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Opening Extract from...

Americanah

Written by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

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Americanah

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Part 1

CHAPTER 1

Princeton, in the summer, smelled of nothing, and although Ifemelu liked the tranquil greenness of the many trees, the clean streets and stately homes, the delicately overpriced shops and the quiet, abiding air of earned grace, it was this, the lack of a smell, that most appealed to her, perhaps because the other American cities she knew well had all smelled distinctly. Philadelphia had the musty scent of history. New Haven smelled of neglect. Baltimore smelled of brine, and Brooklyn of sun-warmed garbage. But Princeton had no smell. She liked taking deep breaths here. She liked watching the locals who drove with pointed courtesy and parked their latest-model cars outside the organic grocery store on Nassau Street or outside the sushi restaurants or outside the ice cream shop that had fifty different flavours including red pepper or outside the post office where effusive staff bounded out to greet them at the entrance. She liked the campus, grave with knowledge, the Gothic buildings with their vine-laced walls, and the way everything transformed, in the half-light of night, into a ghostly scene. She liked, most of all, that in this place of affluent ease, she could pretend to be someone else, someone specially admitted into a hallowed American club, someone adorned with certainty.

But she did not like that she had to go to Trenton to braid her hair. It was unreasonable to expect a braiding salon in Princeton—the few black locals she had seen were so light-skinned and lank-haired she could not imagine them wearing braids—and yet as she waited at Princeton Junction station for the train, on an afternoon ablaze with heat, she wondered why there *was* no place where she could braid her hair. The chocolate bar in her handbag had melted. A few other people

were waiting on the platform, all of them white and lean, in short, flimsy clothes. The man standing closest to her was eating an ice cream cone; she had always found it a little irresponsible, the eating of ice cream cones by grown-up American men, especially the eating of ice cream cones by grown-up American men in public. He turned to her and said, "About time," when the train finally creaked in, with the familiarity strangers adopt with each other after sharing in the disappointment of a public service. She smiled at him. The greying hair on the back of his head was swept forward, a comical arrangement to disguise his bald spot. He had to be an academic, but not in the humanities or he would be more self-conscious. A firm science like chemistry, maybe. Before, she would have said, "I know," that peculiar American expression that professed agreement rather than knowledge, and then she would have started a conversation with him, to see if he would say something she could use in her blog. People were flattered to be asked about themselves and if she said nothing after they spoke, it made them say more. They were conditioned to fill silences. If they asked what she did, she would say vaguely, "I write a lifestyle blog," because saying "I write an anonymous blog called *Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black*" would make them uncomfortable. She had said it, though, a few times. Once to a dreadlocked white man who sat next to her on the train, his hair like old twine ropes that ended in a blond fuzz, his tattered shirt worn with enough piety to convince her that he was a social warrior and might make a good guest blogger. "Race is totally overhyped these days, black people need to get over themselves, it's all about class now, the haves and the have-nots," he told her evenly, and she used it as the opening sentence of a post titled "Not All Dreadlocked White American Guys Are Down". Then there was the man from Ohio, who was squeezed next to her on a flight. A middle manager, she was sure, from his boxy suit and contrast collar. He wanted to know what she meant by "lifestyle blog", and she told him, expecting him to become reserved, or to end the conversation by saying something defensively bland like "The only race that matters is the human race." But he said, "Ever write about adoption? Nobody wants black babies in this country, and I don't mean biracial, I mean black. Even the black families don't want them."

He told her that he and his wife had adopted a black child and their neighbours looked at them as though they had chosen to become martyrs for a dubious cause. Her blog post about him, "Badly-Dressed White Middle Managers from Ohio Are Not Always What You Think", had received the highest number of comments for that month. She still wondered if he had read it. She hoped so. Often, she would sit in cafés, or airports, or train stations, watching strangers, imagining their lives, and wondering which of them were likely to have read her blog. Now her ex-blog. She had written the final post only days ago, trailed by two hundred and seventy-four comments so far. All those readers, growing month by month, linking and cross-posting, knowing so much more than she did; they had always frightened and exhilarated her. SapphicDerrida, one of the most frequent posters, wrote: *I'm a bit surprised by how personally I am taking this. Good luck as you pursue the unnamed "life change" but please come back to the blogosphere soon. You've used your irreverent, hectoring, funny and thought-provoking voice to create a space for real conversations about an important subject.* Readers like SapphicDerrida, who reeled off statistics and used words like "reify" in their comments, made Ifemelu nervous, eager to be fresh and to impress, so that she began, over time, to feel like a vulture hacking into the carcasses of people's stories for something she could use. Sometimes making fragile links to race. Sometimes not believing herself. The more she wrote, the less sure she became. Each post scraped off yet one more scale of self until she felt naked and false.

The ice-cream-eating man sat beside her on the train and, to discourage conversation, she stared fixedly at a brown stain near her feet, a spilled frozen Frappuccino, until they arrived at Trenton. The platform was crowded with black people, many of them fat, in short, flimsy clothes. It still startled her, what a difference a few minutes of train travel made. During her first year in America, when she took New Jersey Transit to Penn Station and then the subway to visit Aunty Uju in Flatlands, she was struck by how mostly slim white people got off at the stops in Manhattan and, as the train went further into Brooklyn, the people left were mostly black and fat. She had not thought of them as "fat", though. She had thought of them as "big", because one of the first things her friend Ginika told her was that "fat" in America was a bad word, heaving with moral judgement like "stupid" or "bastard",

and not a mere description like "short" or "tall". So she had banished "fat" from her vocabulary. But "fat" came back to her last winter, after almost thirteen years, when a man in line behind her at the supermarket muttered, "Fat people don't need to be eating that shit," as she paid for her giant bag of Tostitos. She glanced at him, surprised, mildly offended, and thought it a perfect blog post, how this stranger had decided she was fat. She would file the post under the tag "race, gender and body size". But back home, as she stood and faced the mirror's truth, she realized that she had ignored, for too long, the new tightness of her clothes, the rubbing together of her inner thighs, the softer, rounder parts of her that shook when she moved. She *was* fat.

She said the word "fat" slowly, funnelling it back and forward, and thought about all the other things she had learned not to say aloud in America. She was fat. She was not curvy or big-boned; she was fat, it was the only word that felt true. And she had ignored, too, the cement in her soul. Her blog was doing well, with thousands of unique visitors each month, and she was earning good speaking fees, and she had a fellowship at Princeton and a relationship with Blaine—"You are the absolute love of my life," he'd written in her last birthday card—and yet there was cement in her soul. It had been there for a while, an early morning disease of fatigue, a bleakness and borderlessness. It brought with it amorphous longings, shapeless desires, brief imaginary glints of other lives she could be living, that over the months melded into a piercing homesickness. She scoured Nigerian websites, Nigerian profiles on Facebook, Nigerian blogs, and each click brought yet another story of a young person who had recently moved back home, clothed in American or British degrees, to start an investment company, a music production business, a fashion label, a magazine, a fast-food franchise. She looked at photographs of these men and women and felt the dull ache of loss, as though they had prised open her hand and taken something of hers. They were living her life. Nigeria became where she was supposed to be, the only place she could sink her roots in without the constant urge to tug them out and shake off the soil. And, of course, there was also Obinze. Her first love, her first lover, the only person with whom she had never felt the need to explain herself. He was now a husband and father, and they had not been in touch in years, yet she could not pretend that he was not a part of her homesickness, or that

she did not often think of him, sifting through their past, looking for portents of what she could not name.

The rude stranger in the supermarket—who knew what problems *he* was wrestling with, haggard and thin-lipped as he was—had intended to offend her but had instead prodded her awake.

She began to plan and to dream, to apply for jobs in Lagos. She did not tell Blaine at first, because she wanted to finish her fellowship at Princeton, and then after her fellowship ended, she did not tell him because she wanted to give herself time to be sure. But as the weeks passed, she knew she would never be sure. So she told him that she was moving back home, and she added, "I have to," knowing he would hear in her words the sound of an ending.

"Why?" Blaine asked, almost automatically, stunned by her announcement. There they were, in his living room in New Haven, awash in soft jazz and daylight, and she looked at him, her good, bewildered man, and felt the day take on a sad, epic quality. They had lived together for three years, three years free of crease, like a smoothly ironed sheet, until their only fight, months ago, when Blaine's eyes froze with blame and he refused to speak to her. But they had survived that fight, mostly because of Barack Obama, bonding anew over their shared passion. On election night, before Blaine kissed her, his face wet with tears, he held her tightly as though Obama's victory was also their personal victory. And now here she was telling him it was over. "Why?" he asked. He taught ideas of nuance and complexity in his classes and yet he was asking her for a single reason, the *cause.* But she had not had a bold epiphany and there was no cause; it was simply that layer after layer of discontent had settled in her, and formed a mass that now propelled her. She did not tell him this, because it would hurt him to know she had felt that way for a while, that her relationship with him was like being content in a house but always sitting by the window and looking out.

"Take the plant," he said to her, on the last day she saw him, when she was packing the clothes she kept in his apartment. He looked defeated, standing slump-shouldered in the kitchen. It was his houseplant, hopeful green leaves rising from three bamboo stems, and when she took it, a sudden crushing loneliness lanced through her and stayed with her for weeks. Sometimes, she still felt it. How was it possible to

miss something you no longer wanted? Blaine needed what she was unable to give and she needed what he was unable to give, and she grieved this, the loss of what could have been.

So here she was, on a day filled with the opulence of summer, about to braid her hair for the journey home. Sticky heat sat on her skin. There were people thrice her size on the Trenton platform and she looked admiringly at one of them, a woman in a very short skirt. She thought nothing of slender legs shown off in miniskirts—it was safe and easy, after all, to display legs of which the world approved—but the fat woman's act was about the quiet conviction that one shared only with oneself, a sense of rightness that others failed to see. Her decision to move back was similar; whenever she felt besieged by doubts, she would think of herself as standing valiantly alone, as almost heroic, so as to squash her uncertainty. The fat woman was co-coordinating a group of teenagers who looked sixteen and seventeen years old. They crowded around, a summer programme advertised on the front and back of their yellow T-shirts, laughing and talking. They reminded Ifemelu of her cousin Dike. One of the boys, dark and tall, with the leanly muscled build of an athlete, looked just like Dike. Not that Dike would ever wear those shoes that looked like espadrilles. Weak kicks, he would call them. It was a new one; he first used it a few days ago when he told her about going shopping with Aunty Uju. "Mom wanted to buy me these crazy shoes. Come on, Coz, you know I can't wear weak kicks!"

Ifemelu joined the taxi line outside the station. She hoped her driver would not be a Nigerian, because he, once he heard her accent, would either be aggressively eager to tell her that he had a master's degree, the taxi was a second job and his daughter was on the dean's list at Rutgers; or he would drive in sullen silence, giving her change and ignoring her "thank you", all the time nursing humiliation, that this fellow Nigerian, a small girl at that, who perhaps was a nurse or an accountant or even a doctor, was looking down on him. Nigerian taxi drivers in America were all convinced that they really were not taxi drivers. She was next in line. Her taxi driver was black and middle-aged. She opened the door and glanced at the back of the driver's seat. *Mervin Smith.* Not Nigerian, but you could never be too sure. Nigerians took on all sorts of names here. Even she had once been somebody else.

"How you doing?" the man asked.

She could tell right away, with relief, that his accent was Caribbean.

"I'm very well. Thank you." She gave him the address of Mariama African Hair Braiding. It was her first time at this salon—her regular one was closed because the owner had gone back to Côte d'Ivoire to get married—but it would look, she was sure, like all the other African hair braiding salons she had known: they were in the part of the city that had graffiti, dank buildings and no white people, they displayed bright signboards with names like Aisha and Fatima African Hair Braiding, they had radiators that were too hot in the winter and air conditioners that did not cool in the summer, and they were full of Francophone West African women braiders, one of whom would be the owner and speak the best English and answer the phone and be deferred to by the others. Often, there was a baby tied to someone's back with a piece of cloth. Or a toddler asleep on a wrapper spread over a battered sofa. Sometimes, older children stopped by. The conversations were loud and swift, in French or Wolof or Malinke, and when they spoke English to customers, it was broken, curious, as though they had not quite eased into the language itself before taking on a slangy Americanism. Words came out half-completed. Once a Guinean braider in Philadelphia had told Ifemelu, "Amma like, Oh Gad, Az someh." It took many repetitions for Ifemelu to understand that the woman was saying, "I'm like, Oh God, I was so mad."

Mervin Smith was upbeat and chatty. He talked, as he drove, about how hot it was, how rolling blackouts were sure to come.

"This is the kind of heat that kills old folks. If they don't have air conditioning, they have to go to the mall, you know. The mall is free air conditioning. But sometimes there's nobody to take them. People have to take care of the old folks," he said, his jolly mood unfazed by Ifemelu's silence.

"Here we are!" he said, parking in front of a shabby block. The salon was in the middle, between a Chinese restaurant called Happy Joy and a convenience store that sold lottery tickets. Inside, the room was thick with disregard, the paint peeling, the walls plastered with large posters of braided hairstyles and smaller posters that said QUICK TAX REFUND. Three women, all in T-shirts and knee-length shorts, were working on the hair of seated customers. A small TV mounted

on a corner of the wall, the volume a little too loud, was showing a Nigerian film: a man beating his wife, the wife cowering and shouting, the poor audio quality jarring.

"Hi!" Ifemelu said.

They all turned to look at her but only one, who had to be the eponymous Mariama, said, "Hi. Welcome."

"I'd like to get braids."

"What kind of braids you want?"

Ifemelu said she wanted a medium kinky twist and asked how much it was.

"Two hundred," Mariama said.

"I paid one sixty last month." She had last braided her hair three months ago.

Mariama said nothing for a while, her eyes back on the hair she was braiding.

"So one sixty?" Ifemelu asked.

Mariama shrugged and smiled. "Okay, but you have to come back next time. Sit down. Wait for Aisha. She will finish soon." Mariama pointed at the smallest of the braiders, who had a skin condition, pinkish-cream whorls of discoloration on her arms and neck that looked worryingly infectious.

"Hi, Aisha," Ifemelu said.

Aisha glanced at Ifemelu, nodding ever so slightly, her face blank, almost forbidding in its expressionlessness. There was something strange about her.

Ifemelu sat close to the door; the fan on the chipped table was turned on high but did little for the stuffiness in the room. Next to the fan were combs, packets of hair attachments, magazines bulky with loose pages, piles of colourful DVDs. A broom was propped in one corner, near the candy dispenser and the rusty hair dryer that had not been used in a hundred years. On the TV screen, a father was beating two children, wooden punches that hit the air above their heads.

"No! Bad father! Bad man!" the other braider said, staring at the TV and flinching.

"You from Nigeria?" Mariama asked.

"Yes," Ifemelu said. "Where are you from?"

"Me and my sister Halima are from Mali. Aisha is from Senegal," Mariama said.

Aisha did not look up, but Halima smiled at Ifemelu, a smile that, in its warm knowingness, said welcome to a fellow African; she would not smile at an American in the same way. She was severely cross-eyed, pupils darting in opposite directions, so that Ifemelu felt thrown off-balance, not sure which of Halima's eyes was on her.

Ifemelu fanned herself with a magazine. "It's so hot," she said. At least, these women would not say to her "You're hot? But you're from Africa!"

"This heat wave is very bad. Sorry the air conditioner broke yesterday," Mariama said.

Ifemelu knew the air conditioner had not broken yesterday, it had been broken for much longer, perhaps it had always been broken; still she nodded and said that perhaps it had packed up from overuse. The phone rang. Mariama picked it up and after a minute said "Come now," the very words that had made Ifemelu stop making appointments with African hair braiding salons. Come now, they always said, and then you arrived to find two people waiting to get micro braids and still the owner would tell you "Wait, my sister is coming to help." The phone rang again and Mariama spoke in French, her voice rising, and she stopped braiding to gesture with her hand as she shouted into the phone. Then she unfolded a yellow Western Union form from her pocket and began reading out the numbers. "Trois! Cinq! Non, non, cinq!"

The woman whose hair she was braiding in tiny, painful-looking cornrows said sharply, "Come on! I'm not spending the whole day here!"

"Sorry, sorry," Mariama said. Still, she finished repeating the Western Union numbers before she continued braiding, the phone lodged between her shoulder and ear.

Ifemelu opened her novel, Jean Toomer's *Cane*, and skimmed a few pages. She had been meaning to read it for a while now, and imagined she would like it since Blaine did not. A precious performance, Blaine had called it, in that gently forbearing tone he used when they talked about novels, as though he was sure that she, with a little more time and a little more wisdom, would come to accept that the novels he liked were superior, novels written by young and youngish men and

packed with *things*, a fascinating, confounding accumulation of brands and music and comic books and icons, with emotions skimmed over, and each sentence stylishly aware of its own stylishness. She had read many of them, because he recommended them, but they were like cotton candy that so easily evaporated from her tongue's memory.

She closed the novel; it was too hot to concentrate. She ate some melted chocolate, sent Dike a text to call her when he was finished with basketball practice, and fanned herself. She read the signs on the opposite wall—NO ADJUSTMENTS TO BRAIDS AFTER ONE WEEK. NO PERSONAL CHECKS. NO REFUNDS—but she carefully avoided looking at the corners of the room because she knew that clumps of mouldy newspapers would be stuffed beneath pipes and grime and things long rotten.

Finally, Aisha finished with her customer and asked what colour Ifemelu wanted for her hair attachments.

"Colour four."

"Not good colour," Aisha said promptly.

"That's what I use."

"It look dirty. You don't want colour one?"

"Colour one is too black, it looks fake," Ifemelu said, loosening her headwrap. "Sometimes I use colour two, but colour four is closest to my natural colour."

Aisha shrugged, a haughty shrug, as though it was not her problem if her customer did not have good taste. She reached into a cupboard, brought out two packets of attachments, checked to make sure they were both the same colour.

She touched Ifemelu's hair. "Why you don't have relaxer?"

"I like my hair the way God made it."

"But how you comb it? Hard to comb," Aisha said.

Ifemelu had brought her own comb. She gently combed her hair, dense, soft and tightly coiled, until it framed her head like a halo. "It's not hard to comb if you moisturize it properly," she said, slipping into the coaxing tone of the proselytizer that she used whenever she was trying to convince other black women about the merits of wearing their hair natural. Aisha snorted; she clearly could not understand why anybody would choose to suffer through combing natural hair, instead of simply relaxing it. She sectioned out Ifemelu's hair, plucked a little

attachment from the pile on the table and began deftly to twist.

"It's too tight," Ifemelu said. "Don't make it tight." Because Aisha kept twisting to the end, Ifemelu thought that perhaps she had not understood, and so Ifemelu touched the offending braid and said, "Tight, tight."

Aisha pushed her hand away. "No. No. Leave it. It good."

"It's tight!" Ifemelu said. "Please loosen it."

Mariama was watching them. A flow of French came from her. Aisha loosened the braid.

"Sorry," Mariama said. "She doesn't understand very well."

But Ifemelu could see, from Aisha's face, that she understood very well. Aisha was simply a true market woman, immune to the cosmetic niceties of American customer service. Ifemelu imagined her working in a market in Dakar, like the braiders in Lagos who would blow their noses and wipe their hands on their wrappers, roughly jerk their customers' heads to position them better, complain about how full or how hard or how short the hair was, shout out to passing women, while all the time conversing too loudly and braiding too tightly.

"You know her?" Aisha asked, glancing at the television screen.

"What?"

Aisha repeated herself, and pointed at the actress on the screen.

"No," Ifemelu said.

"But you Nigerian."

"Yes, but I don't know her."

Aisha gestured to the pile of DVDs on the table. "Before, too much voodoo. Very bad. Now Nigeria film is very good. Big nice house!"

Ifemelu thought little of Nollywood films, with their exaggerated histrionics and their improbable plots, but she nodded in agreement because to hear "Nigeria" and "good" in the same sentence was a luxury, even coming from this strange Senegalese woman, and she chose to see in this an augury of her return home.

Everyone she had told she was moving back seemed surprised, expecting an explanation, and when she said she was doing it because she wanted to, puzzled lines would appear on foreheads.

"You are closing your blog and selling your condo to go back to Lagos and work for a magazine that doesn't pay that well," Aunty Uju had said and then repeated herself, as though to make Ifemelu

see the gravity of her own foolishness. Only her old friend in Lagos, Ranyinudo, had made her return seem normal. "Lagos is now full of American returnees, so you better come back and join them. Every day you see them carrying a bottle of water as if they will die of heat if they are not drinking water every minute," Ranyinudo said. They had kept in touch, she and Ranyinudo, throughout the years. At first, they wrote infrequent letters, but as cybercafés opened, cell phones spread and Facebook flourished, they communicated more often. It was Ranyinudo who had told her, some years ago, that Obinze was getting married. "Meanwhile o, he has serious money now. See what you missed!" Ranyinudo had said. Ifemelu feigned indifference to this news. She had cut off contact with Obinze, after all, and so much time had passed, and she was newly in a relationship with Blaine, and happily easing herself into a shared life. But after she hung up, she thought endlessly of Obinze. Imagining him at his wedding left her with a feeling like sorrow, a faded sorrow. But she was pleased for him, she told herself, and to prove to herself that she was pleased for him, she decided to write to him. She was not sure if he still used his old address and she sent the e-mail half expecting that he would not reply, but he did. She did not write again, because she by then had acknowledged her own small, still-burning light. It was best to leave things alone. Last December, when Ranyinudo told her she had run into him at the Palms mall, with his baby daughter (and Ifemelu still could not picture this new sprawling, modern mall in Lagos; all that came to mind when she tried to was the cramped Mega Plaza she remembered)—"He was looking so *clean*, and his daughter is so fine," Ranyinudo said—Ifemelu felt a pang at all the changes that had happened in his life.

"Nigeria film very good now," Aisha said again.

"Yes," Ifemelu said enthusiastically. This was what she had become, a seeker of signs. Nigerian films were good, therefore her move back home would be good.

"You from Yoruba in Nigeria," Aisha said.

"No. I am Igbo."

"You Igbo?" For the first time, a smile appeared on Aisha's face, a smile that showed as much of her small teeth as her dark gums. "I think you Yoruba because you dark and Igbo fair. I have two Igbo men. Very good. Igbo men take care of women real good."

Aisha was almost whispering, a sexual suggestion in her tone, and in the mirror, the discoloration on her arms and neck became ghastly sores. Ifemelu imagined some bursting and oozing, others flaking. She looked away.

"Igbo men take care of women real good," Aisha repeated. "I want marry. They love me but they say the family want Igbo woman. Because Igbo marry Igbo always."

Ifemelu swallowed the urge to laugh. "You want to marry both of them?"

"No." Aisha made an impatient gesture. "I want marry one. But this thing is true? Igbo marry Igbo always?"

"Igbo people marry all kinds of people. My cousin's husband is Yoruba. My uncle's wife is from Scotland."

Aisha paused in her twisting, watching Ifemelu in the mirror, as though deciding whether to believe her.

"My sister say it is true. Igbo marry Igbo always," she said.

"How does your sister know?"

"She know many Igbo people in Africa. She sell cloth."

"Where is she?"

"In Africa."

"Where? In Senegal?"

"Benin."

"Why do you say Africa instead of just saying the country you mean?" Ifemelu asked.

Aisha clucked. "You don't know America. You say Senegal and American people, they say, Where is that? My friend from Burkina Faso, they ask her, your country in Latin America?" Aisha resumed twisting, a sly smile on her face, and then asked, as if Ifemelu could not possibly understand how things were done here, "How long you in America?"

Ifemelu decided then that she did not like Aisha at all. She wanted to curtail the conversation now, so that they would say only what they needed to say during the six hours it would take to braid her hair, and so she pretended not to have heard and instead brought out her phone. Dike had still not replied to her text. He always replied within minutes, or maybe he was still at basketball practice, or with his friends, watching some silly video on YouTube. She called him and left a long message, raising her voice, going on and on about his basketball prac-

tice and was it as hot up in Massachusetts and was he still taking Page to see the movie today. Then, feeling reckless, she composed an e-mail to Obinze and, without permitting herself to reread it, she sent it off. She had written that she was moving back to Nigeria and, even though she had a job waiting for her, even though her car was already on a ship bound for Lagos, it suddenly felt true for the first time. *I recently decided to move back to Nigeria.*

Aisha was not discouraged. Once Ifemelu looked up from her phone, Aisha asked again, "How long you in America?"

Ifemelu took her time putting her phone back into her bag. Years ago, she had been asked a similar question, at a wedding of one of Aunty Uju's friends, and she had said two years, which was the truth, but the jeer on the Nigerian's face had taught her that, to earn the prize of being taken seriously among Nigerians in America, among Africans in America, indeed among immigrants in America, she needed more years. Six years, she began to say when it was just three and a half. Eight years, she said when it was five. Now that it was thirteen years, lying seemed unnecessary but she lied anyway.

"Fifteen years," she said.

"Fifteen? That long time." A new respect slipped into Aisha's eyes. "You live here in Trenton?"

"I live in Princeton."

"Princeton." Aisha paused. "You student?"

"I've just finished a fellowship," she said, knowing that Aisha would not understand what a fellowship was, and in the rare moment that Aisha looked intimidated, Ifemelu felt a perverse pleasure. Yes, Princeton. Yes, the sort of place that Aisha could only imagine, the sort of place that would never have signs that said QUICK TAX REFUND; people in Princeton did not need quick tax refunds.

"But I'm going back home to Nigeria," Ifemelu added, suddenly remorseful. "I'm going next week."

"To see the family."

"No. I'm moving back. To live in Nigeria."

"Why?"

"What do you mean, why? Why not?"

"Better you send money back. Unless your father is big man? You have connections?"

"I've found a job there," she said.

"You stay in America fifteen years and you just go back to work?" Aisha smirked. "You can stay there?"

Aisha reminded her of what Aunty Uju had said, when she finally accepted that Ifemelu was serious about moving back—*Will you be able to cope?*—and the suggestion, that she was somehow irrevocably altered by America, had grown thorns on her skin. Her parents, too, seemed to think that she might not be able to "cope" with Nigeria. "At least you are now an American citizen, so you can always return to America," her father had said. Both of them had asked if Blaine would be coming with her, their question heavy with hope. It amused her how often they asked about Blaine now, since it had taken them a while to make peace with the idea of her black American boyfriend. She imagined them nursing quiet plans for her wedding; her mother would think of a caterer and colours, and her father would think of a distinguished friend he could ask to be the sponsor. Reluctant to flatten their hope, because it took so little to keep them hoping, which in turn kept them happy, she told her father, "We decided I will come back first and then Blaine will come after a few weeks."

"Splendid," her father said, and she said nothing else because it was best if things were simply left at splendid.

Aisha tugged a little too hard at her hair. "Fifteen years in America very long time," Aisha said, as though she had been pondering this. "You have boyfriend? You marry?"

"I'm also going back to Nigeria to see my man," Ifemelu said, surprising herself. *My man.* How easy it was to lie to strangers, to create with strangers the versions of our lives that we have imagined.

"Oh! Okay!" Aisha said, excited; Ifemelu had finally given her a comprehensible reason for wanting to move back. "You will marry?"

"Maybe. We'll see."

"Oh!" Aisha stopped twisting and stared at her in the mirror, a dead stare, and Ifemelu feared, for a moment, that the woman had clairvoyant powers and could tell she was lying.

"I want you see my men. I call them. They come and you see them. First I call Chijioke. He work cab driver. Then Emeka. He work security. You see them."

"You don't have to call them just to meet me."

"No. I call them. You tell them Igbo can marry not Igbo. They listen to you."

"No, really. I can't do that."

Aisha kept speaking as if she hadn't heard. "You tell them. They listen to you because you their Igbo sister. Any one is okay. I want marry."

Ifemelu looked at Aisha, a small, ordinary-faced Senegalese woman with patchwork skin who had two Igbo boyfriends, implausible as it seemed, and who was now insistent that Ifemelu should meet them and urge them to marry her. It would have made for a good blog post: "A Peculiar Case of a Non-American Black, or How the Pressures of Immigrant Life Can Make You Act Crazy."