

Searching For Common Ground

By the time I hit 30, I realized that the women clock was ticking and I was alone and lonely. I wanted to start a family. Unlike back home in Africa where I could have candidate's referral from family, neighbors and classmates, I was a new Black African immigrant in metro Detroit. So out of limited options, I took the route of online dating. I met Mark, a blond hair blue eyes guy from Dearborn, the home of Ford Moto Company. Mark and I, talked on the phone for a month. Mark had been living with HIV in silence and isolation for a long time. Every one in his family asked him why he was not getting married. Thus, he had been dating online for a while . Also, Mark was confused, lonely and he needed someone to lift him up. I liked Mark accent and I later learned that he spent a big part of his early life in Savana Georgia and speak with a southern drawl. Mark and I, decided to go for in person date. We met at the Fairlane Mall Center in Dearborn. When we saw each other in person for the first time, we were both stunned by how different we really looked. As immigrants, we come to United States thinking everybody looks like Hollywood actors. In contrast, Mark had a look of a typical blue color hard-working country man. Mark had long hair, he was casually wearing worn-out jeans and a T-Shirt and he was driving a rusty American truck.

"I like your big blue eyes! I exclaimed. Mark laughed and looked shy.

"The mall is quite busy today!" Mark said.

"Do you mind if we go to Dearborn oldest Doughnut Coffee Shop for brunch?" He added.

We separately drove to the Dearborn oldest Doughnut Coffee Shop on Ford Road. During our brunch I could not touch my food as I kept staring at him. I was mesmerized by his shiny long ginger hair that perfectly matched his facial hair. A little bit uncomfortable, Mark stared back in my eyes. I felt like I was drowning in the blue sea of his eyes.

On our third date, we both decided we were girlfriend and boyfriend. Thus, we no longer needed to be in restaurants, we could meet at my house or at his house. I loved the serenity of Mark's home...he had two dogs and a cat. His dogs always jumped out of joy and licked me each time they saw me. In contrast, Laura his cat hated me, and she always gave me a mean look before running in the basement. Mark kept his house cold during winter as there was a fireplace in the living room. Country or Blues music always played softly in the background.

Also, Mark is a great cook. For the first time, I was in love with a man who cooked while I watched TV. On my first visit, I was feeling comfortable until I noticed a Confederate flag...Noticing that I saw the flag, Mark jumped and said: "That's my family flag...it represents the Southern heritage."

I was already in love I did not care much about the flag. Life was about to take turns. Mark is of Irish descent, he comes from a big Christian family. Every other weekend the big family meets Up north Michigan for brunches and all households bring in a dish. I enjoyed riding with Mark in his rusty Chevy truck to Northern Michigan for 18 months we dated. The view was beautiful in all four different seasons. The fall we drove through red and golden leaves, in winter we drove through the iced rivers and snow...in spring we drove by many flowers and in summer we drove by many children amusement parks, fire works, and many American flags decorating streets and roads. I mean, everything with Mark was magic.

"Honey, if we decide to have children where are they going to sit? This truck has only two seats."

One time I asked joking.

"In the trunk! Dad used to load all of us four brothers in the trunk and ride with his wife. "Mark replied.

"I love that tough older man! he taught me the value of family and hard work." He added.

"Who was the wife your Dad would be riding with?" I asked with curiosity.

"My Mom. Dad used to say that his marriage with my mom was complete and fulfilled with or without us six kids... [two older sisters and three big brothers]. That older man drops truths man!"

Mark said with enthusiasm.

"Now that Mom passed, Dad is lonely... that is why us his children make sure we see him regularly." Mark added.

I did not know that race was a big issue in United States until Mark raced to introduce me to family brunches. At brunches, I looked way different I mean the family has nothing black. Most of his family members had blond or red hair and blue or green eyes. I loved the warmth, the foods and the family values at Mark's family brunches. However, I hated their narrow conservative opinions on American politics.

"Barack Obama is Kenyan...he is bringing this country down." Mark's Dad said.

"Hussein Obama wants to take away our guns..." Mark's big brother added.

After few beers one of Mark's brother in law said out loud:

" In God and guns, we trust!" Mark's family claimed there is no climate change.

"In the 70's and 80's Michigan suffered global freezing, do not listen to them liberals there is no such thing as global warming." Mark's Dad explained to me.

Back in metro Detroit, Mark had a hunting gun. He sometimes went hunting and brought deer meat to my house. I always complained he was part of people killing innocent animals.

" Claire, we are doing a service to the deer population, they are multiplying so fast and soon they will run out of food." Mark explained.

In the same time, Mark enjoyed my Black African community. He enjoyed the foods, the spices, the noise and the dances. I even bought him African clothes and took him to African parties and events. He was joyful like a kid, he immersed in an African heaven and even started learning few Swahili words.

Also, Mark was introducing me to the American lifestyle. He took me to football, hockey and baseball games in Detroit. Each time he bought me a hat, a T-shirt and we took pictures together at the stadiums to keep the good memories.

Also, Mark has a great working ethic, he is a morning person. For instance, on Saturdays he used to come to my house early morning, mow the lawn or shovel the snow . I would wake up to see a sweating white man.

"Honey, come over, come with me, let us go in the nature and contemplate what God has created for us to see!" Mark used to say out loud while Knocking at my door on weekebds.

Then he would take me on long walks in the snow in the woods...and on our way back we would drive up to his home for brunch. Each time Mark took me on his early morning long walks, I would be out of breath, laughing and happy like a child. Other times, he took me hunting old churches in metro Detroit. Thus, we visited gorgeous Catholic churches in metro Detroit. Given that Mark is a fervent catholic believer, each time we visited a church he met a priest and confessed his sins and insisted we get a blessing together from the priest.

“Honey, coming here for you is like taking a bath, right? I mean a bath for sins?” I asked him one time. Mark gave me a serious look in disbelief I was not getting how he was culturally and emotionally attached to the Catholic church.

“You got it right, the church is a hospital for our weaknesses...we come here to get strengths and mercy from God.” He explained.

I understood that Religion held a big place in his heart and it was not a joking matter.

Also, we went to classic cars racing competitions in different seasons. Each time, his cousin Bob was on the racing team.

“Go Bob go go! That’s my cousin in a 1959 Red Thunderbird!” Mark would be shouting with excitement.

At his house, Mark had old newspaper in black and white in the basement. He once pulled up the old papers from the basement and showed me his uncle fame playing Hockey for the Detroit Red Rings in the 60’s.

"This is uncle Tommy right ther!" Mark told me with excitement showing me an image of a white male on a cover of an old paper in a black and white.

Mark always called me: "my Lady!" For me it felt formal and rigid.

"Call me Claire!" I once humbly asked.

"No! I am an Irish Gentleman! I only talk to women who deserve the title of Lady . Every time you are in my company ...you are my Lady!" Mark replied.

"What about when I am not in your company? I lose the Lady title?" I asked.

"I guess. "Mark replied as he kept driving happily as if these were some sort of fixed principles.

As a feminist, I hated the idea of having a status in society through Mark but I was already in love with him: he was nice and polite. In fact, Mark always carried my purse and opened doors for me. Mark carefully removed my winter coat and my boots and always made sure I was comfortably seated before driving.

Whenever we went to restaurants, he requested waiters to please me.

"Five stars rating and a generous tip guaranteed... as long as my Lady is happy!" Mark would joyfully tell waiters. Then, Mark would put his ginger hairy arms over my shoulders and I could smell his scent and listerine smelling breath as he whispered in my ears: "Honey, make your order!"

Then, Mark would turn to the waiter and give my order as if I needed a translator or I was a child.

I loved it! It reminded me good times I spent with Dad in restaurants as a little girl.

I always felt comfortable, important, respected and safe with Mark. Thus, I let go my feminist ideas and enjoyed the moment.

One year into a relationship, I found a new big puppy at his house.

"The Saint Bernard puppy is for burglars who want to steal... and the gun is for the criminals who want our lives." Mark explained.

I started petting and playing with the Saint Bernard puppy. Other dogs joined in and started licking me. Laura the cat stood in the stairs going upstairs and gave me a mean look.

"I think I will marry you girl!"

Mark suddenly said after a long silence.

Those words thrill struck me like lightening, I was excited and carried away as Mark kept talking. Laura the cat gave me a meaner look and run in the basement as if she was mad Mark wanted to marry me.

"She is a girl!" Mark said petting the Saint Bernard Puppy and getting close to me.

"Name your dog!" Mark asked me.

"Nina!" I replied out of the blue, lost in excitement. I could not believe that someone with big blue eyes, golden blond reddish hair that matched his facial hair, loved me so much that he wanted to spend the rest of his life with me. That evening Mark sang me the Ring of Fire by Jonny Cash...I was in heaven. That evening, I did not go home. I let Mark love me on the daybed by the fire place in the living room. We spoke all night long.

“I want a big Irish wedding ceremony!” Mark said joyful like a kid.

“We shall baptize you in a Catholic church first!” He added.

I wished we could both freeze time and remain in that magic moment. However, the following day was a Saturday and Mark was the godfather in his great nephew baptism. As usual Mark insisted: “Claire, you should be in Ann Arbor by 10 am for Benjamin baptism ceremony...you got be there...this is about my family business.”

After sharing a light breakfast with Mark, I drove home and scrambled to get ready and drove one hour to Ann Arbor. By the time I showed up wearing my colorful African dress, the service was already in the middle. In a small chapel filled with only white people, Mark was wearing white like a saint, standing in front of the altar with a six months baby boy crying. The priest was getting ready to baptize. The white people gave me a stunned look...as if the sky was falling.

Pam is Mark biggest sister, 15 years older than Mark. Pam saw me and came to my rescue and made me sit with the family.

After the service I could see Mark so handsome so polite so sweet with old ladies. He was much more attractive as he was getting lost in a sea of white people. In my heart, I was telling myself :“Mark, I can’t believe you are mine!”

After the service, Mark came to thank me for showing up. I whispered in his ears: “How did you make it by 10 AM?”

“I am Irish!” Mark replied.