

A Cousin in the White House

Louis Amis from New York
December 2008

"I don't want to live in a country that will elect Sarah Palin."

Fragments of a conversation between two grey-blond ladies, sitting a few rows down, drift above the racket of the unlit airport coach that bounces and grinds towards Manhattan on Halloween.

"And can you imagine: Cindy McCain, that Stepford wife?"

Sarah Palin scares people. John, and evidently Cindy McCain too, scare people. The drawing on the cover of the current *New Yorker* shows a group of terrified ghouls fleeing a pair of toddlers in McCain and Palin masks. Barack and Michelle Obama definitely scare people, too, although any shivers their names send down the spines of New Yorkers are mostly of a pleasurable kind. It's as if Halloween, a meaningless relic kept in our calendar for its commercial value alone, once again serves a ritual purpose ahead of the 4 November election.

The scale and inclusiveness of the version of Halloween that awaits me in Manhattan seems to confirm this. In the thronged streets near Union Square, those with particularly droll costumes receive the whooping applause of passers-by, and repay it by breaking into dance. I see a couple of okay-looking Palins (female) and a grotesque Hilary (male). At one point, the crowd appears to part to let a lone man in a suit stride coolly against its flow. He's white, and wearing a rubber Obama mask. But this isn't some communal Bacchic pantomime, designed to explore the mysteries of race and gender that have surrounded this election. The hysteria is here every year, independent of election fever, and the fears will remain.



"My cousin's getting ready to become president."

Ira, a cab driver with a Jewish first name and Norwegian surname, is not referring to an actual relative, but to his fellow black man.

"He's half-and-half, but I'll take one per cent of that. A nigga could win and they say he lost. I believe in that *Mission: Impossible* shit, and they do it, too."

Mission: Impossible shit refers, of course, to a conspiracy theory, the prevalent ideology among the politically apathetic. I expected to hear some of this in New York, but not to have it evoked by the image of Tom Cruise dangling from a wire in a vote-counting room.

"Bush is stealing from this country - him and his crony [Dick Cheney, 8th cousin of Barack Obama]. They bleeding this country dry. Don't let nobody else say it, but let me say it: this country ain't shit. Don't let nobody else say it, but I can say it."

If Ira was a true believer in conspiracy theory, he probably would have droned on about it, and his closing remarks on the subject would not have contained that note of patriotism. Instead, the conversation turns to music ("I love soul music. I tell these kids: rhythm and blues is like coke with a cut on it") and his personal history. He was here 40 years ago, when Frank Lucas became the first black man to wrest control of the East Coast drug trade from the Mafia: "You seen that movie [Ridley Scott's] *American Gangster*? I used to deal with his lieutenants, until I became my own best customer. I've been clean for 18 years and dry for three." It's a reminder of the dearth of positive black-American role models outside the realm of show-business, and of how, though it comes too late for Ira, an Obama

presidency is likely to change at least this.

As we say our farewells, Ira invites me and my friends to the church in Harlem where, when he's not touring the globe with his Drifters tribute band, he sings in the choir on Wednesday mornings: "Just look for the Black Jew. And you'll probably see some of your homeboys from England there too, because people come from all over."



Outside, after the service at a different Harlem church, the First Corinthian Baptist Church, I ask two well-dressed men in their late twenties for their thoughts on the election. One of them beams as he tells me that he's voting for Obama in Pennsylvania, but when I ask the other if I'm wrong to assume that he's supporting Obama too, he replies, "You might be", and has nothing more to say. It's possible that he is a member, or a would-be member, of the Harlem Republican Club, which has seen its already tiny membership dwindle to the point of redundancy during Obama's ascent. Much more likely, though, is that he is supporting Obama, but resents the fact that I have reached this conclusion, as he thinks, purely on the evidence of his skin colour. Ira, "the Black Jew", had freely admitted that Obama's race was central to his appeal, and his world of black cousins and English homeboys was one that, though not "post-racial" yet, could conceivably evolve in that direction. But for now, I was back in the real world of political correctness, tension and misunderstanding that is far less promising.

New Yorkers are easily offended and, in another part of town, the mere suggestion of voting Republican might offend a white person. In the East Village the next day, a middle-aged woman is talking loudly on her mobile phone: "You're not voting for McCain anymore are you? Good, you've redeemed yourself and I'll love you even more now. But seriously, what about that Sarah Palin? The way she just shoots animals for no reason - I mean she is just nuts."

In any case, I meet a non-white Republican later that night. Melvin, the Dominican-born bouncer at an East Village nightclub, is a Republican on social issues. He voted for Bush in 2004 because he "was scared of Kerry". But he isn't a neocon: "I'm surprised you knew that word - it sounds like the name of an evil robot." This time he is voting for the Constitution Party candidate, Chuck Baldwin.

In Harlem on election night, a woman selling Obama pins with her daughter stops me in the crowded street. "I don't see you wearing one of these, baby." I buy one and am happy to sport it as I head back downtown to a club where the hip-hop generation is throwing itself a party. Outside in the smoking-pen, after CNN has projected an Obama victory, people are doing the kind of dances that the shy hero of a romantic comedy does after his love interest has agreed to a first date and gone upstairs, and hugging strangers, saying things like, "I never thought I would live through history." After Obama's acceptance speech, and the dazzling, moving sight of a black first family alone on stage, I walk out to buy cigarettes. On the first corner, five NYPD squad cars and one unmarked car are engaged in what seems to be the task of arresting one passive black male. A crowd has gathered, and one man, craning over the handlebars of his bicycle to film the incident on his mobile phone, informs everyone that one of the cops had said, "Obama hasn't even been sworn in yet." His video will fall well short of the Rodney King-type footage he seems to be hoping for, but the scene is a brutal reminder of the continuity of the status quo.





"There was a time when black men and women, no matter how old, were called boy and girl, and had to give up their seats on the bus for our white brothers and sisters. Now we got one riding in Air Force One."

At Ira's church the next morning, the pastor runs through a modern history of American racial oppression, punctuated by the refrain, "and He was there all the time. Because of what happened yesterday - yes we can!" Ira himself seems too emotional to do much singing. He stands to the side of the choir, bristling, and holding back tears. Around the corner, on 125th Street, people pass each other with greetings like "It's an Obama day". One old black man, speaking to another, passes out of earshot in mid-sentence: "It's been a long time. It's been a very long time. It's been a long, long time since I've been proud to be..."

Later, in the elegant smoking-garden of another nightclub, this one in the fashionable meat-packing district, I talk to another bouncer, another Mel. This Mel is black, but is not at all romantic about Obama. Foremost on his mind is money and the amount he pays in taxes, but he then launches into a long, YouTube-researched tirade about the unfair influence of the Rothschild family. I wonder how, without seeming to care about a black president, he manages to reconcile these two concerns.

Thursday isn't much of an Obama day. I walk all over town before catching my night flight, but apart from the newspapers, and the odd poster still in its window, I see no visible trace of the election. The city is coming to terms with the anti-climactic prospect of another three months of George W. Bush, but there is an ambiguous energy in the air. Perhaps it is biding its time, quietly assured of a bold new future under Obama; perhaps it is slightly in shock, and hasn't quite figured out what to do next.

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