

AMERICANAH



Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

It was a surprise birthday party in Hamden, for Marcia, Blaine's friend.

"Happy birthday, Marcia!" Ifemelu said in a chorus with the other friends, standing beside Blaine. Her tongue a little heavy in her mouth, her excitement a little forced. She had been with Blaine for more than a year, but she did not quite belong with his friends.

"You bastard!" Marcia said to her husband, Benny, laughing, tears in her eyes.

Marcia and Benny both taught history, they came from the South and they even looked alike, with their smallish bodies and honey complexions and long locks grazing their necks. They wore their love like a heavy perfume, exuding a transparent commitment, touching each other, referring to each other.

Watching them, Ifemelu imagined this life for her and Blaine, in a small house on a quiet street, batiks hung on the walls, African sculptures glowering in corners, and both of them existing in a steady hum of happiness.

Benny was pouring drinks. Marcia was walking around, still stunned, looking into the trays of catered food spread on the dining table, and then up at the mass of balloons bobbing against the ceiling.

"When did you do all this, baby? I was just gone an hour!"

She hugged everyone, while wiping the tears from her eyes. Before she hugged Ifemelu, a wrinkle of worry flickered on her face, and

Ifemelu knew that Marcia had forgotten her name.

"So good to see you again, thank you for coming," she said, with an extra dose of sincerity, the "so" emphasized, as though to make up for forgetting Ifemelu's name.

"Chile!" she said to Blaine, who

hugged her and lifted her slightly off the floor, both of them laughing.

"You're lighter than you were on your last birthday!" Blaine said.

"And she looks younger every day!" Paula, Blaine's ex-girlfriend, said.

"Marcia, are you going to bottle your secret?" a woman whom Ifemelu did not know asked, her bleached hair bouffant like a platinum helmet.

"Her secret is good sex," Grace said seriously, a Korean-American woman who taught African-American studies, tiny and slender, always in stylishly loose-fitting clothes, so that she seemed to float in a swish of silks.

"I'm that rare thing, a Christian left-wing nut," she had told Ifemelu when they first met.

"Did you hear that, Benny?" Marcia

asked. "Our secret is good sex."

"That's right!" Benny said, and winked at her. "Hey, anybody see Barack Obama's announcement this morning?"

"Yes, it's been on the news all day," Paula said. She was short and blond, with a clear pinkish complexion, outdoorsy and healthy, that made Ifemelu wonder if she rode horses.

"I don't even have a television," Grace said, with a self-mocking sigh. "I only recently sold out and got a cell phone."

"They'll replay it," Benny said.

"Let's eat!" It was Stirling, the wealthy one, who Blaine told her came from Boston old money; he and his father had been legacy students at Harvard. He was left-leaning and well-meaning, crippled by his acknowledgment of his own many privileges.

He never allowed himself to have an opinion. "Yes, I see what you mean," he said often.



The food was eaten with a lot of praise and wine, the fried chicken, the greens, the pies. Ifemelu took tiny portions, pleased she had snacked on some nuts before they left; she did not like soul food.

"I haven't had corn bread this good in years," Nathan said, seated beside her. He was a literature professor, neurotic and blinky behind his glasses, who Blaine once said was the only person at Yale that he trusted completely. Nathan had told her, some months earlier, in a voice filled with hauteur, that he did not read any fiction published after 1930. "It all went downhill after the thirties," he said.

She had told Blaine about it later, and there was an impatience in her tone, almost an accusation, as she added that

academics were not intellectuals; they were not curious, they built their stolid tents of specialized knowledge and stayed securely in them.

Blaine said, "Oh, Nathan just has his issues. It's not about being an academic." A new defensiveness had begun to creep into Blaine's tone when they talked about his friends, perhaps because he sensed her discomfort with them. When she attended a talk with him, he would make sure to say it could have been better, or that the first ten minutes were boring, as though to preempt her own criticisms.



The last talk they had attended was his ex-girlfriend Paula's, at a college in Middletown, Paula standing in front of the classroom, in a dark-green wrap dress and boots, sounding fluid and convinced, provoking and charming her audience at the same time; the young pretty political scientist who would certainly get tenure. She had glanced often at Blaine, like a student at a professor, gauging her performance from his expression. As she spoke, Blaine nodded continuously, and once even sighed aloud as though her

words had brought to him a familiar and exquisite epiphany. They had remained good friends, Paula and Blaine, had kept in the same circle after she cheated on him with a woman also named Paula, and now called Pee to distinguish them from each other.

"Our relationship had been in trouble for a while. She said she was just experimenting with Pee but I could tell it was much more, and I was right because they're still together," Blaine told Ifemelu, and it all seemed to her to be too tame, too civil. Even Paula's friendliness towards her seemed too scrubbed clean.

"How about we ditch him and go and have one drink?" Paula had said to Ifemelu that evening after her talk, her cheeks flushed from the excitement and relief of having done well.

"I'm exhausted," Ifemelu had said.

Blaine said, "And I need to prep for class tomorrow. Let's do something this weekend, okay?" And he hugged her goodbye.

"It wasn't too bad, was it?" Blaine asked Ifemelu on their drive back to New Haven.

"I was sure you were going to have an orgasm," she said, and Blaine laughed.

From across the table, Paula asked, "Did I tell you I'm having my students read your blog, Ifemelu? It's interesting how safe their thinking is and I want to push them out of their comfort zone. I loved the last post,

'Friendly Tips for the American Non-Black: How to React to an American Black Talking About Blackness.'

"That is funny!" Marcia said. "I'd love to read that."

Paula brought out her phone and fiddled with it and then began to read aloud.

"Dear American Non-Black,

if an American Black person is telling you about an experience about being black, please do not eagerly bring up examples from your own life. Don't say "It's just like when I ..." You have suffered. Everyone in the world has suffered. But you have not suffered precisely because you are an American Black.

Don't be quick to find alternative explanations for what happened. Don't say "Oh, it's not really race, it's class. Oh, it's not race, it's gender. Oh, it's not race, it's the cookie monster." You see, American Blacks actually don't WANT it to be race. They would rather not have racist shit happen. So maybe when they say something is about race, it's maybe

because it actually is? Don't say "I'm color-blind," because if you are color-blind, then you need to see a doctor and it means that when a black man is shown on TV as a crime suspect in your neighborhood, all you see is a blurry purplish-grayish-creamish figure. Don't say "We're tired of talking about race" or "The only race is the human race."

American Blacks, too, are tired of talking about race. They wish they didn't have to. But shit keeps happening.

Don't preface your response with "One of my best friends is black" because it makes no difference and nobody cares and you can have a black best friend and still do racist shit and it's probably not true anyway, the "best" part, not the "friend" part. Don't say your grandfather was Mexican so you can't be racist (please click here for more on There Is No United League of the Oppressed). Don't bring up your Irish great-grandparents' suffering. Of course they got a lot of shit from established America. So did the Italians. So did the Eastern Europeans. But there was a hierarchy. A hundred years ago, the white ethnics hated being hated, but it was sort of tolerable because at least black people were below them on the ladder.



Don't say your grandfather was a serf in Russia when slavery happened because what matters is you are American now and being American means you take the whole shebang, America's assets and America's debts, and Jim Crow is a big-ass debt.

Don't say it's just like antisemitism. It's not. In the hatred of Jews, there is also the possibility of envy—they are so clever, these Jews, they control everything, these Jews—and one must concede that a certain respect, however grudging, accompanies envy. In the hatred of American Blacks, there is no possibility of envy—they are so lazy, these blacks, they are so unintelligent, these blacks.

Don't say "Oh, racism is over, slavery was so long ago." We are talking about problems from the 1960s, not the 1860s. If you meet an elderly American black man from Alabama, he probably remembers when he had to step off the curb because a white person was walking past. I bought a dress from a vintage shop on eBay the other day, made in 1960, in perfect shape, and I wear it a lot. When the original owner wore it, black Americans could not vote because they were black. (And maybe the original owner was one of those women, in the famous sepia photographs, standing by in hordes outside schools





shouting “Ape!” at young black children because they did not want them to go to school with their young white children. Where are those women now? Do they sleep well? Do they think about shouting “Ape”?)

Finally, don’t put on a Let’s Be Fair tone and say “But black people are racist too.” Because of course we’re all prejudiced (I can’t even stand some of my blood relatives, grasping, selfish folks), but racism is about the power of a group and in America it’s white folks who have that power. How? Well, white folks don’t get treated like shit in upper-class African-American communities and white folks don’t get denied bank loans or mortgages precisely because they are white and black juries don’t give white criminals worse sentences than black criminals for the same crime and black police officers don’t stop white folk for driving while white and black companies don’t choose not to hire somebody because their name sounds white and black teachers don’t tell white kids that they’re not smart enough to be doctors and black politicians don’t try some tricks to reduce the voting power of white folks through gerrymandering and advertising agencies don’t say they can’t use white models to advertise glamorous products because they are not considered “aspirational” by the “mainstream.”

So after this listing of don’ts, what’s the do? I’m not sure. Try listening, maybe.

Hear what is being said. And remember that it’s not about you. American Blacks are not telling you that you are to blame. They are just telling you what is. If you don’t understand, ask questions. If you’re uncomfortable about asking questions, say you are uncomfortable about asking questions and then ask anyway. It’s easy to tell when a question is coming from a good place. Then listen some more. Sometimes people just want to feel heard. Here’s to possibilities of friendship and connection and understanding.”

Marcia said, “I love the part about the dress!”

“It’s cringe-funny,” Nathan said.

“So you must be raking in the speaking fees from that blog,” Michael said.

“Only most of it goes to my hungry relatives back in Nigeria,” Ifemelu said.

“It must be good to have that,” he said.

“To have what?”

“To know where you’re from. Ancestors going way back, that kind of thing.”

“Well,” she said. “Yes.”

He looked at her, with an expression that made her uncomfortable, because she was not sure what his eyes held, and then he looked away.



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