

It's Not About Race
a black comedy at the beach
by Jennie Webb

Characters:

WOMAN WHO'S DATING - Tries very hard to be someone who opens up and lets people in. She's white.

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS - Doesn't have to try to be someone who keeps people at a distance. She's whiter.

Setting:

Santa Monica Beach - The bike path at Bay Street

Time:

The afternoon.

SPECIAL THANKS

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It's Not About Race

Two women stand, taking shelter under not very forgiving palm trees along a beachfront path. One's dressed surf chic, an outfit that's intended to appear casual but is obviously put together with great care. She's looking out front, waiting to be noticed. Like she's on a date.

The other woman is attired inappropriately for the beach, by a long shot. Maybe she's wearing a lot of black, maybe heels, maybe a turtleneck. Too much make-up? Whatever it is, it clashes with ocean. And it's not at all Westside. She's looking, doubtfully, at a commemorative plaque placed in a large stone.

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:
"It's not about race?"

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:
It's not about race.

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:
Of course it's about race.

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:
Not really, not only.

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:
Then what's it about?

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:
It's about community, belonging, being accepted.

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:
Or not being accepted.

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:
But we're talking about a totally different time and place.

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:
No. We're talking about this very place. Which is why they have this very plaque right here.

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:
Right, but it was different then—a different time—is what I'm saying.

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:
Different but the same.

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:
No, not the same at all.

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:
Really. Because you see so many black people, here, on the beach.

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

Well, I certainly see one. Hey!

She enthusiastically waves to someone in the distance.

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

And that's exactly what I mean, There's your guy, and there's the rest of the... beautifully buff, tanned but nonetheless paler-than volleyball team. The racial lines are still there. De facto segregation. Look around you: a sea of white.

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

Which is what I was saying. That's why it's different. Back then this was all black. This was a black beach. This part of it. For black people. That's why they called it "The Ink Well."

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

And how is that not about race?

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

But I'm saying it wasn't a bad thing.

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

"The Ink Well?"

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

Or not all bad. Today maybe it sounds bad, but then everyone called it that. Even black people, who didn't have to come here, but wanted to come here.

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

To their own black people beach? To play black beach volleyball?

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

Stop. There weren't laws, or anything. And this is California. It's not the South.

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

Southern California. And of course there were laws! Unwritten laws. That's true of everywhere, even today. But it was apparently pretty black and white: "This 200 ft strip of roped-off beach. This is it: the only place for Negro fun in the sun."

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

Okay okay fine. It was the 1920s, '30s. A different time, like I said.

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

(referring to the plaque) Through the '50s, '60s.

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

Still a different time. I don't even know if they played volleyball and this is not why I asked you to come here today.

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

No. You asked me to come here because of your black boyfriend.

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

Because of my boyfriend, not because he's black.

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

He doesn't live here, does he?

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

No, he— What do you mean?

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

What do you think I mean?

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

Like on the beach? He's not homeless. He has an apartment.

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

I mean over here. Are there black neighborhoods in Santa Monica?

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

I don't— Why does he have to live in a black neighborhood?

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

Oh, that's right, he has a white girlfriend. Color barriers be damned.

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

You don't know what you're talking about. And I'm not exactly his girlfriend.

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

You're not?

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

He doesn't say "girlfriend." We're dating.

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

But you say "boyfriend?"

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

Yeah, I do.

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

So you made me drag my sorry self all the way across town, in beach traffic, to watch from afar someone who, notwithstanding race, what? Considers you a hook up?

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

Do you want to move closer? To the game?

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

Not really. I can't do sun and this miserable palm tree's the only shade there is.

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

You're not wearing sunscreen?

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

Of course I'm wearing sunscreen. I'm the whitest person on the planet. I'm always wearing sunscreen. That doesn't mean I can actually go in the sun.

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

You should have worn a hat, or something. I told you we were going to the beach.

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

"To the beach," I thought, like, to someplace beach-y. To a beach bar. To some fancy, overpriced Westside lounge overlooking the ocean with drinks made from muddled herbs. Herbs with precious names I've never heard of that rich, beach people grow in their organic, raised-bed gardens.

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

Oh.

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

What does that mean?

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

Nothing, I just... (*looking at her friend's outfit*) I should have made myself clearer, I guess.

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

You guess? You know I wouldn't have humped it over here today if I knew there was sand involved.

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

Right, I'm sorry.

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

And it's too bright out. Too many smiles. Too many teeth. Even the dogs have white teeth. It's blinding. "Ink Well," my ass.

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

I thought I told you where we were— I guess I was nervous.

She looks back out at the game.

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

Because you know I hate everything and everyone this side of La Cienega?

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

No, for you to meet him.

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

Because he's black?

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

No! Because of how you always are about my boyfriends.

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

I gotta stop you right there. How can he be your boyfriend if you're not his—?

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

(interrupting, looking out front) Ahhh! Yay! Did you see that?

She enthusiastically claps in appreciation of a move in front of the net.

(out front) Great! Go! Woo hoo! *(to the woman who doubts)* Right?

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

So. What's the deal with him?

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

What do you mean?

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

Fear of "girlfriend."

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

It's not... It's different for him.

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

Because he's...

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

Because he's a guy. Because of his past. Because he... is who he is.

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

Uh huh.

Pause, as both women look out again at the game, straining a bit to see.

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

Oh! Look at that! He made a... whatcha call it.

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

I so do not know what you call it. I so was not prepared for any of this today.

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

A point. I don't know the rules, but I think you call it a point.

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

So is this your first time doing this?

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

Doing what?

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

This whole beach-volleyball-pseudo-surfer-chick-white-non-girlfriend thing?

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

Will you stop it?

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

No, not so much. Who is he, this guy that's made you play twisted Gidget and crave the sound of crashing waves? And what dark secrets in are in his past? No pun intended.

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

He's just a guy and there are no secrets and what pun didn't you intend?

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

"Dark secrets" ha ha ha. So what about his past?

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

That's terrible.

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

It's not terrible because it wasn't intended. I can't help it if you interpreted.

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

I did not interpret. You interpreted.

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

One cannot interpret one's own unintended pun. So, what? Is he a criminal?

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

And why would you say that?

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

Because you date criminals, that's why I said it. You have a history of terrible boyfriends and the last few have done jail time.

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

He has not done jail time.

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

Well, that's a step up.

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

At least I don't think he has.

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

Then I wouldn't put money on it.

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

Meaning?

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

Sorry, but statistically, a black man in his—what? Late 20s?

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

Late 30s.

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

Seriously? He looks good.

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

Yeah. (*cheering at another athletic feat*) Woo hoo HOO!

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

But you know what this sounds like to me? This guy who has no girlfriend?

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

What?

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

Sounds like he's trying to hide you. And if he's hiding you, he's hiding something else.

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

Because he's black.

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

I don't know, maybe! Maybe there is some cultural—

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

(*interrupting*) Black is not a culture!

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

Of course black is a culture!

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

Does that mean white is a culture?

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

Hello? (*gesturing around her*)

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

Do you have a problem with black people?

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

Please, you know where I live.

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

In the same building as me.

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

Where there are people of color. Real people. Not like this part of town.

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

There are people of color here.

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

(looking at the game) One.

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

There are many people of all colors, it's a melting pot, for chrissakes! This is Los Angeles.

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

This is Santa Monica. Maybe a fondue pot.

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

It's only 20 miles from us. You're acting like it's another planet.

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

Well...

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

Okay. If you want to just stay over in your true Angeleno corner and see lines where there are none and sneer at the rest of us, fine. I like it here. And my boyfriend likes it here.

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

But do you belong here?

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

What?

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

Of course you like it here. It's just how you want to see yourself, think of yourself. How you want them to see you. But do you really think you're like them?

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

Like whom?

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

The "whom" to whom I'm referring are the gorgeous sea-salt-crusted specimens out there. Playing, laughing, exchanging quips, gliding on top of the sand, stunning in their perfectly fitting bathing suits, effortlessly earning point after point...

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

Well, I—

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

(interrupting) Do you even own a bathing suit?

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

I... No.

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

Right? Who does? I mean, in our hood. What I'm saying is you don't fit in here. You never will. We're different. And the more you try to be someone you're not the more obvious that becomes.

Pause. The women look out front and we hear the laughter and camaraderie of others.

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

Look at that. Look at him. They love him. He can fit in anywhere. He's comfortable even if he's the only black guy in the room.

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

Or on the beach.

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

And it doesn't bother him. He's never self-conscious, he doesn't have to be. It always seems easy. For him. Why can't I find someone, someplace where I just... Oh! Hey!

She returns a wave with a bit of desperation. They both study the players in the game.

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

It's probably an act.

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

What?

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

Fitting in. Being comfortable. Probably from practice. Living in a white world. Having to always be "the other."

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

It's not like that anymore.

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

Because the ropes are down, "The Inkwell"s stain gets buried under the crystalline, Caucasian sand and it transforms into a place where a beautiful Negro body becomes a shield to protect us from accusations of racism? Where white women use their conquests as badges of liberalism, where black people don't have to try, poor people all have jobs and fat people stay in the Valley except on the weekends?

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

If you want to just go, you know I can get home.

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

I'm sorry, but to ignore the racial issues—while we're on "The Negro Beach," of all spots—just makes me realize how cut off from reality they are. The cannot comprehend that life can be so completely different.

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

And isn't it the same for you? Do you even want to get past the barriers? To see what's on other side?

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

Depends on the parking.

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

(looking for her keys) Okay. Take my car. If he can't give me a ride I'll take the bus.

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

The bus? You can't—

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

(interrupting) I can and I will. I'll figure it out. This was a mistake. Please! Just leave me alone!

Pause. We hear the sound of the surf

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

I... I'm sorry. Did I go too far?

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

I... yes. You did. You always do.

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

I know. And I am sorry. Because it's too easy to forget. There's these incredible tragedies—an innocent boy gets shot, his murderer goes free—and with "It's not about race" it's all gone, just like that. Washed away by the newscycle and complete denial of what's deep, down at the bottom of it all. I watch what goes on across the country and I've never wanted so much *not* to be a part of something, to break off and fall right into the ocean. Do you ever feel like that?

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

I'm not that good a swimmer.

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

Me, neither. How about your boyfriend?

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

Oh, sure. He surfs.

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

Really? A black surfer?

Short pause.

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

Yeah.

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

I just never knew. Black surfers.

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

There's a whole network. He's going to teach me.

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

Lemme know how that goes.

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

Okay.

She waves out front again.

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

Man. It got hot. Where'd that breeze go? Isn't there supposed to always be a breeze, isn't that why people live here? For the breeze?

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

Here. *(handing her a bottle)* Have some water.

WOMAN WHO DOUBTS:

Thanks. That's mighty white of you.

Short pause.

WOMAN WHO'S DATING:

Yeah.

End of Play