

Elizabeth Evans

Americans

Left hand holding open the pages of the strong, green journal lying on his desk, Oyekan wrote:

apple of my eye

Mrs. Scotty Hillis had given Oyekan the journal not long after his arrival in the U.S. A sweet lady. Right to this very room she brought the green journal, and three baked yams in a yellow dish. "I hope you'll be happy here," she had said.

apple of my eye

The blond-haired girl who sat next to Oyekan in Statistical Methods once told him he was "the apple of the teacher's eye." Oyekan did not know the expression, but felt it made easy sense, quite unlike Mr. Scotty Hillis's "If wishes were horses, beggars would ride," or, yesterday, the remark of Oyekan's friend, Joe, at the barbershop: "Oyekan's got the Hillises eating out of his hand." *Eating out of his hand*. When Joe said this, the barber had made a smile, but still it had not sounded nice.

Absently, Oyekan reached across his open journal to the chart hanging on the wall above his desk. "Border Changes in Nigeria." He slid a finger between the chart's colored transparencies. The top transparency — yellow — made his finger appear varnished; the second and third, dark as the back of a turtle.

Truly, Oyekan thought, his friend Joe was not himself lately. Truly, Joe was a good man: One day a month he did not eat so that money saved might be sent to poor peoples of the world; soon he would go to Micronesia with the U.S. Peace Corps; already, he volunteered at the medical center each Wednesday evening! And, too, Joe and his sweetheart, Peggy Dixon, had kindly taken Oyekan to all manner of places: U.S. lectures, films, parties, museums. America! Peggy Dixon herself a black girl, living in the U.S. just as comfy as a white

boy like Joe! And no one staring when they held hands.

Peggy is the apple of my eye

wrote Oyekan. Then turned from this terrible, iridescent sentence — from where had it come? — and using his Burnt Sienna marker added quotation marks and, beneath the sentiment, the words:

says Joe Hart.

Better. Yes. Soon Joe and Peggy would come to take Oyekan to the Internationals' Barbecue. And Joe had hair of the marker's color, the color of the slim pipes running along the ceiling of Oyekan's basement bedroom in the fine, brick home of Mr. and Mrs. Scotty Hillis. Over Oyekan's head went the pipes, then straight into tidy holes in the panelled east wall; and beyond, to the shadowy, sweet bathroom where, since April, small mushrooms occasionally erupted at the toilet's base.

Our son this, our son that, Mr. and Mrs. Scotty Hillis had said the day Oyekan toured the big house and basement bedroom he was to use during his stay in the U.S. They showed him photographs in the adjoining recreation room: golden Lee Hillis throws himself into a swimming pool whose surface appears dangerously white, a bath of mercury; handsome Lee on a motorcycle, still just long enough for the photographer to get the shot. At the time, Oyekan reeled from the long flight from Lagos, the fact of Minnesota. At least a week had passed before he understood the son to be not away, but dead, killed while engaged in an act which Mr. Scotty — face blotched red and white with grief — accorded the ominous, giddy name of "hang-gliding."

A world away all of that seemed now, days when Oyekan did not know Mr. and Mrs. Scotty, or Joe and Peggy!

Oyekan laid down the Burnt Sienna marker, peered through his open door into the recreation room's dark. Only the blond shafts of the pool cues showed distinctly, but Oyekan knew the location of everything: the mini-tramp; the tv; the low table called, mysteriously, "the coffee table"; the photos. There were no photos of the sport of "hang-gliding," so Oyekan could only imagine its aspect; but, on the north wall, there *did* hang a photo which always struck Oyekan as extraordinary in that it contained not only Lee Hillis but Oyekan's friend, Joe, and Peggy Dixon, also. This made sense, of course. It was

the Hillises who first introduced Oyekan to the couple. Many times he was told that Joe Hart had been best friend to Lee. Still. Visible proof. The dead son, Joe, Peggy. Whenever one wanted to examine:

All wore swimming suits, and Lee Hillis appeared to laugh, perhaps at sunburned Joe, who, it seemed, had just kissed Peggy Dixon. Joe and beautiful Peggy smiled at one another with secret, impenetrable happiness. A smear of the white ointment on Joe's nose streaked Peggy's cheek — which made the picture not quite so nice, it gave Peggy the look of a lost tribeswoman, caused a heaviness in Oyekan's heart —

But stop! Soon his friends would arrive. He would tell them his good news:

At first, Oyekan had misunderstood Mrs. Scotty's tears at breakfast. Both he and Scotty Hillis had handed her their napkins, and, in her considerate way, Mrs. Scotty dabbed at her sweet, moon-round face with each in turn. Oyekan supposed that she cried at memory of the dead Lee. The old wife of Oyekan's father still cried at memory of one baby who died of measles some eighteen years before, when Oyekan was only five years of age; and, unlike Mrs. Scotty, the old wife had six children who lived.

Mrs. Scotty was too old for more children. Her hair was white as rice. Her hands lay motionless on the shiny table top, as if choked by their own thick, violet veins.

Oyekan looked across the breakfast table to Mr. Scotty. Was he glum, also? Mr. Scotty favored the word "pep." "I think a brisk walk would pep us up," he often said after dinner. Or, "Let's all go to the club for a swim! That'll get the sleep out of our eyes!" But this morning Mr. Scotty sat quiet while Mrs. Scotty wept. He chewed his bite of the English muffin. He wiped the crumbs off the breakfast nook table into one palm with the meaty side of the other.

Oyekan rose from his chair in the big blue and white kitchen. "What is it, please?" he pleaded. "May I help, then?"

"Oh, these are happy tears, sweetie," Mrs. Scotty said, "aren't they, Scotty?"

Mr. Scotty made the noises of a man digging heavy soil. "We'd like you to stay on with us, Oy," he said finally. "Like family. We thought Lee — the plant's growing every year."

The plant meant Hillis Carton, an impressively large and dusty concern which made waste paper into boxes of cardboard.

Mr. Scotty continued: "You're a bright fellow, Oy. We know you've got opportunities back home, too, but we're awful fond of you,

and there's a place in management for you right now, and more, you can bet on that."

Oyekan could not believe it! A dream!

Mrs. Scotty removed from her hair the single metal clip she inserted each night before bed. Absently, she worked its hinge: opened, closed, a hungry, long-beaked bird. "I can't imagine what it would be like around here without you now, Oy," she said.

"No, now —" Scotty Hillis lifted his hands. "No pressure, Edie. You don't have to answer right off, Oyekan. You sleep on it, see?"

As if he should need to "sleep on it"! Tears started to Oyekan's eyes. Did Mr. Scotty see this? Had he, too, felt as if he would begin to weep, or had shame at Oyekan's tears caused Mr. Scotty to carry his breakfast dishes over to the sink just then? His back to Oyekan and Mrs. Scotty, Mr. Scotty had said, "I know Peg and Joe would be happy if you stayed, Oy. I'd be willing to bet on that."

Yes! In a fit of high spirits, Oyekan now performed a series of pull-ups off the top of his bedroom door frame, dropped to the floor for sit-ups. Twenty-five, fifty, seventy-five.

"Hey, Oy, do twenty-five for me." So his friend Joe would tease if he were here. And then return to the reading of books of social injustices. And Peggy Dixon? Smiling, she would sit on the handsome red and gold bedspread, once Lee Hillis's, now Oyekan's.

One hundred! Happy in his brief exhaustion, Oyekan lay back on the carpet, fingered the gay loops of orange and brown and red. Everything about Minneapolis — its astonishing latitude and longitude, Mr. and Mrs. Scotty's generosity, the garage doors which went up and down at the touch of a button, clear lakes where handsome citizens canoed past homes gray and solid as fairybook castles — everything here affected him like the whiffs of Parson's Ammonia received when cleaning his bathroom: fascinating, purifying, liable to bring tears to his eyes. Bundles of energy thrilled the air! He stretched out a hand, laughing. He could grab a fistful of that energy, compress it — like the Minnesota snow, weightless flakes which, shaped into balls, became hard, might crack the windshield of an automobile.

A knot of poem forming in his belly pushed him upright:

Your hair is dark and kinked as my own
but, dressed with sweet oils,

becomes a cloud of rainbows.

He would give this poem to Joe. To give to Peggy. But that made no sense! The excitement of the day had made him foolish; Joe's hair was neither dark nor kinked —

Gingerly, Oyekan lifted his fingertips to his new haircut. A terrible mistake! Yesterday he had accompanied Joe to the barber-shop, where Joe — who always wore his hair in a battered left-hand parting — told the barber he wanted something "different." And when the man finished? Rusty curls rose out of the top of slender Joe's narrow, shaved head like froth on a glass of beer, so painfully awful that, as a comrade, Oyekan had felt the only thing he could do was to climb up in the chair and say, "Me, also."

He rose from the bedroom's bright carpet. Shyly, as if going to meet a stranger, he examined his reflection in the mirror which hung over the little bathroom sink.

How did he appear? Yesterday, when the barber had stopped his clipping, whisked away the silky apron, Oyekan had made a little joke: "And now I believe I am Frankenstein's Monster!"

But the barber said, "Hey, Joseph, look at your handsome buddy, here, he looks like that Carl Lewis guy, doesn't he?"

Oyekan did not know any Carl Lewis.

"He's a celebrity," Joe had said. "Come on, I'll buy you a beer and you can sign my napkin."

Oyekan squinted at his reflection. They did not have a mirror at his home, but a neighbor let them look in hers before town meetings and such. Americans were forever telling one another they resembled celebrities! Since arrival in the U.S. Oyekan had been told, also, he resembled Mr. Harry Belafonte, a boxing star, and the singer Michael Jackson. At home, he resembled only his mother.

Ay, suppose Peggy Dixon thought him a fool, an imitator of Joe's drastic gesture! Suppose, also, that on the way to the International Barbecue, in the confines of Joe's Datsun F10, he smelled of Mrs. Scotty's sauerkraut dish of last night.

Twice he brushed his teeth. The guide prepared by The Rotary Club stated that U.S. Americans found foreign students "unfamiliar with accepted practices of hygiene." Oyekan and the other Internationals laughed about this at Orientation, but it was not so funny the time a lady at the Union cafeteria backed away from Khabir with a show of disgust. "My friend does not want to be in your nose!" Oyekan told her. Scandalous! But she had not understood. Khabir had not

understood. Oyekan had forgotten to use his English.

“Oy?”

Mrs. Scotty stood in the doorway, so cheering in her bright golf skirt with black dogs following one another about the hem.

“I believe you are already to the barbecue, Mrs. Scotty.”

“On our way, sweetie. I just wanted to tell you” — she shifted a bright green lunch bucket decorated with flowers and birds and such from one hand to the other — “if you *do* decide to stay, Oy, I could write your mother for you. If you like —”

Oyekan’s face grew hot. People gathered in the sunshine outside his mother’s little house, chewing on cane, trying to hear the conversation inside, between his mother and brother. Biki, too, and at her side the old gray and yellow dog which followed her always, to the fields and the pump and the market. Biki might understand; before he left she teased that he would be like Daniel Ojay who went to U.S.C. to study chemical engineering and never returned, broke his betrothal. Oyekan’s mother, however, would not understand. His mother would pull on the clothes and hands of Oyekan’s brother. She would plead: “How can this be? Is he in trouble there? Is he in jail? Is he sick?”

“I thank you, Mrs. Scotty,” said Oyekan. “But should I stay, I would have to write —”

“Of course. Of course, you would, dear.” She lowered her head after that, as if afraid; the exact gesture of his mother when she learned of the scholarship to the U.S.!

“Mrs. Scotty,” Oyekan began, but, outside, Mr. Scotty began to honk the horn of his auto impatiently, and Mrs. Scotty hurried towards the door.

“I know you’ll make the right decision,” she said. “I just know it.”

The thick tires of Mr. and Mrs. Scotty’s auto rolled past his bedroom window, for one moment his room became dark, then the light returned.

Suppose Peggy Dixon called and said that Joe did not wish to go to the Barbecue today, but that she and Oyekan might go anyway?

Oyekan *did* want to see Joe, of course, but he had such news today, and lately, Joe appeared most often deep in thought, and, then, to draw him forth, Peggy Dixon told noisy tales; after Oyekan’s Honors presentation, it had been the story of a drunken cousin drowned in an attempt to retrieve a bottle of whiskey from a flooded

building called a "fallout shelter." Ho, ho, ho, this made Joe and Peggy laugh and laugh.

Oyekan was sorry, but he did not see the humor.

That same night, at Peggy's apartment, he and Peggy and Joe had watched an old television program in which a man received a wound and discovered himself to be a robot. As if they saw themselves in the robotman who did not know himself to be a robot, Peggy and Joe cried; they cried, they laughed! Sometimes Oyekan did not understand Peggy and Joe at all. Oyekan was no robot! His blood ran hot in him, thank you very much! Joe was a good friend, a good man, but if Oyekan were Joe, he would not act so silly before Peggy Dixon. He would not rush off to Micronesia, leaving her to be sought after by other males, no way!

Maybe Joe did not like Peggy Dixon so well after all, for in his place, Oyekan would write her poems and drive her about, perhaps on a motorcycle like Lee Hillis's, certainly not in a rusty Datsun F10 with gravel and squashed fast food containers in the back. He would show good posture and never fall down on the floor laughing during *The Saturday Night Live* television show, an act Oyekan witnessed after Joe and Peggy believed him gone, after the robot television show.

He had been wrong to watch. His dear friends! They had not even wanted him to leave. All the way to the door, Peggy teased, "Won't you stay on just a bit, Oyekan, now we're having such fun?" Peggy Dixon's eyes were flecked with green. She spoke with the accent of the American South, her voice soft and deep as pillows. Down the dark little hall she called to Joe, "Joseph, come on out here and instill a little guilt in this friend of yours so he won't go breaking up our party." Smiling, they both watched for Joe to appear at the end of the hall, Peggy holding in her fingers the cloth of Oyekan's jacket that his hand might not fit through the sleeve, but Joe did not come.

After a while Peggy Dixon let go of the sleeve. She looked beyond him, out the apartment door, her gay voice suddenly sad, "You didn't like me telling that story about Roy drowning in the fallout shelter, did you?"

"You are a good storyteller, Peggy," Oyekan said, "but I think your stories have the problem that they lie. They pretend to ask only for laughter. This is not right. A story may lie and lie, but all its lies must tell the truth in the end."

"Woah!" Joe stood at the end of the hall, his feet clad only in athletic stockings. "It was so quiet out here I figured you'd gone, Oy!"

"I'm trying to get him to stay, Joe," said Peggy. She turned back to Oyekan, smiling. "Come on, now, we'll make you a fine big bowl of popcorn. Popcorn with butter on it!"

But Oyekan left. That he might stand in the open, second-story stairwell of the apartment building across the way and, leaning over the balustrade in a manner which caused passersbys to stare, observe whether or not Peggy and Joe behaved differently in his absence:

They watched television, made popcorn. Then a neighbor had threatened to call police officers if Oyekan did not move along, and so he had missed whatever came next.

Where were they now, Peggy and Joe? Oyekan looked at his digital watch: 1:23 PM. The clock radio beside his bed read one thirty-one. They might be late, or not yet due.

Last fall, when the couple came to Mr. and Mrs. Scotty's for dinner, the night Oyekan met them — why, no sooner had he and Mrs. Scotty stepped into the dining room to insert the clever extra piece in Mrs. Scotty's shiny table than Joe and Peggy had begun to kiss! And not in a polite way, but with hands moving, mouths open!

To still himself, Oyekan reopened his journal, noted yesterday's high and low temperatures. The coldest day of the year since Oyekan's arrival: January twenty-third. He used to imagine reading from the journal to his family. Everyone laughed at such cold, his stories of foolish American University girls, the loss of his new penny loafer shoe in the first snow. Back then, the journal drew him on, it extracted the gifts he wanted to share. Now, he felt the others would understand nothing of his recent entries; and the early entries no longer amused him, showed only what a bumpkin he had been.

The ringing of telephones still made Oyekan jump. Even when one knew one was to receive a call, even if one waited with the hand holding the phone, the ringing happened behind one's back, nasty as Oyekan's auntie's monkey throwing its messes. Oyekan put his fingers in his ears as he walked into the recreation room. He had lived twenty-two years without a telephone and never felt the lack. This would be a rule in his U.S. home: No Telephone!

"Are you ready?"

"Peggy," said Oyekan. The high school graduation photo of Lee Hillis sat on the stereo. It seemed that daring, golden boy offered advice: Oyekan could say, "I have a surprise for you and Joe!" But, in fact, he could say only: "I am thinking perhaps I will study this afternoon, Peggy."

“Oy! Mr. and Mrs. Hillis helped plan this! Besides, I personally know the picnic features ham, po-ta-to salad *slathered* with mayonnaise, and watermelon from Texas! Chocolate brownies with chocolate icing! Food our kidnapped ancestors ate to ease their aching hearts!”

Kidnapped ancestors. As if both descended from slaves.

Joe Hart took the phone from Peggy. “As you can see, Oy, she’s on,” he said.

On. Which meant, Oyekan knew, excited.

“My, my!” Peggy called as he walked briskly around the car and slid into the back seat. Embarrassed, tantalized by the possibility that she truly did believe his haircut handsome, he said, sternly, “You do not have on your seat belt. Either of you.”

“Oh, Oy!” Peggy pulled at her belt with a great sigh. Her lips bore the hot red color of the flowers planted by Mrs. Scotty that very morning. *Geraniums*. Her hair was sleek, bound into a tiny, most elegant knot at the base of the neck; and, to his surprise, she wore a long skirt similar to that worn by women of his own region. “I do believe I’m getting fat as a hippo!” she cried.

“No, no,” Oyekan began; but there were Joe’s eyes in the rearview mirror, watching, they flickered away as if he did not mean for Oyekan to see!

Too late! Oh, terrible, terrible, Joe knew what lay so deep in Oyekan’s heart, and so now did Oyekan also!

Heart jumping, mouth suddenly dry, Oyekan hurried on: “Now, me, I first became a stick in the U.S., you may see this in photos from the Thanksgiving Day. My skin became gray like ash, my clothes no longer fitted!” He forced himself to look, once again, into the mirror, to grin. “Now, however, I am a slick dog, man! I eat Mr. Scotty’s chocolate chocolate chip ice cream each dinner. My belt is size thirty-four inches. This morning, Mrs. Scotty tells me I cannot wear my old shirts anymore, I am not decent!”

Peggy Dixon smiled at Oyekan over her shoulder. “This one boyfriend to Mama, now he loved ice cream. That was Floyd Barstow. Y’all remember Floyd, the one she was carousing with the time she met up with Daddy and *his* honey on that painfully narrow bridge —”

Joe interrupted with a laugh, “And Floyd’s car and your dad’s car got wedged together —”

Peggy Dixon clapped her hand over her mouth.

"Go on," said Joe.

She shook her head. "No. I don't want to tell that. Oy, you tell us something sane and good. Tell us — what you hear from home. Tell us news of your Biki!"

Oyekan smiled, but pretended to take the words of Peggy Dixon as outcry, in no way a genuine request. He was sick at heart, and this — American politeness! They thought betrothal crazy, but that their politeness required they act as if Biki were his heart's desire, that he had chosen her for the foolish reasons they chose one another! In this way, they were bad as children — worse! Like monkeys trained to drink tea from a cup!

Joe slowed the car. "We want ten-nineteen. Ten twenty-seven. And — this must be it."

Oyekan peered up a long driveway to a large and angular home. Tending the barbecue grills on the wooden porches which wrapped the house were Mrs. Scotty, and Professor Reitz, too, her lower half encased in a pair of vast and surprising pink pants.

The car came to a crackling stop on the gravel drive. Miserable, ashamed — what right did he have be angry with Joe! — Oyekan tried to make a little laughter for his friends: "I am the apple of Professor Reitz's eye."

Peggy Dixon smiled, bent for the big covered bowl at her feet. "Is Oyekan practicing his ironing?" she asked. An old joke. All three laughed as they climbed from the car. "Irony is commonplace in modern literature," the teacher of American novels had told Oyekan's class; Oyekan had misheard.

Peggy Dixon set her bowl on the roof of the car. Sunshine shot through its translucent contents. That would be her gelatin dessert embellished with pears and the delicious fluffy bits called marshmallows. "I'm tired of irony," drawled Peggy Dixon. "I do believe modern literature could use more ironing."

"Hey." Joe laid his hand on Oyekan's arm. Forgiveness? Oyekan glanced towards Peggy Dixon, busy rolling up her window.

"Joe," Oyekan began in a quiet rush, "if you believe I have overstepped —"

"This is Lee's shirt, isn't it?"

Oyekan looked down in confusion at the shirt front. "Yes. You see, Joe, Mrs. Scotty —"

Joe shrugged. "Forget it, man. I just wondered." He winked. "It looks good on you."

"So be it, Joe," said Oyekan, though he did not believe the wink of his friend sincere, "so be it. Do you wish me to carry your dish, Peggy?"

Joe laughed, his head turned towards Peggy Dixon, now busy with the hiding of her purse beneath the front seat. "Peggy's a big girl, Oy," he said. "Hell, she *used* to pick me up and carry me into the bedroom whenever the urge hit her."

"Joe!" Peggy rose from the car with a movement too quick, bumped her head on the roof, but Joe did not stop to offer apologies, he crossed the lawn, through girls in blue jeans, and men in turbans, dashki, Muslim women in their headdresses of gray and black wool. Under high pine trees, a group of Indian students played volleyball. "Hey!" called a plump girl in a purple sari as Joe passed through their game, but play continued uninterrupted, a score was made.

"Oh," Peggy moaned. Oyekan did not wish to look at her. The image of Joe in her arms — his heart shook his chest, it was swollen, inflamed. He did not know whether he wished to weep on the shoulder of his friend, or smash his fists into his face.

"Look at this girl," he said, angrily, and indicated with one jerk of his head a Vietnamese he remembered meeting on another such occasion. Mathematics, her area. A vain and giggling girl. Today she wore a leopard-print bikini of impossible size. She stood beside the diving board, shivering, jiggling her knees and shoulders. "Such a fool, to come to such a party in such clothes."

Peggy Dixon shook her head, whispered, "No, I reckon she's got her sights set on some fellow at this picnic, Oy, and she's putting all her merchandise on the counter. Who's she got to love here, poor thing, folks all in Viet Nam or dead?" She sighed. "Now where do you suppose a body's to put her dish? I do hate the first minutes at big parties. Someday, somebody — I *know* it — is going to mistake me for help and send me out to wash up glasses!"

Oyekan softened at this admission. She was so pretty, so kind, and here was her forehead all wrinkled with worry! "Not at this party, Peggy," he said. "Though here we are maybe all potential dishwasher material!" He laughed. "Do you know, such a thing did happen at Mr. and Mrs. Scotty's golfing club? In the coatroom, a member asks if I might bring round his car!"

"No!"

He held up a finger, tapped the air. "I only report this to show it happened, and still I live to tell the tale." He smiled. "Undiminished, yes?"

"Undiminished," said Peggy. "You" — she pulled her long fingernails along the back of her hand. Faint trails of roughed skin remained when she finished, and she looked up from them, as if quite surprised, and embarrassed, too. "You — do you think she's pretty, Oy, the Vietnamese?" she asked, and then, before he could answer, "Do I ever remind you of anybody from home?"

The question lodged in his chest, hot as the heart shown by Jesus Christ in the room Gloria Dei Church loaned for practice of English conversation. As if for answer, he looked at the tiny Vietnamese — so strangely sexual and sexless in her silly clothing, one leg extended before her now, as if she imagined herself to pose in a magazine of American fashion.

Peggy Dixon brought her face close. She stood, perhaps, thirty centimeters taller than his betrothed, her eyes of green flecks almost on a level with his own. She resembled no one, anywhere.

But one learned to parlay such terrible questions in America, and, with the sleeves of Lee Hillis's old shirt rolled above his biceps, his feet springy on their cushion of sock and running shoe, Oyekan felt — almost American. He found an American grin. He asked Peggy Dixon: "When?"

Peggy Dixon covered her mouth with her fingertips. "Don't you mean *'who'*?"

Still grinning, Oyekan shook his head, no. But this made Peggy Dixon look away, her eyes suddenly sad, he did not understand —

"There's Mr. Scotty," she murmured. She waved at Scotty Hillis, down on the lawn, a set of brightly colored wooden mallets and balls in his hand. "You're getting burned, y'all!" called Peggy Dixon. "Better get that head covered!"

Scotty Hillis nodded and smiled. To Oyekan's relief, Peggy Dixon looked back at him, laughing.

"Mr. Scotty enjoys a small consequence," he said.

"He's a sweetheart," said Peggy.

"He's a bear!" Mrs. Scotty, coming up from behind, put an arm around each. "And don't you two make a handsome couple!" She flushed, widened her eyes, as if she, too, were startled by her words. "With Oyekan's haircut, I mean! I can't quite get used to it! How'd Joe's turn out, Peggy? I haven't seen him yet."

Peggy Dixon smiled at Oyekan, happy as a bird, as if she had not heard the most embarrassing words of Mrs. Scotty! "Well, Joe wanted something different," she said with a laugh, "and different he got. I don't doubt but the boy'll be a big hit in Truk, or wherever they

all send him off to!"

Mrs. Scotty laughed at this also, her face tilted up to the sunshine. "So!" She rubbed her hand briskly up and down Oyekan's arm. "Scotty says I'm not to pester you, Oy, but I'll bet Peggy and Joe agree you should stay!"

"Oyekan?" Peggy Dixon leaned forward, squeezed his hand, hard. Perhaps she did indeed remind him of someone from home, he had not recognized this until she put on the traditional skirt, but no, it was the smile, so sleepy, secret. And not from home at all: the smile offered Joe in the photograph in the recreation room! The smile after the kiss. For him, Oyekan.

"Mr. and Mrs. Scotty are most kind," Oyekan said, so stupid, so stupid.

Down on the lawn, Joe held a handful of the wire hoops which Mr. Scotty bent to press into the grass. Mrs. Scotty was saying to Peggy Dixon, "I guess I don't have to tell you Oy's like family," and Mr. Scotty was talking, too, he lifted up his red face to point in the direction of Oyekan, he waved and smiled, and Joe looked up also, his face white as tooth, bone.

Perhaps Joe meant to smile, but could not. Oyekan himself could not smile. Teeth pressed together, he looked at Peggy, at Mrs. Scotty — both of them waiting to be so happy, already they were weary with waiting, their smiles dimmed by something on his face.

"Oy?" said Peggy Dixon.

Oyekan backed into the picnic line, now travelling behind him past the many bowls of food, gathering baked beans and brownies and salads.

"Excuse me," he said. "Excuse me, everybody, please."

The door to the big house stood closed. On the small pane of glass which allowed those inside to look out at callers was a note which read: "Picnickers: Please use bathhouse loo!"

Oyekan pushed open the door, however. He stepped inside. Dark and the chemical cold of conditioned air filled the house, a shock after the bright afternoon. Quickly, he passed through many rooms of beige carpet, brick, wood. He meant to convey acquaintance with the house should anyone see him, but to his surprise all rooms stood empty, quiet, curtained against the sun.

He sat, finally, in the single chair of a small room he took to be a kind of office, walls lined with books and, too, dolls from foreign

countries: a little fellow with a load of straw on his back; a Spanish dancer with wide skirts of orange and red and pink; a Scotsman playing the bagpipes. He fitted his back to the chair. He took deep breaths to calm himself. In, out. Out. The sound of the picnickers reached him as a kind of rustle, a small and uniform wave of gaiety which washed against the outer walls of the big house.

Oyekan sat in the chair for a very long time, long after he grew used to the dark, and knew that the slim shadow caught in the room's pale curtains was not a fold of the curtain's cloth, no, but the Vietnamese from the deck, in hiding, too.