*Americanah*

Chapter 1

Princeton, in the summer, smelled of nothing, and although Ifemelu liked the tranquil green-ness of the many trees, the clean streets and stately homes, the delicately-over priced shops, and the quiet, abiding air of earned grace, it was this, the lack of a smell, that most appealed to her, perhaps because the other American cities she knew well had all smelled distinctly. Philadelphia had the musty scent of history. New Haven smelled of neglect. Baltimore smelled of brine, and Brooklyn of sun warmed garbage. But Princeton had no smell. She liked taking deep breaths here. She liked watching the locals—who drove with pointed courtesy—and parked their latest-model cars outside the organic grocery store on Nassau Street or outside the sushi restaurants or outside the ice cream shop that had fifty-different-flavors including redpepper or outside the post-office where effucive staff bounded out to greet them at the entrance. She liked the campus grave with knowledge the Gothic buildings with their vine laced walls, and the way everything transformed, in the half-light of night, into a ghostly scene. She liked most of all that in this place of affluent ease, she could pretend to be some one else, some one specially admitted into a hallowed American club, some one adorned with certainty.

But she did not like that she had to go to Trenton to braid her hair. It was unreasonable to expect a braiding salon in Princeton (the few black locals she had seen were so light-skinned and lank haired she could not imagine them wearing braids) and yet as she waited at Princeton Junction station for the train, on an after noon ablaze with heat, she wondered why there was no place where she could braid her hair. The chocolate bar in her hand-bag had melted. A few other people were waiting on the platform all of them white and lean in short, flimsy clothes. The man standing closest to her was eating an ice cream cone; she had always found it a little irresponsible, the eating of ice cream cones by grown up American men, especially the eating of ice cream cones by grown up American men in public. He turned to her and said, “About time,” when the train finally creaked in, with the familiarity strangers adopt with each other after sharing in the disappointment of a public service. She smiled at him.