In what ways does Adichie make this such a tense moment in the novel?

Lunch was fufu and onugbu soup. The fufu was smooth and fluffy. Sisi made it well; she pounded the yam energetically, adding drops of water into the mortar, her cheeks contracting with the thump-thump-thump of the pestle. The soup was thick with chunks of boiled beef and dried fish and dark green onugbu leaves. We ate silently. I molded my fufu into small balls with my fingers, dipped it in the soup, making sure to scoop up fish chunks, and then brought it to my mouth. I was certain the soup was good, but I did not taste it, could not taste it. My tongue felt like paper.

"Pass the salt, please," Papa said. We all reached for the salt at the same time. Jaja and I touched the crystal shaker, my finger brushed his gently, then he let go. I passed it to Papa. The silence stretched out even longer.

"They brought the cashew juice this afternoon. It tastes good. I am sure it will sell," Mama finally said.

"Ask that girl to bring it," Papa said. Mama pressed the ringer that dangled above the table on a transparent wire from the ceiling, and Sisi appeared.

"Yes, Madam?"

"Bring two bottles of the drink they brought from the factory."

"Yes, Madam."

I wished Sisi had said "What bottles, Madam?" or "Where are they, Madam?" Just something to keep her and Mama talking, to veil the nervous movements of Jaja molding his fufu. Sisi was back shortly and placed the bottles next to Papa. They had the same faded-looking labels as every other thing Papa's factories made—the wafers and cream biscuits and bottled juice and banana chips. Papa poured the yellow juice for everyone. I reached out quickly for my glass and took a sip. It tasted watery. I wanted to seem eager; maybe if I talked about how good it tasted, Papa might forget that he had not yet punished Jaja.

"It's very good, Papa," I said.

Papa swirled it around his bulging cheeks. "Yes, yes."

"It tastes like fresh cashew," Mama said.

Say something, please, I wanted to say to Jaja. He was supposed to say something now, to contribute, to compliment Papa's new product. We always did, each time an employee from one of his factories brought a product sample for us.

"Just like white wine," Mama added. She was nervous, I could tell—not just because a fresh cashew tasted nothing like white wine but also because her voice was lower than usual. "White wine," Mama said again, closing her eyes to better savor the taste. "Fruity white wine."

"Yes," I said. A ball of fufu slipped from my fingers and into the soup.

Papa was staring pointedly at Jaja. "Jaja, have you not shared a drink with us, gbo? Have you no words in your mouth?" he asked, entirely in Igbo. A bad sign. He hardly spoke Igbo, and although Jaja and I spoke it with Mama at home, he did not like us to speak it in public. We had to sound civilized in public, he told us; we had to speak English. Papa's sister, Aunty Ifeoma, said

once that Papa was too much of a colonial product. She had said this about Papa in a mild, forgiving way, as if it were not Papa's fault, as one would talk about a person who was shouting gibberish from a severe case of malaria.

"Have you nothing to say, gbo, Jaja?" Papa asked again. "Mba, there are no words in my mouth," Jaja replied.

"What?" There was a shadow clouding Papa's eyes, a shadow that had been in Jaja's eyes. Fear. It had left Jaja's eyes and entered Papa's.

"I have nothing to say," Jaja said.

"The juice is good—" Mama started to say.

Jaja pushed his chair back. "Thank you, Lord. Thank you, Papa. Thank you, Mama."

I turned to stare at him. At least he was saying thanks the right way, the way we always did after a meal. But he was also doing what we never did: he was leaving the table before Papa had said the prayer after meals.

"Jaja!" Papa said. The shadow grew, enveloping the whites of Papa's eyes. Jaja was walking out of the dining room with his plate. Papa made to get up and then slumped back on his seat. His cheeks drooped, bulldoglike.

I reached for my glass and stared at the juice, watery yellow, like urine. I poured all of it down my throat, in one gulp. I didn't know what else to do. This had never happened before in my entire life, never. The compound walls would crumble, I was sure, and squash the frangipani trees. The sky would cave in. The Persian rugs on the stretches of gleaming marble floor would shrink. Something would happen. But the only thing that happened was my choking. My body shook from the coughing. Papa and Mama rushed over. Papa thumped my back while Mama rubbed my shoulders and said, "O zugo. Stop coughing."

THAT EVENING, I STAYED in bed and did not have dinner with the family. I developed a cough, and my cheeks burned the back of my hand. Inside my head, thousands of monsters played a painful game of catch, but instead of a ball, it was a brown leather-bound missal that they threw to each other.