



WICHITA STATE  
UNIVERSITY

UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES

## Anecdotes of her rites of passage to America

Item Type	Book chapter
Authors	Okafor, Chinyere Grace
Citation	Okafor, Chinyere Grace. Anecdotes of her Rites of Passage to America. -- He wants to marry me again and other stories, p 152-161.
Rights	Copyright by author.
Download date	2026-06-18 00:59:35
Link to Item	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10057/1912">http://hdl.handle.net/10057/1912</a>

## **Anecdotes of her Rites of Passage to America**

### **The Crooked Line**

She is still gazing at the agitated line of seekers of the 'Valid Stamp' when her mind strays to other lines in her experience. She recalls the long line of acolytes filing to the sacred grove for Earth's clay, the crowd of celebrants with iron implements at the annual festival, the procession of mock mourners making its way to the altar on Ash Wednesday. "But something is different with this line," she thinks wondering what it can be.

"Move no-w." The man behind her nudges her to fill the gap in front of her. She can detect the impatience in the voice.

"As if I am the one who causes the go-slow," she complains silently as she fills the gap with one step. She regrets the loss of her line of thoughts. She glares sternly at the man behind her whom she thinks is the obvious cause of the disruption of her pleasurable thoughts. She decides to observe the environment more closely. In front of her is a woman. She scrutinises the woman's hair. It is braided in zig-zag lines ... like the crooked path of the stream of her disrupted thoughts. The braids are rope-like ... just like a tendril winding round a stem. She focuses on the woman's neck ... lovely slim lines like ripples on a gentle stream. Chioma stretches her hands touching one of the slender lines on her neck. The woman turns round sharply.

"Sorry, I was only admiring your hair." This compliment does not assuage the anger on an otherwise beautiful face despoiled by tension pimples, anxious lines and oily pores.

"How you go fit talk about beauty when things dey hot like pepper."

"I'm very sorry," Chioma again apologises.

"Make you no worry." The woman, now smiles coarsely adding, "No be your fault sha-a. Dis na the third time I don come here

with my pickins and dem be American childrens-o. Na only me-o, for sake of say dem Papa dey for America." It looks so simple to Chioma who offers a piece of advice.

"Since your husband is in America, tell him to get the visa ..."  
The woman cuts in, "For American face, I no be 'im wife."

"Why?"

"Na di tin wey me I no sabi. Dem Papa dey work there but 'im pickins dey suffer suffer here and dem tell me say I no be 'im wife."

"Why no-w?"

"For sake of we no marry for church, no marry for court. Na for our village traditional we marry."

Chioma cannot understand the reasoning. As far as she is concerned, marriage is marriage whether by traditional law, ecclesiastical law or by statutory law.

"Are you sure you married by traditional law?" she asks.

"Yes no-w. I look like *Asewo*? I no be free woman at all. Na dis stamp wey dem no give me dey make me dey waka wit pickins up and down as if dem no get Papa!"

"Why not ask your husband to come and take them with him?"

Chioma asks wiping sweat from her face. The woman is angered by this question which implies an acceptance on her part of the new arrangement necessitated by the poor economic situation that separates husband and wife so that each can make a living wherever work is available. The woman sees no reason for couples to live separately when they are already united in marriage. She directs her anger at Chioma for reminding her of this emergent disgusting phenomenon.

"When you marry, make you carry your pickins them give man wey dey for America, you hear!"

"When I marry, I go live with my husband." Maybe it is the heat or the pain of waiting for a long time that has prompted Chioma to make this kind of unrealistic statement. Who, in Nigeria, does not know that the time has passed when couples insist on living together. The Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) which the masses have "christened" "Suffering, Adjustment and Poverty" (SAP) has wiped off that spirit of togetherness usually treasured in the institution of marriage. These days, a couple thanks their God if one of them gets a job anywhere in the world. The question of living together is fast

becoming a luxury which only few couples can afford.

"No be stupid you dey, na real *mu-mu* you be, goat. You no sabi wetin dey happen for ya country and you say you sabi book."

"I know what I am saying. I cannot let my husband go abroad to work leaving me and my children here. You asked for it!" Chioma insists thereby exacerbating the woman's anger. The woman visibly annoyed now gives Chioma the rough edge of her tongue.

"Na foolish ..." She says before Chioma is saved from her tirade by the man behind her who shouts, "Move!"

Again Chioma's eyes hit the lines before her resting evenly on the zig-zag which looks like the crooked path to her village stream. The comparison reminds Chioma of her childhood when, among other children, she used to delight in going to the Ajali stream to fetch clean water which her mother used to equate with rain water. While climbing the hill with her water pot, she had often wondered why the path should be crooked in addition to being hilly which in itself was enough punishment. She looks far away searching for a comfortable spot to fix her gaze. She sights the bespectacled immigration officer and fixes her gaze on his spectacles. She realises that the spectacles look like two chameleons locked in a wrestle. It appears as if the chameleons change colour and size. They now look like a red stream snaking through her village. As Chioma gazes at them, her emotions modulate between enthusiasm, apprehension and even outright hostility towards the American immigration officer, all the while constantly reminded of the reality that is her position on the crooked line.

## Passport To America

Chioma is right in front of the officer who is checking the passports at the Nigerian Airways checking counter. She checks the passport of the man on Chioma's left and passes it to the next officer. She now takes that of the young woman on Chioma's right. It is when she takes from the boy behind her that Chioma confirms that the woman's action is deliberate. Chioma waits. Having checked the boy's passport, she stretches her hand to take that of a man just walking in. Chioma decides to complain and calmly she says, "I was here before him." The man withdraws his passport. The officer has no choice but to take Chioma's. She

takes it and hisses. "This kind that think the country no good for the men," she tells her colleague not attempting to whisper her words. Her colleague quickly looks through the passport and responds, "She is going to America."

"Where else she go go? No be to go do *jankara* job, useless job wey white people no go do for America."

"Well, make she go earn American dollars no-w," replies the man.

"Na 'im sabi." She hisses again. Up until now Chioma has refrained from telling the woman to mind her business, because that may lead to a quarrel. She has not forgotten the one she nearly had with the woman in front of her on the line in the American embassy earlier.

"Maybe her husband, that is, if she has not chased him away with nagging, squeezed her mouth today and she wants to take it out on me." Chioma thinks eyeing the woman and wondering why the Nigerian Airport Authority should employ such "an officer who has no sense of order, who deliberately offends customers when she should be very polite to them, who chooses to speak pidgin when she knows that English is the official language."

"A beg pass di tin for her make she leave my front," says the woman to her colleague adding, "See her.. She never reach America before she begin to talk for nose like a masquerade!"

This is too much for Chioma. "Are you calling me a masquerade?" she asks.

"I call your name?" shouts the woman. The line already disjointed now begins to disintegrate as people gravitate towards the scene to watch a budding spectacle. Chioma curses herself for not maintaining her earlier decision to ignore the woman's tantrums. The woman now plays to the gallery as she hisses audibly and shouts, "Ame-ri-caancer." Chioma tries to ignore her and wait patiently for her passport. But a foul "You are only jealous" escapes through her angry mouth. She is surprised by this seemingly irrelevant outburst.

"Jealous! Jealous for wetin? You? Look at you *kpanla*, stockfish wey dey go do *asewo* for America."

"I'm not a prostitute!"

"Wetin you dey go do for America wey you no fit do here? *Asewo* dollar!"

Another officer has emerged from inside to find out the cause

of the commotion. The aggressor is the first to complain, "Look at me-o, doing my duty and dis gal here come tell me say I dey jealous am because she dey go do *asewo* for America."

Chioma focuses her eyes on the officer, waiting for his reaction. He looks at Chioma.

"Young lady, let me see your passport." He glances through it and says,

"No trouble. Let her go. Young lady, you can go." She says nothing. She is giving the officer some papers.

"What are these?"

"Read them."

"Our duty here is to examine passports and nothing else."

"But your colleague here," Chioma complains pointing at the woman, "has exceeded that duty by saying that I'm going to be a prostitute in America. You heard her call me *asewo*. I want you to examine these papers and tell her that they are my admission papers to Ithaca University College." Hardly has she finished the sentence than the woman retorts, "Because you no fit pass University for Nigeria, so you dey run go America." The man takes the papers, folds them without reading them and gives them back to Chioma.

"I don't have to examine your papers. You know what you are going there for and good luck to you. Next person, please." Chioma reluctantly takes her papers, picks her bag and is walking away without a word when the woman shouts, "When you reach America, greet my only child wey I use all my money send go school for America. She dey talk for nose like you. Dem say she dey parade herself for Madison Avenue for America!" The crowd burst into laughter. In spite of her anger, before she takes the turn, Chioma feels a tinge of pity for the woman who is disappointed by her only child, a daughter, who instead of being in school has become a street girl in America. She turns round and waves. The crowd cheers.

## **A Sort-of Marriage**

She is just zipping her bag when her brother calls, "Chioma-a ... Chi Chi somebody here to see you." She goes to the living room where a man with some letters in his hand is waiting for her.

"I am sorry to bother you so early in the morning. I am Major Ken Ojezuwa, Victoria's father." He says getting up.

"Oh Vicky, was my class mate at the Mission School. I saw her yesterday."

"Yes, she told me that you will be traveling to the U.S. today. So, I wrote these letters. Will you be kind enough to dispatch them to my sons. This one is for my friend." Chioma accepts the three letters but refuses the money which the man offers her in lieu of postage stamps. He thanks her and wishes her a safe journey. As soon as he leaves Chioma comments, "This is the kind of thing that our Sister Principal criticises."

"What?" asks her brother.

"How our people do things. I mean, why can't he just post the letters here himself?"

"Maybe they are urgent."

"But Emeka, everybody knows there is the Speed-post which can get a letter anywhere in three days."

"Maybe it is too expensive for him."

"And I'm the one who will pay the postage now."

"You asked for it."

"Our people can be funny."

"One of those things Africans do."

Chioma is almost at the end of her journey. She is relaxed and happy. She looks out through the window of the plane and observes scattered moulds of cloud floating on what looks like a sea of golden haze. It looks so serene and beautiful. She has always observed the clouds from the ground and marvelled at their translucency and amoebic structure. But observing them now from above is another experience which she has never imagined its joy. She feels like a huge bird surveying the world. She feels so happy and free like the metal bird ferrying her to her destination. She now realises that she is learning a lot of things through her travel experience. She yawns as she recalls her experience with the woman in front of her at the American embassy and the hostess at the Nigerian Airways check-in counter. Tranquil and happy, she feels no anger or bitterness towards them because they are victims of oppressive economic structures that lure their loved ones to America.

"Their quarrel with me is a kind of misplaced aggression," she muses feeling sleepy. She recalls the man who nudged her to

move forward in the embassy and believes that he did not realise that an ominous machine or master is responsible for that crooked line which he was so eager to maintain. Chioma reclines her head by the window savouring the beauty of nature as sleep engulfs her.

Chioma is roused from sleep by the voice of the Air hostess reminding the passengers to fasten their seat belts in preparation for landing in Ithaca airport. She is still in a happy mood as the plane touches down and they disembark from the plane. Her happy mood soon turns to one of apprehension as she does not see her brother's friend who is expected to meet her at the airport. "Nigerians," she hisses, "Never time conscious."

She identifies her luggages, assembles them and waits for her contact.

She does not know when she dozes off again. It has become dark outside by the time she wakes. She is no longer apprehensive. She is really afraid now. She looks at her watch. It reads two hours. "So it is two o'clock in the morning and I am still here?" Chioma cannot believe it. All the other passengers had left. She looks at the man on the counter. He is still the same man who was there when she arrived. How could she have slept for so long, she wonders? It was still day light when she arrived. She panicks. She goes to the man at the counter. "Excuse me, please." The man is busy with the calculator. She waits so as not to disturb his calculation.

"Yeah, say what it is. Don't stand there staring at me," he shouts. Chioma is embarrassed. She would have told the man to go to hell, but she reckons that she needs his help.

"Please how can I get ... I mean, can you recommend a hotel that is safe for me to spend the night. A friend who is supposed to ..."

The man cuts in, "Which hotel?"

"I don't know." Chioma replies.

The man continues with his calculations. Just then, a vehicle pulls up. Relief! Chioma strongly feels that this is her contact. She goes outside to meet her. To her dismay, a man comes out from a small bus-like vehicle on which is written 'Airport Limousine'. She is disappointed. Almost tearfully she asks the man, "Please, can you take me to a hotel where I can spend the night?"

"What?"

"My friend who is supposed to ..." Again she goes on to explain her story at the end of which the man says, "Look in the directory over there and find any hotel of your choice." Chioma runs to the telephone booth and picks up the directory. She gets an idea. One of those letters she is carrying has an Ithaca address. She rummages through her bag, finds the letter, reads the name, opens the directory and looks for the name. She almost cries out in joy when she finds the name, OJEZUWA N.A. She does not know how to use the telephone. She reads the instruction on the telephone booth, '5 10 25 US coins only.' It makes little meaning to her. She does not know whether to put the three coins at the same time or just one of them. She goes back to the man who directed her to the telephone for assistance.

"How do I use the telephone, please."

"Just drop a quarter." he answers. She pours out the few coins her brother had given her while doing a quick arithmetic of how many dimes or cents make a dollar which she learnt in school not too long ago. She is lucky. She finds a coin with the inscription, QUARTER DOLLAR. She drops it in the machine and dials.

"Chineke!" Chioma exclaims inwardly in surprise as it rings. Somebody answers. "Is it a woman's voice?" She wonders.

"Good evening. Is that Professor Ojezuwa's residence?"

"Yes." It is a woman's voice, Chioma confirms, probably White.

"Please, can I talk to him?" asks Chioma.

"Speaking."

"Oh! Madam." Chioma is surprised. She hurriedly explains, "My name is Chioma Njoku. I am a Nigerian just coming to the U.S. for the first time. Somebody is supposed to pick me up at the airport but she has not arrived yet. Could you, please recommend a hotel where I can put up for the night, somewhere that is safe and not too expensive."

"Where are you calling from?" That's definitely a White woman's voice.

"Ithaca Airport."

"I'll be there in twenty minutes." Relief. Joy. Gratitude. Chioma feels the three at once as she eagerly awaits Professor Ojezuwa. Her gratitude also extends to Vicky's father who gave her the letters and she thanks God for not making it possible for

him to send the letters by Speed-post.

"When did you say you arrived?"

"About six hours ago."

"What!"

"Yes!"

"It is now 8:00 p.m. This means that you arrived here by 2 o'clock in the afternoon" Chioma is confused.

"The plane was due to arrive here by 7:00 p.m."

"Then that should be an hour ago." Chioma looks at her watch again, puts it near her ear to check if it is ticking. The watch has never disappointed her. The professor is amused.

"Have you adjusted your watch since you arrived?" she asks Chioma.

"No Madam."

"Then, put it back six hours because Nigerian is six hours ahead of American time."

"I must look stupid, don't I?"

"No. It is normal for a new-comer." Silence. Chioma still feeling uncomfortable about her having to disturb the professor without prior warning almost unnecessarily ejaculates, "And to disturb you like this without any warning...I'm really sorry."

"Don't worry about it . It is one of those things. I'm used to your people. Afterall I was sort of married to one of them, a soldier who came here some years ago for a course." Chioma is shocked at the woman's Nigerian connection. And the sudden realisation that Major Ojezuwa could be her husband. She digs into her bag for the Professor's letter and vaguely hears her add, "And my two boys consider themselves Africans even though they were born here." She however hears the woman chuckle and use the common cliché. "One of those things Africans do."

## **Gazing at America**

Chioma marvels at the glitters of America. Disciplined drivers of Ithaca command her respect. Eighteen libraries in one College alone, each bigger than what she had imagined! Computers and other machines: food machine, drink machine, laundry machine! All glare at her, sapping her pocket without a smile. Her class mates, all new and fast and busy in heavy coats and boots to defy the cold just as herself. Only the wooded land with its squirrels and deers reminds her of friendliness. She seeks to

understand her new environment, to woo her and conquer her. The television becomes her best friend taking the first place before her books and even the sisterly Professor.

Her eyes suffocate with screen tales, as she watches the feline noose of cowboys bore through eyes and nose. Yeah, even the anus of Saddam Hussein who still dares America with his yet indestructible life unlike rulers of nations that are rich in retreating warriors and fawning kings with bloated bellies. Those are nations rich in famished women and men seeking the stamp that would banish them from their motherland.

Her eyes marvel at America with drug and gun and poor people fighting civil wars with words and books, and even clubs calling the ghosts of Columbus who started it all and invoking the turtle which inhabited the land before Columbus. They invoke Malcolm X and and another King..

Tales of Afrocologist, Multicologist, Womanist and Humanist, all flood her ears with labels, labels without hands without eyes, labels that form a film through which her eyes seek to see:

The walls, The walls, And more walls.  
Break them down! Let them fall apart...

She sees Anita Black and Clarence Black wear gloves, wear masks. They do not oscillate nor even gyrate. They plunge headlong into the arena, like modern gladiators seeking to please white masters and their manicured queens.

The arena is deserted.  
Swept carcasses of fighters  
Dumped by circus owners.  
The arena is deserted,  
But,  
The smell of Blood!  
Marshed souls  
Of my father's children  
demand full funeral rites  
For a clean resurrection.

And Chioma continues gazing, even at herself, and she remembers the words of the hostess at the Nigerian Airways counter.

Ameri-cancer ... Asewo dollar.