as well as a lack of understanding of how dire the 2008 financial crisis actually was for those not in the top one percent of the economy.

Leah's view of herself as more advantaged, due to being unmarried and having no children contrasts with the ways in which Cindy and Neni are tethered to their husbands and

how their lives are determined by Clark and Jende's actions, respectively.

> More jobs would be lost [...] The Dow would drop in titanic percentages. It would rise and fall and rise and fall, over and over, like a demonic wave. 401(k)s would be cut in half, disappear as if stolen by maleficent aliens. Retirements would have to be postponed [...] College education funds would be withdrawn; many hands would never know the feel of a desired diploma. Dream homes would not be bought. Dream wedding plans would be reconsidered. Dream vacations would not be taken [...] In many different ways it would be [...] a calamity like the one that had befallen the Egyptians in the Old Testament. The only difference between the Egyptians then and the Americans now, Jende reasoned, was that the Egyptians [...] had chosen riches over righteousness, rapaciousness over justice. The Americans had done no such thing. And yet, all through the land, willows would weep for the end of many dreams.

Related Characters: Leah, Jende Jonga

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 184-185

Explanation and Analysis

The day after he speaks to Leah, Jende thinks about how strange it is that the United States is facing an "economic crisis"—a phrase that he hasn't heard since the 1980s in Cameroon. The narrative describes a chain reaction that would impact people's lives like cataclysms, destroying households and dreams. By describing the drop in the Dow as "titanic," the reader is alerted to how something massive and seemingly indestructible sank in an ocean of financial insolvency. If this weren't enough, its constant rise and fall would cruelly trick people into thinking that things were getting better and then sink their hopes yet again. The author's use of the adjective "demonic" and the noun phrase "maleficent aliens" expresses the feeling that something evil has invaded the American economy, though the wrongdoing has, in fact, come within.

Jende, however, doesn't recognize that there's something problematic within the American value system that would lead to the kind of corruption that would ruin millions of people's lives. He reads the American tragedy in biblical terms but cannot bring himself to associate Americans with the "rapaciousness" that led to the fall of Egypt. If Jende were to do this, he would have to admit to himself that the reality of life in the United States is incompatible with his idealized image of it. He would also have to acknowledge that Clark, a man whom he respects and would like his son to emulate, is responsible for destroying people's dreams, just like the doublers back home.

Chapter 49 Quotes

> "In America today, having documents is not enough. Look at how many people with papers are struggling. Look at how even some Americans are suffering. They were born in this country. They have American passports, and yet they are sleeping on the street, going to bed hungry, losing their jobs and houses every day in this...this economic crisis."

Related Characters: Jende Jonga (speaker), Neni Jonga

Related Themes:

Page Number: 307

Explanation and Analysis

Jende has just left the doctor's office in Jamaica, Queens, where he was seeking relief for his aching back, which is the result of stress. Walking out of the office, he knows that his only relief is to tell Neni that it's time for the Jongas to return home to Cameroon. When he makes this announcement, Neni is too irritated with him to sympathize with his pain—both his backache and his probable heartache over being unable to deliver on the promise of the dream that he fostered. Jende tries to explain to Neni why their problems won't be resolved with his getting a green card.

By starting off with the phrase, "in America today," Jende expresses how much things have changed since they first arrived. The land that was still prosperous, due to a housing bubble, is now a place of despondency. What joins everyone now, both the undocumented and citizens, is a struggle against poverty and homelessness. Jende's explanation of how even natural-born citizens with passports are losing their livelihoods exposes something nightmarish about the pursuit of the American Dream. His pessimism contrasts sharply with the wonder toward his country that he expressed to Clark at the beginning of the novel. Whereas, before, Cameroon was a bad place where he could achieve nothing, now Jende has that opinion of America. His hopes, like those of so many others, evaporated in the aftermath of the economic crisis.

❝ "You should have been with me last week when I saw this man who used to drive another executive at Lehman Brothers. We used to sit together outside the building sometimes; he was a fresh round man. I saw him downtown: The man looked like he had his last good meal a year ago. He has not been able to find another job. He says too many people want to be chauffeurs now [...] Everyone is losing jobs everywhere and looking for new jobs, anything to pay bills. So you tell me—if he, an American, a white man with papers, cannot get a new chauffeur job then what about me? They say the country will get better, but you know what? I don't know if I can stay here until that happens. I don't know if I can continue suffering like this just because I want to live in America."

Related Characters: Jende Jonga (speaker), Neni Jonga

Related Themes:

Page Number: 310

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Jende explains to Neni that they can no longer stay in the United States with the hope that they'll achieve more than they already have, especially since their fortune has reversed. Jende uses the example of the white male chauffeur, as opposed to telling Neni about Leah, because a white American male is the person most likely to succeed in America. Jende's logic is that if his acquaintance no longer has a chance, his family certainly doesn't. The picture he draws is that of a man who was once "fresh" and "round," but who now looks as though he's having the life squeezed out of him.

Jende contrasts this anecdote with news that filters in saying that the economy will improve. He refers to the optimists as "they," indicating that he doesn't know where this message is coming from and may not be sure if he can trust it. Later in the novel, when he meets with Clark, the latter will tell Jende that the economy is improving. Given that the architects of the crisis are the ones who promise a reprieve, it makes sense that Jende would register a lack of clarity about where to attribute the messages and if he can trust them. His lack of clarity is also reflected in the refrain, "I don't know," in response to how he feels about Neni's wish to remain and keep fighting. He feels that he's already lost, which would make a fight futile.

Chapter 50 Quotes

❝ By her late twenties, all she could think about was America [...] The African-Americans she saw on TV in Cameroon were happy and successful, well-educated and respectable, and she'd come to believe that if they could flourish in America, surely she could, too [...] Even after she'd seen the movies *Boyz n the Hood* and *Do the Right Thing*, she couldn't be swayed or convinced that the kind of black life depicted represented anything but a very small percentage of black life, just like Americans probably understood that the images they saw of war and starvation in Africa were but a very small percentage of African life [...] Every picture she'd seen of Cameroonians in America was a portrait of bliss: children laughing in snow; couples smiling at a mall; families posing in front of a nice house with a nice car nearby. America, to her, was synonymous with happiness.

Related Characters: Neni Jonga

Related Themes:

Page Number: 312

Explanation and Analysis

After Jende announces that the Jongas are returning home to Limbe, Neni sets her mind on resisting him. She admits that her love for her new country borders on obsession, though she was outwardly reserved when Jende first announced his troubles with immigration. Neni looked to America as a place where black people had a chance to become prosperous. She figures that it's a place that will offer a fair shot to anyone with a good education and a willingness to work hard. Her reliance on media to help her understand both the benefits and ills of life in America for black people only allows her to see half of the picture. While it is true that black people can succeed, there are also many who remain trapped in substandard schools and criminally infested neighborhoods. A select few rise above those circumstances, but the majority do not. On the other hand, people born into the kind of wealth that the Edwardses have are guaranteed success, despite whatever level of talent they may have. It's this ingrained system of inequality that Neni doesn't understand. Similarly, she negates how much Americans understand about Africa, forgetting how dismissive Cindy Edwards and Dean Flipkins were toward her, partly because they believe that she comes from poverty and ignorance. Neni is determined to usurp her own identity and that of her children in the myriad images she has seen, both on television and among her friends, of black people living interesting and happy lives (she connects their happiness with material objects) in America.

Later, as she stood in front of the mirror staring at her face before applying her exfoliating mask, she promised herself she would fight Jende till the end. She had to. It wasn't only that she loved New York City [...] It wasn't just because she was hopeful that she would one day become a pharmacist [...] It was hardly only about [...] things she could never find in her hometown, things like horse-drawn carriages on city streets, and gigantic lighted Christmas trees in squares and plazas, and pretty parks where musicians played for free beside polychromatic foliage [...] It was mostly for what her children would be deprived of [...] It was for the boundless opportunities they would be denied [...] She was going to fight for her children, and for herself, because no one journeyed far away from home to return without a fortune amassed or dream achieved.

Related Characters: Betty, Liomi Jonga, Jende Jonga, Neni Jonga

Related Themes:

Page Number: 316

Explanation and Analysis

Neni has just met with her friend Betty, who encourages her to consider the bold idea of divorcing Jende and marrying Betty's cousin in exchange for a green card. Betty says that Neni could use the money that she got from Cindy Edwards (ten thousand dollars) to pay Betty's cousin for the service. Neni's willingness to make such a grand sacrifice comes from her determination not to fail. She exhibits this attention to achievement in her academic studies as well as when she went to Cindy, determined to be compensated for the great inconvenience her former boss caused to the Jonga family. The exfoliating mask is a symbol for how Neni is changing into a more willful person. Previously, she was not the kind of woman who would fight her husband and assert her own desires. However, she still has some discomfort with asserting her desires and, in her thoughts, chooses to negate or diminish the things that she wants—living in New York, becoming a pharmacist, and enjoying the offerings of the city. She makes her fight "mostly" about her children because it's more acceptable for her to fight first for them and, secondly, for herself. Nevertheless, the concluding sentence strongly suggests that Neni's fight is really for herself, because her children could care less about "a fortune amassed" and do not yet have any dreams that they would like to achieve.

Chapter 52 Quotes

When he had told her of his plan to return home, she had wondered why he was coming back when others were running out of Limbe, when many in his age group were fleeing to Bahrain and Qatar, or trekking and taking a succession of crowded buses to get from Cameroon to Libya so they could cross to Italy on leaky boats and arrive there with dreams of a happier life if the Mediterranean didn't swallow them alive.

Related Characters: Winston Avera, Ma Jonga , Jende Jonga

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 323-324

Explanation and Analysis

Jende has announced to his mother, Ma Jonga, that he plans to leave New York and return to Limbe. He has this conversation with her shortly after expressing to Winston his desire to leave. The two men then joke about how, soon, things will get so bad in the U.S. that Americans may start fleeing to Mexico instead of the other way around. Both conversations reveal that the dream of living in the U.S. has been complicated by the financial crisis and by the immigration system being far more difficult to navigate than Jende realized.

Ma Jonga doesn't understand the stress of these realities and only sees her son returning to the life that he was eager to flee. She describes a persistent movement of young men, across land and sea, in the effort to find more opportunity. The continuous action verbs "fleeing," "trekking," and "taking" express the urgency and continuity of their movements. The "leaky boats" on which they cross the Mediterranean are reminiscent of the ships that explorers boarded to cross to new lands. The fact that the boats are leaky reinforces the sense of danger associated with this crossing. They may also serve as a metaphor for the possible unsustainability of the migrants' dreams. The Mediterranean, in this context, isn't a glorious blue expanse with the promise of new lands in the distance. It is, instead, a violent beast that threatens to swallow those who cross it. It then seems that both nature and societies are conspiring against the migrants' searches for opportunity and freedom.

Chapter 62 Quotes

"One can never trust any government—I don't trust the American government and I definitely don't trust the Cameroon government."

"No, but it's our government and it's our country. We love it, we hate it, it's still our country. How man go do?"

"It's our country," Winston agreed. "We can never disown it."

Related Characters: Winston Avera, Jende Jonga (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 380

Explanation and Analysis

Jende tells Winston that he's going to carry the twenty-one thousand dollars that he's earned from his time in the U.S. in a backpack instead of sending it via Western Union. He's afraid that, if he wires it, the government will find out that he's got it and will try to seize the money from him. Winston's lack of trust in the American government is fostered by his experiences, first in the army, and probably, too, from his sense that the government may have been complicit in the financial crisis. This shared mistrust of governments is part of what has clouded Jende's idealized view of the U.S. He sees it as a place that may offer more opportunity than Cameroon but also as a place with its own share of corruption. Cameroon, however, is a country that he's willing to embrace, despite its corruption, due to it being the only country that has been willing to welcome Jende. His rhetorical question, delivered in pidgin English, asks Winston what else a man can do but embrace what he knows. It's an expression of acceptance, not futility. Though Winston is an American citizen, he agrees that Cameroon is his country in a way that America may never be, as both his history and culture are rooted there.

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

Jende Jonga walks into the halls of Lehman Brothers for his job interview with Clark Edwards. This is the first time in which Jende has worn a suit—the "green double-breasted pinstripe suit" that he wore when he arrived in America—for a job interview. He never even had a résumé before recently seeking the help of a volunteer career counselor at the library. In his homeland of Cameroon, Jende worked as a farmer and a street cleaner. In New York, he worked as a dishwasher and a livery cab driver. When he walks into Mr. Edwards's office, Jende is determined to impress the man into making him his chauffeur.

The interview causes Jende to feel and experience a level of distinction that's new to him. Though his suit can be perceived as loud and unprofessional, wearing it makes him feel like more than a menial worker. The process of learning to present himself on paper is also new. The scene foreshadows how his relationship with Clark—an upper-class man—will make Jende more self-conscious about the way he presents himself.

Jende's mouth falls open at the sight of the Clark's plush furnishings and the views of Central Park and the Manhattan skyline. Clark asks Jende to sit, never taking his eyes off of a shredder in which he is inserting paper. He asks if Jende's been in any accidents or has any outstanding tickets; Jende answers no to both questions. Clark then asks Jende to tell him about himself. Jende explains that he lives in Harlem but comes from a little coastal town in Cameroon called Limbe. Clark asks if Jende has any "papers." Jende assures him that he has a work permit, which he believes will hold him over until he gets his green card. He also assures Clark that he's in the country legally, "for the long term."

Clark's office signifies a level of wealth and importance that is new to Jende. The papers that he's inserting into the shredder foreshadow the revelation of Lehman Brothers' dishonest financial practices. The juxtaposition of this criminal act with Clark's question about whether or not Jende has any outstanding tickets seems ironic. Meanwhile, Jende's explanation of his immigration status reveals the thinking process of some undocumented workers. Knowing that laborers aren't granted visas, they must circumvent the system.

Jende tells Clark that he's been in the country since 2004. During the interview, Jende feels both parched and sweaty but senses that he's doing well. Clark says that Jende will sign a "confidentiality agreement," swearing never to reveal anything about what he sees Clark doing—not to anyone—while chauffeuring him around town. When Jende isn't taking care of Clark, he'll chauffeur other members of the Edwards family. After assuring Jende that he'll hear from Clark's secretary the following day regarding his decision, Clark advises Jende to get a better suit, in black, blue, or gray, and to wear a real tie, instead of the clip-on that Jende's presently wearing. They shake hands, with Jende thanking him in advance, and offering to be "the best chauffeur" if he gets the job. Clark smiles and pats him on the arm.

His feelings of being both "parched" and "sweaty" are signs of his nervousness because Jende knows how much he needs this job to gain a foothold in his new country. The confidentiality agreement will later be the cause of a personal dilemma in Jende—as the Edwards family's driver, he'll become privy to aspects of their personal and professional lives without wanting to be. Though Jende doesn't impress Clark with his appearance, he learns a lesson in how not to present himself, which he will use going forward.

CHAPTER 2

A year-and-a-half to the day that Neni Jonga arrived in the United States, she and her friend, Fatou, are in Chinatown trying on fake designer handbags. Neni loves New York, and being in Manhattan still feels like a dream. She's no longer "a jobless, unwed mother, sitting in her father's house in Limbe [...] waiting for Jende to rescue her." Jende worked three jobs to save the money that Neni needed for her student visa, for their son Liomi's visitor visa, and two airline tickets. For two years, Jende shared a two-bedroom basement apartment in the Bronx with six other men.

Living in New York makes Neni feel, for the first time, like she's playing an active role in her life. The fake designer bags make her feel rich and important, as though she can seize some of the wealth that seems abundant in her new country. Jende's willingness to sacrifice his own comfort by living in a cramped apartment for a year is an indication of his commitment to his family and the realization of all of their dreams.

Two weeks after Neni arrived in America, in May 2006, she became "a respectable woman" and married Jende. For Neni, Limbe now feels like "some faraway town," a place that she loved less with Jende no longer there. She felt nothing when she left Cameroon, whereas New York is now the place where all of her desires are harbored. She has a job for the first time in her life, as a home health aide. For the first time in sixteen years, she's a student, studying chemistry at Borough of Manhattan Community College. She also has a dream beyond marriage and motherhood: to become a pharmacist. At thirty-three, Neni is determined to become something, to make herself proud.

Marriage is important to Neni because her father's imprisonment of Jende made it feel as though their love was not only illegitimate but illegal. Limbe feels far away to her because it's a place that she associates with a lot of bad memories—particularly the death of her first child. In New York, she can realize the dreams that were merely shriveling up in her in Limbe. Neni's immigrant experience is one in which stagnancy has been replaced by possibility.

CHAPTER 3

While driving along White Plains Road, a call comes in from Clark Edwards's secretary, notifying Jende that he got the chauffeur job at a salary of thirty-five thousand per year. After calling Neni, he calls his cousin, Winston, to thank him for putting a good word in to Clark's friend, Frank Dawson. Neni sends a text message noting that all Jende needs now are his "papers" and he'll be "all set."

The job offers Jende more money than he's ever made before. This is the first step in making their dream of establishing themselves in the U.S. possible. They assume that the combination of a well-paying job and a green card with make Jende feel like a true American.

Jende's been fighting to become documented for three years. He was in the country for only four weeks when Winston took him to meet an immigration lawyer to find a way for Jende to stay in the country permanently after his visitor's visa expired. This had been the plan all along, though Jende never admitted this when he went to the American embassy in Yaoundé to apply for his visitor's visa. He told the consulate that he would only be in New York for three months and even furnished proof that he had too much awaiting him in Cameroon—a job that he supposedly liked and a title on a piece of land inherited from his father—to give up on his life there.

Jende knew that, as a poor laborer, he wouldn't be able to obtain a work visa. This description reveals the steps that working-class immigrants take to gain a foothold in new countries. Jende lies about why he wants a visitor's visa. The irony of this lie is that the title he furnishes as proof that he plans to return to Cameroon will also be one of the things that will actually provide him with a more promising future.

Jende was determined to escape the "future of nothingness" in Cameroon. He would succeed in America and return to his home country a "conqueror." Winston tells him that, second to marrying an American citizen, applying for asylum is the easiest path to American citizenship. Winston hires Bubakar—"a fast-talking Nigerian" with an office in Flatbush, Brooklyn—based on the recommendation of a friend of his from Atlanta who said that Bubakar is "a great immigration lawyer with hundreds of African clients all over the country." Bubakar is supposedly expert in concocting stories of persecution to help with asylum applications. Winston's friend credits Bubakar for getting him his green card and placing him two years away from applying for citizenship.

Like Neni, Jende imagines Cameroon as a place that is devoid of possibility. He feels powerless and passive at home but uses the active language of conquest to describe the possibilities that he imagines in the U.S. Like an actual conqueror from the Age of Exploration, he imagines a land of riches and wonders. Bubakar serves as his navigator through the American immigration system. The fact that he specializes in lying to the authorities about asylum, and often gets away with it, is an indication of how little the authorities understand politics in other countries.

Jende tells Bubakar his story so that the lawyer can use elements from his life to construct the lie that can win him asylum. When Bubakar discovers that Neni's father had him imprisoned for impregnating Neni, Bubakar insists they use that, despite it having happened fourteen years ago.

The story that Bubakar chooses to tell is, ironically, a classic one akin to "Romeo and Juliet"—that of a young couple in love who are torn apart by warring families.

When Winston expresses skepticism, Bubakar insists that he knows more about how to handle immigration judges and that Winston should stick to what he knows: finding ways to help businesses avoid paying their taxes. The comment angers Winston and Bubakar, knowing that he went too far, quickly makes peace. Jende continues with his story, saying that his and Neni's daughter died in infancy. Neni's father didn't want Jende to marry Neni because he came from a poor family. Bubakar suggests that they weave a story about how Neni's father wants to kill Jende because he doesn't come from a particular social group. Winston doesn't think it's plausible, but Bubakar insists that they trust him.

Bubakar insults Winston, despite the fact that Jende is visiting Bubakar on Winston's recommendation, because he's probably intimidated by Winston's more prestigious and lucrative career. Bubakar thinks that the story about warring social groups will work because of how little he thinks the immigration authorities know about Africa and their likely assumption that tribal conflicts occur all the time. To Winston, the story sounds implausible because he understands Cameroon's sociocultural context and knows that such a thing wouldn't happen in practice.

CHAPTER 4

Neni stays up late, waiting for Jende to come home so that she can hear about his first day at work. When he arrives, he says that all went well. While eating the dinner that Neni prepared, Jende tells her about the Edwardses' beautiful apartment, which looks like "one of those rich-people apartments you see on television." He talks about their son, Mighty, who's "very nice" and "well brought-up." When Neni asks if Mighty is an only child, Jende mentions that Mighty told him about an older brother who attends Columbia School of Law but doesn't come to visit often, much to the dismay of their mother, Cindy Edwards.

For Neni, Jende's story about the Edwardses is a window into the lives of privileged people whom she has only read about or seen in movies or on television. His mention that Mighty is "nice" tells her that maybe they aren't snobby rich people, but Jende's brief mention of Mighty's distant brother foreshadows the familial discord to which he'll later be a witness.

When Neni asks what Cindy looks like, Jende says that she's "good-looking" and looks the way a rich man's wife should. She's "one of those food people," he says, always instructing others on how to eat better. Neni wants more details about her appearance and Jende says that, when he first saw her, she reminded him of the lead actress in a film they both loved—*American Beauty*. Neni remembers the actress's name: Annette Bening. Neni assumes that Cindy has been rich her whole life.

Jende's description is generic but it conjures an image of a woman who's probably thin, glamorous, and self-important. Her work as a nutritionist indicates her class, given that she talks to those who can afford to be selective about food. His comparison to Annette Bening's character in American Beauty *inadvertently alludes to Cindy's frustrations lurking beneath a flawless surface.*

Neni asks Jende what he did after dropping Mighty off at school. He says that he returned to the Edwardses' home and picked up Cindy, who had appointments in Battery Park City and SoHo. Then, he picked Mighty up from school and drove him and his nanny, Stacy, to Mighty's piano lesson on the Upper West Side. After that, he picked up Clark from his office and took him to a steak house on Long Island before returning to the city around ten to park the car in the garage and catch both the bus and subway home.

Jende's itinerary for the day reveal all of those who depend on families like the Edwardses for their livings. In addition to Jende, Stacy is another servant, Mighty has a piano teacher, and Cindy has numerous cosmeticians who work to ensure that she continues looking "like a rich man's wife."

Neni thinks that this is a lot to do in one day, but Jende insists that, for the kind of money he's being paid, this is to be expected. Two weeks ago, he was making only half of his current salary while driving the livery cab twelve hours per day. Neni figures that with Jende's thirty-five thousand and her ten thousand, even after taxes, school fees, and rent, they can still save three or four hundred dollars per month. She figures that, in ten years, they can have enough money for a small house in a New York suburb.

Jende is unafraid of working hard to earn what he considers to be a very good living, though his salary barely gives him enough to survive in an expensive city like New York. The Jongas' experience of getting by on very little, however, makes them more capable of extending an otherwise meager salary to get a little closer to realizing their dreams.

Jende finishes his dinner and asks Neni if Liomi is sleeping in their bed or his own; he's in his own, Neni assures him, knowing that he'll want them to be alone so that they can "celebrate." While picking up his dirty dishes, she sings a Cameroonian song. These days, she's been singing more than she ever has in her life. After washing the dishes, she picks up Jende's jacket, which is part of the new black suit that she bought him at T.J. Maxx for a hundred and twenty-five dollars, "a third of their savings." She wanted to get him a cheaper one, but Fatou dissuaded her, insisting that Jende had to look good to drive around a man like Clark Edwards. She assures Neni that, one day, when Jende becomes rich, she'll buy all of their clothes from a "fine white people store," like Target.

At this point in the story, Jende and Neni are happy and in love, thus their implied wish to "celebrate" by making love. Neni's singing is also an indication of her happiness and hopefulness. Fatou's encouragement that Neni buy Jende a nicer suit reflects her understanding of the importance of dignified self-presentation, which she's learned from having lived in the U.S. longer than Neni. However, she comes from a similarly humble background, so her understanding of where the rich would shop is limited by her distance from that world.

CHAPTER 5

Cindy is always cordial, albeit remote, around Jende. Still, he stiffens up every time she gets in the car with him. He's thankful that she's on her phone most days. One Tuesday, after Jende's been on the job for two weeks, Cindy visits her eldest son, Vince. Jende notices how much the young man resembles his father. Cindy is ecstatic to see him and, based on what Mighty told Jende, it's possible that they haven't seen each other in months. Two hours after their lunch, Cindy is devastated to learn that Vince won't be going with his family to Aspen, Colorado, for Christmas. Instead, she tells Clark, he wants to go to "some silent retreat in Costa Rica." When her husband seems indifferent to this, Cindy hangs up on him and tosses her phone onto the seat of the car in frustration.

Jende's discomfort with Cindy may be a reflection of the worry that many black men feel when alone with white women. Their fears of false accusations and causing inadvertent offense are rooted in both America's racist history and Africa's colonial history. Vince's decision to spend Christmas alone, despite his mother's eagerness to be with him, is Jende's first glimpse into Vince's wish to create a separate and distinct life from the one offered by his parents. Cindy is frustrated by both her husband's reaction and her powerlessness to keep her family close to her.

Cindy calls Clark back and asks if he's going to Mighty's piano recital. Jende notices that her voice sounds "drenched in agony." He wishes that someone would call her with good news or funny news, anything to help the woman cheer up. Her phone rings again: it's Clark. He says that he can't make it to Mighty's recital but will "make it up to him." Cindy is outraged and, once again, hangs up on her husband and tosses her cell phone aside.

Clark's clearly unwilling to make time for his family, suggesting that he's more committed to his career and reputation than being fully present for his son. His offer to "make it up to" Mighty is probably empty, given Cindy's exasperated reaction. Her hanging up on Clark mirrors his disregard.

Cindy sits for several minutes in a state of glumness, "resting her head in her hand" until she picks up the phone and calls her friend Cheri to let her know that she'd be happy to accompany her on a visit to her mother the following week. Cindy then calls her other best friend, June, to commiserate with someone, but June's busy. For the remaining ten minutes of the ride, Cindy makes no calls, but sits quietly, "watching happy people marching up and down Madison."

Figuring that she can't do anything to improve her situation with her own family, Cindy immerses herself in her friends' needs. When June can't avail herself to hear Cindy's problems, Cindy sits quietly observing those whom she thinks must be happier than she. The narrative suggests that the appearance of happiness isn't always true.

CHAPTER 6

Jende is driving Clark back from Washington, D.C. They are cruising across the Delaware Memorial Bridge and entering New Jersey when Clark asks Jende to tell him about Limbe. Jende smiles and a nostalgic lilt enters his voice. He tells Clark about the sign that welcomes people: "Welcome to Limbe, the Town of Friendship." It's a sign that, along with the smell of the ocean breeze, makes people happy to be there. Jende describes Limbe as a small town, but one "made of magic, an OPEC city" with a "national refinery on one side of the shore, fishermen with their nets on the other side." People in Limbe lead simple lives, Jende says, but they enjoy their lives.

Jende's initial description of Limbe idealizes it because he misses his home, though he may not yet realize that he does. He describes a place that is intimate ("a small town") and special ("made of magic"). It's also a place that is rich in natural resources ("an OPEC city" and a great place for fishermen). His note that people lead simple but enjoyable lives contrasts with the lavishness and misery in which the Edwardses live.

Clark describes this as "fascinating," while reopening his laptop. Jende goes on to say that Limbe "is the best town in Africa," and that Vince once told him that "it's the type of town he wants to live in." Clark is unsurprised by this and asks when Vince told Jende this. Jende says that Vince mentioned it two nights ago, when he was driving Vince back to Columbia after he had dinner with Mighty and Cindy.

Vince's desire to live in such a town probably strikes Clark as yet another example of what he perceives as his son's flakiness and his wish to live a kind of alternative lifestyle. Unlike Jende, Clark doesn't take the comment seriously. Vince is eager for the simple, enjoyable life that Jende has described.

Clark asks Jende why he's in America if Limbe is so beautiful. Jende says that everyone wants to be in America. Clark is unconvinced, leaving Jende to think about "what to say without saying too much." Jende says that his country "is no good" and that, if he had stayed, he "would have become nothing" and "would have remained nothing." He feared that Liomi would grow up to be poor like him, just as Jende was poor like his father, Pa Jonga. In America, Jende knows that he can "become a respectable man" and that his son can become respectable, too.

Clark is unconvinced because Jende is speaking in clichés. Jende's description of Cameroon as "no good" contrasts sharply with his vision of Limbe as an ideal place. Jende can idealize Limbe because it's his home, but he can also regard Cameroon objectively as a place in which no one from his kind of background is ever able to advance.

Clark takes a call in which he explains in ten seconds why someone shouldn't be fired for something. He then asks why Jende couldn't achieve respectability in his own country. Jende's voice drops "ten decibels lower" as he explains that, to be somebody in Limbe, you have to be born in a family with money. Jende's voice escalates again when he contrasts this condition with life in America, where someone like Obama, who didn't come from the nation's elite, is trying to become president of the United States.

The brevity of Clark's speech, is juxtaposed with Jende's slow narrative about why America is better than Cameroon. What he doesn't realize is that the kind of poverty that he found inescapable also exists in America and that it's people like Clark, who make ten-second judgments that determine the outcome of people's lives, who can foster that poverty.

Clark picks up a buzzing phone and says something to someone named Phil about being unsure about what Tom, the CEO, is thinking. He says that the company can't continue doing the same things, expecting different results. Clark is worried about their "superficial short-term fixes" coming back to haunt them. He expresses concern that their lives, careers, and reputations will be compromised. He takes a deep breath while listening again, then laughs and agrees to a round of golf sometime soon. Clark declines another offer from Phil, saying it's not his "cup of tea," but that he'll probably beg Phil for "her number" when he finds himself "on the verge of an explosion."

Clark worries that his career may be ruined by Lehman Brothers' fiscal irresponsibility. What he doesn't mention is how the lives of people who aren't rich executives will be more severely compromised. Phil's offers of golf and a prostitute are examples of how some of these people comfort themselves when they feel guilt. Clark's description of "superficial short-term fixes" could also apply to these activities.

Clark places other calls, including one to Paris during which Jende overhears him speaking "mediocre French," which he praises as "very good French" at the end of Clark's call. Clark says that he lived in Paris for a year while he was studying at Stanford and, when Jende registers ignorance, he explains that Stanford is "a college." Jende notes that the school has a good football team. When Clark says that he originally comes from Evanston, Illinois, Jende recalls that his cousin, Winston, lived in Illinois for a few months, but he called home all the time complaining about the cold. Jende says that he thinks Winston joined the army so that he could move to a warm place. Clark chuckles at the supposed logic and wistfully recalls his childhood in Illinois. He says that his sister, Ceci, is thinking of moving back there.

Their conversation reveals how, despite Jende's lack of formal education, each possesses a knowledge that the other doesn't have. Jende probably speaks far better French than Clark, due to French being one of Cameroon's official languages; but, he's never had the privilege of going to France and is unfamiliar with Stanford as a prestigious academic institution. He knows of Clark's home state only from Winston's stories. In the conversation they each reveal more about themselves. Clark, like Jende, exposes his wistfulness for his original home.

Thinking of Ceci, Clark calls her. He leaves a voicemail message in which he notes how busy he's been at work and that he insists that Ceci go to Mexico for their father's eightieth birthday. Clark says he'll pay for everything and promises that he'll try to pick up the next time Ceci calls, though email or text is always better for him. He throws his head back after hanging up and closes his eyes. He then asks Jende if he had a job back home. Jende says that he worked for Limbe Urban Council. When Clark asks if this was "a good job," Jende says that there aren't really good jobs or bad jobs in his home country. The problem is that the job offered him no solid future, not even a sure way to marry Neni.

Despite Clark's seeming indifference to his wife and children, his eagerness to reconnect with his parents and sister for a special occasion suggests that he misses a life that he no longer has—a life he associates with Illinois and the family he grew up with. It's the money that he earns in New York, however, that gives him the privilege to foster this connection. Jende, on the other hand, didn't have a job in Limbe that gave him the privilege of creating and maintaining the family he wanted.

Clark doesn't understand. Poor people marry all the time. Jende explains that, in Cameroon, "not everyone can marry the person that they want." Neni's father, for instance, refused to allow him and Neni to marry because he wanted her to find someone with money who would give him money whenever he asked for it. Though Jende acknowledges that people do elope and live together before marriage in Cameroon, he wanted to do things the right way and pay Neni's bride-price, which included livestock, cloth, bags of rice, bottles of wine, and an envelope of cash containing twice the sum that Neni's father demanded. After Jende's family handed over the bride-price to Neni's family, the relatives sang and danced together, and then he and Neni were married. He says that the payment of the bride-price means more to him than his marriage certificate.

Jende's explains to help Clark understand that in his culture, people don't feel that they have the freedom to do as they please. Clark imagines how people in the U.S. "marry all the time" with no concern of what others think. For Jende, however, it was very important that he do things in a way in which Neni's father would approve. This is partly due to Jende wanting to show the snobby, greedy man that he is perfectly capable of giving Neni a good life and to get back at him for having Jende imprisoned for impregnating Neni. The payment of the bride-price is important to Jende because it disproves what Neni's father believed about him.

Clark says that he hopes Neni's "worth it." Jende insists that he has "the best wife in the whole world." Clark then asks if Jende thinks that America is better than Cameroon. Jende insists that it's a "million times" better, proven by the fact that he's driving such a nice car and that Clark is talking to him as if he's "somebody." He's also sitting in the driver's seat, "feeling as if [he's] somebody."

Jende speaks in superlatives, not only because he feels optimistic about his new life, which places him in proximity to someone as wealthy as Clark, but because he feels that he's already triumphed over his original circumstances by winning over Neni from her family.

While flipping through some loose papers from a folder, Clark asks how Jende could afford to buy a plane ticket to the U.S. if he was so poor. Jende explains that Winston helped with that. Clark recalls that Winston is an associate at Dustin, Connors, and Solomon—a Wall Street firm. Clark then wonders how Winston arrived in the U.S.; Jende says that Winston "won the green card lottery" and then joined the army. When Jende begins to explain how Winston "used the money" from the G.I. Bill to attend law school, Clark stops him, remembering that Frank told him Winston's story.

Clark uses Jende's story, it seems, to distract him from the hopeless drudgery that characterizes his daily life. The stories of Jende and Winston's ascendancy into American life is juxtaposed with Clark's imminent fall from his lofty position. Jende characterizes Winston's good fortune as luck, which discounts Winston's relatively financially privileged background, which gave him an advantage, and his personal sacrifice in joining the army.


Clark's phone buzzes again. He speaks to someone about someone else going to Arizona and then hangs up and dials another number. He's calling Vince to say that Cindy just called to tell Clark that Vince is turning down "the Skadden internship offer" to spend a month on a reservation in Arizona. He asks if Vince can't just go there after the internship. He asks Vince to call him back or come to his office so that they can talk. He directs Vince to call Leah and check his calendar, saying it's important that he talk to his parents before making "major decisions."

Vince's rejection of the internship is yet another example of how Vince is rejecting the life that his parents are trying to create for him. Clark views Vince's search for spiritual fulfillment as something that should be relegated to a hobby as opposed to making it a serious pursuit. Clark tries to make time to talk to Vince but forces his son to work around his schedule and work obligations.

Clark hangs up the phone and sighs deeply, muttering about how "unbelievable" his son is. Jende longs to tell him that he's sorry about Vince and that "nothing could be harder than a disobedient son." Clark then calls Frank, asking if he can arrange for an internship for Vince at Dustin, Connors, and Solomon. When he ends the call, he tells Jende that he's glad that he understands that he's been given a "great opportunity." Jende nods and says that he thanks God every day for the opportunity. He says that anything is possible for an American. He hopes that, one day, Liomi will grow up to be "a great man" like Clark.

Jende identifies with Clark because he believes that the life that Clark has and the one that he wants for his son are the only legitimate paths for success. Clark's privilege is also expressed in his ability to arrange jobs and internships on Vince's behalf, which is something that Jende is unable to do for Liomi. This scene shows how achievement is often less determined by accomplishments than by social connections.


CHAPTER 7

Around noon, Leah calls Jende, saying that he'll need to drive back to the Lehman Brothers office tower to drop off "an important folder" that Clark left in the backseat and needed for "a three o'clock meeting." She tells Jende that she'll meet him downstairs, where Jende is leaning against the car. He's surprised by her appearance, which he had expected to be "tiny," given her "high-pitched honeyed voice." Leah is actually "wide and round." She reminds him of the people he saw when he landed at Newark International Airport, people who made him wonder if "America was a country of large people."

When Jende landed at Newark International Airport, he saw how the Americans who were walking around looked very different from those he observed in movies or on TV. He didn't realize it at the time, but he was getting a glimpse into the country's obesity problem. Part of his process of assimilating into the country is learning how his expectations about people may contrast with the reality.

Leah asks how Jende likes working for Clark. He says he likes it very much and that Mr. Edwards is a good man. Leah's been working for Clark for fifteen years, but she says that things have been tense at the company "since the subprime unit fell apart." She insists that, when it's time to lay people off, "the little people" will go first, while "Clark and his friends up there" will be fine. She says that one can never trust executives who say that everything will be fine, while they simultaneously hide "a lot of dirty shit."

Jende's perception of Clark's goodness conflicts with Leah's general perception of men like Clark as dishonest and indifferent to the struggles of those who work for them. She's giving Jende a brief lesson in the American class system, which can be as exploitative and corrupt as that in Limbe, and equally capable of trapping people into a lifetime of poverty.

CHAPTER 8

It's midnight and Neni still hasn't started studying. She figured she'd be done with the chores by ten, but she didn't finish until eleven. Then, she needed to shower and wash her hair. She needs to study for three hours to finish all of her homework and prepare for her precalculus test. She goes to the kitchen and makes herself a cup of instant coffee. With two cups, she can stay up until dawn.

Neni works hard at her studies, which she knows his necessary to help her realize her dream, while she has the additional responsibility of maintaining a comfortable home for Jende and Liomi. This occupies her so much that she barely has time, it seems, to squeeze in personal hygiene.

Two other students in Neni's precalculus class had formed a study group and invited others to join, but she didn't reply to their emails. She likes studying alone. Besides, she doesn't think there's much to gain from being in a study group. She joined one earlier in the semester for her Introduction to Statistics class and was appalled when, barely thirty minutes into their study session in the students' lounge, one of the members suggested taking a break to order Chinese food. When the others agreed, Neni felt that she had no choice but to spend ten dollars that she didn't want to spend on moo shu pork. They then spent an hour eating and chatting about who they thought would win on *American Idol*. Neni thought that maybe they could afford to lose an hour of study time, but she couldn't.

Neni views the members of the study group as having the privilege to be more frivolous with their time and money. She can't be so careless, due to having the additional responsibilities of working and caring for her family. She also can't spend money as freely because her family remains poor, despite their improved circumstances. Their discussion about American Idol *seems especially wasteful. However, it merely demonstrates that Neni faces greater pressures than her classmates, who are younger and have fewer pressing responsibilities.*

Around three-thirty in the morning, Neni goes to the kitchen for another cup of coffee. She takes a sip and then closes her eyes, enjoying the moment of stillness. Usually, her mind is always active with planning her next step. Life in America has turned her into someone who's always thinking and planning for the next thing. She decides that she's studied enough. She'll do some practice problems on Sunday, and more the night before the test. On test day, she'll be ready.

The late night coffee break gives Neni rare time to spend with herself because Jende and Liomi are asleep. She has time to think about what she would like to do next with her life and not only about what her family needs. Life in America encourages her to think for herself and about herself, which makes her more confident when facing challenges.

CHAPTER 9

While eating at Red Lobster in Times Square with Neni and Liomi, Jende gets a text message from his brother. When Jende calls back, he learns that Pa Jonga has come down with "an ugly case of malaria" and can barely speak. He needs to go to a hospital in Douala. His brother says that they can borrow money from a businessman in Sokolo if Jende can talk to him and promise to send repayment as soon as possible. Jende's brother begs him to do something; otherwise, their father could be dead by daybreak.

The Jongas have a ritual, which recurs in the novel, of dining at the Red Lobster in Time Square. The Jongas' designation of it as their favorite restaurant parallels with a story that Cindy later tells Neni about having been too poor to have shrimp for dinner when she was little. This ability to indulge in a "luxury" also makes Jende feel more responsible for his family back home.

Jende runs to the ATM, while Neni has a waiter wrap up the sautéed shrimp that Jende didn't have time to finish. He then goes to a bodega with a Western Union logo and sends the money to Cameroon. Jende rushes, pushing aside tourists, though he knows that his urgency will make no difference because his brother won't receive the money until Monday. Pa Jonga survives, but the news is yet another reminder of how "bad news has a way of slithering into good days and making a mockery of complacent joys."

Jende rushes to the Western Union, despite knowing that it won't make a difference to do so, because he wants to prove to himself that he's capable of addressing and solving problems. The mention of "complacent joys" expresses his yearning for some semblance of the life of ease that people like the Edwardses have.

On a Tuesday in April 2008, Bubakar calls while Jende's parked on a street corner, "reading Clark's discarded *Wall Street Journal*." When he answers, Bubakar tells him that his asylum application wasn't approved. He then assures Jende not to worry; they'll keep fighting. Jende asks if this means that he has to leave America. Bubakar says yes; they don't believe the story about him being killed if he goes back to Cameroon. Jende is outraged. Bubakar told him that the story would work and said that the woman at Immigration seemed to believe him. Bubakar recalls that he thought it was a bad sign when the official told them to wait for a decision by mail instead of returning in a couple of weeks to pick up the visa. Bubakar goes on to say that someone people at immigration are "wicked" and don't want people like him and Jende in the U.S.

Jende's reading of Clark's discarded newspaper reveals that, despite his lack of formal education, he's eager to understand what's going on in the world. Despite this, he retains a naïve trust in Bubakar, who seems increasingly incapable of managing Jende's immigration case. To distract from his own inability to read a situation accurately, he blames possible racism for the dismissal of Jende's asylum application instead of admitting that he advised Jende poorly. He feigns empathy with Jende's situation by suggesting that they're joined in an effort to fight against an unjust system.

Bubakar reminds Jende of how far they've come in his case and that it was Bubakar who helped Jende petition U.S. Customs and Immigration Services to get a work permit so that he could then get a driver's license, which allowed him to get a better job. He also reminds him of how he helped Jende apply for Neni's student visa. He asks Jende to trust him. They'll go before a judge, win his case, and get him a green card.

Bubakar mentions all of this to avoid the possibility of being fired. He wants to assure Jende that he's still capable of helping him and reminds him of how much of he's already helped Jende to achieve. This is designed to create a sense of obligation in Jende and to paint a possible firing as ingratitude.

That night, after Jende tells Neni the news, he watches her cry "the first tears of sadness she'd ever cried in America." She asks him what they're going to do, and he says he doesn't know. They agree that they'll have to use all of the money that they've saved—a couple of thousand dollars, which would've gone toward the renovation of his parents' house, "a down payment on a condo in Westchester County, and Liomi's college education." All of it is necessary now to help them remain in America and to give Liomi a chance to grow up there. Neni wonders if they should tell Liomi, so that he can be prepared if they have to leave. Jende replies, "No, let him stay happy."

Neni experiences sadness for the first time in America because she imagines that all that she has gained will be taken away from her. The Jongas become so desperate to realize their American Dream, particularly their wish for Liomi to become American, that they are willing to stake all that they've saved in Bubakar's ability to help them. Like many parents, they want to protect Liomi from hardship, but it also seems that they want him to know no other life than that as an American.

CHAPTER 10

Neni goes on as though everything is fine. Jende assures her that they'll take things as they come, but this leaves her uneasy. She wants to feel in control of her life. Six days after Jende reveals the dreadful news about his immigration status, her stress-related headache ceases, but she experiences new symptoms: loss of appetite, frequent urination, and nausea. When she tells Jende that she thinks she's pregnant, she bursts into tears of joy and despair.

Neni has difficulty with accepting Jende's insistency on leaving their lives up to fate. To her, it feels too much like the complacency of her life in Limbe, which she escaped. This feeling of lacking control is compounded with her realization that she's pregnant. She's happy to have a baby but worries about how much harder this will make her life.

While packing Liomi's lunch one morning, he reminds Neni of the parent-teacher conference scheduled for that day. She's tempted to tell him that she can't come, but she knows that she has to carry on as though everything were normal. The teacher assures Neni that Liomi's a good student, which Neni knows, due to helping him with his homework on most evenings. However, when the teacher tells her that he could be more attentive in class and suggests that he spend less time associating with his classmate, Billy, Neni rises to button her coat and assures the teacher that this "nonsense" will end after today. Neni is out the door before the teacher can say anymore.

Neni's performance is for Liomi's sake, so that he won't feel as though he's being uprooted yet again. However, Neni also expects Liomi to perform as the perfect, diligent student. This doesn't give Liomi a lot of room to experience life as a kid. Though Liomi's teacher finds his behavior typical, Neni regards it as a digression from the path that she and Jende are trying to set for him, as someone who's single-mindedly focused on achievement.

At home, Neni gives Liomi crackers and juice and then proceeds to remind him of why she and Jende send him to school. She asks who Billy is. When Liomi identifies him as his friend, she tells him that he doesn't go to school to make friends but only to listen to his teacher. She reminds him that his father doesn't go to work every day for him to play in school. Liomi cries and promises not to do it again. Neni assures him that he'll do well in school and grow up to be a doctor or a lawyer. Liomi says that he'd like to be a chauffeur like his father. Neni's amused and says that Jende's only a chauffeur because it's the best he can do, due to not finishing school. Liomi, however, can be much more if he does well in school.

Neni doesn't think that social interaction and the development of relationships are as important to Liomi's upbringing as his academic achievement. This is a reflection of her own perception of social interaction (like the kind that she experienced in the study group) as a waste of time. Also, unlike her son, she has no social interaction with people who aren't Cameroonian, which probably makes her wonder what Liomi would have in common with someone named Billy.

The talk with Liomi makes Neni feel hopeful, as though her family may still have a chance. When Jende returns home from work at six o'clock that evening, she serves him dinner and leaves for her eight o'clock precalculus class. When the instructor hands back the previous week's test, she sees that she got a B-minus. She goes to her instructor, saying that she doesn't understand how she got the grade after studying so much. She worries that her GPA may suffer. The instructor suggests that she email him so that they can arrange to meet and find out where she's struggling. He encourages her to "cheer up," reminding her that many students would be happy with a B-minus.

Neni's talk with Liomi doesn't benefit her son but reinforces her own belief that, with a focus on education, he can be more than his parents. She doesn't realize that the pressure that she's putting on Liomi is a projection of her own insecurities about not being a top student. She believes that she can't afford to make mistakes, out of fear that she won't be given another chance to pursue her dream of becoming a pharmacist.

CHAPTER 11

One evening, while waiting for Cindy, Jende gets a call from Bubakar. It's been a week since they last spoke. Bubakar explains that the Immigration courts are extremely backlogged because there are so many people the government wants to deport and not enough judges who are eager to deport them. He tells Jende that he may not stand before a judge for another six months, maybe even a year.

Bubakar reports this as good news, but it also reveals the ineptitude of the American immigration system, which puts a lot of pressure and work on immigration judges and does nothing to address the lives that are left in limbo due to ineffectual laws and an unwillingness to offer a viable path to citizenship.

Jende feels better, as though released from under a great weight. Bubakar says that his situation is better than most because he has a wife who has a job, despite her not having a work permit. Jende wonders about his own work permit. Bubakar asks if Clark asked to see Jende's work permit when he hired him. Jende says no, and Bubakar says this is good and that Jende should stay with him. Jende then wonders if he could get in trouble with the police if he's stopped on the road with an expired work permit. Bubakar says that, with Immigration, there's a gray area consisting of many illegal things that the government doesn't want to worry about. However, it's important that Jende avoid the police. This is advice that Bubakar gives all black men in the U.S. The police, he insists, only exist "for the protection of white people."

Jende feels relieved because the postponement buys him time. However, he must live in a kind of secrecy. Bubakar's advice to avoid the police in general reveals how the systemic racism in police departments contrasts with the American Dream of everyone having equal chances at liberty and opportunity. His comment also foreshadows Cindy's later threat against Neni to call the police if she doesn't leave the Edwardses' apartment.

Bubakar encourages Jende not to give up hope. If Obama or Hillary becomes president, he says, "they'll give everyone papers." He says that Hillary "likes immigrant people," and that Obama must know some Kenyans without papers whom he'd like to help. Jende wonders if such a thing could happen. Bubakar says that it did once, in 1983. Until then, however, Immigration will be in pursuit of Jende "every single day," and he'll need money to fight them. Then, one day, Jende will become a citizen, and he and his family will finally be able to relax and enjoy their lives in America.

Bubakar is referring to the Immigration Reform and Control Act, which wasn't actually passed until 1986. The act gave illegal immigrants the opportunity to apply for and gain legal status if they had been in the U.S. continuously for four years (and could prove it), had a clean criminal record, and had some knowledge of U.S. history and the English language.

CHAPTER 12

Neni goes to a café across from the public library in midtown Manhattan to meet her instructor, who tells her to call him Jerry. They've met at this same place twice already. This time, she brings along Liomi and introduces them. Jerry mistakenly calls Liomi "Lomein" and Liomi smiles. Neni prods him to respond to Jerry's niceties. She then asks Jerry if he has children. Jerry says he doesn't but wishes that he did. Neni jokingly offers that he can borrow Liomi. Jerry says that he'd take him, but that Neni shouldn't be surprised if he doesn't give him back.

By bringing Liomi along, Neni can avoid feeling inappropriate for meeting a man alone, even if it is for school. She's also getting to know her instructor on a more personal level. Her jokes about letting him "borrow" Liomi will foreshadow her idea to ask Jerry to adopt Liomi so that the boy can remain in the country and become American, even if she and Jende are deported.

This meeting is more comfortable than Neni's first with Jerry. She spent the whole hour just nodding while he spoke, afraid of asking a silly question. By the second meeting, she'd pushed herself to ask questions, believing it was pointless to travel all the way downtown if she couldn't take full advantage of Jerry's offer of private tutoring. By this third meeting, she and Jerry are chatting about his background. She learns that his father was in the military and that he's "lived in many parts of America and Europe." She then tells him about her life in Cameroon and having never traveled more than forty miles outside of Limbe before coming to the U.S. Jerry expresses curiosity in her dream of becoming a pharmacist, but Fatou arrives at the café early with her two children, putting an end to their conversation.

Neni is initially intimidated by Jerry, fearing that she may ask a question that could be perceived as stupid or even thinking that her accent could make it difficult for him to understand her or to sympathize with her need for help. When she learns that Jerry has spent a lot of time abroad, it indicates that he's a person who's accustomed to and open to people who aren't American. She's also interested in how Jerry's history of mobility contrasts with her life of relative inactivity in Limbe.


Fatou tells Jerry all about her and Neni's plans for Mother's Day, which reminds Jerry to call his mother. Fatou reminds him to do something nice for his wife, too. Jerry says that he isn't married, but that he has a boyfriend. Neni and Fatou are shocked, much to Jerry's amusement. Fatou says that she knew no gay men in Cameroon, though there was a man in her village who, she says, walked like a woman and who everyone said must've been a woman inside. No one called him gay, though, because he had a wife and children. She also says that there's no word in their language to describe homosexuals.

Neni and Fatou's shock is an indication that they have a preconceived ideas about what kind of life a man Jerry's age should have and that such ideas are incompatible with the diversity of American life. The supposed non-existence of gay people in their Cameroonian village indicates that homophobia was common and that those who were gay felt pressure to conform to traditional lives. Otherwise, they risked ostracism or even death.


Neni timidly asks Jerry how he can like children if he's gay. Jerry says that, once he's done with school, he and his boyfriend plan to adopt. Fatou jokes that he should take one of her children—she's got seven! Neni asks how many Jerry wants. He says that he'd like to have one or two kids.

Neni's question is naïve and comes from being brought up in a culture in which expressions of sexuality and of family life are limited and follow patriarchal conventions.

When Neni leaves her meeting with Jerry, she still registers her surprise to Fatou about him being gay. Fatou says that Neni's surprised because she's attracted to Jerry; Neni denies this. Fatou then asks why she didn't tell Jende that she's been meeting her teacher at a café. Neni says that she just didn't want Jende to worry about his wife being on "a rendezvous on a Sunday afternoon with a young professor." Fatou asks what'll happen if Liomi tells him. She relates an anecdote about her cousin who did just what Neni did—that is, tell her husband that she'd be in one place, and then he passed somewhere different and saw her drinking a beer with another man. He dragged her back to their house and beat her. Neni asked what her cousin did about it. Fatou said that she simply learned her "lesson," and the marriage continued.

Despite Neni's increasing independence, Fatou reminds her of how the expectations for a Cameroonian wife are somewhat incompatible with the things that she now believes she should be able to do, like meet with whomever she pleases without first receiving permission from her husband. Fatou's story about her cousin reminds Neni about the abusive control that men from their country can sometimes hold over their wives to remind them that life in a new country doesn't free them from oppressive customs.

CHAPTER 13

Though Jende loves New York, he tells himself that he'll go elsewhere after he gets his papers. New York is simply too cold, crowded, and expensive. His friends, Arkamo and Sapeur, regale him with stories about how much sweeter life is in cities like Phoenix and Houston. They send him pictures of "their spacious houses and gargantuan SUVs." They make the same salary he does, working as certified nursing assistants or stockroom associates at department stores. They tell Jende how he can get "a zero-down-payment mortgage on a sweet mini-mansion." This all sounds wonderful to Jende and is a reminder of what makes America so great. Still, he knows that none of this will be possible without first getting his papers.

Because Jende doesn't yet understand his new country very well but, instead, views it through his own idealizations, none of this seems too good to be true, as it would if he had heard the same thing back home. He views his friends' success through their acquisition of material objects that are signs of wealth. The author emphasizes the sizes of their cars and houses ("spacious," "gargantuan," and "mini-mansion") to emphasize the notion of size as a status symbol.

On the third Thursday in May, while driving Cindy across Fifty-seventh Street, Jende's cell phone rings and he apologizes, believing that he turned it off. She encourages him to pick it up. It's his brother, Tanga, calling to say that his children can't go to school because he doesn't have any money for their school fees. He's calling Jende to ask him to send money. Jende tells Cindy how "shameful" it is that his brother had five children whom he can't afford to look after, leaving Jende in the position of having to find a way to send the money. Cindy's voice becomes "hollow" when she says that children should never have to suffer because of their parents. Jende agrees that it's never the child's fault.

Jende speaks with shame about his brother whose children become his responsibility because Jende is more prosperous than Tanga. Jende narrates this story, focusing on his brother's carelessness, while Cindy is more focused on the children who suffer because of circumstances out of their control. The "hollow" quality in her voice is an implies that she's comparing this situation to the unfortunate circumstances of her own upbringing or that of her children.

Cindy assures Jende that something will "work out one way or another." Jende assures her that he'll try his best, but Cindy responds in a way that suggests that she doesn't believe "that he [has] a best to try." She hands him a check for five hundred dollars, for which Jende is immensely grateful. He rushes to find a Western Union so that he can send the money that Tanga needs and get back to Cindy on time. However, he decides not to send his brother the full sum, knowing that he needs only three hundred dollars and would only spend the rest on a new girlfriend or a pair of new leather shoes for himself, "while his children went to school with rubber shoes held together with twine." Jende puts the remaining two hundred in savings, with the expectation that someone from back home will soon need something else.

Cindy's lack of faith in Jende's ability to solve his own problem is not only due to his meager income and her belief that he can't afford to solve such problems; her skepticism may also be linked to a general lack of faith in men to rectify problems. This would the result of her frustration with Clark, and what the reader will later learn about her father. Jende's unwillingness to give his brother the full five hundred dollars reveals an important difference between their perceptions of their paternal roles. Jende takes his responsibility more seriously than Tanga.


Cindy reenters the car twenty minutes later and gets on her phone to talk to Cheri. She expresses shock that June's husband, Mike, is leaving her for another woman after thirty years of marriage. Cindy says that she worries that Clark will one day do the same—announce that he's in love with "someone younger and prettier." She relates how Clark ogles at and flirts with other women in front of her and how it humiliates her.

Cindy's insecurity is not surprising. It's a reflection of her fears about aging and, thus, losing the youth and beauty that she thinks give her value. Infidelity would also be the final proof, in her mind, that she's incapable of keeping her family together. Clark's attention to other women further diminishes Cindy's self-esteem.

CHAPTER 14

When Neni enters the Hudson Hotel bar, where Winston is having his birthday party, she wonders why people like hanging out in bars, where one has to scream to chat with a friend and spend four times more than a beverage would cost in a supermarket. She and Jende arrive an hour late, thanks to Neni's multiple wardrobe changes. She wanted to look "equally sexy and respectable." The sight of two men sitting so close together on a stool that they look as though they might kiss reminds her of Jerry, whose help earned her an A-minus final grade in precalculus. She will end the semester with a 3.7 GPA.

Neni's opinion about bars is yet another indication that she's a practical and frugal person who doesn't like to spend time or money unnecessarily. On the other hand, her clothing changes indicate that she's eager to look like she fits in, even in spaces in which she doesn't feel she belongs. The social rituals in the bar, including the sight of the two men, are new and strange to her.

Neni excuses herself to go to the restroom. She looks at herself in the mirror and notices that she's sweating. She doesn't know what she's going to say to Winston's guests for the next two hours. She's never been to a party with mostly white people, and this doesn't feel like her kind of place. She wonders if she just should've stayed home and cooked him fufu and eru for his birthday gift. Neni is fine with working for white people or attending class with them, but it's a whole other thing "to laugh and chat with them for hours," worrying about her accent as well as what they would talk about. Most of them are associates at Winston's law firm, so she's concerned about doing something that might embarrass Winston.

The sight of Neni sweating in the mirror parallels with Jende sweating during his interview with Clark. Both feel insecure in spaces that are dominated by upper-class white people. The idea of cooking him the traditional foods that she knows he likes reminds her of what binds her and Winston, despite his ability to mingle easily with people who make her feel out of place. She feels that she can't fully be herself around white people, as she worries about how they'll perceive her.

A minute after reentering the bar, Neni doesn't see Jende or Winston and ends up standing by herself. Then, she sees Jende standing by the door, chatting with someone, probably one of Winston's friends whom he met when he first arrived in America. While trying to decide if she wants to join Jende or order a soda on Winston's tab, a young woman approaches her and introduces herself as Jenny, Winston's girlfriend. Neni exchanges pleasantries with her but can't decide if she should laugh or feel sorry for the young woman. She knows that Winston will never marry a white woman and that he "[changes] them the way someone changes underwear." He would date every type of woman who availed herself and then marry a Cameroonian woman.

Neni's meeting with Jenny makes her feel a bit more at ease. Though she and Jenny are very different on the surface, Jenny is also vulnerable. Just as Neni feels that she can never fit comfortably into Jenny's world, Neni knows that Winston will never fully bring Jenny into his world. For him, Jenny is part of his American experience and one of the ways in which he integrates himself into his new country, but he will never make Jenny a part of his Cameroonian family or introduce her to that aspect of his life.

A friend comes and takes Jenny's attention away from Neni, and the two women hardly pause to say goodbye. Neni pushes through the crowd to look for Jende. When she finds him, she tells him that she wants to leave. He asks for thirty more minutes, and she tells him that he can stay; she'll leave and wish Winston a happy birthday on the phone tomorrow. She feels better in the cool air but averts her eyes from the sight of Roosevelt Hospital where her friend Betty delivered a stillborn baby a year ago.

Neni may be slightly annoyed at how much more easily Jende is blending into this social scene. It suggests that he's more capable of adapting to new environments and more eager to socialize to fit in. Neni averts her eyes from the sight of the hospital, as though she were trying to avoid bad luck with her own pregnancy by banishing the thought of Betty's stillborn baby.

Jende suggests that he and Neni go sit at Columbus Circle. On the way there, she notices that most of the people on the street are walking with people like themselves—a white man walks hand-in-hand with a white woman, a black teenager giggles with other black (or Latino) teens, a quartet of Asian men pass in tuxedos, and a group of friends with different skin colors but who "[are] dressed in similar elegant chic styles" walk by.

Despite the diversity of the city, Neni notices that she's not so unusual for being uncomfortable in an unfamiliar crowd. Everyone around her seems to prefer those who are familiar and similar to themselves, which suggests the desire for connection and belonging is widespread.

At Columbus Circle, Jende and Neni sit near **the statue of Christopher Columbus**, "surrounded by skateboarders and young lovers and homeless people." Jende tells her that this place is the best place in the city. During his first days in the country, he would come to Columbus Circle to call Neni "when he got so lonely and homesick" that his only comfort was the sound of her voice. He tells Neni that they're sitting at the center of the world because Columbus Circle is the center of Manhattan, Manhattan's the center of New York, New York is the center of America, and America's the center of the world.

The statue serves as a beacon for all kinds of people. For Jende, who wanted to return home as a "conqueror," the statue was a reminder of his purpose as well as the importance of journeying away from home to discover something new. His presence in this "central" space, this time with Neni and a step closer to the fulfillment of his American Dream, makes him feel as though he's an active part of the world.

CHAPTER 15

Jende drives Clark to a golf course in Westchester one afternoon. Clark has taken up his friend Phil's invitation to play but regrets it, believing he could be in the office instead. Worse, he has a stiff neck. Halfway to the course, Clark's mother calls, but he cuts their conversation short to take a call from his boss, the CEO, Tom. Jende notices how affable Tom's voice sounds compared to Clark's, but it soon rises when Tom talks to Clark about his wish to come clean and tell the world that Lehman Brothers is in trouble. Clark insists that they need to change their approach and that he disagreed with Tom's refusal to accept an infusion of cash from the Chinese to help them get out of their mess. Tom interrupts Clark to tell him not to "circumvent" his authority again by talking to a board member.

Clark is overwhelmed by the pressures of his job and the stress is starting to show in his body, as indicated by his stiff neck. These physical signs of stress parallel with those that Jende will later experience when he, too, starts working too much toward no productive end. Clark, unlike Tom, seems to feel guilty about his role in Lehman Brothers' impending doom. Tom's refusal of money from the Chinese to save the company could be perceived as arrogance and unwillingness to accept help from foreigners, despite however jobs will be lost from the company's collapse.

Clark reminds Tom that they may soon have to face Congress. Also, what's the next generation of Wall Street employees going to think of them? Another phone rings where Tom is. He calls the person on the other end "honey" and says that "he would be there, no way in the world was he going to miss it." He then returns to his call with Clark and offers him the possibility of resigning. Clark says that he'll remain at the firm. Tom is pleased to hear this and says that, if someday he's proven wrong, Clark "can look back at this moment and be damn proud of [himself]."

Unlike Clark, who cuts a conversation with his mother short to talk to Tom, Tom interrupts his conversation with Clark to talk to a loved one, suggesting that he's more invested in his personal life than he is in whatever will happen at Lehman Brothers. Clark, ironically, demonstrates more fidelity and effort toward the firm than he does to his family, insisting on doing all that he can to set things right.

CHAPTER 16

Jende has been waiting for Vince to come out of his apartment for fifteen minutes. He arrives and hops into the backseat with a cup of coffee in his hand. He apologizes for making Jende wait. Then, he realizes that he left his phone at his apartment but refuses Jende's offer to drive him back to retrieve it. Vince uses the time to "unindoctrinate" Jende on all the lies he's learned about America. He talks about how the U.S. conspired to kill the Congolese leader Patrice Lumumba to stop the spread of Communism. Jende tells Vince that he appreciates how Vince wants him to see things another way, but he's fine with his perspective. Vince says that the problem is that too many people won't see the Truth because they prefer their illusions. He cites his parents as examples of people who are trapped "under the weight of so many pointless pressures."

Vince means well, but his self-righteous claim to the Truth comes off as condescending. Jende is patient and diplomatic with Vince, understanding that the younger man is simply finding his own way in the world and doesn't mean to insult those whose pursuits are different from his own. What Vince doesn't realize is that someone like Jende doesn't have the privilege to dismiss the only country that's ever offered him an opportunity to advance. Vince's opinion of his parents also discounts their existential pain, which they mask with work and material comforts.

Jende assures Vince that his parents are "good people" and that Clark works very hard for his children. Jende thinks that Vince should be thankful that he has parents who have afforded him such a good life and the opportunity to go to law school and become a lawyer. Vince says that he's not becoming a lawyer and won't return to law school in the fall; he's moving to India instead. He asks Jende not to say anything to his parents just yet; he's only telling Jende this because he enjoys talking to him.

Jende speaks to Vince less as a peer and more as a father who identifies with the opportunities that Clark works to afford his son. Vince's dismissal of that opportunity may seem wasteful to Jende, but it also reveals that parents are often so preoccupied with molding their children according to their own visions that they fail to see their children for who they are.

Jende tells Vince that he should finish school, become a lawyer, and then go to India on vacation. Vince says that lawyers are miserable, and he doesn't want to be miserable. Jende notes that his cousin, Winston, is a lawyer. When Vince asks if he's happy, Jende says that sometimes he is and sometimes he isn't, as one would feel in any line of work. Vince insists that he can't stand law school, where his classmates are being indoctrinated by lies. Jende knows from the younger man's impassioned tone that this isn't really about law school or his country, but about Vince wanting to become his own person, separate from his parents and the world in which they established him.

Jende's suggestion that Vince go to India "on vacation" indicates that he doesn't understand what Vince is doing and cannot fathom giving up a lucrative career to live in a poor country. Vince's dream is the opposite of Jende's and the opposite of the dream that Jende and Neni have for Liomi. However, Jende doesn't yet see how Clark and Cindy's imposition on Vince mirrors his and Neni's imposition on Liomi's personal development.

Vince tells Jende that his family's never been close and that he's always viewed his father as "an absent provider who's going through the motions for the sake of his family." Jende insists that things are never easy for anyone. Vince agrees and says that this is why "our only choice is to embrace Suffering and surrender to the Truth." Jende finds this funny. As they arrive at the dentist's office, Vince reminds Jende to keep the news between them for now. Jende nods in agreement and they shake hands.

Part of Vince's wish to disobey his parents' expectations comes out of an unwillingness to become a man like his father—that is, someone who views the earning of income as more important than connections with people. However, Vince can't really articulate what he feels about his father, so he resorts to platitudes that he picked up through what is implied to be a superficial study of Buddhism.

Vince returns to the car in an hour, with an ice pack held to his cheek. He's numb and drowsy from the anesthesia used during his wisdom tooth extraction. He falls asleep in the backseat. Looking through the rearview mirror at Vince's face, Jende imagines Liomi in eighteen years. He would never permit Liomi to throw away a chance at a successful career to roam around India "talking about Truth and Suffering." However, he can't "fully denounce" Vince's decision either. He feels both proud of him and worried for him.

Jende imagines Vince as his own son. He admires Vince's willingness to be his own man, but worries about the consequences of his walking away from a life of privilege in favor of a life of uncertainty. The likelihood of Liomi making the same choice is very small, not only because of the Jongas' lack of privilege but because Liomi is rooted in cultural richness and has the familial bond that eludes Vince.

CHAPTER 17

That summer, New York is unbearably hot. Clark tells Jende that he can take a paid vacation in the first two weeks of August. The Edwardses (mainly Cindy and the boys) will be spending late July and nearly all of August in Southampton. Jende knows that he'll call the livery cab company that he used to work for and get shifts so that he can add to the funds for his deportation case.

For Jende, summer is no invitation to take a vacation, which he can't afford. However, Clark will also be spending most of his time in the city. Though he has the financial means to take a vacation, the increasing pressures at Lehman Brothers don't allow him the time.

Clark says that Cindy will need a housekeeper for four weeks and that Jende should ask Neni if she would like to take on the job for extra money. Jende says that Neni would be "very grateful" for that. He figures that it'll offer Neni a welcome break from "feeding and bathing incapacitated senior citizens" as well as the prospect of earning more money in four weeks than she had in three months. So, she agrees to skip the second semester of school and go to Southampton. She calls Cindy to accept the position, and Cindy fills her in on her duties. Neni mentions that she's four months pregnant, but insists that it won't be a problem for her. Cindy says that it won't be a problem for her either. She tells Neni that she'll accompany Anna on the Long Island Railroad to the Hamptons to get acquainted with Cindy and the job.

The housekeeping job invites Neni into the Edwardses' lives. The families are beginning to be codependent on each other—the Edwardses depend on the Jongas for service and to keep their secrets, while the Jongas depend on the Edwardses for sustenance. However, Jende accepts the position on Neni's behalf without first asking his wife if she'd like to work as Cindy's maid. His action is part of a pattern of behavior in which he makes decisions for Neni without her consent. Though Neni agrees to perform the job, one wonders if she would have been as willing if Jende hadn't already accepted.

On Neni's first day on the housekeeping job, she descends the steps into the subway with Jende to begin the first leg of her journey to the Hamptons. He tells her to do only what they say to do exactly as they say to do it. She's amused by his concern, but he insists that it's no "laughing matter" and that the Edwardses are their "bread and tea." Neni reminds him that she knows how to behave among rich people, having come from a family that "used to be rich in the eighties and early nineties." However, that was long in the past. Neni's father was eventually forced out of his lucrative job at the seaport by a Bamileke boss who wanted his tribesmen to take his job. These days, he's retired and lives on "a meager pension."

Jende conveys to Neni how dependent they are on the Edwardses without bringing up the matter of how hard it would be to get another job like this one. He knows that they best way to stay in the family's favor is to be exacting to their standards. Neni believes that she understands, due to having been rich in Cameroon, though she doesn't account for the vast disparity in how wealth is defined in Cameroon compared to the United States. Her father's fall from grace will mirror Clark's loss of his job at Lehman Brothers.

CHAPTER 18

When Neni first goes to the Edwardses' Hamptons house, she tries not to show Anna how "awed" she is by their large "two-story warm gray stone-and-wood-shingled house," which they only occupy for a few months a year. The afternoon when she arrives, Vince gives her a big hug and tells her to make herself comfortable. She spends all evening on that first day in the kitchen with Mighty, whom she knows will be "her only true source of joy there." The boy reminds her of Liomi, particularly in regard to his cheerful nature and love of laughter.

It's remarkable to Neni that people could be so rich that they have two lavish homes. Vince's expression of warmth, as well as Mighty's friendliness, help to put her at ease. Though she is a servant in this home, their behavior toward her causes her to feel that she belongs. Her recognition of similarities between Mighty and Liomi will aid in her developing maternal affection for him.


Babysitting Mighty is the best part of Neni's job, and Cindy approves of how happy she makes Mighty. Neni observes how Cindy's concern for her children's happiness is "followed closely" by her need for a sense of belonging. Neni doesn't understand this, particularly given Cindy's air of superiority, which was evident during Neni's first meeting with her. She behaved like a woman who had the right "to take as much of a listener's time as she wished." She gave instructions like an empress and told Neni what she couldn't stand in a housekeeper: dishonesty, poor communication, and a lack of poise around company.

Cindy believes that money gives her importance and uses this in lieu of developing self-esteem. Neni doesn't yet know it but her empress-like air is her armor against feeling the effects of her low self-worth. Cindy wants to feel that she has a family that loves her and will never leave her. She also wants to feel that she belongs in the wealthy world of the Hamptons because she was born into poverty.


Neni sees that Cindy is obsessed with being where everyone else in her social circle is and doing what they're doing. Neni doesn't understand why people care about "stupid things like the approval of others." Five days after she arrives at the house, she calls Jende to tell him that Mrs. Edwards seems "very sick." She says that Cindy went into her bedroom for a nap, while Neni stayed in the basement, doing laundry. When she opened the door to the second-floor guest bedroom, she saw Mrs. Edwards inside, which was a surprise because Neni thought that she'd be in the master bedroom. The normally composed woman is splayed against the headboard of the bed with hair strands stuck to her sweaty face, her hands limp at her sides, and her mouth half open with saliva running down her chin.

Neni thinks it's "stupid" to require the approval of others because she has a clearer sense of who she is and what she comes from than Cindy does. Cindy is trying to create the feelings of rootedness and belonging that Neni already has. Though Cindy is rich, she's impoverished emotionally, which explains her presumable drug and alcohol abuse.

Jende asks Neni if she looks dead. Neni says that Cindy was still breathing. She asks him what to do and he tells her not to touch her or go back into the room. Instead, he wants her husband or sons to find her and decide on what to do. He admonishes her when she insists on doing something. Neni hangs up on their call and phones her friend, Betty, who tells her that Cindy's probably on drugs. Neni doesn't believe it, but Betty insists that people like Mrs. Edwards do drugs all the time. She says that Neni should go wake her up and, if Mrs. Edwards is dead, Neni should call her husband, not the police. Also, if Neni calls the police, Betty begs that Neni not mention her name, due to her fear of the police.

Jende worries that Neni could be blamed for Cindy's condition. Betty agrees and believes that Neni should call Clark. Both Jende and Betty are afraid of the police. Jende is worried because of his immigration status and Betty has probably had similar experiences of being targeted as a possible illegal. There's also the prevalent trouble of being racially profiled by the police. Neni doesn't believe that Cindy could be on drugs because she doesn't associate drug use, which she assumes is always illegal, with someone of Cindy's class.

Neni goes back upstairs to the guest bedroom and sees Cindy sleeping in the same position. She leans forward and whispers Cindy's name, while nudging her in the arm. Cindy doesn't respond. Neni leans closer and says Cindy's name, directly in her ear. Suddenly, Cindy closes her mouth and begins smacking her lips. She asks Neni what she wants and Neni assures her that she just wanted to make sure that "madam" was all right. Cindy asks Neni for the time: it's five o'clock. Cindy swings her legs around to get out of bed and staggers a bit but assures Neni that she's fine. Neni offers to run a bath and Cindy nods in agreement. She then tells Neni that Clark won't be coming home that night, and that Vince is leaving after he and Mighty return. Around seven o'clock Cindy starts the engine to her Jaguar and leaves for her social engagements.

Cindy's behavior suggests that she's often in this condition. What strikes Neni as cause for concern seems routine in this scene. The fact that no one is in the house, except for her and Neni, suggests that Cindy's destructive behavior is due to loneliness. When she tells Neni that Clark and Vince won't be around for the rest of the day, it gives the sense that there's something cold and empty about the spacious and sumptuous house that Neni admired. It's so cold, it seems, that Cindy can't stand to be in it when she isn't high and must leave to feel with others the connection that she lacks with her family.

CHAPTER 19

The next morning, Neni knocks "lightly" but "insistently" at Cindy's door to ask where she'd like to have her breakfast. It's eleven o'clock. Cindy says that she'll have breakfast by the pool in an hour. Cindy emerges from her bedroom just before noon, wearing a purple-striped halter-top dress, while Neni is slicing pineapples for her breakfast. When Neni finishes and carries the tray out to the pool, where Cindy is waiting, Cindy asks where Mighty is. Neni says that he went to the beach with a neighbor and the neighbor's son. When Neni turns to reenter the house, Cindy asks her to pull up a chair and sit with her.

Neni is worried about disturbing Cindy but also worries that there remains a possibility that Cindy could be drugged and passed out again. Her summery appearance contrasts with the ugly and slovenly condition in which Neni found her the day before. Her invitation for Neni to sit with her by the pool briefly places the women on equal footing, even if it's only for Cindy to ask Neni for something.

Cindy thanks Neni for helping her yesterday. She picks up her sunglasses and puts them on, despite it being an overcast day. Neni says that she was glad to help "madam" when she was "a little sick." Cindy says that she wasn't sick and she suspects that Neni knows that, having seen everything on her nightstand. Cindy insists that Neni is smart enough to "put two and two together," though Neni still insists that she didn't see anything. Cindy resists her pretense of ignorance and says that she wishes Neni wouldn't take her for a fool. Neni apologizes for finding out about Cindy's drug and alcohol abuse, while Cindy stirs her coffee with a silver spoon and sets it down.

The sunglasses are an attempt to shield her eyes so that Neni can't see how vulnerable Cindy is, despite the secret having been revealed the day before. Neni's attempts to pretend that she didn't witness Cindy's drugged condition, and her apologies for finding out, stem from her fear of being discarded for learning Cindy's shameful secret, for seeing beneath her boss's flawless façade. Meanwhile, the silver spoon reminds readers of Cindy's privilege, which has done nothing to disguise her pain.

Cindy takes off her sunglasses and looks into Neni's eyes. She tells Neni that she wasn't born into wealth and came from a poor family. When Neni says that she did too, Cindy says that it's not the same because poverty in Africa is common, which makes it less shameful for them. Neni nods as though she understands what Cindy is saying and agrees. Cindy goes on to say that, in the U.S., poverty is embarrassing and painful. A tear falls down her cheek as she tells Neni that she has "no idea" how much Cindy has endured.

When Cindy removes her glasses, it coincides with her desire to reveal to Neni who she really is and what she comes from. She inadvertently reveals herself to be ignorant (she assumes that most Africans are poor) and thinks that her problems are more extraordinary than everyone else's. Neni doesn't realize that she's being insulted, but it doesn't seem to matter in response to what ails Cindy.

Cindy talks about how she rose above her circumstances by working her way through college, getting a job, her own apartment, and how she learned to carry herself in such a way so that she would fit in to an upper-class world. She picks up her silver teaspoon and stirs her coffee again, then puts it down and looks at Neni, whose eyes are lowered. Cindy says that she's telling Neni all this to help her understand why Cindy fights so hard to remain where she is and to keep her family together. This is also why Neni must never tell anyone what happened yesterday. Neni swears that she'll tell no one. Cindy asks Neni to make her promise "as from one woman to another" who knows the importance of protecting family. Neni swears and places her right hand into Cindy's, which lays open on the table.

Cindy reveals her story of how she achieved her American dream, which was to rise out of poverty and join the upper-class through marriage. She keeps stirring with her silver spoon, which is both a nervous tic and a reminder that it belongs to her, that she finally has all of the beautiful things she wants. However, her grasp of these things is tenuous, it seems—reliant on her ability to maintain a façade of perfection. She asks Neni not to tell anyone about what she saw yesterday because it would destroy the illusion that Cindy wants to maintain.

Cindy thanks Neni and then offers to give her some clothes that she was going to send to the thrift store. Though Cindy is a smaller size, Neni says that she knows how to alter clothes. Cindy says that the garments are all designer goods, which Neni may have. She also has some of Mighty's old clothes and toys, which Neni may give to Liomi. Neni is grateful. Cindy then instructs Neni to remind her of her bonus before she leaves because she'll need the money for the baby. Cindy looks at the gleeful pregnant woman and smiles again, while Neni smiles back. They've found "a win-win solution."

Cindy's gifts of money, toys, and clothes could be perceived as bribes that would make Neni feel to grateful to betray Cindy's trust. However, they could also be gifts that Cindy bestows because she genuinely wants to help Neni, whose own wishes to lift herself from poverty and to provide the best life for her children mirror Cindy's own concerns. The situation is "win-win" because Cindy's wins Neni's silence and Neni wins the goods she covets.

CHAPTER 20

One evening, while Jende and Liomi are having dinner at a restaurant near the 116th Street subway station, Liomi asks if they're going back to Cameroon. Jende stops eating and puts down his ball of attiéké. Liomi says that he overhead Neni talking about it on the phone to someone. Jende scolds Liomi for listening to his mother's conversations. Beside them, a bald man eating thiebou djeun pauses to observe their tense exchange. Jende sets his clenched fists on the table and says that the family is never going back to Cameroon.

Liomi's innocent question infuriates Jende because it seems like an admission of his defeat. Though Jende wants Liomi to feel that he will soon be an American and resents the implication that they'll be going back home, Jende has maintained the boy's connection to Cameroon through food. Most of the food that Liomi eats at home and at restaurants is that of his country.

Back at the apartment, Jende calls Neni and scolds her for exposing Liomi to their pain. Neni says that she didn't know Liomi was listening. Jende tells Neni that all she needs to know is when to shut her mouth. She insists that Liomi should be prepared for the possibility of returning home, but Jende screams that a child shouldn't know about his father's possible deportation. He goes on to say that Bubakar has promised that they can be in the country for years and that anything can happen. Neni apologizes for making Jende feel bad. He insists that he will get a green card. Though he's afraid, he tells her that they have to be strong for Liomi. Neni insists that she won't talk about it again and asks Jende to end the conversation because of what Bubakar said about "the government listening."

Jende wants to maintain his dream of staying in the United States and becoming a citizen. The boy's innocent unawareness of his father's struggles and immersion into the life of his country give Jende hope that he, too, can experience life as an American as Liomi does. Neni's choice to break Liomi's illusion by exposing him to the reality is an affront to Jende's hope. Later in the novel, there will be a reversal of their positions. In addition to giving Jende bad legal advice, he also seems to be instilling him with conspiracy theories.

The next evening, Jende and Liomi go to a classical music concert in St. Nicholas Park and listen to a blind pianist play a tune so sad that it makes Jende tear up. The following afternoon, he takes Jende for a swim at the public pool in East Harlem. Jende shows Liomi how he and Winston used to swim at Down Beach back in Limbe. That night, they sleep in the same bed, as usual. Though Jende isn't a religious man, he says a lengthy prayer that night for his son, that Liomi will live "a long happy life."

Jende tries to expose his son to as many of New York's cultural offerings, which are still numerous for those who don't have a lot of income. Even at the city pool, it conjures nostalgia for his own childhood and tries to bestow some of those experiences to Liomi. Jende wants Liomi to be connected to his heritage but he also wants him to lead a richer life.

CHAPTER 21

Halfway into Neni's stay in Southampton, Vince walks into his bedroom and jumps on his newly made bed while Neni fluffs the pillows. He tells her, "Today's the day." When she registers confusion, he realizes that Jende hasn't told her about Vince's plans to leave law school. He decides not to say any more about it. Around five that evening, Vince and Cindy leave to meet Clark for dinner at a restaurant in Montauk. The next morning, Neni sees nothing of Vince and very little of Cindy, who declines her breakfast and lunch and spends much of the day on the phone, begging someone to be reasonable and think of the consequences of their actions.

Vince jumps on the bed, without much consideration for the fact that Neni has just made it, like a careless child. Vince is eager to establish his adult independence but, in some ways, still behaves like a child. He tells his parents about his plans to drop out of law school at dinner and then disappears, probably to return to Manhattan. Cindy's response to her distress over her son is to starve herself, which will become a recurring habit.

Neni calls Jende later that evening to see if he knows what's going on and he advises Neni to mind her own business. Still, Neni's determined to find out what's going on. Mighty could only tell her that his parents and Vince are fighting and that Vince won't say anything else to him about it until Mighty returns to Manhattan. Two nights later, though, Neni overhears an argument between Cindy and Clark that reveals Vince's plans to drop out of law school and move to India. Cindy blames it on her and Clark's inability to provide Vince with a happy life. Clark becomes frustrated with what seems like blame from his wife and leaves her crying alone in the kitchen.

Mighty becomes a source of information for both Neni and Jende over the course of the novel about what's going on in the Edwards household, though his understanding of his family's arguments is limited. Cindy is right to think that Vince is unhappy with the life that she and Clark have provided because he resents how they use material comforts to justify their control over him and his future plans.

Neni silently steps into the kitchen, afraid of startling Cindy, and stoops close to her. She tells Cindy that she hopes that she and Mr. Edwards will get things sorted soon. Neni smells alcohol emanating from Cindy's mouth, along with her slurred words. She asks Cindy if she'd like some water. Cindy asks instead for a glass of wine, which Neni dutifully pours. Cindy talks about how everyone thinks they have the right to treat her however they wish. First, it was her father who raped her mother. Then, it was the government, which forced her mother to carry an unwanted pregnancy to term. Finally, her mother thought she had the right to beat Cindy and curse at her because she looked at her daughter and was reminded of her rapist.

Neni learns why Cindy is so insecure and eager to belong: she was never wanted in the first place. As a result, she's spent her life being the scapegoat for other people's pain. First, Cindy becomes the scapegoat for her mother's pain—the trauma of her rape and her inability to control her own reproduction—and later, the scapegoat for Vince's dissatisfaction with the life that Cindy and Clark have provided for him. Clark's lack of empathy toward his wife reinforce her feeling of not mattering or even of being outright unwanted.

Neni turns away, not wanting Cindy to see her look of surprise. She can't give her a hug, but she also can't figure out what to say. Cindy goes on to say that Clark thinks that he has the right to love her less than his work. And now, Vince thinks he has the right to abandon her. Cindy's cries grow louder. She finishes her glass of wine and says that, though she doesn't want Vince to move to India, she'll summon the strength to support him even if he's not doing what she wants. However, she can't bear the thought of him being so far away and thinks that, if anything happens to him, it'll kill her.

Neni doesn't want to reveal her surprise about Cindy's origins because it would be yet another indication that Cindy is another person behind her façade. She wants to comfort Cindy but feels that she can't due to how it would disrupt the air of formality that she must maintain as a servant. Cindy's concern over losing her child reinforces her fears of abandonment.

CHAPTER 22

Neni returns from the Hamptons and tells Betty about Cindy being a product of rape, to which Betty responds that it's now no surprise why Cindy drinks. She also suspects that Cindy takes painkillers, based on how she looked when Neni found her in the guestroom. Betty says that women like Cindy are usually prescribed painkillers and then start taking them for pleasure. Betty talks about how she was given Vicodin last year after delivering her stillborn baby. Neni thinks that she may have seen the name of the drug on the label of the empty medicine bottle that she saw in the guest bathroom garbage. Betty figures that Cindy must know someone who can get her the pills and wonders how many Cindy takes per day.

Betty reveals to Neni how easy it is to become addicted to prescription drugs and that corruption among healthcare providers fosters Cindy's addiction—that is, as long as she can pay for the drugs, she can find someone who'll obtain them for her or a doctor who will write a prescription. When Betty uses the phrase "women like Cindy," she's referring to wealthy women who become addicted to pills because they offer the pleasure of illicit drugs without the shame. Furthermore, they have the means to obtain them.

CHAPTER 23

Jende notices that whenever Clark is in the car these days, he's shouting at someone on the phone. Leah tells Jende that Lehman Brothers is a mess, and Clark is going crazy. It saddens Jende to know that Leah is clinging to a job that makes her miserable because she's five years away from receiving Social Security. So, she can't quit, despite her rising blood pressure, hair loss, and only getting three hours of sleep each night. He also doesn't tell Leah that Clark sometimes sleeps in his office or goes to the Chelsea Hotel on some evenings for hour-long appointments.

Clark's shouting is a sign of his stress over trying to save Lehman Brothers from its inevitable collapse. Many people, including Leah, depend on Clark to maintain their jobs and standards of living. Clark is likely aware of this responsibility, which is why he spends so much time at work and only finds relief with prostitutes who demands from him the only thing he gives easily: money.

On the last Thursday of August, Jende holds the car door open for Clark outside of the Chelsea Hotel. Clark directs Jende to go to Hudson River Park and to take him near the piers. Clark calls Jende ten minutes later to ask him to come join him. Clark is sitting at a bench with his eyes closed. Together, they watch the sun set over the Hudson River. Jende thinks about how both Clark and Vince love sunsets and wonders if Vince knows this about his father.

Clark's extension of the offer is a sign of Clark's desire for companionship or, at the very least, a form of it that doesn't require more demands on his time and energy. The similarity that Jende perceives between Clark and Vince is also an expression of his wish that the father and son can see how much they have in common.

Clark tells Jende about Vince's plans to move to India and Jende pretends that he didn't know about them. Jende tells Clark that he hopes that he's not "too angry" with Vince. Clark says that Cindy thinks that he isn't angry enough, as though Clark is giving up on Vince. Truthfully, Clark admires his eldest son. All Clark ever wanted at his age was the life that he currently has. Clark understands Vince's reservations about the system, but he insists that the problem doesn't lie within the system but within each individual person.

Cindy expects Clark to be angry, as this would be a demonstration of the concern that she believes he should feel for Vince. What Cindy perceives as indifference is a mixture of concern and admiration for Vince for having the courage to pursue more than money. However, Vince's grievances have less to do with society than with the corruption within individuals.

Jende tells Clark that he thinks that Vince will probably return from India after several months and then "run back to law school." Jende figures that if India is anything like Cameroon, with its heat and mosquitoes, he'll be picking him up at the airport before New Year's. The men laugh. Jende then says that, even if Vince stays, he'll be happy; for, a man can find a home anywhere. Clark remembers that, while thinking about his son, he wrote a poem about home. Jende is surprised to hear that Clark writes poems. He says that he once wrote one for Cindy, but she didn't like it much, so he writes only for himself now. Clark recites his poem, "Home," which is about the permanence of home.

Jende figures that Vince is too delicate and has lived too sheltered a life to cope with the discomforts in less-advantaged countries. However, if he remains, it'll be because he's acquired a sense of belonging that will make India feel like home. Clark's poem is a point that he shares in common with everyone in his family: they all have a desire to feel as though they belong. Clark's inability to share his poetry with Cindy, however, indicates that she isn't interested in every aspect of who Clark is, which may foster his sense of alienation.

CHAPTER 24

What Neni misses most after her departure from the Hamptons is the food, all of which was catered for the Edwards family's cocktail parties. It was so good that she called Fatou one evening and told her that she had "died and gone to food heaven." It was the kind of food that Neni had seen in magazines: sesame seared tuna, beef tenderloin, California caviar, mushroom caps stuffed with jumbo lump crabmeat, and steak tartare. Neni loves the latter most, though she never thought she would one day like raw meat. So, Neni is glad when Anna calls and asks if she can help out with a brunch that Cindy and her friends are having in Manhattan. Neni and Anna will serve and clean up.

The food symbolizes the luxury that the Edwardses enjoy on a daily basis. Neni's exposure to such food—and her newfound love of steak tartare—reveals that she has tastes that she never believed existed. Through food, Neni becomes exposed to the Edwardses rarefied world of privilege, while the Cameroonian cuisine that Neni later prepares for Vince and Mighty exposes them to a cultural world to which they might not have otherwise had access. In other words, food is a key point of exchange between the families.

The brunch takes place at June's apartment, where Neni arrives the next Sunday afternoon. There are no more than six children there, and Neni is thankful to see that Mighty is one of them. He runs up to her and hugs her so tightly that she reminds him that he isn't her only baby, but that she also has one growing inside of her. He tells Neni that his last days in the Hamptons were boring. Neni says that next time she'll stay instead of taking off her last two days, and that maybe Mighty can go with her to Harlem where they can continue making puff-puff for breakfast. Mighty says it'd be "cool" to go to Harlem, then he remembers that there's no beach there.

Neni's appointment of Mighty as her "baby" reveals the attachment that can form between nannies and their charges. For Mighty, Neni has become an important source of comfort and constancy, particularly in lieu of his parents' increasing arguments about his older brother, which demonstrate less concern and attention toward him, and his mother's drug and alcohol abuse. He associates puff-puff with that warmth and constancy because he and Neni make it together.

Neni walks the appetizers around the room before setting the leftovers on the table, always smiling and nodding at Cindy's friends, all of whom she'd met in the Hamptons. They are kind and polite to her. They offer advice on prenatal yoga and tell her where she can find the best studios in the city. They remind her to call them by their first names, though she can't bring herself to do this; it's a sign of disrespect in Limbe. They compliment her on her smooth skin and ask her how long it takes to get her braids done. Neni is surprised by their friendliness, having expected that they would be indifferent to her, like rich white people in the movies.

Neni's interactions with Cindy's friends reveal not only the cultural gulf between them but also their steep differences in class. It never occurs to anyone in that room that Cindy's servant may not be able to afford prenatal yoga classes at Manhattan's best studios. Their curiosity about her hair and compliments on her skin border on an occasional tendency to fetishize blackness, but Neni is taken aback by the fact that they wish to interact with her at all.

Cindy is the "kindest and politest" of everyone in the room, reminding Neni not to overexert herself. While watching Cindy laugh and chat with her friends, Neni finds it hard to reconcile her joyfulness with the strange episodes in the Hamptons. Then, Anna whispers in her ear that they need to talk about Cindy. Anna asks if Neni noticed Cindy's "problems" in the Hamptons. Neni doesn't say anything. Anna then tells her that Anna came in for work in the morning and noticed that Cindy reeked of alcohol. She says that, last week, she saw three empty bottles of wine in the garbage. Neni admits that she noticed the same problem in the Hamptons. Anna says that the family has "big problems." Neni thinks about telling Anna about the pills but doesn't want to upset her any further.

Cindy's expression of kindness toward Neni is probably a show for her friends to display how generous she is with her staff. This, in addition to Cindy's façade of happiness, is how she wants to present herself to those within her social circle. That self-presentation vastly differs from what her servants witness. Anna's concern about Cindy's "problems" is probably the result of authentic concern for someone whom she has known for two decades, just as it is also concern for whether or not Anna would remain employed in the event of Cindy's death.

Neni figures that Cindy will one day stop drinking, which is a habit that Neni thinks is no big deal. In Limbe, lots of people drank every day, and one of her uncles is "the best drunkard in Bonjo," who serenades the neighborhood on his best days. Anna says that servants who've worked for families with problems like the Edwardes' end up losing their jobs. Now, Neni is worried. Anna goes on to talk about Cindy's mother and sister, about how unkind Cindy's mother was to her, and how her sister cut Cindy out of her life after their mother died four years ago. Anna says that Cindy has no family, except for Clark and the boys.

Neni doesn't take alcoholism seriously because it wasn't taken seriously back in Cameroon. Anna knows, however, how prevalent substance abuse is in the U.S., and that it also exists among the upper class. When it impacts this group, it can also impact the lives of those who work for them. Anna suggests that Cindy abuses drugs because she feels that her husband and eldest son are slipping away from her, and they're all she has.

Anna wants to tell Clark about Cindy's alcoholism, but Neni insists that they can't. She walks to the kitchen, picks up a bottle of water, and gulps down half of it. Maybe Anna's right. Though she doesn't want to get involved in other people's marriages, Clark works all the time and could never know the extent of what Cindy's going through. During the weeks in the Hamptons, Neni only saw him during cocktail parties, where he and Cindy acted as though they were together all the time. The first party was to celebrate Cindy's fiftieth birthday. Cindy blow-dried her hair and looked like Gwyneth Paltrow in her orange backless dress. Toward the end of the party, they stood with their arms around each other while Cindy's friends toasted her selflessness and beauty. By the next morning, Clark was gone, as was Cindy's "ceaseless smile" from the previous evening.

Neni faces a moral dilemma. She doesn't want to disobey Jende by getting involved in the Edwardses' messy lives, but she's also worried that something can happen to Cindy and that it may come as a surprise to her family when it does. It seems that the other Edwardses only see the neat façade that Cindy presents to show how good she is at managing her family life and her social life. The "ceaseless smile" that she wore during the party could be likened to a mask that hides Cindy's true pain and sadness. The praise of her friends do not fulfill her need to belong.

During the brunch, Anna prompts Neni to talk to Clark, while people were starting to leave. Neni nods and starts walking toward the living room. She decides not to say anything to Mr. Edwards about the pills—only about the wine. Then, she remembers that Jende will be furious if she brings this up. She tells Anna, but Anna insists that this is only between them.

There are two possibilities as to why Neni doesn't want to say anything about the pills: she doesn't want Clark to worry and she doesn't want him to think his wife is a drug addict. Alcoholism is deemed more socially acceptable, she figures, particularly among their class.

Neni stands with a tray of scones, unsure of what to say or how to say it. Instead of talking about Cindy, she asks Clark if he's related to John Edwards. Clark turns toward her, chuckling, and says that he isn't. Neni rubs her belly at the spot where the baby is kicking her, as though admonishing her for being so silly, and tells Clark that he resembles the politician a bit. Clark says "that's funny" and suggests that Neni go offer the scones to the other guests. When Neni runs back to the kitchen, Anna asks if she told Clark about Cindy's drinking. Neni shakes her head and buries her face against the fridge.

Neni's hesitation stems from fear of how Clark will react. Will he argue with Cindy as he did in the Hamptons? Will Cindy then blame Neni for sowing additional discord in her marriage and, worse, fire Neni or refuse to pay her in revenge for exposing her secret? Her comparison of Clark, who is stern and authoritarian, to the affable John Edwards is rather ironic.

CHAPTER 25

On the day that Vince is supposed to come over for his farewell dinner, Neni spends the day cleaning the apartment, shopping for groceries, and preparing the five-course dinner: egusi stew with smoked turkey, garri and okra soup, fried ripe plantains and beans, jollof rice with chicken gizzard, and ekwang, which takes two hours to prepare, due to peeling and grating cocoyams, wrapping them in spinach leaves, and simmering them with palm oil, dried fish, maggi and other ingredients for an hour.

Neni's desire to prepare a five-course dinner is likely the result of both her wish to give a dear friend a warm send-off and her wish to provide food that will meet Vince's high standards. She wants to prepare a meal whose ingredients may not be expensive as what Cindy provides but that would be equal in taste and quality.

At three o'clock, two hours before Vince is due to arrive, Jende's phone rings. Vince asks if it would be all right to bring Mighty along. Neni initially refuses, worried of what Cindy would think of her baby being in Harlem near nightfall, but she later relents after Jende convinces her that it'll be fine. By the time the Edwards boys arrive, Neni has showered and changed her clothes. She feels more excited than fearful. When she opens the door, Mighty rushes in to hug her and asks if she's made puff-puff, which she reminds him is a breakfast food.

Neni is worried that Cindy will get upset about Mighty being in a predominately black and lower-income community, though Harlem is not very far from Mighty's home on the Upper East Side. Her fear is her own projection of believing that Mighty doesn't belong in her world, just as Neni feels that she doesn't belong in the white, upper-class world in which Mighty is being raised.


The Edwards boys seem unfazed by the Jonga family's poverty and behave as though they're in any of the apartments on Park Avenue or Madison. Mighty's impressed at how everyone gets to sleep in the same bedroom and goes to Liomi's bedroom to see his toys, while Vince and Jende drink Malta, eat peanuts, and talk about America.

Though Neni worries about how the boys will react to their poverty, Mighty's excitement over how close-knit the family is because they sleep in the same room exhibits that people value different things based on their needs and experiences.

After Neni sets the table, Jende announces that it's time to eat. He explains that, in Cameroon, everyone takes their food and sits wherever they like. They also eat however they like, even with their hands. Mighty says that he wants to sit on the floor and eat with his hands. Liomi agrees, so Neni puts a tablecloth on the floor and puts the food on the floor, where they all sit in a circle and eat while Jende tells stories from his boyhood. He talks about how he and Winston used to steal mangoes, and that he once got his foot caught in an animal trap and had to run all the way home with it stuck to his foot. Everyone laughs, except for Neni, who rolls her eyes. She's heard the story before, and it always has a different ending.

For Mighty, and perhaps also for Vince, eating Cameroonian style not only offers a new cultural experience but frees them from the strict attention to appearances and manners that they presumably have to adhere to at home or at Cindy's parties. The Jongas provide a warm and open environment filled with humor and levity. This environment is very different from the antagonism that exists at the Edwards household—that is, when they manage to spend time together.

Mighty wants to hear more stories, but Vince announces that it's time for them to leave. Mighty sulks and Liomi tries to cheer him up by saying that, maybe, he can one day go to Mighty's house for a playdate. He says it so sweetly and sincerely that Neni avoids laughing out loud at the prospect of her child going to the Edwardses' for a playdate. Then again, Neni couldn't be so sure that Cindy *wouldn't* invite Liomi over. Once, when Liomi came down with a case of pneumonia just a month after Jende started working for them, Cindy sent Jende home one evening with a basket full of fruits, teas, and healthy snacks. After Liomi sent her a thank-you card, Cindy wrote him a letter praising his handwriting and told Jende that he was doing a great job in raising the boy.

Mighty doesn't want to return home to a household that's tumultuous and lonely. Meanwhile, Neni reevaluates her view that Mighty doesn't belong among the Jongas when she recalls instances of Cindy's generosity. This isn't exactly proof that Cindy would socialize with the Jongas—after all, her gift basket aligns with her reputation as a nutritionist—but, it does reflect a level of consideration that Neni wouldn't have expected from someone for whom she works. Neni realizes that she doesn't know as much about Cindy as she thinks.

Mighty keeps trying to convince Vince to let him stay longer and asks if Jende can take him home later. Neni tells Mighty that maybe she'll go back to the Hamptons with him next summer, but Mighty is unconvinced. Jende stands up, holds out a hand to help Mighty up, and assures him that "there will be many more times" like this evening. Mighty follows Jende to the kitchen sink to wash the palm oil from the ekwang off of his hands. The Jongas hug the Edwards boys goodbye and wish Vince a nice trip to India. Just as they're leaving, Mighty asks how there will be another time like this when Vince is leaving. His parents will never bring him to Harlem. Smiling, Neni jokes that he'll have to take the subway up to Harlem by himself. Mighty smiles.

With Vince leaving, the Jongas are Mighty's only sources of companionship and comfort. He wants to spend more time with them because it's the only time that he gets to spend with people who are loving, attentive, and entertaining. He knows that his parents exist in a world that is very different from that in Harlem—not only due to distinctions in race and class but also because their lives on the Upper East Side are more tense than relaxed and more concerned with appearing happy than actually being happy.

CHAPTER 26

Two weeks before the collapse of Lehman Brothers, Jende has a dream. He's back in Limbe, strolling the market with his friend Bosco, who, though actually a sturdily built man, appears "slender and tall." The singing gamblers, who wear agbadas and beat djembe drums and usually position themselves near the women selling strong kanda, are no longer there. Bosco says that although he doesn't like the singing gamblers, they aren't nearly as bad as **the doublers**, who once stole his school fees. His mother trusted them to double the sum so that she could also pay for Bosco's sister's school fees. Bosco sits down on the sidewalk and starts wailing and cursing the money doublers. People stare at the grown man crying in the market. Embarrassed, Jende runs to the beach, but there's no water there, only a pile of garbage, "stretching to the horizon."

The doublers are parallel figures to the Wall Street brokers who gambled with the lives of millions of Americans and misled them about the solvency of subprime loans. The dream is foreshadows the doom that will befall Lehman Brothers. Jende has the dream because the conversation that he heard between Clark and Tom still exists in his subconscious. Though he may not understand the intricacies of the threat that Lehman Brothers faces, Jende senses that something is wrong. The trash in the place of water symbolizes waste due to materialism and greed.

By the time Jende wakes up on the morning of Lehman Brothers' collapse, he's already forgotten about Bosco and his dream about **the doublers**. Cindy gives Jende the day off. He uses the time to help Neni around the house. He tells her to stop working, and then informs her that she's going to take off her upcoming spring and summer semesters to stay home with the baby after its arrival in December. Though Neni agrees to take time off from work, she resents Jende making decisions for her. In regard to Neni's visa status, Bubakar already assured Jende that he would help to get a medical leave of absence approved with the international students' office at her community college.

Neni resents the control that Jende is imposing over her life, though she relents when she considers that he's merely trying make sure that she remains healthy in preparation for giving birth. Still, it's an encroachment on her independence that Neni resents because living in the U.S. has made her more self-reliant. Many of Jende's ideas about how Neni could be healthier are influenced by Cindy. Jende wants to believe that, even though he doesn't have Cindy's money, he can still be attentive to Neni's well-being.

One Monday morning, while Jende is folding clean clothes, Neni calls out to him in a voice that makes him think something's going on with the baby. She points to the television, which is tuned to CNN. The news has broken that Lehman Brothers has collapsed. Neni wonders if this means that Clark no longer has a job. Considering this, Jende wonders if *he* still has a job. Lots of people—restaurateurs, artists, private tutors, limo drivers, nannies, and housekeepers—will see their income "vanish on the day that Lehman die[s]."

Neni's tone is probably one of concern, even panic, due to what the collapse of Lehman Brothers could mean for the Jongas. If an institution as lofty and important as that one can fail, it portends the failure of the Jongas' ambitions in the U.S. They, like so many others, are part of a financial food chain that relied on those at Lehman for sustenance.

Jende calls Clark, who doesn't answer his phone. He then dials Cindy's. When she answers, she assures Jende that he still has a job and that nothing's changing. Clark will let him know when to come back to work. After ending the call, Jende realizes how tightly his fate is wound with Mr. Edwards's. His work permit is set to expire in March, and he may be unable to renew it, depending on how his court case goes. Without papers, he can't get another job. Neni encourages him not to dwell on this but to be thankful that they were spared today.

Cindy's assurance that "nothing's changing" reiterates what Leah previously told Jende: those at the top won't be impacted by the consequences of their own unethical practices. This is good news for Jende, who won't be able to get a job with anyone else, due to his illegal status.

CHAPTER 27

The next time Jende sees Clark, it seems that the latter has aged ten years in seven days. While driving Clark to his new workplace at Barclays, "the British giant" that bought Lehman Brothers, Jende apologizes for all that's happened. Clark thanks him for his sympathy. For the rest of the week, Jende drives Clark in silence—from the Sapphire Building to Barclays or to the "Lehman-turned-Barclays office tower on Seventh Avenue." Clark only offers brusque greetings, orders to hurry, or reminders to pick up Cindy or to drop of Mighty. Once, he barked at Jende to cut around another car, but he usually just sits in the backseat, sweating, or mumbling to himself when he isn't on the phone talking about derivatives and regulations, things that Jende doesn't understand. What Jende does understand is the "misery and exhaustion" in Clark's voice.

The signs of Clark's distress are increasing. The silence in which Jende drives Clark around Manhattan contrasts with the increasing complexity of Clark's language, which is supposed to explain how Lehman Brothers got into its mess; however, this language is useless in fixing the problem. Clark is miserable because the failure that he warned Tom would ensue has resulted, and it's now too late to do anything about it. However, he continues working, perhaps to avoid feeling incompetent.

One day, while Jende is driving Cindy and her friend Cheri to visit Cheri's mother in Stamford, Cindy talks about how Clark behaved on the eve of Lehman Brothers' collapse. He arrived home early two nights before the news broke, sat on the edge of their bed with his head bowed, and didn't move or speak. Cindy had a mammogram the next morning, so she wasn't in the mood for small talk either and didn't ask her husband why he looked so despondent.

Cindy's lack of concern for her husband is probably the product of adapting to his similar attitude of indifference toward his family. She reduces an expression of concern over his distress to "small talk," and the gulf in communication that exists between Cindy and Clark reveals a hopelessness in their marriage.

Cheri tells Cindy about constantly checking her financial portfolio. She balked when her husband suggested that they get rid of their maid for a few months to save. She says that things are getting "scary" "when people start talking about flying coach and selling vacation homes." Cindy agrees that Anna isn't going anywhere either; she wouldn't know what to do without her.

Cindy and Cheri's worries over how they'll be impacted by the crisis exhibit how their money insulates them from the threats of poverty that will face Jende and Leah. Though Cindy grew up poor, she has become so accustomed to financial privilege that she may not know how to cope without it.

Cindy tells Cheri about how people like them will lose money in the short term but will be all right in the end, unlike "those poor devils on the streets." She says that she hasn't spoken to Clark much since the night he returned home looking defeated, and that she went three days without seeing him last week. She worries that he might be cheating on her, though she can't bring herself to say so. Cheri assures her that no such thing is going on.

Cindy's description of those from the middle- and working-classes as "poor devils in the streets" intimates that she remains insulated from the worst aspects of the crisis while the majority of people are left vulnerable on the outside, shut out from the privileges that protect Cheri and Cindy.

Jende thinks about the previous night, when, after work, Clark called his friend Frank to see if it might be time for him to get away from Wall Street. He's beginning to question the meaning of his life and finds it strange that he's beginning to sound like Vince. This prompts Jende to wonder how Vince is doing in India. He also thinks about Leah. He worries about her high blood pressure and swelling feet. One day, Jende dials the work number, expecting to get a voice message, but she answers the phone. She announces that she was laid off but figures that she can use it as an excuse to take a month off and relax. She'll go to see her sister in Florida before applying for new jobs. With over twenty years of experience, she has no doubt of finding a new position.

Clark is beginning to realize that all of his work to save the company was futile, and that it's pointless for him to continue to work so hard. Jende worries more about Leah than anyone else because she depended squarely on Clark as Jende does. Leah, like many Americans, didn't understand how dire the financial collapse is. She believes that, with her work experience, she'll easily be able to find another job. However, there won't be additional jobs to find, and she discounts the problem of age discrimination in employment.


The next day, while dropping off and picking up the Edwardses, Jende thinks about how strange it is that Americans are talking about an "economic crisis," a phrase that was very familiar to Cameroonians in the late 1980s, when the country entered a prolonged economic downturn. Jende is thankful that he still has a job, especially in lieu of so many job losses. (And there would be more losses. People's lives would change in unprecedented ways: retirement savings would be halved, "college funds would be withdrawn"; dream weddings, vacations, and homes would be deferred.)

Jende thinks this economic situation is "strange" because he never thought that a country as prosperous as the United States could face such a dire circumstance. Because he's uneducated, he doesn't know about the Great Depression. He also doesn't know that the country faced a similar depression in 1987, around the same time that Cameroon suffered from its own crisis.


CHAPTER 28

Jende drives Clark to the Chelsea Hotel at least a dozen times in the five weeks after Lehman Brothers falls. On the way, Clark confirms the rendezvous and verifies with the person on the phone that "the girl [will] do the acts she promised to do on the website." Jende always sits in the driver's seat, pretending not to hear anything. Before every appointment, he pulls up in front of the hotel, drops Clark off, searches for a spot on the street, and waits there until he gets a call from Clark to pick him up in five minutes. When Clark reenters the car, he seems more relaxed, showing no sign of guilt.

Jende knows that Clark is seeing a prostitute at the hotel but feigns ignorance, which is reflected in a narrative that never communicates Jende's thoughts about what Clark might be doing and how it could impact his family. Dutifully, Jende drives Clark to and from the hotel, abiding by the terms of his strict confidentiality agreement, so that he can keep his job.

The bond between Jende and Clark is "firmly established" by this secret. This is why Jende says no more than what is necessary on the night when Clark returns to the car without his tie on. Normally, Jende wouldn't notice such a thing. He opens his mouth to say something about it; then, he thinks better of it. Instead, he offers to take Clark back to his office. Clark tells Jende to take him home. Jende foresees how this will play out: Clark will walk into the house; Cindy will ask him where the tie is; Clark will tell a lie that Cindy won't believe; Cindy will start a fight and, the following day, Jende will be subjected to more "cringe-inducing details about their marriage." It'll become yet another battle that Clark will have to fight. Then again, maybe Cindy won't notice.

The secret between Jende and Clark parallels with the secret between Cindy and Neni about Cindy's drug and alcohol abuse. Though the Edwardses have power over the Jongas' economic stability, the Jongas hold the secrets that, if revealed, can ruin the stability of the Edwardses' lives, which are already on tenuous ground. Jende knows that Clark will likely be confronted about the tie, which will become symbol of both his infidelity and his neglect, but he tries to convince himself, for the sake of his own peace of mind, that she won't suspect anything.

CHAPTER 29

One evening early in November, three days after Barack Obama is elected president, Cindy asks Jende to come upstairs to the Edwardses' apartment so that she can speak to him. He knows this is about the tie. He notices, too, that Cindy looks different, as if in pain. After asking after Neni and Liomi, Cindy pushes a notebook toward Jende and asks him to write down every place to which he drives Clark. She assures him that the notebook will be their secret. Jende hesitates, afraid of losing his job. She assures him that, if he tells her everything, she'll make sure that he keeps his job. Though Jende tries to calm her fears, Cindy doesn't believe him; she's sure that there's another woman. She encourages Jende to think about his new baby and how he'll need his job. She then stands up and wishes him a good night.

The positive moment of "hope and change" that characterized Obama's campaign and presidency is, for Jende, a signal of uncertainty. He worries that Cindy is asking him to compromise the terms of his confidentiality agreement, which could cause Clark to fire him and could even justify legal action against him. However, in encouraging Jende to think about the new baby that he has coming, Cindy threatens Jende with job loss if he doesn't properly inform her of Clark's whereabouts. She fears being usurped by someone younger, as she expressed earlier to Cheri.

CHAPTER 30

Jende returns home early that evening and finds Winston eating kwacoco and banga soup at his table. He announces that he's going to see his ex-girlfriend, Maami, next weekend. He found her on Facebook, he says. She's living in Texas and has a boyfriend—"a little white thing"—but Winston thinks that'll change when she sees him again. Jende makes a joke in which he suggests that Maami should "compare the snakes," and whoever has the longer one wins. Liomi questions the analogy, and Jende shouts at him to go do his homework, causing Neni to admonish him for shouting. Winston asks them to stop shouting before he "[swears] off marriage forever."

Just as Neni predicted, Winston is looking to settle down with a Cameroonian woman and is undeterred by the fact that his former sweetheart is in a relationship with someone else and lives in another city. Winston speaks of Maami's boyfriend in a way that emasculates him ("little white thing"), but it's really an assertion of his belief that a white man is inappropriate for Maami, just as Neni thought that Jenny was inappropriate for Winston.

Jende tells Neni and Winston about his meeting with Cindy. They insist that Jende tell Cindy what she wants to know, and that it wouldn't serve him well to make her angry. Winston reminds Jende that she can cause him to lose his job. Jende wonders why Cindy can't just ask her husband what she wants to know. Winston thinks for a moment and says that, in a couple of days, Jende should go to Cindy and say that, if she fires him, Jende will tell everyone about her drug use. Neni high-fives Winston, thinking his plan is brilliant. Jende can't bring himself to do such a thing to a woman who has so many troubles, but Neni reminds Jende that he doesn't have a relationship with Cindy. Winston agrees: Jende's just a black man who drives her around; he shouldn't worry about Cindy.

Unlike Jende, Neni and Winston know that Cindy can manipulate Clark into firing Jende no matter how much Clark might not want to. Jende's responses are a bit naïve: if Cindy were to ask Clark directly about infidelity, predictably, he would deny any wrongdoing. Jende's unwillingness to expose Cindy's drug use in revenge for the possibility of being fired is not only the result of pity but fear of what Clark, a man he respects, would think of him for saying such things about his wife. He tries to remember his role and his loyalty to his own family, but he still wants the Edwardses' approval.

Jende insists that he understands that he's merely Cindy's chauffeur, but that doesn't mean that he shouldn't feel sorry for her. Neni reminds Jende that, if Cindy decides to have him fired, it's *she* who'll cry, not Cindy. Jende doesn't think that Clark would ever fire him because of his wife and assures Neni and Winston that he'll handle the matter right and will not lose his job. Neni is skeptical and insists that the only way to escape this situation is to shut Cindy up. Cindy may look weak, but she knows how to get what she wants from people. Jende wonders how he got himself involved in the Edwardses' marriage. Winston says that women can be tricky and that, if Jende doesn't give Cindy what she wants, she may make up a story about Jende so that Clark will get rid of him.

Neni knows that Jende's admiration for the Edwardses is clouding his judgment. She tries to remind him that his own family is his first obligation, and that his decisions must always reflect that loyalty. Having seen Cindy's duplicity in the Hamptons—that is, the presentation of one image in public and another privately—Neni doesn't trust her. Both Neni and Winston characterize Cindy as passive-aggressive and as someone who will use her vulnerability to manipulate her husband.

CHAPTER 31

On the morning of his thirty-eighth birthday, Jende holds the car door open for Clark, who offers a perfunctory "happy birthday." Once they start driving, Jende tells Clark that Cindy wants to know where he goes. Clark offers that Jende can tell her "everything," but nothing about the Chelsea Hotel. Jende wants to tell Clark that he'll protect him in exchange for giving Jende a job that has changed his life. He doesn't say this, but Clark thanks him anyway for his willingness to look out for his boss.

Clark's offer that Jende can tell Cindy "everything" is really telling him that he should tell Cindy nothing because the one thing she wants to know about—his infidelity—is the one thing that Jende can't divulge. However, Jende's loyalty to Clark, and his erroneous belief that Clark decides on his employment status, overrides his concern about Cindy.

Jende thanks Clark in exchange, saying that he was afraid of losing his job if he didn't do the right thing. Clark assures him that his job is secure. Jende asks about Cindy. Clark says that she's fine and asks Jende why he's asking. Before Jende can respond, Clark's phone rings. It's his sister, Ceci. They'll be meeting in New York for the first time in years. Clark asks Jende to continue what he was saying about Cindy. Jende mentions that he noticed that Cindy has lost some weight and just wants to make sure that she's fine. Clark insists that she's doing "very well," though the recession is hard on everyone. He then says that Jende should tell her that she's lost weight; she'd be glad to hear that.

Clark's assurance that Jende's job is "secure" and his expression that Cindy is "fine" both reveal how Clark is oblivious to certain aspects of his wife's identity. Cindy's drug and alcohol abuse, of which he presumably remains unaware, indicates that she's anything but fine. Her weight loss, which Clark thinks is no more than a reflection of the desire of women in her class to be thin, is the result of her anorexia and substance abuse. Clark may as well be a stranger to his wife, given how little he knows compared to the Jongas.

CHAPTER 32

Twice a day, Jende writes down what Clark does, including times, locations, and names. He also adds descriptions of people, though their actions and behaviors contribute nothing to the narrative. Jende uses the opportunity to use words and phrases that he learned from reading the dictionary that he's owned since secondary school, and expressions that he picked up for the newspaper. He offers this language as proof to Cindy that he's thinking carefully as he writes. On Friday evening, however, after driving Clark from the Chelsea Hotel to his office, he writes that he has driven Mr. Edwards from Washington, DC to the gym and then back to work. As often as he can, he writes "gym" in the place of the Chelsea Hotel. During weeks in which Clark goes to the hotel more than twice, he invents another lie.

Jende takes his job as recorder seriously. He tries to be precise to hide from Cindy the fact that he's lying. He also uses the opportunity to show the Edwardses that, despite being a chauffeur, he has some level of education. Jende writes "gym" in the place of the Chelsea Hotel because it's a place where someone would normally spend an hour to relieve stress. However, Clark's diminished looks, due to stress, offer no physical evidence that he's been frequenting a gym.

In moments in which Jende fears that Cindy may have tried to contact Clark while he's at the hotel, Jende writes that they were stuck in the Holland Tunnel, where there's poor phone reception, in bad traffic. Another time, he writes that Clark had to rush to a meeting in a taxi while Jende was on his way back from picking up Mighty, so Jende had no way to know where Clark was going or whom he was meeting. Jende carries the notebook with him at all times and hands it to Cindy to read every morning. She nods in satisfaction with his work. Jende notices no more phone calls to her friends about "what he's doing to me." She laughs a bit more, but she still looks unhealthily thin. She talks a lot about Vince, worrying that he hasn't responded to her email.

Jende invents one lie after another in the interest of protecting Clark and keeping the Edwardses together. The time that he takes to invent such lies reveals how deeply invested he is in protecting Clark and, in doing so, in protecting his own job. His explanations satisfy Cindy because they're all reasonable. The notes also work to lift her mood, due to her newfound belief that her marriage is actually secure. Despite her fear, it also seems that Cindy reveled in the drama of her unraveling marriage, for it gave her an excuse to seek pity and attention—now, she turns to Vince as a means to stir up more drama.

Jende wants very much for Cindy to have fun and she seems to have it when she and Clark attend a gala at the Waldorf Astoria the Monday after Thanksgiving. The holiday had been a happy one because Clark's parents, his sister, Ceci, and his nieces visit. Mighty tells Jende about what "an awesome Thanksgiving" the Edwardses had and that they had celebrated it with June's family. Jende can see in Cindy's new joy that the security of family is "her greatest source of happiness." On the night of the gala, she and Clark enter the car beaming. She looks "lustrous" in a red strapless gown, and he looks suave in a well-tailored tuxedo. They reenter the car five hours later even happier, laughing at what "had transpired on the dance floor." Back home, Jende tells Neni that he never thought a day would come would he would see the Edwardses so happy.

If Cindy is having fun, it means that she won't hound Jende for more information about Clark's whereabouts based on her suspicions. Jende seems to think that his plan has worked because Cindy is once again calm, seemingly happy, and secure in the company of family and friends. Their glamorous appearances for the gala, as well as their display of closeness, restores Jende's image of the Edwardses as a happy couple who lead the idyllic lives that everyone would like to have. Jende feels that he can take some credit for their happiness.

CHAPTER 33

Two days after the gala at the Waldorf Astoria, a story appears in a tabloid—one that, at any other time, might have been "dismissed as rubbish." Now, however, there's a "collective desire to find the presumed architects of the financial crisis despicable," so the story isn't dismissed. It's talked about in barbershops and on playground benches. Leah calls Jende and tells him that an escort claims that she has lots of clients from Barclays who have been paying her with government bailout money. The woman mentions Clark among her frequent clients.

The news about Clark's visits to escorts unravels Cindy's dream of a happy marriage which, in turn, will result in the undoing of the Jongas' American Dream. The story results from a desire to punish Clark for destroying the dreams of so many Americans due to greed, arrogance, and, specifically in Clark's case, his inability to stand up and challenge what he knew to be unethical behavior.

Jende cuts his conversation with Leah short to go pick up Mighty. He hangs up, thinking about how miserable Leah had recently sounded due to not getting any calls back after sending out fifty résumés. Today she sounds cheerful, reveling in the sordid details about others' lives. Jende calls Winston, hoping that he's read the story and can advise Jende about what to do, but Winston doesn't pick up. He thinks about what he can say to Cindy when he picks her up at five to drive to Lincoln Center, where she's to meet a friend for dinner and the opera. He prepares himself to assure her that he's never seen Clark with a prostitute. He opens the door for Cindy and greets her, but she doesn't reply. She doesn't speak at all for the duration of their ride. When he offers her the notebook, she tells him to keep it; she no longer needs it.

Leah's mood lifts from talking about the scandal involving Clark because he's partly responsible for her job loss. It makes her feel better that he, along with the other executives whom she never trusted, will also suffer in the aftermath of the crisis. Meanwhile, Cindy's silent wrath is palpable in this passage. She would never express this anger toward an employee, but her detached silence toward Jende portends her intention to have him fired. She doesn't respond to his greeting because, for her, he no longer exists. She refuses the blue notebook because she knows that it contains lies constructed to protect Clark.

CHAPTER 34

When Jende hears Mighty sniffling in the backseat, he thinks that the boy just has a cold. Then, he sees Mighty wiping at his eyes with the tissue that Jende hands him from the glove compartment. He asks if Mighty is okay. The boy nods, but Jende pulls to the side of the street. He isn't going to let the boy go to school crying, though they have to be there in ten minutes to avoid being late. He turns the car off and gets in the backseat. Mighty says that the Edwardses' plans to spend Christmas in St. Barths have been canceled, and that his mother was screaming and crying last night. Jende tries to assure the boy that his parents will be friends again. He worries about someone seeing them—a black man with a white boy nestled against his chest in the backseat of a luxury car—and calling the police.

Mighty is afraid of his parents' marriage breaking up and takes their cancelled Christmas plans as a sign of their imminent divorce. With Vince no longer around, it becomes increasingly clear that is family is breaking apart. Jende's assurances to Mighty are also assurances to himself that the Edwardses will stay together. Discord in Cindy and Clark's marriage could also affect his employment. Additionally, Jende worries about someone calling the police because of what Bubakar told him about the police's racism and antagonism toward black men.

Mighty asks if he can visit the Jongas. Jende says that, as glad as he and Neni would be to have him as a guest, his parents wouldn't approve. Mighty suggests that it could only be for an hour and Stacy could come too. Jende shakes his head, but suggests that Neni could make Mighty some puff-puff and fried ripe plantains for him to eat going to and from school. When Jende asks if that would make Mighty happy, the boy looks up at him, nods, and smiles.

Jende knows that Cindy would never allow Mighty to go to Harlem. Moreover, Cindy's cold treatment of Jende strongly suggests that she no longer wants anything to do with the Jonga family. The offer of food is a reminder of the warm, happy times that Mighty has spent in the Jongas' company.

CHAPTER 35

When Jende and Neni's baby girl is born in Harlem Hospital on December 10th, they believe that she's their dead daughter who has returned to bring them happiness, so they name her Amatimba Monyengi. Amatimba means "she has returned" and Monyengi means "happiness." They have a gathering in their apartment two days later, when they return from the hospital. Winston is in Houston, wooing back Maami, but nine friends gather with the Jongas "to eat and rejoice and welcome Timba to earth."

Despite the uncertainty that awaits Jende, the Jongas' second child is, in a way, a fulfillment of their American Dream because she is the first member of the family who is a natural-born American citizen. She is also evidence of Neni and Jonga's triumph over their early circumstances—hopelessness and being kept apart.

Jende calls Clark to share the news, and Clark tells Jende that he can take off as much time as he needs. Anna stops by with a box of size-two diapers a couple of days later, which he and Neni assume come from the Edwardses. A day later, a letter arrives from Immigration. It says that Jende is subject to removal from the United States due to over-staying his visa. He's to appear before an immigration judge in the second week of February to show why he shouldn't be removed from the country.

The Jongas assume that the gift came from the Edwardses, but this is unlikely, given Cindy's coldness. The gift is probably from Anna herself. The arrival of Timba coincides with the prospect of Jende's deportation. This makes Jende's case more urgent because his removal from the country will deprive Timba of the future he and Neni dreamed for her.


When Jende calls Bubakar about the letter, the lawyer assures him that this is typical and they'll just continue to appeal. Jende wants to know how much this will cost, and Bubakar admits that it'll be expensive. Jende then calls Winston, who thinks that Bubakar is taking Jende "down a bad road." He calls Bubakar "a useless loudmouthed buffoon" and that a former colleague of his, who's now in immigration law, has told him that asylum applications couldn't be won with ridiculous tales about a man who ran to America out of fear of being killed by his father-in-law. What Winston's colleague finds so strange about Jende's case is that it took so long to process. There are asylum cases that disappear for so long that applicants wait for months or years for interviews or decisions, but Jende's case was extreme. Either he's unlucky or has a very lazy lawyer.

The continuation of appeals will benefit Bubakar, because Jende will have to keep paying him. However, there's no guarantee that it'll result in any change due to the very implausible story that Bubakar told to get Jende asylum. Though Winston recommended Bubakar, he no longer has faith in Bubakar's competence, in addition to regarding him as a lazy, vulgar person. Though Winston understandably has his own life to deal with, it's rather strange that he didn't offer these suggestions to Jende much sooner and that he didn't advise Jende to seek a consultation with another lawyer.

Jende asks Winston if his former colleague can take him on as a client, but the colleague replies that he can't. He specializes in investor visas—"helping foreign billionaires and multimillionaires obtain entrance and legal status in America through investment, business development and trade." Still, the colleague advises Jende to find a smarter lawyer than Bubakar. Winston wonders why Bubakar didn't use a political asylum story, and Jende wonders why Winston didn't ask this during their first meeting with Bubakar.

Winston's colleague could take on Jende's case—and could even offer to do it pro bono, or for free. However, he won't because it isn't lucrative. Jende learns that there are immigration cases for "little people" like him and separate cases for those who are likely to bring a lot of revenue into the U.S., and, for that reason, are very likely to have their visas approved.

Jende talks to Neni about his asylum case. They agree to stick with Bubakar and encourage each other to be hopeful. But, that night, they each have nightmares. Jende dreams of strange men in uniform knocking on his door and then taking him away, while Neni dreams of returning to "a largely deserted Limbe." When Neni wakes up, she pulls Timba closer to her and kisses her. Her daughter will return to Cameroon as an American, and Liomi will become American, too.

Jende and Neni stick with Bubakar because they have no other recourse; they simply can't afford another lawyer. Jende's dream reflects his fear of being deported, while Neni's fear is that she'll be forced back to a country that she believes has nothing to offer her. She doesn't want her children returning to a land that offers them nothing.

The Sunday before Christmas, while Jende is working, Neni takes the children to church. She takes the subway to Greenwich Village and enters a house of worship filled with middle-aged white people. The pastor is a woman with long gray hair and red-framed glasses who's preaching about "some kind of coming revolution." After the service, the pastor approaches Neni and introduces herself as Natasha. Other congregants also come over to greet Neni and to admire Timba, who's sleeping in her carrier. A man tells Neni that he was a Peace Corps volunteer in Cameroon many years ago. Neni is surprised and excited to meet someone who's been to her country, though he was stationed in a region she'd never been to. She feels as though she's "reconnected with a long-lost friend."

Unlike Neni's experience at the bar of the Hudson Hotel, when she was also in a room full of white people, she feels welcome at Judson Memorial Church. Much of this has to do with how the congregants make her feel welcome by introducing themselves to her, which diminishes her worry about presenting herself to the group and being rejected. She's also happy to meet the former Peace Corps volunteer because, though he's not Cameroonian, he understands some things about her country, which help her to feel less alienated.

Later that night, Neni tells Jende about how happy everyone was to welcome her, Liomi, and Timba to the church. Jende figures that it's because they don't have any black people there and are just trying to prove to their friends how much they like black people. Neni suggests that the church can help Jende with staying in America. He laughs derisively, thinking it a stupid idea. Neni accuses him of not being willing to fight to remain in the country. Jende angrily says that he works as a servant just so that he can stay in America, but that if America says that the Jongas are unwelcome in the country, he's not going to beg to stay. He slams the bedroom door and goes to sleep in the living room, leaving Neni to whimper in the darkness of their bedroom.

Jende is skeptical of the welcome that Neni, Liomi, and Timba got at the church. However, given that he's expressed greater ease than Neni in predominately white environments, his reaction suggests that he's threatened by the prospect of his wife finding friendships and a sense of community outside of him and their West African friends. It suggests that, even if Jende is deported, Neni and his children would be able to continue on in America and would thrive happily without him. He also feels impotent due to his inability to fulfill his promises to his family.

CHAPTER 36

Three days before Christmas, Natasha sends Neni an email, asking her to stop by Judson Memorial Church so that Natasha can get to know her better. Neni schedules a meeting for the next day and tells Jende nothing about it. In private, Natasha seems more subdued than the fiery preacher who stood at the pulpit a little while before, speaking about revolution. Over tea, they talk about motherhood and marriage. Neni also tells Natasha about Jende's deportation case. She talks about their argument on Sunday and the shame she would feel if she had to return to Limbe and face a sense of failure that she might never escape. Natasha listens and nods, while Neni cries.

Neni doesn't tell Jende about the meeting because she suspects, rightly, that he'll disapprove. It'll be yet another sign that Neni is learning to manage without him. Natasha is the only female friend Neni has who can offer her a perspective outside of what she knows as a Cameroonian wife and as an immigrant who's desperate to become a legitimate part of American life. Furthermore, Natasha listens without judgment.

Natasha tells Neni that the American immigration system can be cruel, but the church will stand and fight with her until the end. Neni walks out of Judson and into Washington Square Park "with the lightness of a beautifully crafted kite." Across the park, young people are holding up placards, "chanting and protesting the bailout." Neni stands beside the empty fountain and watches them, admiring their passion for their country. She thinks that, if Judson can help the Jongas stay in America, she can one day "protest like that, too." She could say anything she wanted without "fear of being thrown into prison the way dissidents were being thrown into prisons in some African countries for speaking out against abominable authoritarian regimes."

Neni feels lighter because she feels that there are Americans who are on her side. If there are more people like Natasha, and if the church can successfully offer its support, then Neni can become an American. She imagines herself being so secure in her freedom and so thoroughly assimilated that she would take place in protests as an expression of a right that she never imagined having in Cameroon. She contrasts the "passion" of the protestors with the apathy that characterizes life at home.

When Jende comes home from work around midnight, Neni quickly serves him dinner and tells him about going to Judson. She says that Natasha told her that the church will help them to remain in the U.S.; however, Jende is outraged that Neni would discuss his situation with strangers. When he berates her, she offers no excuse. She knows that Bubakar warned them to guard their immigration status and not to share it with anyone because they could be reported. Despite this, she insists that she told Natasha about their plight because she believes that there are some Americans who want to keep hardworking immigrants in the country. Kindhearted people like Natasha would never betray them. However, it's futile to reason with a raging man, who now "stand[s] above her vomiting a parade of insults." For the first time, she's afraid that he may beat her.

Jende, who's spent months living in fear, worries that Neni has exposed him. He fears the fulfillment of his dream in which men in uniform show up at his door and take him away. She doesn't know this because he hasn't shared this dream with her, and he also isn't telling her that he's increasingly losing faith in his ability to hold out for asylum. Afraid of appearing vulnerable, Jende chooses anger instead—an emotion that gives him some semblance of power, even if it's only over his helpless wife. Neni notices that Jende's character is changing in ways that make him frightening and unpredictable.

CHAPTER 37

On Christmas morning, the Jongas eat fried ripe plantains and beans but they don't exchange gifts—Jende doesn't want Liomi to conflate exchanging gifts with love. In the afternoon, they eat rice and chicken stew, like most people in Limbe do, and Neni makes chin-chin and cake. The night before, the family watched *It's a Wonderful Life*. For the rest of Christmas Day, Jende tells Liomi stories and rocks Timba to sleep. No one comes to visit, but it's a far happier Christmas for Jende than his first Christmas in America, when he laid all alone on his upper-level bunk in the apartment he shared in the Bronx because Winston had gone to Aruba with a woman he was dating. He imagined Neni taking Liomi to new town to see Ma Jonga who would have prepared a meal of chicken stew with yams, a side of ndolé, plantains, and nyama ngowa.

It's more likely that Jende doesn't provide any gifts for Liomi because he can't afford them. Christmas at the Jonga household is a mixture of Cameroonian tradition, indicated by the food that they make, and their adaptation of American traditions, such as watching the iconic film It's a Wonderful Life. *For Jende, it's a happier holiday because he has his family with him and he's less nostalgic for past holidays at home, which he associated with the comforts of food and family companionship. Jende's frustration causes him to briefly overlook how far he's come in the past year: he has a more comfortable residence, and his wife and children are with him.*

Five days after Christmas, Jende returns to work, "only to find that there [isn't] much to do." Anna tells him that Clark is living at a hotel. She also tells him that Cindy won't be needing his services, but that Mighty will need to get to his piano lesson and back. Jende could return home after that and wouldn't have much else to do during the holidays. Anna says that there's no telling how long Clark will remain at the hotel or how much longer Cindy will keep herself locked away in the apartment. Anna also mentions that Cindy's drinking is getting worse.

Unlike the warmth that has characterized the Jonga family's Christmas, the holiday was merely a reminder of the discord between Cindy and Clark. Clark has moved out of the apartment and Cindy is self-medicating with alcohol, in addition to isolating herself away from those who could help her. Her behavior is indicative of someone who's lost faith in everything she once held dear.

Jende greets Mighty and asks about his Christmas, which Mighty says he doesn't want to talk about. He mentions that Cindy called Vince on Skype and that Vince now as "some funny-looking dreadlocks." He then mentions that his parents fought in the kitchen the night before. Jende tries to comfort the boy by saying that married people "like to fight sometimes," but it doesn't mean anything. Mighty sniffles and says that he heard his mom crying and throwing things at the wall while his father shouted for her to stop. He reports that Cindy said, "I don't ever wanna see his face again," and to "get rid of him right now." Mighty tells Jende that he doesn't know who his mother was talking about, but that she was screaming it repeatedly, while his father said, "I won't do it."

Just as Jende comforted Mighty before with assurances that things would turn out all right, he does so now, with the same dual purposes of comforting the worried boy while also alleviating his own concern about how the infighting between the couple could impact his job. However, Cindy's vague mention of wanting to get rid of someone, in addition to her violent behavior, is a strong indication that Cindy will fulfill on her promise to have Jende fired. Clark's resistance, however, seems to be no match for his wife's hysteria, at least for the time being.

Mighty worries that his parents will get divorced. When the boy leaves the car to meet Stacy and go to his piano lesson, Jende calls Winston, who assures Jende not to worry. Jende is sure that Cindy was talking about him, but Winston says that women like her have lots of people working for her. Winston offers to call Frank and ask him, figuring that Clark would mention this to Frank. Winston can then ask Frank to help him convince Clark to keep Jende. After getting off of the phone, Jende closes his eyes and reclines his head against the car seat. He thinks about the pain he's experienced, not only Neni's father sending him to prison, but also the "dread and despair" he experienced when Liomi and Neni ended up in the hospital after a bus accident. This occurred during his first year in America. He thought of them dying while he was so far away from home.

Mighty's report of Cindy's behavior makes Jende feel helpless, like a man who isn't in control of his fate, due to his complete dependence on the Edwardses. He compares this to other moments in which he felt powerless against circumstances. Then, as now, he has to rely on others to ensure a good outcome. He has to rely on Winston to put a good word in for him by proxy because Jende's work—his effort—is no longer enough to hold him in good stead. Similarly, his love for Neni was not enough to convince Neni's father that he was worthy of marrying her.

CHAPTER 38

After receiving a call from Clark, asking him to come down to his office, Jende parks the car in the garage and pulls his briefcase from out beneath his seat. He holds it in his lap and thinks about how it's his greatest pride to carry it every day to work, about how it makes him feel like "a sort of big man himself, not just a little man driving a big man around." He turns around and checks the backseat, which is "impeccable," thanks to his recent visit to a car wash. He puts on his gloves and hat, picks up the briefcase, and steps out of the car.

The briefcase is a symbol of Jende's progress. Though his work doesn't require him to carry one, it's a point of pride. It's proof that, though he doesn't have Clark Edwards's wealth, that he is a man who is just as worthy of respect and who's just as willing to work hard to provide for his family. It's also a reflection of Jende's newfound attention to having a refined appearance, which he didn't have at the beginning of the novel.

Jende enters Clark's office and sees Clark sitting at his desk, writing on a legal pad. He lifts his head, smiles, and wordlessly motions for Jende to have a seat. Clark puts aside his writing pad, looks at Jende, and clasps his hands. Clark commends Jende's good work and mentions how "highly" he thinks of him, calling him his "favorite chauffeur." He then runs his fingers through his hair, exhales, and rubs his eyes before saying that he has to let Jende go. He apologizes and Jende bows his head, realizing that the thing that he feared most was happening.

This meeting in Clark's office differs from the last time Jende entered this space, when Clark barely acknowledged him. Here, the acknowledgement comes, not only as a result of their knowing each other, but because Clark feels guilty about disposing of Jende. His running of fingers through his hair and the rubbing of his eyes are nervous tics that are signs of discomfort with his action.

Clark mentions that "it's a horrible time" for this to happen due to Jende's new baby. Jende looks up and angrily demands to know why he's being fired, but Clark only describes the situation as "complicated." Jende accuses Clark of lying to him and is sure that Cindy is behind the decision. Jende reminds Clark that he did what his boss asked him to do and wrote only what Clark told him to write in the blue notebook. Jende insists that Cindy now dislikes Jende because she thinks he's a liar, but Jende insists that he "would never do anything to cause trouble in another man's house." Clark opens a drawer in his desk and takes out a check. He says that it's Jende's paycheck for the rest of the week, "plus more." He stands up, thanks Jende for everything, and shakes "Jende's weak hand." Jende bids Clark goodnight.

Clark's acknowledgement of other people's difficulties—of the fact that Jende has another child to care for and that Leah still can't find work—doesn't prove that he's sympathetic. His unwillingness to explain his reasons for the decision, though Jende already knows, indicates that he's more interested in protecting Cindy's reputation than he is in explaining why he would destroy someone's livelihood, especially for following his instructions. Clark's action demonstrates that he's not a very responsible person and he uses money to pay for yet another mistake he's made that'll have far-reaching consequences.

CHAPTER 39

At Judson Memorial Church, Neni listens to Natasha's sermon about subjugating one's ego and viewing oneself "as a vital piece of Divine Oneness." Neni wants to tell Jende about the sermon when she returns home, but she can't because she's not sure if she believes it. She recalls how he returned home to her on the night when he was fired, "pitilessly bowed by life." Neni cried, knowing that Cindy was behind the decision. Jende assured her that it didn't matter and held out his arms to pull her into a hug.

Jende's return home after being fired parallels with how Clark returned home after learning that Lehman Brothers had collapsed. However, Neni expresses a love and sympathy for her husband that Cindy didn't care to express toward Clark. Natasha's sermon gives Neni comfort because it reveals how everyone is connected. This helps her feel that the Edwardses don't have as much control as they think.

CHAPTER 40

Mr. Jones tells Jende that he has no shifts for him because too many people are lining up to drive livery cabs. When he returns home, Neni tells him not to worry because they have money saved. The following week, he gets a job washing dishes at two restaurants. He works mornings, afternoons, and evenings, six days per week. He leaves before Liomi wakes up and returns when his son goes to bed. He makes less than half of what he made working for Clark Edwards. Three weeks into the job, his feet begin to ache.

Jende's inability to return to his former job as a cab driver is a consequence of the financial crisis, in which people are now willing to take any job they can to survive. Jende's mode of survival leaves him no time for his family and offers far less income. He is becoming physically and spiritually exhausted, and his American Dream is becoming less attainable.

Neni begs Jende to let her go back to work. She knows that she could call her agency and get another home health aide job fast, but he insists that she stay home. Besides, they can't afford daycare. On the day of his hearing, Jende wears the black suit that he wore on his first day chauffeuring for the Edwards family. He stands next to Bubakar, who "answer[s] most of the judge's questions." Next, "Bubakar and the judge and the attorney for ICE [take] turns saying things Jende [doesn't] understand." After, "The judge set[s] a date in June for Jende to reappear." Bubakar grins as they exit the federal building, saying that they can continue doing this to buy Jende time. Jende nods, but he doesn't feel free. It seems that he's just "postponing the inevitable."

Jende won't let Neni go back to work because he wants to assure himself that he can still provide for his family, despite his job loss and his uncertain future. His wearing of the black suit is, it seems, an effort to prove to the judge, just as he eventually proved to Clark, that he is a respectable man and one who is worthy of being given a chance. Just as Jende couldn't understand the intricacies of Clark's talk about the financial crisis, he's similarly confused about the intricacies of the immigration system and feels helplessly caught up in both.

CHAPTER 41

Neni sits on a crosstown bus with a gift bag in her lap. She listens to two black men behind her chatting about the Obama inauguration. She gets off the bus at Lexington Avenue and takes the subway downtown. When she gets off, she walks toward Park Avenue. She had never been to this part of town and is "awed by its elegance." There's no dirt on the streets and doormen are dressed like rich men. The doorman at the Sapphire asks if he can help Neni but doesn't move away from the fiberglass door. She says that she's there to see Cindy Edwards. The doorman asks if Mrs. Edwards is expecting her. Neni nods. He directs her toward the service entrance.

The hope that the men feel about Obama contrasts with the desperation that Neni feels. For her and her family, circumstances haven't changed for the better. She also sees, for the first time, how much more opulently people live just a few miles away from her, alerting her further to stark class inequalities. The doorman's reservation in response to Neni and his assumption that she's a servant are indications of racism. He assumes that she couldn't be a guest of anyone in the building.

Neni walks toward the hall to apartment 25A. Anna opens the door and says that Cindy has just come back out into the living room. Neni takes her shoes off in the foyer and follows Anna into the kitchen. Neni wants to give Cindy a gift. When Anna offers to give it to Cindy, Neni insists that she wants to do it herself. Anna leaves to go ask Cindy if she'll take the meeting and returns to say that Neni can go the living room, but she must be quick and then leave. Neni steps into the magnificent white-and-gray living room with a view of Manhattan beyond the window.

Neni's offer of a gift is merely a ruse to give her an excuse to be in Cindy's home. It could be read as a subtle metaphor for the Trojan horse—the presentation of a gift from a visitor, which puts the receiver at ease, and disguises the unsuspecting of the visitor's true intentions. Like Clark's office, his home has a view of Manhattan. Their views give the Edwardses the sense that the city is at their disposal.

Cindy emerges, mentioning that Anna said that Neni wanted to give her something. She reaches out to take the bag, which contains a dress that Neni's mother made. Neni thought Cindy would like it, due to her admiring the same kind of dress that Neni wore in the Hamptons. Cindy thanks her and tells Neni to tell Jende that she says hello. Neni doesn't move, prompting Cindy to ask if there's something else that she wants. Neni says that she wants Cindy to help Jende get his job back. Cindy turns away and looks toward the window. She calls Neni "a very funny girl" and says that Jende "lost his job because Clark no longer needs his services," and "there's nothing [she] can do about that."

Cindy exchanges pleasantries with Neni in an effort to maintain her façade as a polite, caring woman. However, her belittling comment toward Neni (particularly infantilizing her as "a very funny girl") and her lie about Clark no longer needing Jende confirm that she isn't caring and doesn't regard the Jongas as equals. Her assertion that "there nothing she can do" perpetuate the lie that she's passive and helpless when she showed great strength and dominance in getting her way.

Neni asks Cindy if one of her friends might need a chauffeur. Cindy scoffs and says that Jende should go out and get a job like everyone else. When Neni explains that this isn't so easy, Cindy breezily picks up a book and says it's "a tough world." Neni takes her phone out of her purse and tells Cindy that she took a picture of her when she was passed out in the Hamptons. She shows Cindy the photo of herself with "drool running down her chin," and "a bottle of pills and a half-empty bottle of wine on the nightstand."

Cindy's comments that Jende should just go find a job like "everyone else" and that "it's a tough world" not only indicate her indifference but her unawareness of how many people are genuinely unable to find work in a world that has been made increasingly tougher by Clark and his colleagues. Neni meets Cindy's indifference with the only thing that'll get the woman's attention: possible damage to her reputation.

Cindy demands that Neni leave and calls Anna to dial 911, saying that she'll teach Neni "a lesson." Neni doesn't budge and says that, when the police come, she'll say that she doesn't know what Cindy is talking about. They'll think Cindy is "crazy," and they'll call Clark or her friends, which will then force Cindy to tell them the truth. Cindy throws down the phone that Anna has brought her and sits down trembling. She asks Neni what she wants. Neni says that she only took the picture so that she could show it to the police in case something happened to Cindy; but now, she can sell it to man she met in the Hamptons who works for a website that's always looking for "good pictures" of women like Cindy.

The "lesson" that Cindy threatens to teach Neni is how easily a white person can have a black person sent to jail in the U.S.—Cindy can simply claim that Neni threatened her or that her former maid is trespassing. Neni, as a testament to her strength (or, maybe, her unawareness about the extent of police brutality and racial profiling), is unfazed by this. Cindy throws down her phone and trembles in frustration because the power dynamic between her and Neni has shifted. She isn't accustomed to feeling powerless against someone like Neni.

Cindy calls Neni "a filthy bitch" and tells her to name her price. She asks Neni how she could do such a thing after all that she and Clark have done for her and Jende. Cindy writes a check, but Neni demands cash. Cindy leaves and returns minutes later with a paper bag. Neni takes the SIM card from her phone, hands it to Cindy, and walks out of the apartment.

Cindy believed that her generosity toward Neni, particularly as she expressed it in the Hamptons (like giving Neni used clothes and toys), would keep her quiet, which makes her gifts more akin to bribes than genuine offers of help. Unlike Jende, who is more trusting of people, Neni recognizes Cindy's lack of integrity.

CHAPTER 42

After putting the children to bed, Neni counts the money. She goes to Jende, who's watching a basketball game in the living room, and places the bag next to him on the sofa. She tells him that it's ten thousand dollars, which Cindy gave her after telling her about the picture from the Hamptons. Jende is angry and asks Neni how she could do such a thing. Neni insists that Jende doesn't understand Cindy. She thinks that she's better than people like the Jongas and can do whatever she wants to them.

Jende is angry because he believes that the Edwardses were genuinely interested in helping him and his family. Neni sees the situation more realistically—the Edwardses are people who merely have the money to pay for the things they want, whether it's service or silence. Despite Cindy's poor background, Neni also knows that Cindy thinks she's superior because she's American and white.

Jende insists that he doesn't like what Clark did, but that Mr. Edwards had a right to do what he needed to do. Neni insists that she also had the same right. Jende says that he wants nothing to do with this "wickedness." Neni repeats that Cindy thought she could use them because they're African, while Jende insists that this has nothing to do with being African; Cindy was good to them. He turns off the TV and goes to the bathroom. Neni sits down, "livid and humiliated." Jende returns and apologizes for getting angry. He says that he doesn't like what Neni did, but he's also shocked that she could be so strong. He says that they'll put the money in their savings. He asks if Neni was afraid of Cindy calling the police. Neni insists that, unlike Jende, she does what she has to, without thinking too much.

Jende's initial reaction to Neni's acquisition of the money is outrage, which appears to mask the shame he feels that Neni was able to provide for the family when he couldn't. He has to characterize her action as "wickedness" to feel better about her ability to accomplish something he couldn't—that is, to bring much needed income into the household. When he finally relaxes and reveals some of his true feelings, he can find space to be proud of his wife. He realizes, too, that she has strengths that he doesn't have, and that it may be best to work with her instead of treating her as though she's incapable.

CHAPTER 43

Anna calls Neni before six o'clock on the morning after Neni left the Edwardses' apartment. She wants to know what Neni said to Cindy, who locked herself in the bathroom and cried alone for two hours after Neni left. Anna went to her and Cindy shouted at her to leave her alone. Anna says that Cindy shouted the F-word at her over and over again. Anna worries that Cindy thinks that she and Neni may have planned the blackmail scheme together. Anna reminds Neni of Cindy's "problems," and Neni insists that she has problems, too. She says that she's tired of people wanting her to care more about others than about herself and her family. She says that it's Cindy's responsibility to find a way to be happy. Neni says that she hopes that Cindy does so soon, because Neni feels very sorry for her.

Unable to get back at Neni for besting her, Cindy takes her frustrations out on the only person who has no real choice but to suffer her abuse—Anna. Anna's concern that Cindy may think that she and Neni planned the scheme together anticipates Cindy's willingness to believe the worst, even about a woman who has worked for her for twenty-two years. Neni's focus on her own problems is a step away from the class co-dependency in which both Jende and Anna got caught.

CHAPTER 44

Neni goes to Judson Memorial Church to help fold fundraising envelopes and stuff them into envelopes. The assistant pastor, Amos, tells her that Natasha is at an interfaith conference but should return in about an hour. When Natasha arrives back, Neni enters her office, prepared to say goodbye. She asks Neni if there are any new developments with Jende's immigration case. Neni says that they're still waiting and hoping, but her friend, Betty, offers her the possibility of divorcing Jende for a few years, marrying Betty's cousin, and getting a green card through him. Natasha nods and listens. She then asks Neni if staying in America is more important to her than her family. She says that a lot could go wrong with this plan.

Neni finds solace and purpose at the church. Volunteering gives her a break from her routine and an excuse to get out of the house, which is becoming increasingly gloomy due to Jende's bad moods. She can also talk freely to Natasha in a way that she can't with anyone else. Neni's idea to divorce Jende in favor of marrying Betty's cousin is the first sign in her desperation to do anything to remain in America. She and Jende have reversed positions, and now it's Neni who's willing to stay and fight. It seems that getting the money from Cindy on her own has given Neni courage to find solutions.

Neni understands and mentions a friend from work whose sister married a Jamaican man for papers so that she could bring her husband and children to the U.S. Then, the man refused to give her a divorce unless she gave him fifty thousand dollars. Now, she's just praying that the man will stop being so greedy so that she can reunite with her family. Neni doesn't think that this will happen to her, though; Betty's cousin is a nice man.

Neni calms her fear of something going wrong by reminding herself that Betty's cousin is "a nice man" and that her friend wouldn't recommend someone to her who would be so greedy and cruel. However, the story reveals how people at all levels of society try to profit from the helplessness of those who are undocumented.

CHAPTER 45

Cindy Eliza Edwards dies on a cold afternoon in March 2009, five days after Neni walked out of her apartment. She was alone in bed because Clark was in London on a business trip, Vince was still in India, and Mighty was studying at the Dalton School, "being groomed to be a man like his father." Neni can't believe it when Winston tells her the news, based on the story Frank told him that evening, a day after her death from asphyxiation due to vomit. High levels of opioid and alcohol were found in her blood, leading the examiner to believe that she swallowed multiple Vicodin pills, drank around two bottles of wine, fell asleep, and accidentally drowned in her vomit. Anna found her, lying on the bed with dried vomit crusted on her chin, neck, and the neckline of her silk nightgown.

Cindy died alone, realizing a fate that she feared deeply—that is, being bereft of those whom she loved and depended on the most during a time of need. Anna realizes the fate that Neni once feared when she discovers Cindy dead. The excess of alcohol and pills in Cindy's system make it unclear if her death was accidental or if it was a suicide. With Vince gone, Clark having betrayed her, and Mighty increasingly drawn to the warmth that the Jongas provided, Cindy probably felt useless to her family. Neni's getting the best of her may have been the final straw in her feeling of defeat.

CHAPTER 46

At Cindy's funeral, Mighty wears a gray suit and plays "a beautifully imperfect" version of Claude Debussy's "Clair de Lune." Vince delivers the eulogy, for which he speaks in anecdotes, talking about hiking with his mother in the Adirondacks, her love of her friends and for those who needed her, her love of the arts, her failed attempt to get him to learn the violin, and her successful attempt to get Mighty to learn the piano. He describes his mother as "imperfect" but "beautiful," like everyone. Jende sits in the last pew and closes his eyes to pray for Cindy's soul.

In the aftermath of her death, Vince is more capable of sympathizing with his mother and remembering her as more than the overbearing, status-oriented person that he described her as when she was living. Furthermore, it is Cindy's death that will draw Vince back home, though not permanently, when he had been trying to distance himself from his family.

Jende tells Neni later about the funeral and talks about feeling sorry for Mighty. Neni suggests that they donate the ten thousand dollars that Cindy gave her as hush money to Judson Memorial Church. Jende tells her that she needn't feel guilty; Cindy would've died whether or not she gave Neni the money.

Neni feels sorry for Mighty because he no longer as a mother. Due to her traditional mindset and her observation of Clark's interactions with his family, she doesn't think he's equipped to care for the boy.

CHAPTER 47

One day, Neni receives a letter from Phi Theta Kappa, inviting her to become a member. She's reluctant to tell Jende because it'll cost her one hundred dollars to join, but he's happy for her and sees it as an opportunity to get one of the scholarships that the society offers its members. Neni submits her membership application online and, days later, gets an envelope welcoming her to the society. She learns that, to get a scholarship, she'll need to be nominated by a dean. She emails Jerry for the name and office number of the nominator, Dean Flipkins.

Neni's entrance to the society is not only an opportunity to get a scholarship, which places her one step closer to realizing her dream of becoming a pharmacist, it's also an acknowledgement of her hard work and her talent as a scholar. She's nervous about asking Jende for money, despite the ten thousand dollars that she recently brought in, due to her newfound tendency to fear his reactions.

On the walk from the subway to her school, Neni imagines that the dean will be "a kindly old white man." When she arrives to the dean's office, she sees a young white guy wearing "geek-chic black-framed glasses." Dean Flipkins tells her that he doesn't nominate by request and that, though Neni has excellent grades, she hasn't been very involved in the college or the community. She feels ashamed and says that she just doesn't have the time, due to having two children, but he's disinterested in Neni's excuse. Dean Flipkins also tells her that every scholarship and grant that the college offers is for citizens or permanent residents, not international students.

Neni's image of the dean is a common one for those in authority. It doesn't occur to either her or Jende that the dean could be a woman, a person of color, or a young person, which suggests how deeply their perceptions have been shaped by stereotypes cultivated through media. The dean's lack of sympathy for Neni's roles as a working mother and student could result from his being a young man, but he also seems to have less faith in her competence on account of her race and ethnicity.

Looking at his computer, Dean Flipkins notices that Neni plans to apply to pharmacy school after graduation and asks her why. Neni says that it's a path to a good job, and that her husband's cousin advised her to do it. The dean smiles and asks if it's the right career path for her, given how expensive pharmacy school is. Also, as an international student, it'll be hard for her to get loans to pay for a degree. He assures her that part of his role as a dean entails making sure that his students' goals are attainable. He asks if she knows what that means. Neni silently glares at him. Neni rises to leave, declaring that will become a pharmacist.

Dean Flipkins thinks that he's being helpful, though he's actually being discouraging. He doesn't know anything about Neni's history beyond what she's volunteered to tell him. When he condescends to her by asking if she knows what it means for something to be "achievable," it's a clear indication that he thinks that she lacks either the knowledge or intelligence to follow his speech, which is ironic given that she's proven to be quite adept academically.

When Jende comes home from work that night, Neni tells him nothing about her conversation with Dean Flipkins, except that she probably won't get any scholarships. He then wonders about the point of going to the honor society's ceremony. She asks Winston to go with her instead and he delightedly agrees. He leaves work early to join her, Fatou, and the kids in front of the auditorium. Fatou stays with Timba in the hall while Winston and Liomi clap and cheer as Neni is inducted into Phi Theta Kappa.

Jende, rather insensitively, disregards the importance of the ceremony because he's too concerned with results at this point in his life to enjoy the fruits of Neni's labor. This is particularly true now that his own labor yields so little. He doesn't realize, or perhaps doesn't care, that Neni has proven to herself that she's capable of becoming more than she expected.

CHAPTER 48

Pa Jonga dies on a rainy night in May. Ma Jonga and their other children tried to treat what was either malaria or typhoid fever with a drink made from boiled masepo and fever grass, along with the medication the pharmacist prescribed. Jende's brother, Moto, calls him at five in the morning, an hour after Pa Ikola Jonga died. The chef at the Hell's Kitchen restaurant where Jende's working excuses him for the rest of the night and offers his condolences. Jende rides home on the subway with his head down for the entire ride. When he enters the apartment, he finds Neni wailing on her cell phone. At that moment, Jende allows himself to cry.

The combination of traditional medicine with Western medicine reveals that people in Cameroon have as much faith in their home remedies as they do in Western science and medicine. Jende's mourning for his father is intensified by the fact that he's so far away from home. He doesn't express emotion but continues on with his work day to fulfill his responsibilities to himself and his family. Neni's expression of grief causes Jende to feel that he can mourn safely.

Pa Jonga is buried two weeks later, and Jende sends money for the funeral. Jende watches the ceremony on a video that he asked Moto to produce. He watches the six-hour DVD collection in one sitting. He sees Ma Jonga collapse in grief when Pa Jonga's casket is opened. He listens to speeches about what a good man Pa Jonga was. He watches the dances that went on from late Friday night to early Saturday morning, and he also watches his father get lowered into the ground. A day later, Jende's back begins to ache. He spends his mornings "lying on the floor, writhing in pain."

Jende watches the DVDs in one sitting, wanting to experience the funeral as though he was there. Despite his full engagement with the images, and the fact that he sent money for the funeral, he feels passively involved in his father's mourning. The ache in his back is due to increased stress—not only the stresses of his immigration status and his inability to make a good living, but also his guilt over not being present for his father.

One of Jende's co-workers refers him to a cash-only doctor in Jamaica, Queens, who charges him sixty dollars after finding out that the accidental health insurance plan that Neni purchased online is useless. The doctor, who works out of a windowless basement office, asks if he's been dealing with any stressors. Jende wants to recite the litany of problems that haunt him: his inability to bury his father, his aging mother's need for more money, the financial responsibility of caring for his wife and children, his uncertainty about affording his wife's international tuition, his shaky immigration status, and his inability to afford food for a decent meal on some days.

Jende's lack of health insurance and Neni's vulnerability to an insurance scam reveals yet another problem that both undocumented people and citizens face: lack of access to adequate healthcare. Jende doesn't tell his doctor about his "stressors" because he knows that medicine can't cure what's wrong with his back. Jende believes his problems are psychosomatic, not physical.

CHAPTER 49

When Jende walks out of the doctor's office, he decides that it's time to go back home. That night, after work, he tells Neni that he doesn't want to remain in the United States. Neni stares at him, wanting to feel sympathy but only feeling irritation. He talks about how tired he is of working all the time for so little money. He says that, even if he were to get documents, they wouldn't be enough. Citizens are struggling, too, and he doesn't expect that he'll get a better job with no education.

Jende's visit to the doctor "cures" him of his boundless faith that he can make it in America with only faith and hard work. Now that their positions have reversed and it's Jende who has embraced the reality of their situation, Neni is upset. For her, things have been improving, which gives her greater will to stay and fight.

Neni suggests that they can move to Phoenix, but Jende says that the department store where Arkamo was working closed down, and he found out two days later that he lost his house. He's now living in his sister's basement. Neni suggests that they stay in New York. Maybe he can find another chauffeuring job, but Jende insists that it isn't easy to find a job like that, and he only got lucky with Clark Edwards because Frank Dawson likes Winston and trusted him to recommend a good driver for his friend.

Neni's alternative overlooks the fact that the effects of the financial crisis are present nationwide, and that things are, in fact, worse in Phoenix. Many houses, including Arkamo's, were foreclosed upon, due to the collapse of a housing boom that was built around subprime mortgage loans.

Jende tells Neni that much of what happened to get them to America happened because of Winston, who's offered to pay the rest of Bubakar's fees, allowing them to keep the money that they saved. However, they can no longer rely on Winston, who will soon have a child. His sisters will finish at Buea University next year; then, he'll then bring them over. He tells her about another driver he knows, a white man, who looks as though he hasn't had a proper meal in a long time and can't find another job as a chauffeur. Everyone is losing their jobs everywhere and taking anything to pay the bills. Jende refuses to suffer like this just to live in America.

Jende lays out the case of why it's impossible for them to remain in New York. He reveals the extent of how dependent they've been on Winston and how that cannot last, given that he's starting his own family and will want to help his sisters, whose American Dreams are more feasible than Jende and Neni's, due to their educations. To further drive the point home, he emphasizes how even white people, who are usually more advantaged in the U.S., are in dire straits.

CHAPTER 50

Neni refuses to return to Limbe. Since she was in her late twenties, all she could think about was leaving her father's house and moving to America. On the day that Jende told her that Winston was buying him a ticket to New York so that he could move there and eventually bring over her and Liomi, she was so ecstatic that she wept and wrote Winston a five-paragraph letter of gratitude. She started watching American movies to prepare her for a future in New York, where she would finish her education, own a home, and raise a happy family.

For Neni, a return to Limbe would mean defeat and relinquishing a dream that she's had for over a decade. The prospect of going to America gave her something to look forward to. Winston's offer to pay for Jende's passage, which would later allow her and Liomi to come over, was a ticket to the promise of a new life. She watched American movies to prepare herself on how to fit in, to teach her how to be American.

While Fatou braids her hair, she tells Neni that she must stand behind her husband and not say no to him. Two days later, Betty tells Neni to tell Jende that she's not going. She says that Neni will regret returning and asks her about using the money that she got from Cindy Edwards. Neni says that Jende won't allow them to use that money. Betty flares her nostrils and looks at Neni, moving her eyes up and down her face. She reminds Neni that it was she, not Jende, who got the money, so it belongs to both of them. Neni insists that she's not American and can't just tell her husband how she wants something to be. Still, she doesn't want to return to Cameroon. Betty insists that she tell Jende that she wants to stay and keep trying.

Fatou and Betty offer Neni differing advice, which is based on how much each of them has assimilated into American life. Fatou remains more traditionally Cameroonian and doesn't believe that Neni should challenge her husband's presumed authority, while Betty, who's been in the country for decades, thinks that Neni has every right to assert her wishes. Neni sides with Betty, who reminds her that her dreams are still valid.

Later, Neni stares at her face in the mirror and applies an exfoliating mask. She promises herself that she'll "fight" Jende to stay in New York. She'll fight for the "boundless opportunities" that she and her children wouldn't have in Limbe. She asks Jende how people back in Limbe would see them. Jende scoffs at her for caring what others think and then leaves for work. Neni calls Betty who reminds Neni about the idea of divorcing Jende temporarily and marrying for a green card. Neni says that she'll talk to him about it soon.

The exfoliating mask is a symbol of Neni becoming a new person—more independent, assertive, and clearer about what she wants out of life. She's afraid, it seems, to admit to her husband that she's changing, so she explains her reservations about going back home in the context of how others will perceive them. This way, she doesn't offend him with her assertiveness.

CHAPTER 51

While Jende brushes his teeth, Neni mentions Betty's cousin, who can help with get them papers if they pay him with the money she got from Cindy Edwards to pay him. She says that she and Jende should divorce so that she can marry him. Jende abruptly pulls a bath towel away from his face and tells her never to say something so foolish again. He leaves the bathroom and slams the door in her face. She sits on the toilet seat, as though she were frozen.

Neni's idea shocks Jende, both because it is an extreme measure and because Neni is suggesting that she is willing to throw away their marriage for the prospect of remaining in a country that has already rejected her husband. It is, however, foolish to trust a stranger with this task and to give away so much money on faith alone. It's a sign of Neni's desperation.

CHAPTER 52

Bubakar agrees to petition the immigration judge to close the deportation case in exchange for Jende leaving on his own within ninety days—that is "voluntary departure." Jende wonders if he can return to America, and Bubakar says it's up to the consulate if they want to give him another visa. In regard to his wife and children, Timba is an American; Neni would be fine because no one would hold it against her that she arrived on a student visa and then had a baby. Liomi, however, would be regarded as an illegal, like Jende. Bubakar encourages Jende to persevere, as he did, to try to become an American.

As frustrated as Jende is with America, he still retains the hope of one day returning, which speaks to his love for the country that disappointed him. In explaining Liomi's situation, Bubakar reveals the cruelty of the immigration system, which treats undocumented children as criminals just like undocumented adults. Bubakar's encouragement to Jende to "persevere," using his own story as an example, is probably just a ruse to get more money out of Jende.

When Jende reports this to Winston, he tells Jende that it makes no sense to remain in America if things aren't working out. Even if he got papers, without a good education, and being a black African immigrant male, it'll still be hard for him to make a living. Jende suggests that he could, perhaps, try to stay until the recession is over. Winston is unsure. He notes that, even people like him who went to law school, can't expect a good life in America anymore. They joke that, soon, Americans may start running across the border to Mexico instead of the other way around. When Jende tells his mother about his plans to return, Ma Jonga wonders why he would come back to Limbe when so many his age were trying to leave, fleeing toward dreams of a happier life across the Mediterranean.

Winston reveals to Jende how even getting a good education is no longer a guarantee that one will remain secure in the current economic climate. He neglects to mention how astronomical student loan debt, which increased after the recession, makes "a good life" even less attainable. Jende and Winston's joke, along with Ma Jonga's confusion over Jende's wish to return to Cameroon, both reflect a hopelessness that has become a global problem. No country, it seems, offers any safe harbor, but people are still buoyed by hope.

CHAPTER 53

Neni tells Natasha about her idea to offer Jerry the opportunity to adopt Liomi so that her son can have the best possible future. Natasha asks her if she really thinks that it's a good idea to give her son to a man whom she barely knows. She also asks if she really believes that this would make Liomi happy. Neni says that she will tell him that it's what's best for him because he'll become a citizen.

Due to Jende vetoing her plan to marry Betty's cousin, Neni's next idea is to offer Liomi the possibility of a better life through Jerry. Neni's willingness to give up her son demonstrates her willingness to sacrifice as well as her belief that she can't offer him the life that he deserves.

Natasha asks if Neni is sure that Liomi will become a citizen if Jerry and his partner adopt him, particularly considering that the couple is gay, which makes it more difficult for them to adopt. Neni throws up her hands in frustration, saying that she can't pay a lawyer without telling her husband and that she can't say *anything* to Jende these days. Natasha assures her that she can get a free consultation and that she can also talk to the church board about helping the Jongas pay for a lawyer. First, though, she wants Neni to think about whether this is the best solution. Neni insists on doing what she has to do. She wonders if she's becoming "another person," and Natasha asks if she likes who she's becoming. Neni's eyes well up with tears, but she doesn't cry.

When explaining her reasoning to Natasha, Neni repeats the statement that she gave to Jende when he asked her how she was able to get ten thousand dollars out of Cindy. Neni has come to regard herself as someone who solves problems that others can't or won't solve. Her new resolve, however, brings her in conflict with her husband, which causes her pain. Neni's ideas about how to become American are neither wise nor very feasible, but her willingness to suggest them, instead of deferring to Jende, indicates a motivation she didn't have before.

CHAPTER 54

Jende and Neni spend much of their time arguing. She calls him selfish, and he insists that America isn't "all that." The truth, as he sees it, is that the country "no longer has room for people like [them]." Their worst fight occurs four days before his court appearance. While rubbing his back, she tells him that doctors in New York are better than those in Limbe and would do a better job of curing his bad back. He pushes her off of him and glares at her. When she doesn't obey his command to "shut up," he slaps her. He calls her "useless and idiot and stupid and a selfish woman" who wouldn't care if he died as long as she could remain in New York. Neni pushes him, saying that America has beaten him and now all he can do is beat her to feel better. So, he does, until she falls to the floor, wailing.

Jende and Neni are at odds because they now envision their futures differently. In referring to "people [like] them," Jende means that the U.S. is no longer interested in offering itself to poor immigrants, particularly poor, black immigrants. His opinion may have been partly shaped by Winston's colleague's disinterest in taking Jende's case because Jende isn't wealthy. Indeed, Jende is verbally and physically abusive toward Neni because he feels powerless. Furthermore, he feels threatened by her increasing independence.

Liomi runs out of the bedroom and sees his mother "balled in a corner and his father standing over her, his hand raised and about to descend." Jende barks at him to go back in the bedroom. Liomi bursts into tears and runs back to the bedroom. An elderly man knocks on the door to ask if everything is all right; he thought he heard a woman screaming. Neni answers from the floor that she's okay. After the man leaves, Jende does, too. It never occurs to Neni to file charges against him; that was unimaginable. If Jende were to do it again, she would get the family involved. A marital dispute "was a private family matter."

Liomi, like Mighty, becomes a witness to his family's disintegration as the result of being overwhelmed by financial and legal pressures. Neni's attitude toward domestic violence is a reflection of her traditional Cameroonian upbringing, which doesn't regard domestic violence as criminal behavior. Her belief that one should rely on family to settle such disputes may work in her case while, in other instances, it can be disempowering.

Jende returns fourteen hours later with a bouquet of red roses and a new video game for Liomi. He promises to do all that he can to give them good lives in Cameroon. He tries to pull Neni into his arms and she pulls away, but she decides to forgive him because there's nothing else to do. Three days later, Jende stands before an immigration judge with Bubakar and requests voluntary departure. Jende doesn't feel relief until Neni looks at him that night, with tears in her eyes, and says how glad she is that his ordeal may soon be over.

Jende tries to reingratiate himself with gifts and the promise of providing for his family back home. Neni forgives him because she knows that she has no choice but to return to Cameroon with Jende—she can't survive in New York on her own. Though her husband hurt her physically and emotionally, she remains sympathetic and understanding, believing that his "ordeal" changed his character.

CHAPTER 55

While preparing to go to Olu's mother-in-law's seventieth birthday party, Neni gets an international call that she knows isn't from Cameroon. She doesn't answer because she's already running late to the gathering, which takes place all the way down in Flatbush, Brooklyn. The morning after, she listens to the voicemail; it's Vince. She calls him back, much to his surprise. He asks her about how her family is doing and she asks about his. Vince tells her about what a worrier Clark has become, checking in on everyone all the time. He tends to Mighty's well-being, rescheduling meetings to attend hockey practices and writing poems for him while he sleeps. He's also learning how to cook the meals Cindy used to make for Mighty.

It took Cindy's death, as well as the failure of his company, to help Clark realize the importance of his family and, particularly, Mighty's need for care and attention. In becoming "a worrier," Clark's behavior mirrors that of Cindy at the beginning of the novel. Whereas Clark didn't have time for Mighty's recital earlier in the novel, he's now willing to reschedule things to ensure that he's there for his son. He's also able to share his poems, Clark's only expression of his inner life, to demonstrate his closeness to his son.

Vince says that, now that Mighty and Clark are okay, he'll probably never return to the U.S. permanently. Neni tells Vince how sorry she is about everything that happened. When Neni asks if he misses Cindy, he says that he accepts the situation. Mighty, however, has been spending most of his time with his mom's friends, which he doesn't enjoy as much as his time with the Jongas. Neni suggests that he might like them more if they gave him fried plantains and puff-puff. Vince uses that as a segue to ask Neni if she'd like to be Mighty's nanny because Stacy is moving to Portland. Mighty's grief counselor suggests that he would benefit from a consistent maternal presence.

Vince's belief that he has accepted his mother's death could reflect his immersion into Eastern spirituality, which encourages an acceptance of suffering and the short-lived nature of all things, or he may not be coping with his grief over his mother's death. His distance from his family makes it easier for him to put it out of his mind and focus on other things. His wish for Neni to reestablish a relationship with Mighty is also partly due to his preference for the Jongas' values compared to those of his own family.

Vince asks Neni to take her time to think about it, but Neni knows that she can't take the job; she's leaving. Besides, after what she did to Cindy, she couldn't walk into her home and usurp her place in her child's life, no matter how much she cared about Mighty.

Neni believes that she may have played a role in Cindy's death, due to causing Cindy additional distress. Believing that changes her relationship with Mighty.

CHAPTER 56

On Friday afternoon, Jende finds out that the judge has granted his request for voluntary departure. Bubakar tells him that he has to leave by the end of September. Jende grins and says that'll be no problem; he's ready. In fact, he's already bought tickets from Air Maroc. He'll be out of the country by August. He tells Bubakar that Neni isn't happy to leave, but she's packing. Bubakar warns Jende to make sure that Neni isn't spending too much money buying things because women like to spend too much on things that make them look good.

Jende's choice to depart voluntarily leaves him with some semblance of dignity. Though his time in America didn't turn out as expected, he has at least escaped the fate that he feared most: being forced out of the country by men in uniform. Bubakar's sexist comment about Neni perpetuates the stereotype that women are vain and materialistic.

Jende actually gives Neni more money than he intended because doing so was the only thing he could do to make her smile. She ends up buying things not easily found in Limbe: dollar-store toys for the children, foods in jars and the sweet cereal that Liomi likes; clothes that will help them "preserve their American aura." For herself, she buys beauty creams and anti-aging moisturizers in Chinatown—items that she hopes will help her maintain her looks and keep him from being tempted by the loose women she'd heard were not "aplenty" in Limbe.

Neni uses material goods to make up for not being able to keep her children in the U.S. She is keen on maintaining her appearance, afraid of women who may avail themselves to Jende because he'll return to Cameroon with a lot of money. Poverty and the oppression of women in a patriarchal system force them into competition with each other.

On a Sunday evening, Jende takes Neni to dinner at Red Lobster, while Winston and Maami watch their children, and tells Neni that she'll live like a queen in Limbe. He takes her hands and kisses them the way he sees men do so in the movies. After paying the bill, they walk to Times Square. They stand side by side and hold on to the moment. Neni thinks about how there's no Times Square in Limbe. No billboards that'll flash things that she wishes she had the money to buy. No McDonald's. No people of many colors and speaking many languages, running around to countless fun places. There'd be no pharmacy career and no condo in a New York suburb. She buries her face in Jende's shoulder and begs herself to be happy.

Jende's promise that Neni will "live like a queen" is undesirable to her because she isn't interested in being spoiled—she's interested in feeling successful. When she returns to Limbe, she'll likely be no more than Jende's wife and the mother of his children. Though she can be proud of her work to be a good wife and mother, it isn't enough. The problem that Neni has with Limbe is that it doesn't offer enough, whereas New York offers too much to discover in a lifetime.

CHAPTER 57

The ten thousand dollars Neni got from Cindy, along with the five thousand they saved and the three thousand that Neni earned working in the Hamptons for Cindy, would make the "millionaires many times over" in Limbe. Jende would become one of the richest men in New Town, their section of Limbe. They could rent a beautiful house with a garage. They could hire a maid. Jende could start a business and, someday, build a large brick house. He'd send Liomi to the boarding school that Winston attended. Winston encourages his idea to hire people to farm the eight acres of land that Pa Jonga left him in Bimbia. He could then sell the food in the Limbe market and ship some of it abroad.

Though the Jongas don't get to fulfill their dream of making good lives for themselves in the U.S., they do fulfill their dream of earning a small fortune. This will help them to change their circumstances in Cameroon and give them the means to give their children better futures. Contrary to their expectations, their possibilities have expanded in Cameroon as a result of their hard work in America, and their idea of what constitutes success has also expanded.

Winston asks that Jende not become "an American wonder" when he goes back—one of those Cameroonians who goes to America and returns home with "laughable American accents, spraying 'wannas' and 'gonnas' all over sentences." They walk around town wearing suits, cowboy boots, and baseball caps, claiming that they no longer understand Cameroonian culture because they're now "too American." Jende assures him that he'll never be laughable. He'll always be respectable.

What makes such people "laughable" is that they seem to be parodying an idea of what it means to be American. Furthermore, they are trying too hard to set themselves apart from their fellow Cameroonians, which makes them seem phony. When Jende says that he'll be "respectable," he means that he'll always be true to who he really is.

Later that evening, Jende shares with Neni his idea about wholesaling food. She contemptuously asks him what he needs her opinion for. He notices that, less than a week after their shared moment in Times Square, that she's back to despising him for taking her and their children away from America. Liomi, however, has forgiven him.

Neni still doesn't see any possibilities for herself in Cameroon. Jende talks constantly about plans that will make him successful, but Neni doesn't see herself starting her own career there.

Jende calls Moto and asks him to search for men who'll till his land in Bimbia, who'll plant plantains, egusi, and yams. He also asks him to look for a three-bedroom brick house with a garage, a maid, and a car that he'll drive until the used Hyundai that he bought at a New Jersey auction arrives in a shipping container. His brother texts three days later saying that all of Jende's requests have been met.

Because Jende is now considered a rich man in Cameroon, he can gather resources and make demands as the Edwardses do in the U.S. He can now experience something akin to the life that Clark Edwards enjoyed—the importance that he admired.

When Neni tells Fatou about all that Jende has arranged, Fatou wonders why her husband, Ousmane, can't do the same for her. She misses home and worries about her parents, who are in their eighties and need care. Fatou sends money when they fall sick, but, after twenty-six years, she's ready to stop braiding hair for a living and return home. However, even if Ousmane wanted to go home, her children are Americans who've never been to Cameroon and want nothing to do with it. Some of them don't even consider themselves African. She marvels at how they declare themselves New Yorkers and Americans when others ask where they're from and that they only reluctantly admit that their parents are African. Fatou wonders if her children think that they're better than her because they're Americans and she's African.

Neni realizes that not every Cameroonian who is rooted in America is happy to be there. Talking to Fatou offers her another perspective. She realizes that being so far away makes it more difficult to be in touch with family members who may need her. Furthermore, though Neni dreams of a better life in America for her children, it's also possible that, in identifying more as American than African, they could grow to distance themselves and disown their heritage, as Fatou's children have. This may be due to certain racist stigmas associated with Africa.

CHAPTER 58

At work, Jende's friends ask him repeatedly if he's sure that he won't miss America. He admits that he may miss football and cheesecake, but he wants no more of living in a roach-infested apartment. He wants, instead, to visit his family whenever he wants and to meet his friends at parties where they'll have roasted fish and beer by the ocean.

Jende realizes that his quality of life is more important to him. There are things that are unique about living in America, but he can acquire many of the things that he wants in Cameroon, without struggling or fighting for his right to belong.

Neni finds that, as the date of her departure comes closer, she can't stop crying. She cries everywhere and feels no excitement at the prospect of reuniting with her family and old friends. She worries, in fact, that she'll have too little in common with them now. For her children, her feelings waver between joy and sorrow—joy for the beautiful things that Cameroon can give them and sorrow for the things it can't. They would lose the opportunity to grow up "in a magnificent land of uninhibited dreamers." They would lose access to the adventures that only New York could offer a child.

Neni cries out of fear of returning to the life of stagnancy that she was eager to escape. She has changed, too, and worries that she may no longer fit in with her former community in Cameroon. Though Jende is progressing, she feels that she will regress. Worse, she thinks that her children will grow up limited by the rigid traditions and expectations that characterized life for her in Cameroon.

CHAPTER 59

Betty hosts a farewell party for the Jongas in the Bronx. Everyone comes with something to eat: fried plantains, bitter leaf soup, egusi stew, poulet DG, grilled tilapia, attiéké, moi moi, soya, jollof rice, curry chicken, and pounded yams. They eat and dance in Betty's sparsely furnished living room.

Betty's party features all of the food that the Jongas regularly eat and will also eat back home. Their attachment to their cuisine and lack of interest in American food, aside from chain restaurants, suggests that they were never interested in full assimilation.

On the second Sunday of August, Natasha asks Neni if she can visit the Judson Memorial Church. Jende agrees to go, too. He wonders of Americans interpret the Bible as Cameroonians do. Natasha delivers a sermon about the mistreatment of "weary strangers in America" and decries their contemporary label: "illegal alien." The church roars in agreement. Before ending the sermon, Natasha calls the Jongas to the front of the church and explains that they're returning to their country because America has forgotten how to welcome people to our home. Her assistant pastor, Amos, encourages everyone to give what they can to help the Jongas create a new home in their country.

Jende's curiosity about how Americans interpret the Bible may be his wondering if they adjust their understanding of the text to suit their prejudices or values. Natasha's sermon criticizing the persecution of undocumented immigrants proves to him that there are some Americans who believe that there is room for him, and that the country has, in fact, forgotten its supposed principle of being willing to welcome everyone.

After the service, congregants line up to shake hands with Neni and Jende and wish them well. A teenage girl nearly cries while telling Jende about how a friend's father was deported to Guatemala, where he knew no one. Jende hugs her and says that, thankfully, the Jongas still have many friends and family in Cameroon.

Jende's talk with the girl helps him understand that he isn't being singled out. Her story gives a human context to the abstract problems that Bubakar described to him.

CHAPTER 60

Jende sends Clark Edwards an email, announcing his return home. Clark returns the message a couple of hours later, inviting Jende to stop by his office before he leaves. Jende goes to Clark's office, wearing the same black suit he wore on his first day to work as Clark's chauffeur. When he walks in, Clark stands from behind his desk to greet him. He smiles and offers his hand to shake. Jende gives his condolences for Cindy's death and says that he was at the memorial service but didn't have the opportunity to express his sorrow then. Jende notices how Clark's new office has neither a sofa nor a view of Central Park but a view of Queens instead.

Clark's greeting in this instance is the opposite of how he greeted Jende during their first meeting. He's fully attentive and humble. Unlike their last, which was imbued by Clark's guilt, he's fully interested and sympathetic with Jende's need to change his life. Clark has expressed a similar need by moving into a less extravagant office. He seems to have adopted some of Vince's ideas about simplicity and Mighty's interest in human interaction.

Clark says that he and Mighty are moving to Virginia. He found a job in Washington, DC, lobbying for credit unions. His parents are also moving from California to be closer to them. Clark tells Jende that family is everything, which he's sure Jende already understands. He also says that Vince is thinking of opening a retreat center for American execs visiting Mumbai. He told Clark that, if his business idea doesn't work out in India, he may go to Bolivia instead. They laugh at the image of Vince and his followers sitting with their legs crossed, "doing that chanting and meditation thing." When their laughter dies down, Jende says that Vince is "a very special young man" and that, if there were more like him, there'd be more happiness in the world.

Clark's interest in working for credit unions is his way of making amends for his complicity in Lehman Brothers' unethical behavior. He can now be an advocate for the consumers who were harmed in the crisis. Like Vince, he wants to harness his privilege to do some good in the world. Though Jende and Clark make fun of what they perceive as Vince's alternative lifestyle, they admire his willingness to go out into the world and effect the change that he wants to see.

Jende says that he stopped by, not only to say goodbye, but to thank Clark for the job that he gave him. Clark is touched. No one has ever traveled so far to thank him for paying for a service. Jende goes on to say that, when others talk about how bad people from Wall Street are, he doesn't agree because Clark, a Wall Street man, gave him a job that helped him take care of his family. Clark says that it was a great experience to know Jende and that he's sorry their time together had to end. Jende says that good times, like bad times, must come to an end. Clark sends his regards to Neni, while Jende sends special greetings to Mighty from him and Neni.

Clark didn't realize how important Jende's job was to giving him his start. He realizes that Jende wasn't just another person who worked for him, but was someone who took great pride in his work for the feeling of opportunity that it gave him. Jende has a more complex view of the financial crisis, due to his relationship with Clark. He doesn't think in terms of the simple binary of good and evil but regards Clark as a man who made mistakes but was capable of generosity.

Out of curiosity, Clark asks why the Jongas are returning home. Jende says that his asylum application wasn't approved. Clark wishes that Jende had told him about his case because he has a good friend from Stanford who's an associate director at Immigration. At the very least, Clark could've gotten a recommendation for an excellent lawyer. Jende tells him that, though his body is still in America, his heart has already returned to Cameroon.

Jende probably didn't tell Clark about his situation because he didn't want Clark to know that he was technically employing an undocumented worker. Jende was afraid that that revelation would cause him to lose his job. Not having a valid work permit, he wouldn't have been able to find another like it.

Clark goes over to his briefcase and returns with a white envelope, which he hands to Jende. Jende thanks him and then asks if Clark has heard from Leah. Clark says that he heard from her a couple of months ago, when she tried to get a job at his current firm, but there's a hiring freeze. He asks Clark to say goodbye to her for him, if Clark ever sees her again. Jende hopes that Leah will be okay. Clark says that he's sure she's fine; the economy's improving.

The hiring freeze comes from reluctance to take on more people due to the fragility of the economy. Clark's certainty that Leah is "fine" exposes how detached he is from the hardships that so many working Americans are experiencing. Though Jende isn't American, he had more contact with working people than Clark did.

CHAPTER 61

The night before the Jonga family's departure, the apartment is empty, except for their luggage in a corner of the bedroom. Neni has given Betty, Fatou, Winston, and Maami her household items. She gave Natasha her unworn kabas. The new tenants arrive with Mr. Charles, their landlord, to see the apartment. They're a young couple in their early to mid-twenties who are "pretty, giddy, [and] white, with matching long hair." They've just left Detroit and are in pursuit of music careers. They ask Neni about the best place to order Thai or Chinese takeout late at night. Though Neni is tempted to resent them, they offer to buy her bed for twice what someone else offered online, and they pay her in cash.

Neni initially wants to dislike the young couple because she envies their carefree demeanors and their ability, it seems, to go where they want and to do what they please, in pursuit of their dreams. Their question about takeout is oblivious of the fact that the Jongas can't afford takeout. The couple's move into the apartment is a sign of gentrification in Harlem, when low-income people like the Jongas would slowly be pushed out by younger people with more money who can't afford to live in Manhattan.

With all of the bags packed and the travel clothes laid out, Neni looks out the window, thinking of what she may have forgotten to do. She's forgotten nothing. She said goodbye to everyone. Now, she wants to go to sleep, wake up, shower, get the children ready, pick up her luggage, and leave.

Neni wants to hurry her trip along because the anticipation makes her feel worse about returning to a life that she doesn't want.

CHAPTER 62

The Jongas say goodbye to New York in late August, on one of the hottest days of the year. They board an Air Maroc flight from JFK to Douala via Casablanca. On the cab ride to the airport, Neni stares out the window, seeing New York and America pass her by. Jende forces himself to feel nothing. He sits in the front seat with the seed money for his new life—twenty-one bundles of cash, each containing a thousand dollars—tucked into his backpack. They got an additional fourteen hundred dollars from the congregation at Judson. He insists on carrying the money with him out of fear that, if he sends it via Western Union, the Cameroonian government will find out and come after him.

Neni looks longingly at everything that she believes she'll never see again. Jende doesn't want to feel anything because he doesn't want to be saddened or feel the sense of loss that consumes Neni. He wants to focus on the life that the intends to build for his family in Cameroon. With one dream dead, he must envision another one. However, he hasn't relinquished his reservations about the extent of corruption in his home country.

When the Jongas arrive at Douala International Airport, it's "steamy and overcrowded." People are shouting in English, French, pidgin English, and in any of the two hundred indigenous languages of the country. Moto meets them at the airport with a borrowed Ford pickup truck for the two-hour ride to Limbe. Just after seven o'clock, while Neni and the children sleep, the pickup drives under the red and white sign above the highway that says "Welcome to Limbe, The Town of Friendship." Liomi is waking up. Jende turns from the front seat to look at his son and asks him to guess where they are. The boy opens his eyes and asks, "Home?"

Though Neni will miss the diversity that characterizes New York, she overlooks the diversity of her own country, which is expressed through its multilingualism. The truck in which Moto picks them up is a reminder that, even far away from the United States, the country's commercial and cultural influences are always close. The sign is a symbol of the feeling of welcome that Jende longed for in the U.S. but could only achieve at home.


HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Sutton, Mary. "*Behold the Dreamers.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 30 Jan 2019. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Sutton, Mary. "*Behold the Dreamers.*" LitCharts LLC, January 30, 2019. Retrieved April 21, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/behold-the-dreamers.

To cite any of the quotes from *Behold the Dreamers* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Mbue, Imbolo. Behold the Dreamers. Penguin. 2016.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Mbue, Imbolo. Behold the Dreamers. New York: Penguin. 2016.