

# If the Label Sticks

Isabelle de Courtivron Prize Submission  
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“Dear Non-American Black, when you make the choice to come to America, you become black. Stop arguing. Stop saying I'm Jamaican or I'm Ghanaian. America doesn't care.”

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Americanah*

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It is October 2nd - my birthday - and I keep seeing statuses and posts all over my social media about Solange Knowles' new album, *A Seat at the Table*. After seeing what feels like the 20th post, I type in the album title on Spotify, somewhat exasperated.

Nothing could have prepared me for what I would hear. 51 minutes and 43 seconds of words and raw emotions that sounded familiar, at once understandable, although I could never claim to have experienced the exact feelings of rage, despair, and empowerment about which Knowles croons.

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You see, I am Black, but I am not African-American; I am African. What does that mean? I am not sure even I know, or understand. Growing up in Ghana, West Africa, I never identified as Black, but simply as Ghanaian. There were no labels and no need to explain my braids or Senegalese twists to my classmates.

Ghana was Ghana, and Accra was home. Your mother woke you up at the crack of dawn, had you bathe and moisturize with Cocoa butter before neatening your braids, brushing your eyebrows and making sure you had your tiny gold hoop earrings on. After nursery, I went to an International School, and was instantly immersed in a sea of different hues of skin, different eyes, different backgrounds. Scotland, Pakistan, Kenya, South Africa ... were never far away; all I had to do was look around me to find a small five year-old face who could point to one of the big colorful maps in our classroom to show where else they called home. Tolerance was not just taught, it was implied as being innate. All this time, I was still never told that I was black, and it simply never occurred to any of us to call Calum white or Kajol brown.

Accra wasn't my only home - London was too, and I constantly found myself oscillating between both worlds, as unquestionably in love with both as any child is. London was simple, beautiful and easy; it was listening to Jazz FM in the mornings as I had my Greek yogurt and orange juice; it was skipping the cracks in the pavement on typical rainy English mornings; it was waving to Skye or Anna and their mums on our way to school.

Accra, by contrast, was my father's dark emerald BMW; it was the BBC World Service when he picked me up from school; it was a spicy kebab and a Sprite at the local sit-out

he and I would frequent while waiting for Mummy to get off work; it was *Harmattan* - the dusty Eastern winds that swept everything in a swathe of quiet, dreamy fog on December mornings; it was running to hide from my piano tutor as soon as I heard his baritone voice fill the foyer; it was swirling creamy evaporated milk into my *Tom Brown* - toasted cornmeal porridge - at breakfast.

Dipping in and out of each world should have been hard, but it wasn't; although the faces changed in each place, the variety of them did not. Oddly, even in London, I was never questioned about my kinky curls or my accent; I was never made to feel different, because London itself was the epitome of different. Weekends were spent wandering through the African food shops at Finsbury Park, in the recesses of the Tube or on the 390 Bus to Oxford Street, always surrounded by an eclectic medley of faces. London was the Indian newsagent, the Turkish bakery, the Greek real estate agent; it was my class teacher, Miss Padmore, with her West Indian lilt and abundance of gleaming, ebony hair.

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My parents never discussed race explicitly; instead there were always oblique references, always the underlying sense that there was something being left unsaid.

Then one night, while at our regular weekend haunt in Accra, *Fridays*, we started to talk about me getting married someday. My mother said I could marry whomever I wanted. My father disagreed.

“Absolutely not. Only an African.” his eyebrows creased, the way they would when he was reading a dense book or contemplating a difficult thought. “Frankly, Ghanaian would be best.”

“Oh come on Emile,” implored my mother.

“It’s my opinion and it’s final,” he responded darkly.

I didn’t know what to say; I was five.

When I was eight, my father passed away. He left me his library of books, several beautifully written, wisdom-filled letters, and the greatest gift of all - his memory, which has been my guiding light since, unfading, a relic of some of my brightest dreams and my happiest moments. I found out later that he had once been married to a German woman in the ‘70s and had endured incredible racism from her family and society at the time. I have many questions, but it is a door that has already been locked, with a key that has gone missing.

The first time my mother and I discussed racism, I was thirteen. We were in Dubai, and for the first time in my life, I noticed there were no other faces like ours in the hotel. One morning, after entering the lift, my mother smiled and greeted the elderly white couple opposite us. Silence. The man, crowned by a halo of ivory hair, grimaced. As the trip wore on, I suddenly became aware of the looks we garnered, in the restaurant, at the mall, in shops. What was so different about us? What was wrong? My mother had no answer. "Some people won't like you because of how you look, but it simply isn't your problem, you can't let it be." was all she said. Then, that same summer, a bus driver in London refused to pull up at the stop when we held out our hands. My mother was scandalized, muttering that she thought things had changed since the '80s.

Yet in spite of all of this, the concept of me being Black, of racism being some sort of dark, overhanging cloud, remained limited to exasperated mutterings, school trips to Elmina Castle, and lessons on a long past and seemingly buried Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. African-Americans, our long lost cousins, were a source of fascination; people who sounded completely different, but looked just like us. I could count the number of times I had come into contact with any Black Americans, or Americans for that matter. To me, the endless sheet of azure Atlantic water between us made the U.S. a completely disparate world.

How ironic then, that I ended up in Boston after secondary school. I had applied to MIT more out of curiosity than anything else, not really expecting to hear back. England still had my heart, and I longed for university years filled with the ornate architecture and perfectly manicured lawns that were so emblematic of Oxford and Cambridge. Boston, however, represented a world untouched in my conscience, novel in every possible way to me. It meant the difficult task of leaving behind everything and everyone I had known my entire life in the pursuit of something different, something more.

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“Oh my god, I *love* your braids. Can I touch? How do you do them? Is it all your hair?”

“Wow, Ghana? Where is that? It must be *so* different there. I thought you were British.”

“So how come your English is so good? Where’d you learn it?”

“What kind of clothes do you wear in Ghana? Anything similar to here?”

Orientation was a barrage of questions, a torrent of innocuous queries that threw me into a perpetual state of irritation and angst. I felt like some kind of tropical fruit on display. How did people not know these things? Why was Ghana so distant, so unheard of, to everyone here? I had never been asked where Ghana was before. Boston itself



was uniquely novel to me; I had never heard so many American accents at once. Here people said “How’re you” without expecting an answer, and “You’re good” when you accidentally bumped into them. It felt like my world had been turned upside down.

Before leaving, a mutual family friend had sat solemnly with me and given me advice: find the Black Students’ Union and the African Students Association as soon as you can - you will need them; don’t go out late and don’t explore the city alone, not everyone will be happy to see someone like you there. I didn’t understand, but I smiled and nodded anyway.

Amidst the flurry of orientation excitement, I soon forgot to find the BSU and ASA, but kept hearing about “recruitment” and how everyone would be going. At the time, sororities were a mystery, ridiculed back home as an odd element of modern American culture, full of blonde girls, house parties and red cups. Naturally, I soon found out this wasn’t quite true, and eager to find a diverse group of friends, joined one. I have always been incredibly proud of my sorority, of the diversity it fosters, of the confidence it has taught me in interacting with a myriad of people, no matter how different they look from me, but I have to be honest. I have to admit that even though no one asked me to, all I wanted, was somewhere to fit in, to find balance in a new world I couldn’t make sense of. I didn’t notice it at first, but I started to change. My braids got longer, sleeker,

and then disappeared altogether. I began to wear my hair straight, put in extensions and blonde highlights, bought a pair of boat shoes. I started to notice that people were less interested in hearing about my home across the water in Accra, preferring to latch on to my British-flecked accent and London. I was puzzled, hurt, upset; why was Accra not as interesting, not as sexy, as London? But I said nothing; I simply spoke about London more. Michael Brown had been shot a few months earlier, and the Black Lives Matter movement had begun to gain traction; still, I stayed stagnant, unmoving, not knowing how to respond, not wanting to tarnish the safe, racism-free, diverse bubble I was living in with my fear and confusion. It was better to pretend prejudice did not exist in my world.

Then, a year later, after Thanksgiving, I sat in my dorm lounge. Discussion turned to a recent trip to Guangzhou, and how beautiful I found the children there.

“It’s not like you’ll end up marrying a Chinese man though.” laughed my Australian floormate, Matt.

“What? Why not? Who knows?” I interjected, bemused.

“They don’t tend to date black women. There’s a study on it.”

Matt proceeded to describe how different races had been ranked based on increasing masculinity. It went from Asian, to White, to Black, for both men and women, meaning that Black women were the most masculine, and thus least attractive females. This would mean we were on the opposite side of the spectrum from Asian males, who would be the least masculine. I could not believe what I was hearing. But Matt wouldn't stop.

"Why are you so angry?" he said. "It's only statistically accurate - some amount of stereotyping is useful." He continued, "It helps us to categorize quickly."

I was stumped. Here I was, this Ghanaian girl; I had never asked for a label, for a category, and yet here I was, being plastered with labels and simultaneously lumped into several categories that were apparently a statistically accurate predictor of my femininity. How insulting; how belittling; how tragic.

My disenchantment with the world around me was gradual, a slow realization of some vague, over-arching truth. I started to notice how quickly eyes would glaze over at parties when I introduced myself and said I was from Ghana, that Accra was absolutely amazing. It was a stinging truth - I did not fit in, not *really*, and it was because I was different; because I was from a different place, because I looked different.

All this time, I still did not seek solace or understanding or comfort in the BSU or ASA, even though I had joined both. I was convinced I could fix things if I went out more, or learned more about everyday American life, if I rolled my r's more. But it didn't work, and I felt so vulnerable, so self-conscious, and for the first time, not because of my weight or my grades or some aspect of everyday adolescent life, but because of my color. It was a way I had never felt before, and one morning it hit me - this feeling of "other-ness", this not-belonging because my roots stemmed far away - was this what it meant to be Black? Was this how African-Americans felt? The realization, and the comprehension, were shattering.

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Recently, I saw a video of a Ghanaian man traveling to a South American village to meet its inhabitants, who had settled there during the Slave Trade. He had barely stepped off a small wooden canoe when an old man ambled up to him. Excitedly, he began to speak in a native dialect, and the Ghanaian man paused, taken aback because he understood. My skin prickled as I watched, because there was such a heavy sense of belonging, of an unavoidable separation, of an unshakeable bond.

I reflect on all this and it is suddenly clear. I see why listening to Solange's album spoke so clearly to me - it is like standing at a window and seeing my people on the other side; they sound different but they look like me - we are reflections of each other, a constant reminder that we once shared more than skin, separated by time, ships and an incredible fight for freedom that I cannot even begin to comprehend.

My life has barely begun, and I am slowly learning that there is still more to learn, that there will always be more to learn. The fact is that I am a child of two worlds and an adult of three. I am more a nomad than anything else, not belonging and yet also belonging. I am a melange of too many things and forces and influences because I have left little pieces of my heart in London and Accra; I have abandoned them and moved to Boston and started a new life, and the guilt wracks me sometimes, because homesickness is real, an ache too painful to ever truly fade. Every time I make the flights, several thousands of miles at a time, through Heathrow or Dubai Airport, I am astounded at how easily buildings, people and cars fade into little flecks, at how easy it is to leave one life behind and simply go and continue another one. I am taken aback at how at one I feel with the swarm of people milling around each airport, as if we are all friends, somehow all tied together by something more. It is why the concept of having labels makes me so anxious; it is so unnatural, so inhuman.

I don't claim to understand human beings, or society and its issues; they are too complex, too nuanced, for a mind as young as mine, or perhaps for any mind at all. All I know is that while living in America, I have found a long lost part of my history; I have found some of my skin, my blood that went missing across ripples of ocean. Centuries may have passed, but we are still the same, and living here has allowed me the smallest of glimpses into what life can be like for a young African-American woman. I am glad I have gained some insight, but more sad that being African and being African-American are tied to such divergent experiences. I wish I had joined the BSU earlier; I wish I had spoken out more, asked for answers, and tried to understand, instead of pretending I was on the outside looking in.

Now I sit and think about that night when my father was so adamant that I marry a Ghanaian, and I understand it. He knew what he was talking about; he knew how hard it would be to find someone from a different world who could make enough space in theirs to understand mine, and he knew how hard it would be for me to comprehend theirs and feel like I fit into it. I always thought it didn't sound so hard, marrying someone from a completely different culture, but now I wonder, and a little part of me is scared, that it is too mammoth, too Herculean a task to even contemplate. Labels will always interfere, and they are inevitable - it seems like the world, or at least the one in which I currently live, cannot spin if everyone is not plastered with one.

