

LOVE ISN'T ALWAYS (COLOR) BLIND

By ELIZABETH HAYT

January 30, 2006 -- OPENING this week, "Something New" is a romantic comedy poking fun at racial and class stereotypes by reversing them. The heroine, Kenya (played by Sanaa Lathan) is a beautiful, single, African-American lawyer who falls for a hot, Caucasian gardener, Brian (played by Simon Baker). Her upscale family and friends freak out, bending over backwards to replace him with a prosperous, African-American dream guy, Mark (Blair Underwood). Their plotting is for naught. Opposites attract.



While the movie is easy breezy, real-life interracial dating is not. Genuine fears of miscegenation still exist, even in the melting pot of Manhattan. A racially homogeneous neighborhood or profession insulates people from difference. No matter how tolerant and enlightened we believe ourselves to be, a "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner" moment can trigger unexpected feelings of anxiety.

A girlfriend who looks like a blond goddess and is a self-described "typical, Ivy League, Upper East Side, married liberal" admitted why she initially balked at sleeping with a Nigerian fellow who worked on Wall Street several years ago. "I was afraid of discovering something really different about a black body," she said. "The hair grows differently. Skin has a big role and so does smell. I had a fear of the other. It's so cliched. The sex turned out to be an incredibly reassuring human experience."

I understood immediately. About a year ago, I was dating an African-American neurosurgeon, 41, who grew up in Dayton, Ohio. We had a lot in common: upper middle-class backgrounds, our fathers both doctors, Ivy League educations, overlapping social circles, and mutual cultural interests. That he had more melanin in his skin than me seemed beside the point.

But I was less colorblind than I thought. I confess feeling particularly hip on his arm, precisely because he was black, enabling me to telegraph to the world how open-minded and sophisticated I was. I enjoyed bragging rights to his accomplishments, championing how he'd overcome prejudicial hurdles to rise to the top of a world dominated by whites. His overriding self-confidence, drive and tenacity - attributes that ordinarily attract me to a white guy - were all the more alluring because they reinforced his professional superhero status. Being with this particular African-American reflected well on me.

For all my self-congratulations, a true moment of reckoning came when he invited me to his TriBeCa loft one night. I knew where things were headed - to his Pratesi sheets. He was cool as a cucumber, while I broke out in nervous perspiration. It was the first time I'd ever been with a black man.

I'd grown up in a Jewish suburb on the North Shore of Long Island

during the '60s and '70s when the concept, let alone the behavior, of political correctness was decades away. Attending public school until I was 14, I don't recall much social interaction between the white and black kids, but I do remember many seemed angry, and I was careful to walk on the far side of a hallway when they came my way. There was no official segregation, but most black kids lived on or around Steamboat Road (yes, that's actually the name) and their parents often worked as the maids and taxi drivers for the town's white families.

Standing in the surgeon's bedroom, I was frozen with fear. It was one thing to be seen in public with him, but quite another to be naked. The darkness of his body was frighteningly exotic, so opposite my own fairness, which, by comparison, I suddenly perceived to be weak and wan. How would I touch his hair when I couldn't run my fingers through it? What if he was physically aggressive?

My reaction startled me. Until that night, I'd prided myself on being progressive and tolerant, especially since I'd devoted many years to teaching at inner-city high schools. I was no Scarlett O'Hara, yet, to my shame and horror, I held sexual fears that were practically antebellum. Where did they come from? Who was to blame?

No one and nowhere, I surmised. I had unconsciously inherited social myths about African-Americans because I had no personal basis for formulating my own opinions. My fears resulted from ignorance. I wasn't even aware I harbored them until I had to face them. But when my lips met my bedmate's, all my worries melted away. I ran my hand over his head, enjoying the wooliness of his hair. I'd never felt anything like it. And as for his moves? We were totally in sync.

"Were you at all nervous about this because I'm white and you're black?" I asked afterward, immediately realizing how jerky I sounded posing the question.

"Fear has to do with what you're exposed to," he answered. "You're far from the first white girl I've slept with. I stopped having fears of racism a long time ago because I've existed in a white world for so long. Your race doesn't even remotely enter my radar."

We didn't prove the rule that opposites attract, despite our ability to bridge a racial divide. In the end, our personalities clashed, driving us apart. But I had no regrets since I came away with a whole new perspective on love. The possibilities for pairings seemed as limitless as the range of skin tones.

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