MY MOTHER TOLD ME: ‘Before you are married keep both eyes open and after you are married close one eye.’ But when I was young I closed my ears instead. I refused to listen to my mother. All I wanted was to get as far away from her as I could, you understand? And so I did the very opposite. I knew that in so doing I might hurt myself, but it mattered more that I hurt her.

Where to begin? I gave myself away. That’s the beginning and end of the same story, the whole story, start and finish. Not to become a first wife, no. Nor even a second. I threw myself away to become some man’s third wife. And would you think perhaps that man came from a ruling family, or was rich, or respected, or held an honourable position in the men’s society? I would understand why you might think so.

But, no. It’s true to say Osman Iscandari was none of those things.

After I married I learned a lot. I did not learn so much about men – after all, Osman Iscandari was not all men. Rather I learned about myself. I learned about us. I learned about women – how we are made into the women we become, how we shape ourselves, how we shape each other.

The day I married I rode to my husband’s home on a maka carried by four makamen dressed in tunics and trousers edged with green and round felt hats with long, black tassels. They jogged barefoot. At times lifting me up over roots and stumps, at other times raising
me high above their shoulders as they waded through streams. I lay back and dreamed in the silence. The *makamen* were graceful as mimes. I admired this about them as I swung under the shade of the canopy towards the border of our chiefdom: away from my home and towards a new life with my husband.

Behind me came the load bearers carrying the luxuries bought with my bride gift – a bride gift so great it was the talk of the town. That was how everyone knew that this man loved me, from the day he came to put kola. For days I begged my father – out of my mother’s hearing – until I persuaded him to receive Osman. On my beloved’s second visit I wore the new *tamule* and *lappa* he had sent for me. I stood behind my father’s chair and gazed at him, unable to believe my own good fortune.

At the crossroads that marked the border the *makamen* lowered me to the ground. I climbed to my feet, gathering my gown up in both hands. My husband’s *makamen* were waiting for me. Their uniforms were a little shabby: short trousers and striped shirts like a football team. Still, I determined not to let this bother me. Instead I settled on to the bed and arranged the folds of my yellow gown in a way I thought made me look elegant. The edges of the gown were scalloped and embroidered with butterflies. My mother thought I had made a foolish decision. Still, she would never allow anyone to say she had not sent a daughter to her husband in the proper manner. Early in the morning she had roused me to begin preparations. Kaolin from the river bank had made my complexion soft and even. Oil scented with lemon grass had been massaged into my skin and left my body gleaming. The soles of my feet buffed smooth. The edges of my hands and feet painted with henna to highlight the contrast of my palms and my soles with my skin. My teeth shone white from chewing *egboka* leaves, so bitter they numbed my tongue and left me barely able to taste a single dish of my wedding breakfast.

And when she had finished dressing me my mother placed the brocade sash over my shoulder and stepped back, nodded and left the room.

Now I smiled to myself. I imagined the expression on my
husband's face when he saw me for the first time. No longer a girl, but a woman.

I lay back, propping myself up on one elbow so that I could see where we were going. It wasn’t easy to do. The maka rocked so vigorously from side to side. I thought nothing of it: we were on an underused path. As we neared the town the paths would broaden and the makamen find their stride. I tried not to think too much about how crushed my gown was becoming; I concentrated instead on the sky and the ever-changing patterns in the canopy of trees.

I was thrown out of my reverie by a sharp pain.

‘Be careful!’

No reply. I tried to sit upright but my arms were pinned down by the steep sides of the hammock. The rocking and jostling persisted. I began to feel nauseous, saliva flooded my mouth. I struggled so hard I all but tipped out of the hammock. The makamen came to a halt and stood watching me as I tottered to the side of the path. There, in one great heave, I deposited my wedding breakfast into the undergrowth.

And so this was how I arrived at my husband’s home: my wedding gown flecked with vomit and my breath sour. Not that I need have worried. My husband was not there, in his place a message to say he was away on business. Many days passed before he returned.