

**TOO BLACK TO BE FRENCH**

Isabelle Boni-Claverie

Translated by Joshua David Jordan

[Excerpt 1 – p. 19-21]

**Chapter 3: You'll Play Balthazar, My Dear**

I was six years old. I attended a Catholic school run by the Ursuline sisters. No one gave a second thought to my skin color, at least none of the other children did. Blind to my pigmentation, they nicknamed me China Girl because of the especially tight, eye-stretching buns my mother made me wear to tidy up my kinky hair.

I had a lot of friends at school. We played rowdy games at recess. Whatever trouble we got into, the nuns never punished us, figuring they could sort anything out by talking it through. It was the late 1970s, and it seems that the decade's libertarian current had reached all the way to my Catholic school. I remember working little and enjoying myself much during the many outings and pastimes that punctuated our days.

As was the case every year as Christmas approached, one class was chosen to perform the nativity scene. Our turn had come. I immediately saw myself playing the Virgin Mary, kneeling center stage, a long blue veil covering my hair, cradling the pink celluloid doll that was supposed to represent Baby Jesus. In short, I was already the star of the show. Except that our teacher, a stern middle-aged woman, announced that Julie, the daughter of the school's custodian, would be taking the role instead. "As for you, Isabelle," she added, "you'll play Balthazar, the Wise Man from Africa."

I was speechless. I wanted to cry. How could my teacher humiliate me like this? How could she force me to play a boy's role even though I was a girl? Why was I the only one stuck with such

rotten luck? For my teacher, the answer was simple: there was no other black student in the class – nor probably, at the time, in the entire school.

Black. No one had ever said that to me before. Until then, although I was too dark to bear out the tales my parents told, I wasn't black. I was dark brown.

Black.

What was this mysterious term that won out over everything, that was supposed to define who I was? Why was it the opposite of being white? I had a white grandmother. She was of my flesh and blood and I was of hers. I had cousins, uncles, and aunts whose skin colors covered every shade from white to black. I was raised by a white man who, although not my father, considered me his daughter, as did his whole family, all of whom had accepted me without a word. One of my father's sisters often looked after me. She never thought twice when introducing me as her niece; she never tried to explain how she could measure just under five feet, weigh a mere ninety pounds, have straight hair and white skin whereas I was tall, dark, and big-boned, with a head of kinky curls. Let others puzzle out our family ties whichever way they please; we know it's the bonds of the heart that matter most.

I wasn't black. I was dark brown. I didn't want to play Balthazar in the nativity scene. I wanted to continue being that same complex, composite Isabelle and – something important for me at an age when I was just getting a sense of my gender identity – a girl.

Once home, I counted on my mother to get me out of the predicament. But she thought it was an excellent idea, and to console me she promised a handsome costume for the king.

The day of the nativity scene, I was again overcome by the urge to cry. My costume amounted to a red turtleneck, which in winter I already wore nearly once a week, and velour pants

– I would indeed be looking like a boy. My mother draped me in several yards of shapeless red satin, whether to evoke the pagnes of Akan chiefs or a Roman toga, it was hard to say. Satisfied with the result, she placed a crown on my head. And what a crown it was! The kind given away for free with king cakes at Epiphany, the ones in gold paper, with colored dots passed off as gemstones. I held a dirty-brown box that was supposed to represent the chest of myrrh Balthazar gave to Baby Jesus. Suffice it to say, by the time I stepped forward to deliver my gift to Mary and Joseph, every bit of Christian charity in me had long departed. If daggers had shot from my eyes, I would have murdered Julie-who-got-to-play-Mary, my teacher, and all the organizers of this nativity farce.

There was no one among my family or friends to tell me that it wasn't normal to be assigned a black role, that I shouldn't be essentialized or be made the representative of all those – around a billion, mind you – who shared the same pigmentation as mine.

---

[Excerpt 2 – p. 139-141]

#### **Chapter 14: My First Black Role Models**

*[After her less-than-happy experience abroad as a fifteen-year-old, when she stayed with a black host-family in Melbourne, Florida, Isabelle returns to the United States...]*

My trip to New York in 1991 was a completely different story. No doubt reassured to see me back in school – after my return to France in the fall, I would start a program in art history at the École du Louvre – my parents loosened the reins. This time I went to stay with a friend from Abidjan who was studying at NYU. There was no one to chaperon me or to make me do anything I didn't want to do. It didn't matter that our Manhattan apartment was barely fit for habitation, or that at night the white kitchen tiles became black with cockroaches. I was free. As soon as I

unpacked, I headed for a telephone booth to call my mother to tell her I had made it safe and sound. It was shortly after noon, bright as can be. In the booth next to me, a man plunged a syringe into his arm; he was shooting up. I stared wide-eyed. Welcome to New York, where anything can happen!

At night, my friend DJed at parties that brought together Africans and African-Americans, as American blacks were beginning to be called. It was at one of these parties that I met Gerome. He was a law student, came from Detroit, grew up in a ghetto. His older brother had been killed. He was the first in his family to go to college. One afternoon, he came to pick me up for a walk in the city with his best friend, whose family was Haitian. They were waiting for me in front of my apartment building. It was terribly hot outside. They both were wearing Bermuda shorts, tank tops, and baseball caps on backward. I was struck by their outfits, by their tall figures that stood out against the concrete walls, and by their way of being at once so relaxed and so self-assured. But then, as I went to greet them, I stopped, taken aback. On their left forearms, they each had a large puffy scar in the shape of a Greek letter: the sign of their fraternity. To join this exclusively black student society, they had been branded. Like slaves.

I thought about the pain they must have suffered. The burning flesh. The keloid growth that formed where the iron had been pressed. I shuddered imagining how barbaric it was. They were proud of their branding, which proclaimed their membership in a “black frat,” but also, quite simply, their pride in being black.

Unlike the mother of my host family in Melbourne, Gerome showed no hostility toward whites. And yet, for him and his friend, the world was clearly divided in two. On the one side, there were blacks, on the other, whites: two distinct entities with antagonistic interests.

One day, the three of us went to Long Island for a picnic put on by the law firm where Gerome was interning. His friend, who owned a car, a massive air-conditioned thing in the American style, drove us. At some point, we got lost in a residential area. Taking advantage of a red light, Gerome asked a young blond woman in the convertible next to us for directions, which she graciously gave. Gerome thanked her. After he had closed his window and relayed the directions, his friend blurted out: “Never trust a white woman driving a convertible.” Then, with a knowing look, they both burst out laughing.

It was the first time that I had heard anyone talk in that way. A line that seemed straight out of a Tarantino movie summarized everything separating these two young black men from this white woman: gender, race, economic background, and the legacy of segregation, when it was enough for a white woman to accuse a black man of whistling at her for him to be lynched, the idea that, American history being what it is, even when they coexisted, they would never belong to the same world.

A dynamics of race began to dawn on me, one that structures, whether we want it to or not, a large part of our social relationships. I started to see that things weren’t at all what they seemed. Perhaps the white universalism I had grown up with wasn’t the only norm. There existed a political and historical subtext that, were I to grasp it, would allow me to better understand my reality.

---

[Excerpt 3 – p. 117-119]

### **Chapter 12: Alphonse and Rose-Marie: A Mixed-Race Couple in the Colonies**

*[The narrator concludes the previous chapter, in which she discusses the limited perceptions of blackness in France, by evoking the hardships and perseverance of Nina Simone: “A black woman quite simply doesn’t play ‘great’ music. She had to have known: in music theory a black-filled note is never worth more than half of a white one.”*

*NB: Isabelle’s grandparents, Alphonse and Rose-Marie, first met while attending university in Toulouse, where Alphonse, a young black man from Ivory Coast, studied law and*

*prepared to take the judges' exam. They married in the early 1930s despite the vehement opposition of Rose-Marie's small-town French parents.]*

If a white note is worth at least two black-filled notes, then what is a white woman married to a black man worth? As much as, or perhaps less than, a black woman? The harsh reality of racial degradation would soon become part of my grandparents' experience.

On June 2, 1938, the news that Alphonse had been impatiently awaiting for over a year arrived by telegram. He had been named to his first posting in Africa: deputy judge to the court in Lomé, the capital of Togo. After a fourteen-year absence, he would finally return to the continent of his childhood.

Plenty had changed since his arrival in 1924. In the train that took him to Bordeaux, where he would catch the ship for the shores of the Gulf of Guinea, retracing the journey he had made when he left Ivory Coast for the first time, Alphonse's past came rushing back. He saw himself again, my grandmother writes, as "a quivering little boy in his cotton-drill suit, lost and surprised, having formed a picture of France quite different from the reality he encountered. He again saw the scene of his first steps in Bordeaux, his astonishment at the illuminated streets, then his arrival in Angoulême, his five years of boarding school, his life as a student, and finally his reaching the goal he had set for himself. He beheld his entire life with the optimism of his youth."

Alphonse could indeed take pride in the distance he had traveled. He had kept the promise he had made to his parents. He was now a judge. Despite the obstacles, he had married the woman he loved. And only recently he became a father, for Jean-Pierre, my biological father, had been born several months earlier in Gaillac, in the same little house where Rose-Marie herself was born. But his joy was clouded by apprehension. "They would have to confront the issue of skin color, which he had never had to deal with in secondary school or at university. Because of Rose-Marie, he dreaded confronting it. How would she react to the new problems? He reminded himself that

she had managed with her own family quite well. Except in that case, she had settled things at a single blow. How would she hold up against the wear and tear of the petty slights she was bound to be subjected to every day?” As she liked to say, where they were going, “there mustn’t be many couples in half-mourning.”

“Half-mourning.” After full-mourning attire, all in black, there was half-mourning, in which white and black could be worn together. That’s how my grandmother referred to her and her husband.

The racism that Alphonse feared for his young wife showed itself even before they set foot on the ship for Africa. As they edged their way up the gangway, Rose-Marie’s attention was drawn to two old colonials speaking loudly enough for her to hear.

“Look at that Negro heading for the first-class deck.”

“Mostly likely a West Indian. You see them everywhere.”

“No, he looks African.”

“A Senegalese?”

“No.”

“If the Negroes get an education, what’ll happen to us?”

Fortunately, Alphonse, too busy protecting his son from the pushing and shoving in line, didn’t hear a thing. Rose-Marie preferred to keep quiet. But that evening, in the ship’s dining room: “the passengers, comprised mostly of colonial administrators, military doctors, and officers, were arranged by rank.” She and Alphonse were seated at a table of non-commissioned officers, which in no way corresponded to my grandfather’s position. They were there, of course, because he was black.

Made uncomfortable by the exchange of barracks jokes at her own table, Rose-Marie observed the social comedy playing out around her. As she put it herself, she felt as if she were in one of Georges Courteline’s satires. “The civil servants of various ranks eyed one another scornfully. Madame Chief Administrator, who found herself seated to the right of the ship’s captain, surveyed with steely hauteur the unfortunate ladies whose lesser-ranked husbands had never had the singular honor of having a place at the Official Table. The wife of an infantry colonel inspected through her lorgnette the troop of blushing student administrators, among whom she might find husbands for her three daughters accompanying her, three girls noisily evincing their stupidity.”

When Rose-Maire later expressed how surprised she was by such behavior, Alphonse explained that “as soon as these women board, they already have one foot in the colony, and enjoy the prestige that comes with skin color and their husbands’ rank.” To which my grandmother sharply replied:

“Ah! Because there’s something prestigious about the epidermis? [...] The scales are finally falling from my eyes. Now I see what racism is. Does the color of a man’s skin give him worth or is it the goodness of his heart? [...] I will never keep company with people who think such things. Never.”

And her voice grew hoarse from sobbing.

---

[Excerpt 4 – p. 166-168]

### **Chapter 17: Where Are You From?**

[...]

“Where are you from?” is probably the question the most frequently asked of blacks in France, the question that pops up the most naturally, so often, in fact, that it makes you wonder if it isn’t the prerequisite to any and all conversation.

“Where are you from?” asks a friend of a friend at a party, asks the person sitting next to me at dinner, asks the colleague making small talk, asks someone I haven’t met in my life. I am on a beach in Portugal. A young Frenchwoman pounces on me: “Your kids are so beautiful! Where are you all from?” I want to tell her, “From France, like you!” But I know very well that that isn’t what interests her. She is asking me where we are from the same way she should inquire about the breed of a dog. What kind of crossbreeding could have produced the physical type she finds so exotic?

I am at a fitness class. The instructor, talking about his dream of retiring in Senegal, notices me and shouts out, “Where are you from?” The question I want to ask him is why he feels he has the right to inquire into my origins, because besides “hello,” we have yet to say a single word to each other.

2005. I am a member of the awards panel at the Amiens International Film Festival. Riots have broken out in the city’s working-class neighborhoods, revealing the discontent of an outcast class of young people of non-European origin. A local politician holds forth about these long-marginalized youths, making them out to be pariahs and adding fuel to their anger. He concludes his tirade, turns to me, and, as naturally as can be, asks me where I am from.

One of my childhood friends to whom I confide feeling offended by the question’s frequency doesn’t understand my exasperation. She thinks it is normal that when people see me, they want to know about my background. For her, it is simply an indication of interest, totally

devoid of racial overtones. In that case, why doesn't anyone ask her where she is from? Because she is white, so naturally from here? She had never thought to ask herself.

“Where are you from?” is a central point where understanding between whites and blacks breaks down. The latter are sick and tired of a question that, they know all too well, they are asked solely because they are black. The former, in all good faith, just don't understand how this sign of curiosity could be racist.

In the United States, Derald Wing Sue, drawing on the work of psychiatrist Chester Pierce, has defined the concept of microaggression. He notes that, after the gains of the civil rights movement, expressions of racism have changed, becoming subtler and more ambiguous, and thus harder to identify. Racial microaggressions are commonplace words or behavior that, whether intentional or not, convey a hostile, degrading, or insulting message to the person or group concerned. Sue stresses that most of the time those who commit microaggressions don't even realize it.

In France, since the 1980s, when associations fighting racism and antisemitism convinced public opinion that being racist was a bad thing, you are hard pressed to find many people openly calling blacks monkeys or dirty niggers, or Arabs ragheads, except among the ranks of the National Front, groups on the extreme right, or in the internet's “Fascisphere.” Microaggressions, on the other hand, are flourishing. We speak of cultural racism or casual racism in France.

“Where are you from?” whites ask blacks, without realizing that the question itself creates a hierarchy. I am from here, the person asking the question implies. I don't have to explain being French; it's self-evident. This gives me the legitimacy to inquire about your origins, you whose skin color tells me that you come from somewhere else, you who could never be as French as I

am, even if we share the same nationality. All those with French citizenship are French. But in the collective unconscious, a person with white skin is more French than anyone else. To ask about origins at the outset implicitly reestablishes a racial definition of national identity.

---

[Excerpt 5 – p. 271-273]

### **Chapter 24: Run, Black Man, Run!**

[...]

Adama Traoré takes off running to avoid a police check. He doesn't have his ID on him. When the police catch him, three officers force him to the ground and hold him there facedown. Adama complains he can't breathe. He dies of asphyxiation.

Neighborhood police carry out another random stop. Théo Luhaka, who has done nothing wrong, intervenes between an officer and a young man. The police try to restrain Théo; Théo struggles. He is hit several times with truncheons and slapped. One officer uses his expandable baton and penetrates it four inches into Théo's anus.

How many like them are killed or injured each year?

A young man between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four identified as black or Arab has twenty times the chance of being stopped by the police than the rest of the French population. But the police, we are told, don't employ ethnic or racial profiling, and François Hollande, once elected president in 2012, abandoned the idea of requiring police officers to issue receipts explaining the grounds for identity checks.

Myself, I am a woman, a mother; I mind my manners. Policemen treat me with respect. They don't make inappropriate remarks. They hand me a tissue when I shed a tear as I file my police report at the station. I like to cry; it relieves me of having to be strong. They tell me, "Don't

worry, ma'am, we'll find him. We don't like guys who go after women." It doesn't matter if the sex offender who tried to assault me is white and I am black, everything is as it always should be. I am not *une Black, une Bamboula*, or whatever else, but myself, Isabelle, a woman who, according to the police, has the right to walk down the street at night without becoming a sexual target.

I was returning home. The last metro had stopped one station before mine, leaving me with a twenty-minute walk. I was alone in the street. As I walked past an overlit shopping arcade, I noticed a shadow on the sidewalk trailing me close behind. A guy, his penis exposed, was trying to rub himself against me. I told him to stop, he continued following me. For a second, I thought I had lost him; then he reappeared, his pants down. There was still no one around. I had to think fast, before fear overtook me. Either I would be a victim and risk getting raped or I would do my best to turn the tables. I took out my cell phone, he turned his back. I shouted that since he was showing me his ass, I was going to take a picture of it. I started snapping away, telling him to turn around so that I could get a shot of his face for the cops. Then he started to move away, insulting me as he went. I immediately dialed the police. I wasn't home yet. At any moment, he might come back. I was still on the line with the dispatcher when an unmarked police car suddenly pulled up and the policemen inside invited me to get in to help them search for the man. Since my attacker was wearing a hooded sweatshirt, they obviously headed for the nearest housing projects.

At each hoodie, every one of which was worn by a young black or Arab, we slowed down. How satisfying it was to tell them, in a reversal of the usual clichés, "No, that's not him. The man was white." The cop in the passenger seat turned to me, "You mean the individual looks European?" He spoke into his police radio, "A Maghrebi-type male. An African-type male. We're continuing our pursuit." In the backseat, I looked out the window, taking in my little tour of the city, nice and warm in my red hooded jacket.

Sometimes, I find the cops amusing. When, for example, just starting out on the job, clearly befuddled by the mysteries of spelling, one of them has to consult a thick dictionary every three words to type up my statement, then, no less bewildered by the dictionary, he can't find the right entry words. I tell him, I can spell the word for you, if you'd like. It will speed things along.

I am still giving my statement when one of the undercover cops returns. He shows me a picture of my assailant on his cell phone. I commend him for being so quick and efficient. You would have thought I was his boss. Probably a quirk I picked up from being escorted with my grandfather by deferential police.

Like everyone else, I prefer the cops in movies. Still, the real ones don't frighten me. What would it be like if they stopped me for no reason several times a year? Or several times a month? I would be a little less of a smartass, that's for sure. And I would undoubtedly know the visceral fear that Ta-Nehisi Coates describes so well in *Between the World and Me*. The ancestral fear instilled in black bodies subjected to attack dogs, the lash, and the whip. Yes, massa. Yes, boss. Yes, sir. Lower your eyes, bow your head, even when you feel like screaming. Acquiesce. Don't move. Make a servile show of your eagerness to hand over your ID. Of course, officer. Save your skin.