BOOK REVIEW

‘The Arrangements’: A Work of Fiction

By CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE  JUNE 28, 2016

The New York Times Book Review asked the acclaimed novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie to write a short story about the American election. A second work of election fiction — by a different writer — will follow this fall.

Melania decided she would order the flowers herself. Donald was too busy now anyway to call Alessandra’s as usual and ask for “something amazing.” Once, in the early years, before she fully understood him, she had asked what his favorite flowers were.

“I use the best florists in the city, they’re terrific,” he replied, and she realized that taste, for him, was something to be determined by somebody else, and then flaunted.

At first, she wished he would not keep asking their guests, “How do you like these great flowers?” and that he would not be so nakedly in need of their praise, but now she felt a small tug of annoyance if a guest did not gush as Donald expected. The florists were indeed good, their peonies delicate as tissue, even if a little boring, and the interior decorators Donald had brought in — all the top guys used them, he said — were good, too, even if all that gold yellowness bordered on staleness, and so she did not disagree because Donald disliked dissent, and he only wanted the best for them, and she had what she really needed, this luxurious peace. But today, she would order herself. It was her dinner party to celebrate her parents’ anniversary. Unusual orchids, maybe. Her mother loved uncommon things.
Her Pilates instructor, Janelle, would arrive in half an hour. She had just enough time to order the flowers and complete her morning skin routine. She would use a different florist, she decided, where Donald did not have an account, and pay by herself. Donald might like that; he always liked the small efforts she made. Do the little things, don’t ask for big things and he will give them to you, her mother advised her, after she first met Donald. She gently patted three different serums on her face and then, with her fingertips, applied an eye cream and sunscreen.

What a bright morning. Summer sunlight raised her spirits. And Tiffany was leaving today. It felt good. The girl had been staying for the past week, and came and went, mostly staying out of her way. Still, it felt good. Yesterday she had taken Tiffany to lunch, so that she could tell Donald that she had taken Tiffany to lunch.

“She adores all my kids, it’s amazing,” Donald once told a reporter — he was happily blind to the strangeness in the air whenever she was with his children.

To keep the lunch short, she had told Tiffany that she had an afternoon meeting with the Chinese company that produced her jewelry — even though she had no plans. Tiffany had cheerily forked spinach salad into her mouth, her California voice too pleasant, too fey. Her wrists looked fragile and breakable. She talked about how much she loved Ivanka’s new collection; she talked about a vegan recipe, reciting details of berries and seaweed, as though Melania would actually ever make it. She played a recording of her singing and said: “It’s not there yet but I’m working on it. You think Dad will like it?” Melania said, “Of course.”

Now she found herself warming to Tiffany, perhaps more because the girl was leaving today. Tiffany was nice. Tiffany courted her. Tiffany acknowledged her power. Tiffany was different from that Czech woman’s children — she never disputed, with her manner, the primacy of Melania’s place in Donald’s life.

Not like Ivanka. Melania breathed deeply. Even just thinking of Ivanka brought an exquisite, slow-burning irritation. That letter Ivanka wrote to Donald after their engagement. She would never forget it. Congratulations, Dad. At least your ex-wife was pure. It lay carelessly on the desk, as most of Donald’s papers did, and Melania had read it over and over, and later, unable to control herself, had shown it to Donald. What does she mean by this? Donald laughed it off. Ivanka gets moody and
jealous, he said. I am here! Melania had wanted to shout once at the girl, golden-haired and indulged by Donald, one summer when Ivanka joined them for breakfast in Palm Beach and did not once glance at Melania.

“Melania looks great, but we have to think about how to make her more relatable for the convention, maybe less contour makeup and her smiling and not squinting so much,” Ivanka said just two days earlier, at a meeting with Donald’s campaign team. Melania was seated there, next to Donald and part of the meeting, and yet Ivanka spoke of her as though she were invisible.

“Yes, that’s a good idea,” Donald said. He always agreed with Ivanka. Ivanka who spoke in eloquent streams of words that meant nothing but still impressed everyone, Ivanka whom Donald showed off like a glowing modern toy that he did not know how to operate.

Remember, only praise for his daughter when he is there, her mother told her whenever Melania complained.

Her phone chimed; a text from Donald. I’m leading in the latest poll. National! Nice!

It was probably what he had tweeted as well. He copied and pasted his tweets to her in text messages. Once she had suggested he hold back on a tweet and he replied that he had already tweeted it. He showed her his tweets after he had sent them, not before.

That is so great! she texted back.

She sagged suddenly with terror, imagining what would happen if Donald actually won. Everything would change. Her contentment would crack into pieces. The relentless intrusions into their lives; those horrible media people who never gave Donald any credit would get even worse. She had never questioned Donald’s dreams because they did not collide with her need for peace. Only once, when he was angry about something to do with his TV show, and abruptly decided to leave her and Barron in Paris and go back to New York, she had asked him quietly, “When will it be enough?” She had been rubbing her caviar cream on Barron’s cheeks — he was
about 6 then — and Donald ignored her question and said, “Keep doing that and you’ll turn that kid into a sissy.”

She forced herself to stop thinking of Donald winning. There was this evening to look forward to, with Donald and her parents and a few friends, food and flowers, the butler’s creaseless service, and the magnanimous ease of it all.

Barron had told her last night that he would not join them at dinner. “Too boring, Mom,” he had said in Slovenian. She missed his delicious younger days, when he was pliable and happy to go everywhere with her, when she would brush his hair and hold his perfect little body close and feel it almost one with hers. Now, he had an individual self, separate and wise, with knowledge of golf and video games; when she kissed him he twisted away. At least she had persuaded him to come down and say hello to the guests after they arrived.

She had asked the chef for a menu that was both “old and new,” and he suggested steak and watercress and quinoa and lobster and something else she did not remember. Her mother would like it. When she was growing up, her mother used the French or English terms for the food she cooked, as if the Slovenian would make them unforgivingly ordinary. She would serve a ragout for dinner, after a long day at the textile factory, her lips still carefully rouged, her waist tightly cinched, always striving, always trying to escape the familiar. A woman had to hold herself together, her mother said, or end up looking like a wide middle-aged Russian.

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The butler called her bedroom. “Miss Tiffany would like to say goodbye, Mrs. Trump.”

“Yes, thank you,” Melania said, and waited for Tiffany to knock on her door.

“I’m so sorry, didn’t want to bother you,” Tiffany said. Her blond hair extensions were distracting; too long and doll-like.

“No, no problem,” Melania said. “You look nice.”
“Thank you so much for everything! See you in Cleveland next week!” Tiffany said, hugging her.

“Take care.”

At the door, Tiffany turned back and said, “Ivanka donates to Hillary.”

“What?”

“I saw it on her laptop when I went over there last night. She uses a fake name. It’s the same fake name she uses to order stuff online. I thought you should know.”

Melania swallowed her surprise. Why was Tiffany telling her this? Around Ivanka, Tiffany was like an eager insecure puppy, as though she would not truly be part of the family but for Ivanka’s good grace — a grace that needed to be fed with loyalty and adulation.

So why tell her this? And could it be true? Tiffany was watching, waiting for a reaction. She was determined to say nothing, just in case Tiffany was reporting back to someone. She always suspected intrigue among Donald’s children — and she would not tell Donald about this, not yet; she would first discuss it with her mother. Whether it was true or not, this was a morsel to be saved, molded, used in the best way.

“I must get ready for my Pilates, Tiffany,” she said firmly. “See you in Cleveland.”

Donald called just after she ordered the orchids. He had some meetings, but his big event of the day was a luncheon organized by the Republican National Committee.

“How is it going?” she asked.

“Great. Did you see the polls, honey? Can you believe this?” His voice had an ebullient pitch. He still did not entirely believe this was happening — his lead in the polls, the new veneer of being taken seriously. She could tell from the disbelieving
urgency of his actions, and from the way he flipped through cable channels and scanned newspapers for his name.

“Remember I told you: You will win,” she said.

She always tried to sound casually believing, as if the polls were merely incidental, and her faith had conjured his victory. But she was as startled by his rise as he was.

When she had first told him “you will win,” that balmy day in Florida last year, drinking Diet Coke in tennis whites, she had meant he would win at what he wanted: the publicity, the ego polish. It would help his TV show, and impress those business associates tickled by fame. But she had never meant he would actually win the Republican primary, nor had she expected the frenzy of media coverage he received. Americans were so emotionally young, so fascinated by what Europeans knew to be world-weary realities. They were drawn to Donald’s brashness and bluster and bullying, his harsh words, even the amoral ease with which untruths slid out of his mouth. She viewed these with a shrug — he was human, and he had his good points, and did Americans truly not know that human beings told lies? But they had followed him from the beginning, breathlessly and childishly. There were days when every television channel she switched to had his image on the screen. They did not understand that what he found unbearable was to be ignored, and for this she was grateful, because being in the news brought Donald the closest he could be to contentment. He would never be a truly content person, she knew this, because of that primal restlessness that thrummed in him, the compulsion to prove something to himself that he feared he never would. It moved her, made her feel protective. Even the way he nursed his grudges, almost lovingly, unleashing in great detail slights from 20 years ago, made her protective of him. She often felt, despite the age gap of more than two decades, that she was older than Donald. Her response to his agitations was a curated series of soothing murmurs. Be a little calmer, she told him often. In bed, she had learned to gauge Donald and know when he expected her to gasp. On nights when she did not have the mental energy to act, she would tell Donald, “It is not a good night today,” and he would kiss her cheek and leave, because he liked her air of delicate mystery.
The butler knocked and brought her lemon water on a tray. “Janelle is here, Mrs. Trump.”

He did his characteristic almost-bow. He liked her, mostly because of how little she said, and how she encouraged an air of enigmatic formality.

“Thank you,” she said.

She applied concealer and lip gloss and highlighter, checked herself in the mirror. She had not worn makeup with Amy, her last instructor, but Janelle made her want to look attractive. After Amy moved to Los Angeles and recommended Janelle, Donald saw her — he was home on Janelle’s first day and said: “Really? I didn’t think they did that Pilates stuff. It’s not like Pilates is hip-hop or whatever.” She, too, was taken aback when she first saw Janelle, sinuous and small, skin the color of earth, locs pulled up in a bun. She’s professional and discreet, Amy had said. Now, weeks in, Melania wished that Janelle were not so professional, so singularly focused on straightening Melania’s feet, flattening Melania’s belly, and never saying anything personal.

“Hi, Mrs. Trump. Ready for the warm-up?” Janelle asked, her face, as usual, a pleasant mask scrubbed of expression.

“Yes,” Melania said.

Janelle was beside her on the mat, legs aloft. She smelled of grapefruit. Melania wanted to reach out and taste her — the smooth skin of her arm, her full, brownish-pink lips. She followed Janelle’s lead and wondered about Janelle’s life. Was there a boyfriend? Someone like her, dignified and quiet? Each time the Pilates session ended, she considered asking Janelle to stay for lunch, or just a glass of juice, but she feared that Janelle would say no.

“Oh, I must get a massage, for my thighs,” Melania said, tentative, desperate to say something personal and yet safe.

“A warm bath should help,” Janelle said. “Have a good day, Mrs. Trump.”
Melania felt deflated. Had she expected Janelle to offer to give her a massage? It was so silly of her. Had Janelle meant anything more by “warm bath”? She was trying to read what was not there. But she would not allow herself to be sad. There was the evening to look forward to.

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Her phone chimed. Another text from Donald.

Hope says fashion people are asking what you’ll wear to convention. Has to be a big name. An American designer. Have you decided?

I have three and will choose tomorrow, she texted back.

Donald had never taken much interest in what she wore. Not like Tomaz, her ex, who had picked out her clothes and liked the smell of her sweat. Why had she suddenly thought of Tomaz? Tomaz smoked thin cigarettes and walked the world in an existential haze of disapproval. After she was interviewed in a French magazine some years ago, Tomaz had sent her an email through her sister Ines. Now you have what you always wanted, you have forgotten Ljubljana? It had annoyed her and of course she did not reply. Unlike Tomaz, Donald was not a sensual man. But it was what had attracted her to Donald in the beginning: He was not a man who traded in complexities. After brooding, Sartre-quoting Tomaz, Donald came as a relief.

She checked the time. Donald would be done with his luncheon. She would call, to remind him to be back on time. He sometimes forgot himself at these things.

“The dinner party?” he said. “Of course I’ll be home.”

“You want me to wear those first diamonds?” she asked, light and teasing. It was their joke; the first time they made love, she had worn nothing but those earrings. It had also been his first gift to her, in a pretty black box, and he asked her to open it, humming with a need for her gratitude. He was not eager to please her, she realized, he was keen to be pleased by her pleasure. And so she gave in, thanking him, wreathing her face with delight, even though she wished the diamonds were bigger.
“Yes, wear them. I bet those beauties have tripled in value,” he said. “I have to go, honey, I’m meeting with the top five guys of the committee. They’re all dying to talk to me.”

She undressed and examined herself in the mirror. There was a new dimple in her thigh. Donald would say something if he noticed it. “You need to get these fixed soon,” he had said a few months back, cupping her breasts, and when he got up from bed, she looked at his pale, slack belly, and the sprinkle of bristly hair on his back.

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In the bath, sunk into scented foam, Melania settled down to read the latest coverage of Donald. There was a story about his money; they kept saying he did not have as much as he claimed to have. What did it matter? He had a lot. She glanced at the comments at the end of the article and the name “Janelle” caught her eye. The commenter wrote: Trump needs to modernize those ill-fitting suits, throw away the bottle of orange tan, get fake teeth that actually look like teeth and let himself go bald like God intended. How many Janelles were there in America? Of course it could not be her Janelle. Still, seeing the name excited her. It was unfair that people made fun of Donald’s hair but she could not help smiling, reading it, imagining her Janelle writing it.

There was a story about some of his angry supporters, displaying swastikas on their trucks, and she cringed reading it. Extremes of anything discomfited her. The day Donald announced he would run for president, she had been filled with light on their glorious descent in the escalator, eyes and cameras on them, and everything dazzling. Afterward, she escaped to the cool white of her bedroom, and lay still for a long time, and then looked online at the coverage. She loved the way her smoky eyes popped in the photographs. A heady sense of accomplishment suffused her. But she did not want too many more of those moments, because they shifted her balance, left her spirit vaguely disjointed.

She Googled herself and enlarged some of the photos. Why did some news sites choose the most unflattering images? It was deliberate. She was scrupulous about presenting the best angles of her face to the cameras, practicing the tilt to her neck
that ensured a slim silhouette. Yet some photo editors were determined to use the few bad shots. They were jealous of Donald; nothing else could explain it.

She hoped Donald would not open her bedroom door tonight; this was the kind of day that he would come, exuberant and expansive from victory. It had been almost two months. The last time, he kissed her, eager and dramatic and sweaty as he often was — he hated her initiating things, “aggressive women make me think I’m with a transsexual,” he’d told her years ago — and then fumbled and shifted and suddenly got up and said he had a phone call to make. Only then did she understand what had happened. They did not talk about it, but for a few days he had sulked and snapped, as though it were her fault.

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Donald came home red-faced, his lips a snarl of rage. He ignored the butler’s greeting. Melania kissed him hello and braced herself.

“Can you believe these losers? They’re talking about 2020,” he said. He flung his jacket down on the living room floor and she picked it up.

“What happened?” she asked.

“Reince pulled me aside after the meeting. He’s a great guy, always nice to me. He said all the top guys at the R.N.C. have decided to focus on 2020, and put very little money and effort into my campaign. Like I don’t even have a chance at all!”

“It makes no sense what they want to do. You have many votes. Look at the polls. People love you.”

She knew how easily mollified he was by praise, but he barely seemed to hear her, consumed as he was, typing furiously on his phone. She hoped he would not hurl the phone at the wall, as he had done after a newspaper wrote about Trump University, after which he stayed up all night writing hasty, flagrant letters to journalists.

The doorbell rang and there was Ivanka, her face dewy as though she had not had a long day at work, lips crimson. Too crimson; Melania herself favored nude
lipsticks. She imagined Ivanka sending money to Hillary Clinton’s campaign, using a fake name. Could it be true? What name did she use? Thinking of a fake name made her think of Janelle.

“Hey!” Ivanka said. A general greeting, but she was looking at her father.

“Ivanka. What a surprise,” Melania said.

“Ivanka wanted to come over to discuss this,” Donald said, glancing up from his phone. He was only telling her now. He would expect her to ask Ivanka to dinner and she would have to endure Ivanka’s polished voice, that fulsome surface that shielded cold metal.

“Oh, what gorgeous flowers,” Ivanka said. “Are they from Alessandra’s, Dad?”

“No. I used another florist,” Melania said. Ivanka’s admiration pleased her, and she resented Ivanka for it.

“Can you just believe these losers?” Donald said testily, impatient with talk of flowers. “They want to sabotage me!”

Donald admired in his daughter qualities he would not abide in a wife. Not that Melania minded, she told herself, watching them. Ivanka moved like him, loose-limbed. Like him, she was comfortable with display. Like him, she was always selling something. The difference was that you knew what Donald was selling; Ivanka left you wondering.

“It’s utter sabotage and unacceptable,” Ivanka said.

“I’ve got to hit back at these guys.”

“You do have to hit back, totally,” Ivanka said. “We have to figure out the best way.”

Why did she not calm him down? Melania was annoyed. Her evening would be ruined, Donald’s churlish mood would darken her dinner, and he would probably leave after the main course, without apology. He had done it the day after Cruz beat him at a primary, and they had been with guests that he had invited.
“I’m leaving the Republican Party. That’s it. If they’re going to treat me this way. It’s not nice. That’s it,” Donald said.

“But you need the party,” Melania said.

“This isn’t Europe, honey. You don’t know anything about this,” Donald said and turned back to Ivanka.

She would not be annoyed, not with Ivanka to witness it. Donald used “Europe” to belittle her sometimes, but he also used “European” as Americans did, like an aspirational word. European chocolates. European bread. European style.

“Can we set up a three-way with Paul and Hope in the study, Dad?” Ivanka said, looking amused. “Is Barron in his room? I’ll just go say a quick hi.”

Melania felt an unreasonable urge to get up and drag Ivanka back. You do not go to my son’s room without my permission!

If only Barron didn’t like her. It was Ivanka with whom he discussed tennis and golf.

“Look, honey, can we do this dinner another time?” Donald said after Ivanka left. “I need to think about this. These losers can’t do this to me. Your parents will be fine. They’re here most of the time anyway, and I can fly them back in if they want to. . . .”

He was still speaking, but she could no longer understand. A tightness had gripped her temples, her hands shook. “Donald, I want this,” she said. “We have not hosted my parents. It is 50 years of marriage for them. Their friends are coming. I have planned for one week. I want this today.”

Donald looked up astonished from his phone. She dug her nails in her palm and stared back at him.

“O.K., O.K.,” Donald said sighing. “Just give me some time to talk to Ivanka.”

He went inside, and a new elation settled in Melania’s bones.
They emerged half an hour later, Donald’s face relaxed, Ivanka laughing, pushing her hair away from her face, fondly indulgent of her beloved man-child father.

“We can’t keep letting them think you’re going to be Caligula when you become president, Dad,” Ivanka said.

“Whatever,” Donald said with a grin. He turned to Melania. “Honey, we have a plan. I announce two days before the convention that I’m done with the party. My supporters don’t care about the party anyway. It’s Trump they want. If I’m an independent they’ll still come to me. So that leaves the R.N.C. with one day to try and fix things. I’ll give them a list of my conditions, they need to show me plans and figures for how they’ll support my campaign, otherwise no deal. It’ll knock them down. Let’s see what they do with that!” He sounded gleeful.

Melania was startled. How could Ivanka have agreed to this? It would only lose him votes. His supporters were already with him, but what about the people who would vote for him only because of the Republican Party? Would that not turn them off? She opened her mouth to say something and then closed it. Ivanka had the smallest of triumphant smiles on her face. A well-oiled smile. Melania remembered that smooth smile at other times, when Donald insulted John McCain, when Donald boycotted a Republican debate. Ivanka always egged him on, never dissuaded him; she stirred the pot with her fulsome words.

But Donald was calmer and her evening would go well and her mother would be happy.

After dinner, she would ask Donald to come to her room, and she would be soft and subtle, and wear the jasmine scent he liked, and tell him Tiffany had come to her this morning, upset and crying, because she had discovered that Ivanka was supporting Hillary Clinton. She would suggest that Donald do and say nothing about it, hopefully none of the dishonest media people would find out, because of course it would be terrible if he had to publicly denounce his daughter, and Ivanka was so wonderful really, even though she was always telling the press how she didn’t agree with all of her father’s policies.
“Ivanka, will you join us for dinner?” Melania asked, knowing Ivanka would decline.

“Thanks, but I have to get back to the kids,” Ivanka said.

Melania smiled sagely. “Of course. Say hello to the family.”

The doorbell rang. Her guests had arrived.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is the author of three novels, most recently “Americanah.”

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