

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

How Did You Feel About It?

In the quiet carriage we sat angled away from each other. We always rode the quiet carriage, but today it felt like a gift: a reason not to talk. Jonathan in his maroon sweater cradling his iPad. The sunlight weak, the morning uncertain. I was staring at the magazine in my hand, deeply breathing in and out, a willed and deliberate breathing, aware of itself. *Breathe* – such an easy target for scorn, so often summoned as panacea for our modern ills. But it worked. It helped push away my sense of engulfing tedium, even if only for brief moments. How does this happen? How do you wake up one morning and begin to question your life?

Jonathan shifted on his seat. I kept my eyes on the magazine, to discourage any whispered conversation.

"Something has been on your mind," he told me that morning as he buttered a piece of toast. I kept silent, slowly spooning muesli into my mouth, and he said nothing more. Why hadn't he asked me a question? Why hadn't he asked "What is on your mind?" A question was braver than a statement. A question forced a reckoning. But Jonathan avoided direct questions because they had in them an element of confrontation. His dislike of confrontation I had once found endearing. It made him a person who thrived on peace, and so a life with him would be a kind of seamless happiness.

When he did ask questions, they seemed always to seek reassurance rather than information. His first question to me, shortly after we met years ago, was about servants. I had mentioned the drivers and househelps of my Lagos childhood, and his question followed: *How did you feel about it all?* Because servants were foreign to him, a relationship with them had become a matter of morality. He told me that when he first could afford weekly Polish cleaners for his London flat, he had hidden in the spare room while they cleaned, so ashamed was he of paying somebody to scrub his toilet.

For Jonathan to ask "How did you feel about it all?" was not really about how I felt, but about a moral code I was supposed to follow. I was to say: "I felt terrible. I worried about their welfare." But the truth was I *felt* nothing because it was the life I knew. Had he asked me "What is on your mind?" that morning and had I said "I am wondering if this is the life I want, and what I have missed out on in the years we've been together," he would have no answer for me. Because I was not supposed to think such things. It was unfair to do so. Wrong. That we sometimes think what we are not supposed to, and feel what we wish we did not, was something Jonathan was unable to grasp.

From across the aisle came a loud voice. An elderly American man talking on the phone, his accent distinct, face burnt red as though fresh from a holiday. In the clammy silence of the carriage, his words sounded unnatural, as though coming from somewhere else. Jonathan shifted and sighed, then shifted again. A man turned and rolled his eyes. A woman shook her head.

Why didn't one of them tell the American that this was the quiet carriage? I guessed, from a bluntness in his manner, that he did not know. Jonathan was seated closest to the American, he had only to reach out across the aisle and gesture to the man and in his modulated voice say something. But he would not. Jonathan would shift and sigh and shift again but would say

nothing. I once thought this sweet. I would have teased him about the English ritual of passive aggression, so easily inflamed by the presence of an American.

The quirks that had first charmed me about Jonathan were suddenly scourges designed for my irritation. His sensitivity was weakness. What I thought his innocence was now self-indulgent naiveté. Nothing had happened. Jonathan had done nothing wrong, I had not met anyone else. It was merely that one morning I woke up and felt undone. I began to struggle to shrug off a terrifying sense of something wasted, a colossal waste, leaving a dull mourning for things gone forever.

The train stopped at a station and I watched a couple come into the carriage. My interest in them was instant. They attracted attention: the man looked Japanese, with an angular arresting face and long black hair that gave him a cultivated alternative air. The woman looked Italian, tanned, her kohl eyeliner slightly smudged with the right amount of effortlessness. A throwaway kind of glamour emanated from them, their stylish clothes fit loosely but deliberately, their bags looked expensive. They slid in opposite us, and I felt an excitement I did not understand, as though their choosing to sit with us said something desirable about us, about me. A subtle perfume seemed to come from both of them. They wore the same scent. This impressed me for reasons unknown to me. Her purse on the table, thick leather, an elegant metal monogram. They pulsed with warmth and vitality. Jonathan avoided looking up. I smiled at them. She held my gaze for a few seconds, her expression open and curious and almost eager. Eager for what?

Both their hands were below the table. Were they holding hands? They seemed like people who truly felt things, who touched their emotions. Their lives were lit by an inner incandescence. I tried to imagine their home, full of colour, intense flowers in asymmetrical vases, unapologetic paintings, perhaps leaning rather than hung on the walls.

They probably said things to each other in bed, and made sounds for each other, with no self-consciousness. Her arms would be thrown up above her head. His body relaxed in its sensuality. They had brief intense fights, about their jealousy and their drinking, and they shouted at each other and then reconciled with passion. I felt suddenly that my life with Jonathan, with its contentment, its pacifism, was in fact the absence of true feeling.

The woman leaned in and asked in an exaggerated whisper: "How long have you been married?"

I stared at her. Jonathan looked up then and I imagined him, later, back home, saying how outrageous it was for a complete stranger to ask such a personal question.

It seemed perfectly normal to me to be asked this by this attractive woman on a train. The man was watching me, too, his expression like hers. They were similar even in their expectations.

"Too long," I said, surprising myself, wanting to match her confident and playful air. Because I felt nervous, my voice was louder than I wanted it to be, especially for the quiet carriage.

Jonathan was looking at me. I expected the woman to smile but to my astonishment her face clouded over, into whimsical sadness.

"How did you know we were married?" Jonathan asked the woman and I turned to him in surprise. Jonathan talking, Jonathan asking a direct question, and not in that over-done whisper meant to show that he was following the quiet-carriage rules.

She shrugged, gestured towards us both, as though to say that it was obvious.

"Because we don't talk?" I wanted to quip, to keep them interested in me, and to halt my rising panicky discomfort.

"Must be nice to be so comfortable with each other," the man said, his face similarly clouded as the woman's.

I understood then what that expression was. Longing. They admired us.

This at first seemed to me so incongruous that I nearly laughed, and then it took on a grave weight that suddenly made me feel so much smaller, almost weightless.

Did they admire us because they were themselves grieving something? Had I misread them from the beginning?

"He's your best friend," the man said to me, gesturing toward Jonathan, and then glanced at the woman, as though to conclude an unfinished unspoken point. "And she's your best friend. You tell each other the truth. You trust each other."

A long pause. Jonathan, I sensed, was done with these strange people. He went back to his iPad. Tears were running down the man's face. The woman's eyes were large and liquid. I felt trapped, confused about them and yet also responsible for them.

"Yes," I said finally.

I remembered how I would lie next to Jonathan, watching him sleep, his lips slightly parted, and how I would touch his neck gently and think 'May nothing ever happen to him.' I had never told him how often I did that.