

I feel the yellow Ugandan sun for the first time when I leave the Entebbe airport. I pretend not to notice the warmth, fearful of what I might be communicating to those around me – hundreds of Ugandans, people I am yearning to notice but afraid to be noticed by. I hold a white book in my left hand, *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates, which just happens to be what I'm reading, and I walk with a practiced confidence through the rows of drivers and passersby, looking for my name, searching for any signal that, between me and the world I am entering, I am the lesser confused.

The background music in my head goes something like this: *Race is the child of racism. Race is the accumulative result of many deliberate choices in history, decisions to draw distinctions where previously there were none.* Hoping desperately to see my name, to avoid having to turn around and ask for help, which I know would betray my waning confidence, I set my navy suitcase down momentarily and re-adjust the ringed pillow around my neck. I feel the whiteness of my skin turning red, as if an inner acknowledgement of difference is being pushed outwards. *Is my recognition of difference – and their recognition of difference – something learned and internalized? Is this feeling extractable from my deepest wiring?*

I see my name written in red Sharpie on a piece of white printer paper, held by a short man in a yellow polo shirt. When he leads me to his car, I ask if I can sit in the front – I am still intent on acting comfortable, as if any Ugandan would believe I'd been here before or, better yet, as if I could convince them I was here to stay. He says yes and, when I duck my head into the car, he shakes his head and smiles in part amusement, part tired annoyance. "*Mzungu*, that's the driver's side."

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Joel tells me at lunch that his last name is *Twesigye* and that it means *we trust*. I resist the urge to tell him it's a beautiful name, knowing that I'll sound exactly like the type of outsider I try hard not to be. I've become skilled at substituting my awe with indifference. Besides, my Ugandan friends – Joel, Kyambadde, Cora – expect me to be strong and emotionless, masculine to the core. Days prior, when I showed up to the office on a cloudy morning wearing my pink sweater from J. Crew, Cora asked me if I was gay and I laughed like I was in middle school.

Most days at lunch we eat *matooke*, which is mashed plantains, and *ugali*, a corn-based starch which I've been told repeatedly, with great glee, has been pilfered from traditional Kenyan cuisine. That day, Joel asks me for the first time whether I'm enjoying myself in Uganda. He asks this in the only way he knows how: "How do you find our women? Have you engaged in any, what do I say, ... extracurriculars yet?"

I tell him he's asked a very interesting question, that I'm enjoying Uganda tremendously and I could never have imagined how different it would be compared to the US, to which Joel tells me I haven't answered the question and that, if I'm not planning to *partake* in the Ugandan women, I might as well go home now as Uganda has nothing else worthwhile to offer me. I laugh with him, genuinely, and internally I situate his confusion into the larger confusion around my presence in Uganda. I hear the question he wants to ask, which most of them want to ask: why are you here when you could be in America?

Because Joel also wants to know what I do after work and during weekends, I tell him I've been reading a short book called *Between the World and Me*, which I say is by an African-American man interested in the history of racism and the way blackness has been objectified and vilified in American history; although I hate summarizing books, I'm curious to see how Joel will react. He laughs and says, "One of those books... I don't understand it. I don't get why black people in your country behave this way." I take note of what Joel has said but don't react – can't react – knowing I'll need to scrutinize this answer later. Feeling Joel's eyes on me, I joke, "Sounds like you'd be interested. I'll bring it tomorrow so you can take it home with you."

As the conversation moves on, I'm stuck with the image of Joel holding my white paperback book, a book I've brought here from a different world, whose secrets about American history I'm starting to realize I've been too excited to universalize. Inside, my desire to celebrate Ugandaness, to celebrate difference, to put into words the unique beauty of all that surrounds me in this country is silenced by a confused insistence on universal rules of race and a desire to understand the physical distinctions between myself and my friends in some way irreducible to trope. Irreducible to a word, even sentences, paragraphs, essays. Irreducible to anything.

On Wednesdays, Joel and I attend the fitness class that's put on in the backyard, so do most people in the office. The first part of class is running circles in the grass. The yard is wide and green and half of it is cast in shade by fruit trees. I always run quickly through the sunny half and slowly through the shady half and the instructor, whose bulging muscles appear to be credential enough, teases me with a smile, "Look at *mzungu*! He doesn't like the sun!" Next, we all sit in a circle and do exercises like pushups and sit-ups. The instructor says, "Okay, the ladies are doing this one too but, men, try to stay focused," and one of the women says, "It's the skinny one here you have to watch out for," pointing to Joel. Joel takes it with a smile and teases back, "I'm over here getting big... I don't want you getting distracted either!" When it wraps up, everyone finds their way to the parking lot and a jackfruit appears from somewhere, magically, so large it has to be carried in and presented like a newborn baby. Sliced in half and then ripped into smaller sections, the fruit is passed from person to person. The bright yellow fruit — whose taste and smell is immediately reminiscent of the gum *Juicy Fruit* — is so juicy and sweet it's addicting. We stand around with sticky hands leaning in and out of conversation, some of us really wanting to eat a *lot* of jackfruit, and the blue of the afternoon sky overhead isn't disturbed at all, except for by the branches of the tall leafy trees where monkeys hide, and the hums of the motorbikes on the road are coming closer and getting farther away, giving shape to our ritual.

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Several hot weeks pass before I meet Irem. Her family lives above me in the Victory Suites building – which is the nicest apartment complex in my neighborhood and, for all I know, maybe the nicest in Kampala. It is a small, tidy building on a hill and I have no idea she lives here until I meet her father and, after I meet him a few more times, he invites me to join him for dinner. On a Thursday night, I climb the single flight of stairs and knock on a door identical to mine.

Irem's family is from Turkey. She's in Uganda for the summer visiting her father, who's lived in Kampala for over a year supervising a construction site. Irem is tall and she holds eye contact longer than anyone I've ever met. I sit across from

her father and she serves us a red lentil soup and then a pepper stuffed with something I don't recognize but am too shy to question. Her father interrogates me about life in America but he grows quiet when he learns I haven't been to Philadelphia and that I'm not familiar with the Philadelphia subway, which he claims to have designed. Breaking the silence, Irem tells me she is 20-years-old, that she studies literature at a university in Turkey and, when I make too big a deal of the fact that I am also 20 and that I also study literature, her father jerks my attention once again and begins imploring me about the toughness of the US president – “your tough president,” he says, as if daring me to disagree. When the night is over and I return to my apartment, I find Irem has messaged me on Facebook, apologizing for her father's behavior and asking if I'd like to compare books sometime.

I realize quickly that Irem and I's relationship is conditioned on our non-blackness, the way in which we are both obviously and unavoidably set apart in this country. Of course, Irem and I would be different in America and we would be different in Turkey but, in Uganda, we are similar enough. It is one of few places in the world in which she and I seem to inhabit some adjacent racial category.

In my apartment one night, she tells me she thinks Uganda is too dirty and I respond with a soft noise just to say I've heard her. I can sense that her comment is meant to break a pretense, and I am worried about what my agreement might invite her to say next. Later in the summer, she tells me she is not attracted to Ugandan men and then that she feels unsafe around them and then that she doesn't want the young Ugandan women to do her laundry anymore. On each occasion I am weighed down by the complicity of my silence.

On the night before I leave Uganda forever, I invite Irem over to pick up the books I had long promised her. When she flips through them, she singles out the white paperback with large black letters, *Between the World and Me*, and asks me to describe it. “Well...”, I start, “it's about black bodies being perceived as disposable throughout American history” but I decide to simplify and start over, “It's an African-American guy writing to his son basically about racism in America”. Still smiling, Irem says to me, “How can a black person write about racism in America? Isn't that a biased opinion?” Although I realize she is not joking, I laugh at her, out of my own embarrassment and sense of shame. I wonder briefly if I should respond to her reasoning but I quickly remember how fraught the politics of sanctimony are and I know I won't be able to hide my self-righteousness; I am ashamed of the deep condescension I have developed towards Irem. Once she is gone forever, I interrogate her leftover presence: who is supposed to write on this topic? What does it mean for an opinion to be biased? How are you so kind and yet so cruel?

That evening, I feel the warmth of the falling Ugandan sun for the last time and I recognize it for exactly what it is: a little piece of simplicity, something that doesn't need figuring out. I think about where my experiences have left me, about the voices in the soundtrack of my summer, and about all the ways I've been proven wrong. I say goodbye to a place that I am only beginning to know, which answered my questions with more questions, which had already become a memory, where I became one thing and left another.