**Excerpt from Americanah** by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

 If they asked what she did, she would say vaguely, "I write a lifestyle blog," because saying "I write an anonymous blog called Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black" would make them uncomfortable. She had said it, though, a few times. Once to a dreadlocked white man who sat next to her on the train, his hair like old twine ropes that ended in a blond fuzz, his tattered shirt worn with enough piety to convince her that he was a social warrior and might make a good guest blogger. "Race is totally overhyped these days, black people need to get over themselves, it's all about class now, the haves and the have-nots," he told her evenly, and she used it as the opening sentence of a post titled, "Not All Dreadlocked White American Guys Are Down." Then there was the man from Ohio, who was squeezed next to her on a flight. A middle manager, she was sure, from his boxy suit and contrast collar. He wanted to know what she meant by 'lifestyle blog,' and she told him, expecting him to become reserved, or to end the conversation by saying something defensively bland like, "The only race that matters is the human race." But he said, "Ever write about adoption? Nobody wants black babies in this country, and I don't mean biracial, I mean black. Even the black families don't want them."

 He told her that he and his wife had adopted a black child and their neighbors looked at them as though they had chosen to become martyrs for a dubious cause. Her blog post about him, "Badly-Dressed White Middle Managers from Ohio Are Not Always What You Think," had received the highest number of comments for that month. She still wondered if he had read it. She hoped so. Often, she would sit in cafés, or airports, or train stations, watching strangers, imagining their lives, and wondering which of them were likely to have read her blog. Now her ex-blog. She had written the final post only days ago, trailed by two hundred and seventy-four comments so far. All those readers, growing month by month, linking and cross-posting, knowing so much more than she did; they had always frightened and exhilarated her. SapphicDerrida, one of the most frequent posters, wrote: "I'm a bit surprised by how personally I am taking this. Good luck as you pursue the unnamed 'life change' but please come back to the blogosphere soon. You've used your irreverent, hectoring, funny and thought-provoking voice to create a space for real conversations about an important subject." Readers like SapphicDerrida, who reeled off statistics and used words like 'reify' in their comments, made Ifemelu nervous, eager to be fresh and to impress, so that she began, over time, to feel like a vulture hacking into the carcasses of people's stories for something she could use. Sometimes making fragile links to race. Sometimes not believing herself. The more she wrote, the less sure she became. Each post scraped off yet one more scale of self until she felt naked and false.

**Ironing After Midnight**

BY [MARSHA TRUMAN COOPER](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/marsha-truman-cooper)

Your mother called it

*"doing the pressing,"*

and you know now

how right she was.

There is something urgent here.

Not even the hiss

under each button

or the yellow business

ground in at the neck

can make one instant

of this work seem unimportant.

You've been taught

to turn the pocket corners

and pick out the dark lint

that collects there.

You're tempted to leave it,

but the old lessons

go deeper than habits.

Everyone else is asleep.

The odor of sweat rises

when you do

under the armpits,

the owner's particular smell

you can never quite wash out.

You'll stay up.

You'll have your way,

the final stroke

and sharpness

down the long sleeves,

a truly permanent edge.

--

 **My Grandmother Washes Her Feet in the Sink of the Bathroom at Sears**

BY [MOHJA KAHF](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/mohja-kahf)

My grandmother puts her feet in the sink

        of the bathroom at Sears

to wash them in the ritual washing for prayer,

*wudu*,

because she has to pray in the store or miss

the mandatory prayer time for Muslims

She does it with great poise, balancing

herself with one plump matronly arm

against the automated hot-air hand dryer,

after having removed her support knee-highs

and laid them aside, folded in thirds,

and given me her purse and her packages to hold

so she can accomplish this august ritual

and get back to the ritual of shopping for housewares

Respectable Sears matrons shake their heads and frown

as they notice what my grandmother is doing,

an affront to American porcelain,

a contamination of American Standards

by something foreign and unhygienic

requiring civic action and possible use of disinfectant spray

They fluster about and flutter their hands and I can see

a clash of civilizations brewing in the Sears bathroom

My grandmother, though she speaks no English,

catches their meaning and her look in the mirror says,

*I have washed my feet over Iznik tile in Istanbul*

*with water from the world's ancient irrigation systems*

*I have washed my feet in the bathhouses of Damascus*

*over painted bowls imported from China*

*among the best families of Aleppo*

*And if you Americans knew anything*

*about civilization and cleanliness,*

*you'd make wider washbins, anyway*

My grandmother knows one culture—the right one,

as do these matrons of the Middle West. For them,

my grandmother might as well have been squatting

in the mud over a rusty tin in vaguely tropical squalor,

Mexican or Middle Eastern, it doesn't matter which,

when she lifts her well-groomed foot and puts it over the edge.

"You can't do that," one of the women protests,

turning to me, "Tell her she can't do that."

"We wash our feet five times a day,"

my grandmother declares hotly in Arabic.

"My feet are cleaner than their sink.

Worried about their sink, are they? I

should worry about my feet!"

My grandmother nudges me, "Go on, tell them."

Standing between the door and the mirror, I can see

at multiple angles, my grandmother and the other shoppers,

all of them decent and goodhearted women, diligent

in cleanliness, grooming, and decorum

Even now my grandmother, not to be rushed,

is delicately drying her pumps with tissues from her purse

For my grandmother always wears well-turned pumps

that match her purse, I think in case someone

from one of the best families of Aleppo

should run into her—here, in front of the Kenmore display

I smile at the midwestern women

as if my grandmother has just said something lovely about them

and shrug at my grandmother as if they

had just apologized through me

No one is fooled, but I

hold the door open for everyone

and we all emerge on the sales floor

and lose ourselves in the great common ground

of housewares on markdown.

**Prompt:** All of these passages show a character doing something that is a habitual action. Habitual action can be used to establish character in a story. Often the habitual action is broken, triggering an event or plotline in a story. In the Adiche excerpt, that break happens when the protagonist decides to leave the blogosphere. Incorporate habitual action into a short story, poem or essay to establish character or create tension.