

Chapter 3

All that Tayo knew about Mr and Mrs Barker, prior to their first meeting, was that Mr Barker and Headmaster Faircliff had been at Oxford together in the 1940s and that Mr Barker was a history don at St. John's. Tayo presumed, on this basis, that the two men would be similar – that Mr Barker, like Faircliff, would be highly intelligent, pompous and patronising. Tayo was surprised, therefore, to discover that the man was not at all as he expected, and even more surprised to hear Mr Barker freely joke about his old friend as a colonial 'type' and a remnant of a dying era. Mr Barker was nothing like Faircliff; he was softly-spoken and married to a much younger (and very attractive) Italian woman who preferred to be called Isabella rather than Mrs Barker. The couple had no children of their own, but seemed to have adopted a number of foreign students at Oxford. Isabella cooked wonderful meals in a way that reminded Tayo of his own mother, while Mr Barker talked politics like his father. Mr Barker had visited Nigeria on several occasions, which was what made Tayo feel so at home from the beginning.

Today, the Barkers were having a drinks party for foreign students at their house on St. Giles. Isabella welcomed Tayo with the usual hug and kiss before whisking him through the kitchen and into the garden where everyone else was gathered. Tayo felt disappointed that they had to mingle outside rather than inside where it was warmer, but it seemed to Tayo that this was the British way. People spent all day talking about the weather, complaining about how cold, damp and miserable it was, until the sun poked its head around the clouds, and then everyone cheered up and started talking about lovely weather. But 'lovely' to Tayo could only be warm weather, not this cold, pale orange sun sitting high up there in the sky. He was thinking of an excuse to return indoors when he spotted his friend Bolaji standing next to a striking-looking woman. He had only ever

heard of one Nigerian woman at Oxford so he guessed it must be her – the famously beautiful third year, Christine.

They were talking literature when Tayo joined Bolaji's small circle of friends who stood by the back door, which was at least warmer than standing under the apple trees where everyone else had congregated. Bolaji was in the process of arguing that Shakespeare was the greatest author of all time while others argued for Tolstoy and Homer. As Tayo listened, it became obvious that the group knew much more about literature than he did. Even Bolaji was able to roll out an impressive number of literary theorists in support of his position.

"What does Christine think?" Tayo asked, curious to hear her thoughts for he knew that she read Modern Languages.

"Poets are the greatest writers," she answered.

"And why?" he asked, knowing that the safest way to avoid being questioned himself was to do the asking.

He noticed, as Christine talked, that she appeared quite serious: never smiling, despite the fact that the conversation had taken a jocular tone. Tayo had heard men say that Christine was arrogant on account of her beauty. Others thought it was the result of her having lived in England for such a long time. It was rumoured that both her parents had been to school in England and she had been sent to boarding school as a child. Whatever the reason for Christine's apparent seriousness, Tayo was determined to make a good impression on this beautiful woman. She spoke eloquently, like an actress, poised and confident so that Tayo quickly lost track of what everyone else was saying until he heard someone say his name.

"What do you think, Tayo?"

"Me?" he replied, stalling for time. "I think, if I had to choose, it would always be Shakespeare – the sonnets," he said, with the sinking feeling that someone would now ask him to say more, to explain or, God forbid, name a favourite sonnet. To avoid further questions, he mentioned in passing that one of his old teachers had been a poet.

“Christopher Okigbo was your teacher!” Christine exclaimed. Later that evening Bolaji marvelled at Tayo’s good luck.

“Did you see how she lit up when you spoke of Okigbo? She even smiled!”

Tayo laughed, pretending not to have noticed, but of course he had; everybody had noticed.

Tayo did not see Christine again until they bumped into each other the following Monday as she was dashing out of the Covered Market. He invited her to have coffee with him at the Cadena the next day, and to his surprise, she accepted. It was all he could do to stop himself from grinning while saying goodbye.

The following day he was struck by how made up Christine looked. She was the sort of woman who would always look attractive, but it seemed to Tayo that she had put extra effort into styling her hair and adding rouge to her cheeks. He didn’t care for the rouge, finding it artificial, but the fact that she had gone out of her way to look good for him was all that mattered. Perhaps she really did like him, he thought, while she talked again about Okigbo and some of the other new Nigerian authors. He asked her why she was so interested in these writers. Wouldn’t it be more interesting to talk about other writers that she must know from around the world? No, she replied, insisting that her knowledge of Nigeria and Nigerian writers was not good enough. It seemed to matter a great deal what other Nigerians thought of her. If only she knew how in awe of her they all were! Tayo was beginning to think that she was sharing things with him that she might not have shared with others, when she changed the subject and asked him how many girlfriends he had.

“So far I’ve counted five,” she said, referring to the number of women who had passed by their table to say hello to him.

Tayo tried to laugh it off, but Christine wasn’t laughing. It took some days to convince her that he wasn’t the playboy she took him to be. Each time they ran into each other she would find a way of commenting on his female friends, but because she

was still talking to him, Tayo grew bold again and asked if she would like to come to his room for coffee. On Friday night she came, and this time, when she made yet another dig about his so-called girlfriends, Tayo decided to play along. Rather than be defensive, he told her all about his teenage fantasies of Indian women and how he used to go to the Lebanese theatre in Ibadan to watch Indian films. Unable to understand Hindi, what else was he supposed to do but look at the ladies? Christine laughed a lot this time, which gave him the courage to turn serious and tell her how beautiful she was. He still half-expected to be pushed away or for her to say something about how silly and young he was, but she didn't, so he grew bolder and took her hand. And then, because she didn't resist, he drew her close for a kiss.

For the rest of the term, they spent as much time as they could together. Often, they took walks by the river and now it wasn't only him telling her about his background. She shared hers with him, telling him more about her family. There were moments when Tayo felt guilty about Modupe, but he reasoned with himself that he and Modupe had been too young to make promises to each other. Three years was a long time to be apart at their age and now, when he re-read Modupe's letters, they struck him as childish. Modupe was just a girl. With Christine he had gained confidence, so much so that he no longer felt the need to talk about long-term commitments as he had done with Modupe. He was, after all, only nineteen, and now that he had won the chase with Christine, he still hoped to meet other women and further expand his horizons.

Chapter 4

Vanessa cursed herself as she and her friends left the pub. A wet October night was not the time to have worn, of all silly things, a strapless dress with summer sandals. And what on earth was she doing splashing through rain and stubbing her toes on paving stones as she ran towards Balliol? Who was this person whom everyone was talking about as though he were a god? He was supposedly good-looking, from an aristocratic family, captain of boats at Balliol, and a million other marvellous things, none of which meant much to her. Certainly not the aristocratic bit, but she had to stay with her friends because it was late and too dark to walk back to college on her own, even though she still felt tempted to try.

When Vanessa and her friends arrived at the party, someone was thoughtful enough to lend her a towel. She dried herself off, realising only then that the men who stared were looking not at her dress, but through it! "Oh well," she sighed, feeling tired already. "Let them look."

"Care for a drink?" someone asked.

"Would love one." She took the glass and drank the wine quickly.

"I'm Charlie," he smiled, "and you?"

"Tired."

"Well tired is no good," he said, laughing. "Let me get you something." He took her empty glass and returned with a full one and a jumper.

"Not a bad match," she said, and smiled at his choice of clothing. "Oh, look who's here!" Charlie grabbed her hand and pulled her along.

"Mehul, meet.."

"Vanessa," she offered, shaking herself free of Charlie to greet the newcomer whose handshake was firm but a little too lingering. What was wrong with these Oxford men? Still, she

liked the deep tenor of the man's voice and watched him as he wandered off, stepping gingerly over empty wine glasses, toppled bottles, and a body sprawled drunkenly across the floor. It was rare that a man's looks made her stare, but he was Indian, or possibly Arabic, with dark, shoulder-length hair and eyes that reminded her of Omar Sharif. Everyone seemed to recognise Mehul, or at least pretended to know him as they slapped him on the back in inebriated greeting. Apparently he was a well-known artist.

"He's terribly good-looking, isn't he?"

"He is." Vanessa nodded, trying to remember the woman's name, but by now she was finding it difficult to think straight. The woman was in the same college as her. That much she remembered.

"They say he's a prince."

"Really?"

So, a prince and an artist she thought, until seeing that it was someone else the woman was referring to. And God, he was good-looking, too. Tall and dark, with beautiful hands that gestured as he talked. Oh no-no-no, Vanessa thought to herself, when he looked her way. She was a little drunk, but still sober enough to care about looking bedraggled in front of a man like him.

The next morning Vanessa woke up shivering and with a throbbing headache. Every time she moved her head, the pain got worse so she lay still, trying to recall where she had been the night before and what she had done. She couldn't remember how she had managed to get back to her college and swore to herself that she would never drink so much again. She hadn't intended to get drunk but part of the problem, she realised as she got a whiff of burnt toast from somewhere down the hall, was that she hadn't eaten very much. Food was so terrible in college that she had taken to skipping meals. She lay still for a few more minutes, hoping for some sun to brighten the room.

Then, the relentless ringing of Oxford bells began. She tried folding the ends of the pillow over her ears to block out the noise but that didn't help, so she gazed at the fireplace, wishing it could light itself, when she spotted the lump on the floor. "Shit," she whispered, grabbing fistfuls of blanket. Thinking it might be a rat, she cautiously craned her neck and squinted for a better view. "Thank God," she muttered. It was only last night's clothes lying in a crumpled heap – her red dress and Charlie's jumper that she had forgotten to return. She pushed back the blankets, got out of bed and searched for her slippers and dressing gown before padding across the wooden floor to her desk. She took her notebook and hurried back to the warmth of the bed, plumping her pillows so she could sit up comfortably against the wall. But then she remembered something else. Music. She had to have music. She slipped out of bed again and picked Bob Dylan's *The Times They Are a-Changing* from her record collection.

'The trouble with Oxford men,' she began scribbling on her notepad, or better still, 'The trouble with ~~Oxford~~ men.' Either way, there would be no confusing which article she was referring to, given that *The Problem with Women at Oxford* had been published in the same student paper for which she now wrote. She jotted down a list of ideas and then changed her mind. She would write to her best friend, instead.

Dear Jane,

I've just spent a frustrating hour trying to write something on the status of women in Oxford. If only you were here then we could talk about it, but by the time you receive this I will either have written the article or abandoned it. Perhaps part of the problem is that I'm trying to write this piece in response to a silly article arguing that Oxford women are to blame for distracting the men (as though men have nothing to do with their own distractions!). In any case, I think I've now decided

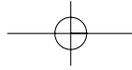
not to bother writing a response. I'll write a totally separate piece on the ways in which we're treated like second-class citizens and how it must change (can you tell that I'm listening to Dylan?).

And now, after all of that, how are you? I miss you so much and can't wait to see you in London next week. You haven't told me what your rooms are like. Do you like them? I love my room, with its view of the college gardens. The birds love it too and each morning I'm greeted by a choir of finches and robins who sit in the tree outside my window and serenade me sweetly, which is far more pleasant than the clanging of college bells. Do please tell me that you are not cursed with the same at Cambridge! Everyone says that after a while one stops hearing them, but I can't see (hear!) how that's possible.

Have thus far made two friends in college, Gita (from Kenya), who reads English, and Pat, who is a physicist like you. Pat's father is a Balliol scout, which must make it terribly uncomfortable for her among the more snooty girls here in college, such as the Roedean girl who speaks incessantly of family connections and refers to Churchill as 'Uncle Winston.' Silly girl!

Vanessa readjusted her pillow and took another biscuit, reflecting for a moment on her own family. It was far more posh than she cared to admit. She had a grandfather in the House of Lords and a father who talked endlessly of his time in the colonial service. At least there was Uncle Tony and Mother, who didn't believe in taking themselves too seriously.

I've signed up for the Labour Club, JACARI (Joint Action Committee Against Racial Inequality), and the college music society. Maybe more if there's time. And you? Do tell me whom you are meeting and all the things you are getting up to at Cambridge. I'll be dreadfully unhappy if you tell me that all you're doing is work.



Write to me soon!!
Lots of love
Nessa xx

Vanessa folded the letter and glanced at the clock. Twelve noon. Lunchtime, but college food was overcooked and flavourless. “Dreadful, dreadful,” she muttered, looking down at the empty biscuit tin and feeling sick. Time for a cigarette, one small consolation for being away from home, but not as good as Mother’s roast beef with horseradish, or lamb with mint sauce and rosemary-flavoured potatoes, peas, carrots, Yorkshire pudding, treacle tart, apple pie...

“Oh stop it!” Vanessa berated herself.

