



**WHITE**

**BOY**

**WHAT OUR  
DIFFERENCES CAN  
TEACH US**

**BLACK**

**GIRL**

**ONE HONEST  
CONVERSATION  
AT A TIME**

**ADAEZE & CHAD BRINKMAN**

**WHITE BOY BLACK GIRL**



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**ADAEZE & CHAD BRINKMAN**



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*White Boy/Black Girl: What Our Differences Can Teach Us, One Honest Conversation at a Time*

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# WELCOME TO OUR WORLD!



Ey, errybody! We're Chadaeze. Welcome to us. \**Lip pop from Adaeze.*\*

Hopefully, it goes without saying that *Chadaeze* is short for Chad and Adaeze (Nigerian pronunciation: "ah-DEH-zeh"; American inflection: "uh-DAY-zee," like the flower). That's our couple name, because we a couple, and we creative like that.

Thanks for picking up our book! We're humbled and honored to have the opportunity to share part of our story with you.

When our relationship first started, we both brought a lot of baggage with us. We were two very different people from two very different backgrounds—a white man with a good heart and good intentions but a lot of cultural blind spots and a family history of strong racial bias, and a Black woman dealing with the sting of years of cultural misunderstanding and racial microaggressions that resulted in some pretty significant trust issues.

We both had a lot to learn, and we both needed to give each other a bit of grace because the experiences we had prior to meeting gave us lenses that colored every conversation we had and triggered a lot of strong emotions. This is exactly why racial topics are so difficult to broach. They are, by their very nature, intensely personal.

Even though we're coming at this from the perspective of our

crazy-about-each-other marriage, this book is not just for married people or people in romantic relationships. It's for everyone. And we think you'll find that the vast majority of what we talk about is just as applicable to relationships with your friends from church, your neighbors, and your coworkers.

You'll quickly discover that we're not perfect, but because we love and trust each other, we have the freedom to speak openly about some pretty sensitive topics that aren't the norm in most relationships.

We offer two often-different perspectives from two always-different people who are complete societal opposites and who love and enjoy each other deeply. This book is a record of how we've done things. And whether we got things right or just flat-out stepped in it, we hope our journey will help empower you on your journey—or, at the very least, help you avoid some of the potholes and point out some of the sights you don't wanna miss along the way.

Our goal is to provide you with a safe space to eavesdrop on some of the more difficult conversations we've had about race with each other, our friends, and our families so you can learn how to navigate similar conversations in a way that's honoring and respectful to both parties and gain a deeper understanding of yourself and others.

So we'd like to invite you into the middle. The middle of the discomfort. The middle of the tension. The middle of asking, "How do I . . . ?"

Stay with us.

We believe on the other side of that uneasy middle is unity where there has long been division, healing where there has long been trauma, and reconciliation where there has long been opposition.

We're guessing you're here because you wanna be a better friend, coworker, neighbor, and basically all-around human being in a

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multicultural context. That's awesome! We hope this book will encourage you to enter into some of those tough conversations you've been wanting to have with your friends and coworkers across racial lines but weren't quite sure how or where to start.

Fair warning: things get deep. During our writing process, there were moments when it was difficult to put words to paper. That's just the reality of talking about the effect racism has on the world. It's difficult. We have all been taught and accepted certain things as truth based on our own experiences, and unfortunately, a lot of what we've come to accept as "normal" is actually quite hurtful. If we're gonna come together, we have to be willing to reevaluate some of our preconceived notions and look at the world through a different lens. That's what this book is all about. At times, it will be tough, but trust us when we say the effort will be worth it—and some of the resulting relationships could become the most meaningful ones in your life.

As you read, you may feel uncomfortable, challenged, or possibly even attacked at times. Believe it or not, that's a good thing! Some of what you read on these pages *should* hit a nerve. It means you're identifying an area where you need to start seeing or thinking about things a little differently. We know how hard it can be to hold a mirror up to ourselves. Let's face it: we don't always like what we see. But we also know firsthand the blessing of having our eyes opened to our blind spots. You know, the ones that turn a well-intentioned comment or question into a panicked retreat of "Noooo, that's not what I meant!" and leave us scrambling to explain, hoping the other person hasn't already tapped out of the conversation or, worse, the relationship.

So, if something you read gives you a check in your spirit, pay attention. Lean into it. Ask yourself where it's coming from and why it's making you feel uncomfortable or defensive. And please,

know our goal here isn't to make anyone feel guilty or to shut anyone down. In fact, it's just the opposite. Our goal is to tear down the walls that decades of racial tension have built between people, help us learn about one another, and celebrate what makes us all unique. All we ask is that you keep an open mind and be willing to consider—and hopefully even embrace—a slightly different perspective.

And if something we talk about hits a little too close to home and you end up throwing this book across the room, that's cool. We get it. We've been there. But we've also managed to work our way through the sludge and muck, and by God's grace, we've emerged with more humility, more strength, and more closeness than before.

So go ahead—freak out. If you have to, walk away from the book for a while. It's okay. When you come back, we'll still be sitting here by the fire with a glass of whiskey, ready to pick up wherever you left off.

Last, but most importantly, you should know that we love Jesus, and we boldly approach the conversations ahead from that perspective. If you don't share our faith, we encourage you not to check out right here. This book is for everyone, and there is still a lot you can learn from someone who sees the world differently from you. (Kinda what we tryna get at in this book, if you haven't noticed.)

All through the writing process, we've prayed for our hearts to align with God's heart for this message. We pray that as you read, our words will ooze the grace and truth of Jesus, and that together we can allow a little bit of the peace and unity of heaven to invade the earth.

## PROLOGUE

# THE FIVE WORDS THAT CHANGED EVERYTHING



**A:** It was a cool November afternoon, and I was getting ready to go on a date with my newly official (as of a month prior) boyfriend, Chad.

We were going to have lunch at a brewery (his idea). Chad had been steadily passing his extensive beer knowledge along to me, and to his delight, it was starting to rub off—even though I still made a bitter-beer face whenever I tried his favorite IPAs. I honestly didn't care where we went—I was just excited to hang out with my favorite person. Give me all the chill time with my bearded man as he drinks a beer like his mountain-man sexy self do.

I was going for a comfy I'ma-look-geuh casual look, so with Beyoncé's "Brown Skin Girl" soundtracking my getting-ready process, I put on some light makeup and threw on a quirky T-shirt that read PIZZA IS MY BAE, some high-waisted jeans,

and a multicolored scarf from Zara that I styled to resemble an ichafu on my head.

As the only Black person on a staff of over 150 people, I had recently reembraced the boldness of expressing myself, and part of that was not being ashamed to represent my Nigerian heritage in creative ways. Having been told more than once that I was “too much” and “probably unattractive” to most white guys in Colorado because they didn’t grow up around Black women, the fact that I felt so comfortable being myself with Chad seemed like an act of God.

Chad wasn’t like other guys in my sparse dating history. I never had to wonder where we stood, what his level of interest was, or how he felt about me, and we helped free each other to be our full selves. Plus, by this point, we’d both had enough dating experience to know that ain’t nobody got time to fake who we are. We both had an “Either you can accept me as *fully* me, or *bye*” mindset.

I always knew that the right guy for me wouldn’t be intimidated by me but would also be able to handle me, and Chad had effortlessly proven that he was man enough to do both, as well as look to Jesus for how to care for my heart.

Feeling good, light, and not nervous at all, I grabbed a cardigan in case it got chilly later and skipped out the door.

**C:** When I saw the notification on my phone that Adaeze was on her way, my heart skipped a beat. We had hit the ground running in our relationship, and every time we saw each other, I wanted more. This day was no exception.

Now, I am a typical guy with four T-shirts, one pair of blue jeans (on which, to Adaeze’s despair, I wipe my hands constantly), and a pair of bright red Vans I thought were the coolest thing ever (though I found out later that Adaeze was not a fan). That

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night I was going to proudly show off the Pacific Northwesterner I was, so I put on my hooded flannel jacket that matched my Vans and a plain T-shirt. I was going for cool and casual, but in reality, I couldn't calm the butterflies in my stomach.

When my phone pinged to tell me that Adaeze was close, I jumped up off the couch and ran to the front door, my inner monologue matching me step-for-step the entire way.

*Just be cool.*

*Everything's gonna be great.*

*Why am I so nervous?*

*You're fine, she likes you.*

*Are you sure she likes you?*

*Of course she likes you.*

*Stop freaking yourself out.*

*Just calm down.*

*Breathe.*

*Don't be weird.*

The second she rang the bell, I reached for the knob, then I hesitated. After all, I didn't want to look like I was just standing at the door waiting for her. *Just be cool . . .*

- A:** After several seconds, Chad swung open the door, and in what had become our traditional greeting, I bounded into his arms and wrapped my legs around him in an affectionate squeeze.

He grinned at me and asked, "You ready?"

"Yeh!" I eagerly responded. He grabbed his car keys, and I happily danced down his front steps, pausing at the bottom to wait for him. I held my hand out, and without breaking stride, he brought his hand down in a low-five-like slap, linking his fingers with mine.

As we drove to the brewery, we each talked about our day, my hand resting on top of his on the stick shift. When we arrived,

I asked if we could take a photo in the parking lot before going in. It was such a beautiful day, and okay, I'll admit it . . . the afternoon light was affirmatively agreeing with my melanin pop pop. Plus, Chad looked great, and we was cute together!

**C:** It was *not* a flattering photo of me. Honestly, I looked drunk. However, like all self-respecting men, the second the girl I liked asked me to take a picture, I happily obliged. Several slightly less inebriated looking selfies later, we headed into the brewery, where we were immediately seated at a booth on the main level of the restaurant.

The server came over to the table, greeted us, and asked if we would like anything to drink. Since I didn't know if Adaeze was aware of the difference between a sour and a pale ale yet, I graciously offered to help her choose a beer.

**A:** I knew what a sour was!

**C:** Okay . . . she knew what a sour was. We decided to order a flight. Adaeze picked a few mild beers, and I picked the rest to push her a little and see her bitter-hop face once or twice.

As soon as we gave our drink order, we got lost in conversation. The poor server came back three times before we even remembered to look at the menu. We were just perfectly content spending time together, talking, and holding hands. As far as I was concerned, we were the only two people in the room.

**A:** I was well aware of the rest of the room from the moment we sat down. I couldn't see everyone in the restaurant from where we were sitting, but as far as I could tell, I was the only Black person in the room.

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This is something I'd grown to be more aware of that year, in the midst of all the racial unrest. Also, we were seated in a booth next to the entrance and close to the restrooms, which meant everyone coming in and leaving saw us, as did everyone going to the restroom. The looks as people passed our booth were hard to miss.

*Focus on Chad*, I thought. *Don't let this ruin the fun you're having together.* I squeezed Chad's hand tighter, leaned forward a bit, and zeroed in on his eyes. He did the same.

**C:** *I wonder what she's thinking about . . .*

**A:** *I wonder what he's thinking about . . .*

**C:** *Man, she's looking good tonight.*

**A:** *Maybe they're not even looking at us. Maybe they're looking at the picture behind us.*

**C:** *How did I end up sitting across the table from this girl? What did I do that God would put me here with her?*

**A:** *Maybe they're looking at us because we're a beautiful couple.*

**C:** *I bet I could turn her into a Seahawks fan.*

**A:** *Okay, seriously, if that old lady looks over here one more time . . .*

**C:** *I could go anywhere with her and have a great time.*

**A:** *Should I say something to him about the looks?*

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- A:** I couldn't tell if Chad had noticed the looks or not. If he hadn't, I wasn't sure I wanted to bring it up. Whenever I raised questions about race at work, I always felt like "that Black girl" who kept "bringing it up" or "making everything about race." I didn't want to be that Black girl today. Not here. Not with Chad. Then, shortly after our food arrived, it happened. There was an older white woman who kept looking at us. To do so, she had to swivel around in her chair a full 180 degrees. It was blatant, and we both saw it.
- C:** "Umm, I feel like the woman to my right keeps looking at us."
- A:** "Yeah, and so is that woman over there . . . and that couple back there . . . and almost everyone who goes in and out of the restroom."
- C:** "Oh . . . I didn't notice."
- A:** *Huh.* I didn't want to punish Chad for not noticing, nor did I really know how to explain why this was bothering me without making him feel bad. "Sooooo . . ." I began, tryna sound casual, "what do *you* think the looks mean?"
- C:** "Maybe they're not used to interracial couples?"
- A:** "Or maybe they're just admiring us because we look geuh . . .?"
- C:** "Yeah, let's go with that." [awkward pause] "You okay?"
- A:** "Yeah. I just . . . don't like being stared at like that."
- C:** "What's making you feel uncomfortable?"

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- A:** “Well . . . wouldn’t you be bothered by a bunch of people staring at you?”
- C:** “Yeah, at times. Right now, I’m not feeling it too much though.”
- A:** “Maybe that’s because everyone in here looks like you.”
- C:** “Oh . . .” Until this point in our relationship, nothing had made me feel uncomfortable being in white spaces together, but it was suddenly clear to me that Adaeze was far more aware of the white space than I was.
- A:** “Babe, no, no, no,” I quickly reassured him. “I’m not trying to make you feel uncomfortable. It’s all good.” [Quick shift.] “How’s your pulled pork sando?”
- C:** “No, wait, babe. I want to talk about this.”
- A:** “Okay . . .” Chad and I had talked about race before, but this was the first time we had to talk about it specifically regarding *us*, in the present. For the first time, we were experiencing microaggressions toward us in public, in real time, together.
- C:** “I’ll be honest . . . I don’t really know what to ask.” I really didn’t.
- A:** “It’s okay, babe, I gotchu.” I sat back in my seat and gestured toward the room. “Do you understand the reality of us being together—here—in White-orado?”
- C:** “Yeah, I think so—I mean us being together is going to draw some looks and stuff.”

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- A:** “Yeah, but that has different implications for me than it does for you.”
- C:** “We *are* different though. God made us different on purpose. Your culture made you into all that you are, and that’s beautiful.”
- A:** “Thank you. Buuuut . . . that’s not the point.” I didn’t want to push too hard too soon, though I was relieved we were talking about it. I knew Chad well, but this was new territory in our relationship, and I was trying to get a pulse on how deep he was willing to go with me. “You don’t feel uncomfortable in all-white spaces, and why would you? You’re white. But it doesn’t seem like you understand why *I* would feel uncomfortable when we get disapproving looks.”
- C:** “So the reality of us being together is that we will have to deal with white people’s disapproval . . . because they don’t approve of you?”
- A:** “Yes.” [Uncomfortable pause.] “So what does that mean for us?”
- C:** “That just means we’re going to face stuff like this. Us being together will make people respond in ways that are frustrating, sure, but that doesn’t bother me. I’ll happily go anywhere with you.” I so had this.
- A:** It felt like he was missing the point. The Band-Aid comment of “I’ll be there” was fine, but I longed for Chad to take the next step in his awareness—not just being proud to be with me but also being aware of our different realities.

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“Okay, but it still doesn’t seem like you’re understanding *why* the looks make me feel the way I feel.”

**C:** “Racism?”

**A:** *For the love of God, finally, you freaking white man.* “Yes.”

**C:** By now, I could see that Adaeze did not feel like I fully understood what she was trying to tell me. I wanted her to feel completely understood and supported and know that I was a safe space for her. I wanted to say something that would make her feel known, seen, and appreciated, so I said, “I feel like we are close . . .”

**A:** *Uh-huh.*

**C:** “And I understand . . .”

**A:** *Sure ya do.*

**C:** “. . . that the world looks at us differently. And with us being together, I am going to have to feel that with you a little bit.”

**A:** *Yeah . . .*

**C:** “I am totally for you, and I want to support all of who you are, including what makes us different.”

**A:** *Okay . . .*

**C:** “That’s why I will still kiss you and hold your hand, even when you’re wearing that!” I said, pointing at Adaeze’s headwrap.

**A:** That definitely nicked something. I could tell his heart was trying to show through, though, so I decided to put a pin in it and come back to it later.

As we walked out to the car, Chad threw his arm around me, and I wrapped my arm around his waist. When we got into the car, I took another selfie of us, and as Chad pulled out of the parking lot, I looked at the photo on my phone with mixed emotions. *I really like this guy, but . . .*

**C:** Something was off. I had my hand on the stick shift, but this time, Adaeze didn't put her hand on mine, and she was much quieter than she had been on the ride out. I was totally confused. I mean, we had just succeeded in our first big conversation about race and what that meant for us as a couple. I'd stuck my head in the mud with her for a little while and showed her that I cared for her, but she was clearly upset about something.

**A:** I was trying to figure out how to bring up what was bothering me without making Chad feel like I was attacking him or making him feel like a jerk while I was processing all my feelings.

I felt the Holy Spirit was gently saying to me, "You *could* avoid bringing it up to Chad, but this is a chance to grow closer to him and to understand each other more deeply."

I wanted an open, honest relationship. The Holy Spirit never seemed to tire of challenging me by asking, Do you *really* want that kind of openness, or are you just going to hold on to what you're feeling and settle for faux comfort?

I didn't like that question. I'd learned that though faux comfort initially feels real, it eventually comes back to sabotage you. Sure, I could spare myself the temporary tension of talking about how I felt with zero guarantee of the response. But that

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would leave me with the internal turmoil of not sharing what I was feeling, which would likely lead to me distancing myself from Chad.

I needed more time to process. But then Chad asked me . . .

**C:** “Is something bothering you?”

**A:** *Crap, I need more time.*

*Where’s my script?*

*Oh, hey there, stress.*

*Nice of you to join.*

[Awkward silence.]

*Well, here we are. Might as well rip off the Band-Aid.*

“Are you uncomfortable talking about my reality as a Black woman?”

**C:** “No, babe, what makes you ask that?” I could sense Adaeze’s discomfort, and it caught me off guard. Adaeze is typically very confident and well spoken, especially in the midst of any sort of conflict.

**A:** “Because it seems like you keep skirting around how my experience at that table was different from yours.”

**C:** “I wasn’t trying to skirt around your experience. I realize those looks made you uncomfortable, but it was just people looking.”

**A:** “Okay.” *Do I even wanna try to explain this?*

**C:** I was starting to feel a little defensive. I mean, yeah, I saw people looking, but it wasn’t a blatant attack on us. Frankly, I didn’t

understand why we were stuck on this topic. “I get that you see we are different, but I’m proud of what you are and what makes you different. It sucks that the world is the way it is.” *Now that was good.*

**A:** *Wait. Did he just “what” me? “What do you mean, you’re proud of what I am?”*

**C:** I needed to reassure Adaeze that I understood that our life experiences were different. So, once again, I pointed at her headwrap and doubled down on what I honestly thought was the statement of the night.

“I will still kiss you and hold your hand even when you are wearing that!”

**A:** It *was* the statement of the night. Just not the way he thought it was. The narrative I heard was that Chad saw me only in the ways I was different from him: all my metaphorical headwraps. In other words, all the ways people viewed the two of us negatively fell on me.

When he repeated the statement, it felt like a betrayal of safety—like a confirmation of the pain I was already feeling. Worse, it solidified to me that Chad didn’t really understand what I was talking about. It was the first time it had dawned on me that our relationship might not work. I loved being with Chad, but I didn’t want him to be with me *in spite of me*.

It was all unraveling.

*Do I have the energy to do this with him, or is he just never going to get it?*

*Maybe Chad’s not ready for this.*

*Maybe I’m not ready for this.*

## THE FIVE WORDS THAT CHANGED EVERYTHING

*Maybe this is too dangerous for my heart.*

In the past, I had spoken up and whistle-blown in white circles an exhausting number of times—to what felt like no avail. Now it seemed like history was repeating itself. So, in order to protect myself, I subconsciously started to check out.

When we got back to Chad's place, I just wanted to get away, be alone, process. I didn't want to make any rash decisions. I wanted to leave, but I really needed to pee. So as soon as we got inside, as nonchalantly as possible, I told Chad I needed to use his bathroom.

**C:** I wouldn't exactly describe Adaeze as nonchalant at that moment.

**A:** I locked myself in the bathroom and took a moment to look at myself in the mirror—taking in my headwrap, taking in *me*. I tried to reaffirm myself with an internal pep talk.

*Everything you are is worth loving and appreciating.*

But I felt like I couldn't win either way. If I tried to explain what I was feeling, Chad would likely hear that he's an awful person—even though I knew he wasn't intentionally trying to hurt me. But if I *didn't* say anything, I'd feel even more isolated, and nothing would get resolved.

I'd been in an interracial relationship years before that had failed miserably. After that ex got enough pressure from his family, he decided I wasn't worth the trouble. Even after I'd genuinely tried to explain my side of things, it wasn't enough. Or rather, *I* wasn't enough. At least that was the false truth I had to unlearn from that painful situation. And now here I was again. Woulda been nice if I could have googled some kind of manual on how to explain things like a perfect Black person, but that would be too easy.

With tears welling in my eyes, I reached up and slowly undid my headwrap, thinking, *I don't know if I can be my full self here, so I need to go.* I wasn't breaking it off with Chad. I just felt like I needed to get out of there and at least take a break from thinking about it for the night.

I looked away from my reflection, as if leaving that inner conversation. *Not now. Wait till you get home to process all this.*

After I finished in the bathroom, I took a deep breath in an attempt to still my emotions and headed back downstairs. *Maybe I can sneak out of the house . . .*

- C:** Meanwhile, blissfully unaware that Adaeze was questioning our entire relationship, I was getting out the blankets and trying to make the living room look slightly less like the grayscale bachelor pad it was so we could watch a movie.

When she came downstairs, I noticed it immediately. *She took off the headwrap.*

Even worse, she did not come over to the couch, where I was sitting. Instead, she walked over to the table, where she'd put her purse, keys, and phone. *Maybe she just wants to be more comfortable. Maybe she just wants her phone.*

Then she went for her jacket. This was the moment the anvil finally fell on Wile E. Coyote's head. Something was horrendously wrong here. I just had no idea what it was.

- A:** "I think I'm going to go home."
- C:** She turned to leave, so I moved between her and the door. I had already learned that when Adaeze is upset, she tends to physically and/or emotionally run away. I wouldn't try to stop her from leaving if she wanted to go—I just wanted her to stay long enough

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to have a conversation. The look on her face made it clear: my ignorance had hurt her more than anyone in the brewery had.

Not wanting her to feel trapped, I asked, “Could we please go for a walk?”

- A:** Chad’s humble request to go for a walk crumbled some of my walls. I didn’t take off my headwrap to wake him up, but the fact that it made him realize that maybe he didn’t get it was somewhat of a relief. Not to say that his—dare I say—*ignorance* didn’t hurt, because it definitely did. A lot. But the fact that he was so desperately trying to get me to stay and talk so he could understand what I was feeling was encouraging.

Even though everything in me was screaming, *This will be hard and maybe suck*, something told me he was worth fighting for.

So I said, “Okay.” After being burned multiple times in the past, I considered that real growth.

As we stepped out into the cool of the evening, Chad put his arm around me. I was as stiff as a stick, with my arms crossed. We walked in silence for a while. Then Chad spoke.

- C:** “I’m sorry. Apparently, I *really* don’t understand what’s going on. Could you help me understand?”
- A:** *Let’s see if the third time’s the charm.* “Can you explain more what you meant by the headwrap thing?”
- C:** “Of course! All I wanted to do was let you know that I am here for you and want to be there with you during moments like that in the brewery. I see that the world is different for you than it is for me. Your headwrap was something that embodies

your culture and makes you who you are, so I was using that as an example. When we go out and you are proudly showing off your Black culture, I will be there with you and be proud of you. People can look all they want and think whatever they want about you, but I still want to be the person with you. It doesn't matter if they think you are wrong, because you are being who you are. I think you're beautiful. Even if you do something that makes me uncomfortable, I will still be there."

I went on for another fifteen minutes or so, and Adaeze, being the gracious human she is, patiently listened to my rant—silently, with her arms crossed.

Finally, I gave up. "Why don't you tell me what upset you?"

**A:** I took a beat. I was mentally calculating how to say this right and be the perfect Black person. You know, the Black person who has the perfect way of talking about tough race stuff so the white listener won't incorrectly think I'm saying they're racist. The Black person who can oh-so-effortlessly call out micro-aggressions and educate in a way that leaves the white listener inspired, changed, and empowered, all at once.

For the record, it really meant a lot that he tried, but listening to him explain his headwrap comment yet again only reinforced what had hurt me in the first place.

"I know you weren't trying to be hurtful when you said that comment about the headwrap, but it hurt me. I don't want to be seen as the person whose differences you have to put up with. I don't wanna be the person you nobly fall on your sword to show up with, as if you are a martyr doing me a favor—as if you're the hero who is valiantly and humbly *still* showing up with me, *even though* I am wearing a headwrap."

I took a steadying deep breath and continued, "When you

say, ‘I’ll show up or be seen with you even if you are wearing that,’ the story that tells me is that when I wear a headwrap to express who I am and rep my culture, you have to look past it in order to be a good boyfriend. That makes it seem like I can’t fully be me if I want you to be fully comfortable. And I can’t do that. I hear your heart in what you are trying to say, but what you are communicating doesn’t feel good. It’s distancing and makes me feel less than. It separates me from *us* and makes me the different one, the problem. It makes me feel like I am so different, and you are normal. And I get that to you, you’re normal, and I’m different. But I don’t want to feel like you are doing me a solid by being with me or like you’re taking one for the team by still showing up with me if I’m wearing whatever I want to wear. It makes it seem like you’re with me *in spite of me*. I want you to be with me for *me*. I want us to be on the same playing field, in this together. You have now made that comment repeatedly, which reinforces that this is how you feel. If that’s the case, I’m not even gonna ask you to change. I’m just telling you why it hurts and why it’s making me question *us*.”

- C:** The more I listened, the more my eyes started to open. Without even realizing it, I had drawn a delineation between myself and Adaeze because of her skin color. It was not my intention, but she was right. I had a white savior complex at the restaurant. I *was* trying to nobly fall on my sword for her. And without meaning to, I had made Adaeze feel less than, instead of feeling like the beautiful gift of God she is. Not only had I failed miserably in our first deep dive into racial conversations, but I had hurt her deeply.

I was starting to realize that as close as Adaeze and I were, there was still a deep well of conversations we needed to have. We had only just scratched the surface.



## CHAPTER 1

# AS DIFFERENT AS BLACK AND WHITE



**C:** Sometimes, white people, we just suck, and I hate that. I hate it for my wife, for my friends, and for all people of color. The truth is, too often, we knowingly or unknowingly say and do things that, at best, marginalize and, at worst, hurt people of color deeply. It's not always intentional. It's just a reality of the cultural beast we have created.

The thing I—as a white man—had to learn right off the bat is that, in Western culture, white is seen as “normal.” Everything else is “different.” It's that simple. Adaeze has been saturated in white culture her entire life without having to seek it out, and yet her normal and my normal look very, very different—and they have from the very beginning.

### **WHERE WE COME FROM**

**A:** My Jesus-loving, intentional parents were born and raised in Nigeria. After they were married, they moved to London to

pursue their medical licenses, which is where my three awesome, perfect-balance-of-protective older brothers and I were born. When I was two, we moved to Tulsa, Oklahoma—the heart of the Bible Belt—because my parents wanted to send us to Christian schools, and the schools in London were not up to their spiritual standards.

My parents never really taught us about differences in people, and it seemed like they never had to. They just led by example. They instilled in us a confidence in Jesus Christ and a sense of pride as Nigerian Americans.

They were the first in their families to leave Nigeria. Once our relatives saw that we had all survived, a lot of them followed our family to the States, and it didn't take long for my brothers and me to figure out that we did not live up to their expectations. For example, our aunts and uncles would expectantly speak Igbo to us, only to have us stare blankly back or mispronounce one of the few words we did know, resulting in a disdainful “Chai!” or some other *tsk-tsk* of disapproval. Though our parents never forced us to fit our relatives' expectations, I was still very aware that, in my extended family's eyes, I wasn't Nigerian enough.

Ironically, people in Tulsa always made sure to point out that my parents still had their Nigerian “accent,” to which my mom would semijokingly retort, “I don't have an accent; *you* have an accent!” She wasn't wrong. Where she was from, everyone talked like her. Still, she never understood why everyone kept pointing it out. Frankly, neither did I.

I learned the word *accent* from Tulsans who labeled my parents' voices that way. And whenever the word was uttered, it dripped with so much “otherness” that I could understand why my mom developed a disdain for the word.

**C:** Obviously, my parents are not Nigerian, and I definitely was not born in London. I was born in Pennsylvania, but we moved to Spokane, Washington, when I was in second grade. Both my parents spent their childhoods in Virginia, and they carried those Southern manners with them all the way out to the Pacific Northwest. My mom, for example, would bring home-baked cookies to the new neighbors when they moved in (which apparently wasn't a thing in the PNW). And as a proper Southern lady, she was always appalled to see people walking around the grocery stores in sweatpants.

And, yes, people made comments on my parents' Southern accents and habits when I was growing up. However, most of the comments were endearing. They would usually come in the form of something like, "Oh, your mom is just so cute!" or "I just love your parents—they are so nice!" Southern hospitality really shines when not everybody does it.

I never felt like I was all that different from the people around me. I acted like my friends. I dressed like my friends. I looked like my friends. Even though my family was Southern, I always identified as being from the upper-left USA. It was all I knew, and I seemed to fit in there.

**A:** Being the only Black girl in my class—or one of three Black kids, at most—I experienced "otherness" early and often.

Since my maiden name is Azubuike, 99.9 percent of the time I was the first name on a teacher's roll call list. And 99.9 percent of the time, the teacher's eyes would widen in fear as she stared at the first entry on the list that had both a first name *and* a last name she was terrified to attempt.

I had to decide if I was gonna let them stumble through it, *juuuust* to see if they might get it right, or if I should help

them out and try to hide my exasperation at once again having to provide the correct pronunciation of my perfectly-normal-sounding-to-me name.

Thankfully, my name wasn't an object of ridicule at school. My hair, on the other hand . . .

One day, when I was in middle school, a strong gust of wind tore through the playground and took my not-so-clipped-in clip-in extension piece with it. All the kids laughed.

Somehow, I wasn't seriously embarrassed. I retrieved my hairpiece, briefly chased a boy who was laughing the loudest, reattached it to my head, and wore it the rest of the day. I don't think I even told anyone in my family about the incident when I got home. But it's making its way into this book, so clearly it had *some* effect on me.

Then, when I was in ninth grade, we were coming back from a field trip, and a loudmouth was throwing paper airplanes on the bus. One of the planes landed in my box braids. The boy laughed, pointed, and yelled out in a voice far too loud for even a bus, "Haha! The plane got caught in your Jheri curl!"

His comment struck me as wrong in so many ways. For one thing, Jheri curl wasn't even remotely close to the hairstyle I was rocking. Think the hairstyle of Michael Jackson versus nineties Brandy. What I couldn't have put into words back then but now know is that it was racist enough for this white boy to make fun of my hair in any way. But for him to ignorantly toss out an incorrect Black hairstyle in the process was even more degrading. Besides, his joke didn't even land. There were a few uncomfortable courtesy laughs, and I removed the plane from my hair and tossed it on the ground, unamused.

My full lips were also a source of fascination for people. It's not that the comments were always bad, but it always struck me

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as interesting that nobody commented on the not-so-full lips of the white girls in class. I mean, what an odd topic of discussion among children, no?

**C:** In stark contrast to Adaeze, I was privileged in almost every way in school. I was never bullied, I felt totally secure, and I never felt alone or singled out in my community. By the time I was in high school, I was spending every waking moment playing any sport I could.

**A:** Playing sports was a wonderful outlet for me as well, especially in AAU (Amateur Athletic Union) basketball. Because we played outside our own school district, there was a lot more diversity in AAU ball, which opened my world and made me feel less alone, less “only,” and less “different.”

I also went on a lot of school-sponsored mission trips to places like Juárez, Reynosa, and Nuevo Laredo, Mexico, which exposed me to some of the world outside our little Tulsa bubble and my Nigerian-American home.

**C:** Diversity wasn't even a discussion for me growing up. My school was so white that we got away with joking about having two and a half Black kids at our school. (Five of my classmates had interracial parents.)

Then, when I was in high school, there was a bomb threat. It was a mess. We went into lockdown, the buses had to come late, and all after-school programs were canceled that day. We even made the local news.

Believe it or not, the bomb threat ended up not being the main story from the day. As it happened, the reporter who came out to cover the incident was a Black woman, and while she was

filming the story, a kid from my school drove his truck, with Confederate flag in tow, right behind her and yelled a racial slur out his window. Our school was definitely on the news that day, but the bomb threat became the setting for the story about harassment of the reporter.

Even though I was sheltered from my own biases at the time, I remember being so disappointed that this would happen at my high school.

Another time, at a volleyball game, a friend of mine pulled out his flip phone, and I noticed he had changed his background to a Confederate flag.

I lost it. I said, “What are you, some kind of redneck?”

**A:** Wait a minute. Isn't redneck *also* technically a slur?

**C:** Yeah . . . probably not my finest moment. But at least I said something.

Looking back, I am sure there were other racially charged situations happening around me, but I honestly wasn't aware of them. (I'm not proud of that either.) All that to say, I grew up in a community that tended to wear blinders when it came to issues of race.

**A:** Conversely, a lot of racially tense situations were happening around me, and I was *very* much aware of them.

In college, one of my closest white male friends told me I was “the whitest Black girl” he knew. I didn't even know what to do with that, but I knew I didn't like it.

When I got a job as a full-time worship leader at a predominantly white megachurch, I was told that one of the worship staff members thought I was “too much” on stage.

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One day, I was standing at the door of the sanctuary after a worship service, my hair in a French warrior braid to the side. As people were filing out, a white grown man told me, “Your hair looks like a snake!”

A long-time white female congregant told me, “You know, it’s so *interesting* having someone different like you on stage.” And yet, when a white male friend mentioned he’d been to my church and had heard me sing, he commented, “You sound white.”

I was told by fellow worship staff members that the songs I wrote or wanted to sing during church services were “too gospel” and that some of the songs I wanted to put in the pre- and post-service music that played over the speakers weren’t our church’s style. (The irony is, after I left, that same church jumped on the “gospel is cool!” bandwagon that erupted during the racial reconciliation movement and started doing songs with big-name Black female artists.)

Whether it was the way I talked, sang, led worship, wrote songs, or dressed, whether it was my volume level or my “extraness,” a common theme among white people around me was to define my Blackness by their own standards of what was “Black enough” or “too Black” for them.

Whether I was at school or at work/church, every space I showed up in resulted in me having to prove I belonged, underscoring the narrative that all the things that made me “different” were either bad or wrong.

Subconsciously, I began building walls around myself to survive.

### **IF YOU’RE “NORMAL,” THAT WOULD MAKE ME . . .**

**C:** Having spent the first twenty years of my life in a white bubble, I didn’t know anything outside my own world. My parents and

grandparents had grown up in segregated churches and cultures that believed interracial relationships were a sin.

Even as a kid, I saw, to some extent, how this diminished the fullness of Black people's humanity. My family was firmly planted in a culture that was harshly divided between "us" and "them." Even worse, they had been taught for generations that this was totally acceptable. We were "normal." People of color were "different."

- A:** Living in a culture that's not only predominantly white but "white normalized" means that the predominant view of the world is filtered through a white lens. When the white experience becomes centralized like this, it's easy to look at everything else as wrong, less than, or strange. This, in turn, creates division—especially when we're not aware of it.

Statements like "You're so [well-spoken/pretty/educated/fill-in-the-blank] for a Black person" come directly from a place of white normalization. The white experience ends up being placed unapologetically on the person of color, in addition to everything else they are already carrying.

- C:** This is part of the reason the headwrap incident was so hurtful to Adaeze. When I said, "I will still kiss you and hold your hand even when you are wearing that!" what she heard was "I am okay with how different you are." What I *should* have said was "Adaeze, I am just excited to be here with you. Our differences are a gift, and it's a shame other people don't see it that way." In other words, I should have simply appreciated her for the wonderful creation of God she is, as opposed to making her feel singled out for expressing herself in a way that is every bit as normal to her as my Vans and flannel hoodie were to me.

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I think this is where white people go wrong most of the time. White normalization renders us insensitive to the reality of people of color. I don't have to think about being a white man. On the other hand, Adaeze is reminded every day of her life that she is a Black woman.

In fact, as we are having this conversation, we are sitting in a coffee shop surrounded by white people. Adaeze just felt the need to pause midthought to tell me that she is very aware of that and she's worried about how they might feel if they heard what we're talking about. While I fully expect that some white people would be offended by our discussion, it never once occurred to me that I should speak more quietly or pause to let someone pass our table before continuing. Adaeze, on the other hand, has to be on automatic, almost constant, alert not to say or do anything that might ruffle someone's feathers.

### WHITE MEN WALKING

**C:** A few months after we started dating, we took a trip to North Carolina for Adaeze's birthday. One of Adaeze's best friends was living in Charlotte, and some of my best friends live in Asheville and Durham, so we thought this would be a great chance to introduce each other to important friends of ours, as well as have some time away together.

We were with two of my friends, driving along the winding roads of the Blue Ridge Mountains in the backcountry of North Carolina one morning, when it hit us: we were stupid hungry. Luckily, my friends knew of a diner close by. When we pulled in, there were a couple of big trucks in the parking lot—and I mean *big* pickups, not the little Tesla sedans we're used to seeing around Denver. We definitely weren't in the city anymore.

A few people stared at us as we got out of the car, but I didn't think much of it.

When we walked in, it felt like we had taken a time machine back to the 1960s. All the booths in the dining area were upholstered in sparkly red leather, with white Formica tables between the seats. Red rope lights ran along the floor and the top of the walls, almost like crown molding. The only nod to the "modern" era was the jukebox, which had been placed front and center and played cassette tapes instead of vinyl records.

The second we stepped through the doors, every eye locked on us, freezing us in place.

- A:** They weren't the kind of stares where you wondered if maybe they were looking at a clock directly behind your head. These stares felt dangerous. If looks could talk, these would clearly be saying, "We don't approve of you, Black woman. And we don't approve of you being with her, white man."

It was bad.

Chad's arm immediately swung around my shoulder and didn't drop the whole time we were there. I was trying to be strong, but I didn't dare make eye contact with anyone. As we followed the hostess to our table, the stares followed us, bodies slowly turning, every eye zeroing in on me.

I *really* didn't want to eat there. But it didn't seem like Chad's friends were even aware of the way everyone was staring at me, and I didn't want to ruin everybody else's good time.

- C:** Not to pile on (doing it anyway), but the food wasn't even that good. No doubt, we could have gotten the same quality

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at the gas station next door. I was very aware that Adaeze felt uncomfortable. But instead of suggesting that we leave, I just held on to her tighter. I wanted to show her that she wasn't alone, that she was safe with me.

- A:** However, even with Chad's arm around me, I still felt alone and unsafe. Worse, I felt like I was on display—as if I was being seen but for all the wrong reasons.

And yet we stayed.

It was one of the most uncomfortable breakfasts of my life.

The next morning, we were getting ready to leave Chad's friends' house, and I was sitting by myself in the living room, which had huge floor-to-ceiling windows. I was just about to take my bags out to the car when two white men walked past the house wearing camo pants. One was wearing a matching camo T-shirt, and the other was wearing a T-shirt with a Confederate flag covering the front and back.

Now I will own that I 100 percent profiled them based on the experience I'd had at the diner the previous day. Still, they were walking with such purpose that, to me, it almost felt as though they were out hunting Black people or something.

Even though I was well aware they had no idea I was there, I no longer felt safe taking my bags out to the car alone. Instead, I stayed where I was, watching the men until they disappeared into a garage at the end of the road.

Then Chad came into the room.

- C:** Actually, I had been there the entire time.

- A:** Are you sure? I could have sworn I was alone.

**C:** And *that* is the point we're trying to make. Just like at the diner, even though I was physically there, emotionally, Adaeze still felt alone.

**A:** Chad's friends walked into the room, and one of them asked, "What are you guys looking at?"

I froze.

"There were . . . some guys . . . walking," I started. "And, uh . . . one was, um, wearing all camo . . . and the other was wearing Confederate flags . . ." I quietly trailed off.

I didn't want to offend them. After all, these were two of Chad's closest friends, and I wanted to make a good impression. Plus, this was where they lived. What if they knew those guys?

**C:** I could feel Adaeze's hesitation, so I jumped in. "There was a guy walking outside with a Confederate flag on his shirt. It was pretty uncomfortable." How I thought that made things clearer, I have no idea.

**A:** You tried, babe.

And he had. But all that did was trigger past experiences when I've tried to explain something about race to white people. It doesn't land, and then a white person valiantly says, "I think what Adaeze is trying to say is . . ." They proceed to repeat literally the exact same thing I just said, and all the white people in the room suddenly get it.

As if on cue, his other friend immediately chimed in with "Well, that's just how the world is," which to me translated to "Well, that sucks, but that's your problem" or "Guess you just have to deal with it."

- C:** In my friends' defense, they weren't trying to be rude or hurtful. They're both genuinely sweet people. It was just a classic normalized statement coming from a place of white privilege.

Unintentional as the comment was, on the heels of what had already unfolded that weekend, it served as yet another wedge separating "us" from "them"—as if Adaeze needed to feel any more "other" there, of all places, in a very rural, very white, very backwoods mountain town.

### STEP OUT AND STEP UP

- C:** Ultimately, what happened in North Carolina isn't all that different from experiences we've had in other parts of the country. Even now, I have to consciously remind myself that, more often than not, Adaeze is dealing with a completely different reality than I am.

This is a very apples-to-oranges example, but my first job out of grad school was at a physical therapy clinic where I was the only guy among six female coworkers. I got along well with everybody, but after about a year, I realized that I could not talk about that Sunday's football game with anyone around me. The women were much less entertained by the guy at the gym who looked like a fool using the squat rack to do some curls, and whenever I wanted to go grab a beer after work, my coworkers all wanted to get martinis or some fruity white wine. If I wanted to be included, it felt like my only option was to go along with what the women wanted to do, because they were the majority.

Granted, this doesn't even come close to what Adaeze has had to deal with. My point is simply that when you are in the minority, what you want, like, feel, or need often takes a back seat to what the majority wants, likes, feels, or needs. And after a while, it can feel very isolating.

**A:** To our white friends in any kind of interracial relationship—romantic or otherwise—I have a loving challenge for you: the next time you are with that person and you have an opportunity to do so, step out of your position of privilege for a moment and allow yourself to be uncomfortable along with them. Look at the room through their eyes. Especially if you know this has been a thing for your loved one in the past, take notice of how many people of color are (or are not) in the room. Consider the conversation that is taking place from their perspective. Make a mental note of who the waitstaff addresses at your table, the tone used when your friend is being spoken to, and the way others look at them. Think about what they're having to work around that you aren't.

I know—this isn't comfortable. And it might take a little practice. But the more aware you are of your counterpart's different-from-yours reality, the more keen you will be to do something about it. Hopefully, the more you empathize with the challenges faced by those you are in relationship with, the more empowered you will feel to speak up for friends and colleagues, especially if their voice isn't as respected a voice as yours. You can then hold others accountable for missteps, accidental or otherwise. Because, let's be honest, most people take it better when they're put in their place by someone who looks like them.

For example, if Chad had stepped out of the privilege of being considered "normal" at the diner, instead of simply noticing that I was uncomfortable and lovingly putting his arm around me, he might have taken a moment to think about how he would feel if the looks coming my way were directed at him. He might have taken his response a step further by asking his friends if we could go somewhere else.

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Once the situation was brought to light for his friends, they might have been willing to step out of their normal and oblige that request—even if they didn't understand why—and then ask follow-up questions to better understand why the situation was upsetting to me.

As for the reaction to the guys wearing camo and Confederate flags, Chad's friend could have stepped out of his privilege by offering a more sincere statement, such as "I hate that this is the way the world is sometimes." It doesn't solve the problem, but at least it shows an attempt to empathize and sit with me in it.

Basically, it's a matter of stepping into the other person's shoes and asking yourself, *How would I want to be treated right now?* As the Bible says, "In everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 7:12).

**C:** Amen to that.

Right about now, if you're white, you may be thinking, *Wait . . . why is it on me to do this? Why should I be the only one to inconvenience myself?*

The reality is that our friends of color have already been asked to deal with more than anybody has the right to ask. If we aren't willing to sacrifice our own comfort (and not in a martyr-type way, where we're constantly reminding the person of color that we're doing them a favor), that relationship will always be at a disadvantage. Not because of the person of color—because of us.

We are the ones who created the playing field we're on (whether we realize it or not), and we have essentially said to our friends of color, "If you want to play here, you need to fit into our box." If we want to start erasing racial boundaries,

it stands to reason that the people who created the boundary should cross first. Taking the first step is like extending an olive branch and saying, “If you are willing to trust me, I am willing to learn.”

We need to be willing! It is easy to love when someone walks, talks, acts, and looks like us. But if we really care about someone, then their feelings, their safety, and their comfort should matter just as much, if not more, than our own. It’s like Paul says in his letter to the Corinthians: “Love . . . does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking” (1 Corinthians 13:4-5).

**C & A:** If we want to level the playing field, we need to honor and seek the best for each other. Look at all the times in the New Testament when Jesus invited someone considered “different” by society into His circle—often at the expense of His own optics.

Jesus asked the Samaritan woman for water at the well (John 4). Jews at the time would not talk to Samaritans, let alone one with a questionable relationship status, yet Jesus approached her. And that isn’t even mentioning the male/female dynamic, which was considered taboo in that context. He was breaking all the rules for the sake of inclusion.

Jesus ate at the tax collector’s table, which was also frowned upon (Luke chapters 5 and 19). Tax collectors were viewed as traitors by the Jews because they were ethnically Jewish but collected money from their own people on behalf of the Romans. Going into the home of a tax collector and sitting down for a meal would have been seen as cozying up with the enemy.

Then there was the time Jesus healed the man with leprosy (Matthew 8). There was so much fear and stigma attached to leprosy in Jesus’ day that they were forced to live outside the

city. Yet Jesus laid His hands on the man—an act that would have been unthinkable to most Jews in His day.

Likewise, Jesus healed a man who was blind and was considered an outcast (John 9). People believed this man's blindness was the result of sin, but Jesus treated him with dignity.

Time and time again, Jesus took the first step, reaching out to the disenfranchised and putting the needs of others before His own.

What about us? We all have people in our lives who could benefit from a little selflessness and grace on our part. Are we willing to get uncomfortable to show them love?

**A:** I think I speak for a lot of people of color when I say that we don't want our white friends to feel like we're waiting for them to attend to us. We just want them to be aware that the realities we live in are often vastly different.

Knowing that Chad is aware of these dueling realities—and that we're on the same team—gives me the freedom to vent to him without fearing he will make me feel guilty for not being “strong enough” when it hurts. It also gives Chad the freedom to learn from my experiences without feeling guilty for not always recognizing microaggressions when they happen.

We're not only aware of white privilege and normalization—we're in it *together*.

Also, my fellow people of color, you all best believe I'm preaching to myself on this next one because this is something I'm constantly working on: we need to be better at being unoffendable. That doesn't mean we don't feel pain when people act ignorantly or discriminate against us. It just means we need to work at protecting ourselves from being offended while also educating others for the sake of improving our relationships.

We can do the work of realizing that cultural ignorance (e.g., Chad not realizing the impact of his comment about my headwrap or his friends not understanding why two white men wearing camo gear and Confederate flags might make me uncomfortable) is not the same as intentional offenses (e.g., the way the locals stared me down in the diner or the guy at Chad's high school shouted a racial slur at the reporter). If we do, it will help us have grace for ourselves when we do get offended, as well as for the person who acted not out of malice but out of ignorance.

When we don't make that effort, we end up with shorter fuses, we're more likely to walk away or shut down a conversation (like I almost did with Chad after the headwrap incident), and we're more prone to build walls to protect ourselves—and, in the process, lock the other person out.

The goal of every interracial relationship—and of this book—should be to tear down those walls, to learn to communicate honestly and effectively, and to move forward together. We can't do that if one party isn't willing to take the first step into the other's reality or if we won't let them in when they do.

This is where the redemptive work of Jesus is paramount. When we surrender our prejudice and pain at the feet of Jesus, He will heal us and help us learn, and we will treat each other better as a result.

Case in point: I remember being at Target one time waiting for a self-checkout kiosk to open up, and I overheard a conversation between the white mom in line behind me and her young blond-haired daughter.

"Mommy, look at her dark skin!" the daughter said, loud enough for everyone in the self-checkout area to hear.

My defenses immediately went up as I waited to see how the

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mom would react, fully expecting to hear the usual embarrassed and uncomfortable, “Shhh . . . we don’t say that,” which would have communicated to the little girl that my chocolate skin was somehow bad or less-than.

But to my surprise, the mom didn’t shush the girl, nor did she attach a shameful or negative connotation to what her daughter had just said. Instead, my heart warmed when the mother simply replied, “Yeah, sweetie, isn’t she pretty?”

To which the little girl replied in drawn-out wonder, “Yeah!”

I wanted to turn around and personally thank that mom, but I thought it might be a bit too much. Instead, I just let her continue to be the boss mom that she is. Maybe someday she’ll read this book and remember that day. Either way, I hope she knows what a positive effect her response had—not only on her daughter but on me and everyone else listening.

**C:** As awesome as that one mother was, the reality is true racial reconciliation is not something we have the power to tackle alone. We need Jesus to come back and restore the world to its original design, fully restored to the Father, and fully healed as it will be in the end.

**C & A:** Whether you are a Christian or not, the reality is, if we want our interracial relationships to improve, we need a lot of help navigating these often awkward and uncomfortable situations and conversations.

Speaking of which . . .