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The Untitled Story

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I met Meryl on my third day in Kalamazoo. Her boyfriend, an African student at Western Michigan University, had promised me the previous night to find me a girl that would show me a hair dresser. When Meryl stopped her black 1959 Chevrolet near my Kalamazoo home apartment stairs, I felt that I had found a friend who would lead me in my search for the true heart of the Americans. I sat at her left glancing at her from the sides of my eyes. She resembled Adamma, my best friend in Logos. She was well groomed from head to toe, her rouge and dark red lipstick and nail polish match her dark skin exactly. She was five feet six, slim and well dressed. Her pleated navy blue skirt measured three inches above her knees.

The first thing I admired about Meryl was how she drove her car. She tore the wind as we floated along leaning to the left or right at the corners and speeding past the traffic lights because they had turned green or yellow. Each time we stopped at the bright red light, my companion craned her neck from side to side as if we were surrounded by enemies. At last she stopped suddenly in front of a small white house bearing a small black board with the sign "Sara's Beauty Shop Permanent-Hair tinting-Hair Shaping and Scalp" the hair dresser was absent so Meryl said to me "Why don't you sit down? I made an appointment for you and I hope she'll come back soon."

She sat on the sofa near the window, crossed her long slender legs, drew a packet of Parliament Cigarettes from her purse and started smoking. I sat on a red davenport opposite the window and stole looks at her over the Vogue magazine I took from the table.

I began to feel that Meryl was a more superior being than I, at least, she possessed some human qualities and advantages that I lacked. She spoke very little when three other women, the hair dresser and a man in work clothes asked me questions about Africa. She did not express any surprise when I told them that I saw my first elephants and tigers in a zoo in Manchester, England. She only said in deep, slow contralto "I have read many books about Africa and I know better than to believe all the shows they put on the TV screen."
I noticed also that the topic of racial segregation in the South which occupied most of our time received only one statement from her: -- "It is in part our fault too."

Meryl accepted me as her friend much quicker than I expected and I regarded this as a good mark on her character, obviously she was less suspicious than most African girls who would have liked to study me for at least two months. She introduced me to her family of four boys and five girls. She was twenty-one and oldest of the children. Her father was working at Allied Paper Industry, Kalamazoo and her mother had not worked for a long time. She also introduced me to her "best friend in Kalamazoo," Vicki, twenty-year old daughter of a medical doctor who lived in Plainwell.

I first met Vicki at Gilmore's Ice Cream Parlor where both friends work part-time each week. That day, I began to regard the Stereotyped Americans I see in books and films as fake. I paused to piece together the bits I have heard about American negroes.

In America, the American white is always the master. He treats the American negro with contempt. American restaurants never serve the American whites and negroes in the same table. American negro accepts the place of second rate citizen complacently. He hates all whites beyond all descriptions. He is laxy, unintelligent and not as industrious as his white neighbors. He is loose and dirty in his habits.

But there, in front of me, sat two Americans white and black, who have chosen each other as the "best friend in Kalamazoo" Both of them attended the same lectures at Kalamazoo School of Business, both cut the same classes when they wished, both have the same aspirations and both hoped to live in the same apartment after their graduation from school and draw the same amount of money from Social Welfare Funds until both were employed.

Vicki roused me from this reverie by shouting: "Hey Africa!" We decided to meet again the following Sunday in front of the Kalamazoo County Police Building so that Meryl would take us to her one month old church on Portage street.

I stood at the rendezvous ten minutes before eight to see whether or not Meryl would keep her time. As I stood freezing in that wintry Sunday morning, old and new models of Oldsmobile, Chevrolet, Chrysler, Mercedes, Benz, Cadillac, Volkswagen, Ford and Pontiac carrying
gaily dressed men, women and children in church clothes, floated past me. At two minutes to eight I saw three large green feathers in bright mauve hat turning from side to side as a black 1959 Chevrolet rolled towards me . . . Meryl. The church was a 30' by 20' old living room, the adjoining bedroom being used as the vestry. The sigh board behind the chairman noted that last week attendance was 82, when the service was over it recorded 83. Only Vicki, the visiting priest, his wife and babe were whites, the rest were negro men, women, teenagers and children. I felt at once that I was in a village church in Nigeria. The negroes still retain the cheerful nature they inherited from their African ancestors. Their beautiful songs enriched with brisk, quick rhythms and sweet melody would have passed unnoticed in many Nigerian villages but for the meanings which were laden with expression of sorrow and suffering. Meryl, Vicki and others sang these unwritten songs cheerfully along with the trembling notes of the organ. The priest spoke "to the hearts of the congregation" about the "worth of patience in this life which results in triumph in the next world." He led them patiently, waiting for everybody to find the correct pages of Exodus, Joshua, Ezekiel, Daniel, Letters to Thessalonica, Hebrews and Revelation, to see where God Himself wrote it.

On our way home I asked Meryl why she left the first church she once took us to. "Because that church was getting too big and too impersonal, I don't want to worship with snobs." She replied. Her reply helped me to understand why I made over sixty hand shakes immediately after the service. Everybody wanted to know my name, the children moved very close to each adult seeking to be patted on the head and cheek.

This church service gave me a deeper insight into Meryl's character. Her behavior in three different dinners we attended confirmed her superiority over me. The first dinner took place at Vicki's house. Vicki, the second and only daughter of her parents' three children was behaving too childishly that day. I too was whimpering with fear because the food, the house and the people were too rich for me. Meryl was very composed. She ate the food quietly and thanked the hostess most graciously while I searched for the appropriate verbs and adjectives to apply. At meryl's house, both Vicki and I were confused about which plates and forks belonged to us on a small table which must seat thirteen eaters. Meryl showed each person where to sit and pacified
everybody by handing each person the right fork and plates at the right time. In my house, the food was too spicy and too different for Vicki but Meryl showed no sign that anything strange was happening.

One snowy evening three of us were coming home from Vicksburg when our car suddenly stuck in a puddle. They knew I would rather sit in that car till next spring then stand in that snow to push the car. Vicki tried in vain to push the car alone. When Vicki failed, we sat in the car looking at Meryl who stared blankly out of the window. At last Meryl bolted out and pushed the car forward, swearing hard at the car and calling it "old girl blockhead."

It occurred to me immediately that I had never seen Meryl in a bad mood, so I got them arguing about who should be blamed for the condition of American Negroes in the South. I knew that this was a topic many American would rather not discuss but Vicki and Meryl had much to say on it. Among African girls this type of topic, which touches the very root of the society, would have invited many high pitched shoutings and hand clappings. Adamma, whose very image I see in Meryl, would have exploded her arguments in unrestricted language until the big nerves on her neck would show. But our discussion in Meryl's car contained none of these agitations and thunder. We calmly came to the conclusion that our forefathers were stupid then we thought. "Why did those white merchants go to Africa to buy their fellow men?" Vicki asked. "Why did those Africans sell their brothers and sisters?" I asked.

"Why did those negroes refuse to go back to Africa when they were told to go? I read it in my history book, why didn't they go back then?" Meryl asked.

Since our forefathers were too dead to answer these questions, we left the argument unconcluded. So I introduced another topic: "What would you do if you marry an African boy and he insists on marrying a second wife?" I asked. Vicki immediately answered: "I think it is immoral."

Meryl did not speak much, as usual, she only said, "If Africans do not think that it is immoral then I won't."

I asked them what they think about Russia "I don't know what I think about Russia, I'll have to read more about them or go there before I know." was Meryl's answer.

One day I told Meryl that I would like her to wear my national dress to the African Student's party. I will never forget how quickly she replied: "I will not, unless
you'll give Vicki too. She'll probably look as pale as death itself. Sometimes I wish I could paint her a bit dark. But I guess, she'll be alright.

Vicki and I always forget to include each other in some friendly activities with Meryl but she lost no second in reminding us to "include everybody." My wrapper fitted her exactly from neck, waist and down to the ankle. I stared at her and sighed "If I were king, I would make you (and Vicki) the ambassador (s) of the world.

"What do you think they'll do to Vicki in Congo?"

Meryl asked very much amused, "Unless she basks in Florida" they'll probably prefer her in Russia", I replied. "Meryl will disappear on the way to Florida if we drive past Alabama." Vicki added.

It is clear to me now why I admire Meryl. Here is a girl who contradicts almost all the stereotyped qualities attributed to negroes in United States. In all my dealings with her she is a unique individual and not a number out of the category of race called negroes, nor even a conventional character in Packard's Status Seeker, Dingwell's American Woman, or Peter Rose's They and We.

Her honest friendship with Vicki shows that she does not judge people on basis of their color or labels but rather on personal qualities.

I do not pretend that thousands of negroes in Kalamazoo are all Meryls nor that the quarter of a million negroes in the United States have such faithful friends as Vicki, all I am saying is that I have discovered two Americans who have built around them a world full of love and joy. These two girls have provided me with a frame of reference upon which I shall base my story of Americans when I go home. Their behavior shouts out to me "Not all white Americans are snobs and not all negroes are lazy and loose. There are millions of Americans who never get recognition in books and films because they are normal people."

Meryl has also taught me that an African, as she is by blood, who is unspoiled by nature's glorious sunshine and hundred relatives' helping hands can find her individuality if she is keen on searching for nothing but the truth.