

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Americanah* (2013)

1 Ifemelu had grown up in the shadow of her mother's hair. It was black—black, so thick it drank
2 two containers of relaxer at the salon, so full it took hours under the hooded dryer, and, when
3 finally released from pink plastic rollers, sprang free and full, flowing down her back like a
4 celebration. Her father called it a crown of glory. “Is it your real hair?” strangers would ask,
5 and then reach out to touch it reverently. Others would say “Are you from Jamaica?” as though
6 only foreign blood could explain such bounteous hair that did not thin at the temples. Through
7 the years of childhood, Ifemelu would often look in the mirror and pull at her own hair, separate
8 the coils, will it to become like her mother's, but it remained bristly and grew reluctantly;
9 braiders said it cut them like a knife.

10 One day, the year Ifemelu turned ten, her mother came home from work looking different. Her
11 clothes were the same, a brown dress belted at the waist, but her face was flushed, her eyes
12 unfocused. “Where is the big scissors?” she asked, and when Ifemelu brought it to her, she
13 raised it to her head and, handful by handful, chopped off all her hair. Ifemelu stared, stunned.
14 The hair lay on the floor like dead grass. “Bring me a big bag,” her mother said. Ifemelu obeyed,
15 feeling herself in a trance, with things happening that she did not understand. She watched her
16 mother walk around their flat, collecting all the Catholic objects, the crucifixes hung on walls,
17 the rosaries nested in drawers, the missals propped on shelves. Her mother put them all in the
18 polyethylene bag, which she carried to the backyard, her steps quick, her faraway look
19 unwavering. She made a fire near the rubbish dump, at the same spot where she burned her
20 used sanitary pads, and first she threw in her hair, wrapped in old newspaper, and then, one
21 after the other, the objects of faith. Dark gray smoke curled up into the air. From the verandah,
22 Ifemelu began to cry because she sensed that something had happened, and the woman standing
23 by the fire, splashing in more kerosene as it dimmed and stepping back as it flared, the woman
24 who was bald and blank, was not her mother, could not be her mother.

25 When her mother came back inside, Ifemelu backed away, but her mother hugged her close.
26 “I am saved,” she said. “Mrs. Ojo ministered to me this afternoon during the children's break
27 and I received Christ. Old things have passed away and all things have become new. Praise
28 God. On Sunday we will start going to Revival Saints. It is a Bible-believing church and a living
29 church, not like St. Dominic's.” Her mother's words were not hers. She spoke them too rigidly,
30 with a demeanor that belonged to someone else. Even her voice, usually high-pitched and
31 feminine, had deepened and curdled. That afternoon, Ifemelu watched her mother's essence
32 take flight. Before, her mother said the rosary once in a while, crossed herself before she ate,
33 wore pretty images of saints around her neck, sang Latin songs and laughed when Ifemelu's
34 father teased her about her terrible pronunciation. She laughed, too, whenever he said, “I am an
35 agnostic respecter of religion,” and she would tell him how lucky he was to be married to her,
36 because even though he went to church only for weddings and funerals, he would get into
37 heaven on the wings of her faith. But, after that afternoon, her God changed. He became
38 exacting. Relaxed hair offended Him. Dancing offended Him. She bartered with Him, offering
39 starvation in exchange for prosperity, for a job promotion, for good health. She fasted herself
40 bone-thin: dry fasts on weekends, and on weekdays, only water until evening. Ifemelu's father
41 followed her with anxious eyes, urging her to eat a little more, to fast a little less, and he always
42 spoke carefully, so that she would not call him the devil's agent and ignore him, as she had
43 done with a cousin who was staying with them. “I am fasting for your father's conversion,” she
44 told Ifemelu often. For months, the air in their flat was like cracked glass. Everyone tiptoed
45 around her mother, who had become a stranger, thin and knuckly and severe. Ifemelu worried
46 that she would, one day, simply snap into two and die.

47 Then, on Easter Saturday, a dour day, the first quiet Easter Saturday in Ifemelu's life, her mother
48 ran out of the kitchen and said, “I saw an angel!” Before, there would have been cooking and
49 bustling, many pots in the kitchen and many relatives in the flat, and Ifemelu and her mother

50 would have gone to night mass, and held up lit candles, singing in a sea of flickering flames,
51 and then come home to continue cooking the big Easter lunch. But the flat was silent. Their
52 relatives had kept away and lunch would be the usual rice and stew. Ifemelu was in the living
53 room with her father, and when her mother said “I saw an angel!” Ifemelu saw exasperation in
54 his eyes, a brief glimpse before it disappeared.

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