

ZADIE

SMITH

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF **WHITE TEETH** AND **NW**

SWING

TIME

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Prologue

It was the first day of my humiliation. Put on a plane, sent back home, to England, set up with a temporary rental in St John's Wood. The flat was on the eighth floor, the windows looked over the cricket ground. It had been chosen, I think, because of the doorman, who blocked all enquiries. I stayed indoors. The phone on the kitchen wall rang and rang, but I was warned not to answer it and to keep my own phone switched off. I watched the cricket being played, a game I don't understand, it offered no real distraction, but still it was better than looking at the interior of that apartment, a luxury condo, in which everything had been designed to be perfectly neutral, with all significant corners rounded, like an iPhone. When the cricket finished I stared at the sleek coffee machine embedded in the wall, and at two photos of the Buddha – one a brass Buddha, the other wood – and at a photo of an elephant kneeling next to a little Indian boy, who was also kneeling. The rooms were tasteful and grey, linked by a pristine hallway of tan wool cord. I stared at the ridges in the cord.

Two days passed like that. On the third day, the doorman called up and said the lobby was clear. I looked at my phone, it was sitting on the counter in airplane mode. I had been offline for seventy-two hours and can remember feeling that this should be counted among the great examples of personal stoicism and moral endurance of our

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times. I put on my jacket and went downstairs. In the lobby I met the doorman. He took the opportunity to complain bitterly ('You've no idea what it's been like down here, past few days – Piccadilly-bloody-Circus!') although it was clear that he was also conflicted, even a little disappointed: it was a shame for him that the fuss had died down – he had felt very important for forty-eight hours. He told me proudly of telling several people to 'buck up their ideas', of letting such and such a person know that if they thought they were getting past him 'they had another think coming'. I leant against his desk and listened to him talk. I had been out of England long enough that many simple colloquial British phrases now sounded exotic to me, almost nonsensical. I asked him if he thought there would be more people that evening and he said he thought not, there hadn't been anyone since yesterday. I wanted to know if it was safe to have an overnight visitor. 'I don't see any problem,' he said, with a tone that made me feel my question was ridiculous. 'There's always the back door.' He sighed, and at the same moment a woman stopped to ask him if he could receive her dry cleaning as she was going out. She had a rude, impatient manner and rather than look at him as she spoke she stared at a calendar on his desk, a grey block with a digital screen, which informed whoever was standing in front of it exactly what moment they were in to the second. It was the twenty-fifth of the month of October, in the year two thousand and eight, and the time was twelve thirty-six and twenty-three seconds. I turned to leave; the doorman dealt with the woman and hurried out from behind his desk to open the front door for me. He asked me where I was going; I said I didn't know. I walked out into the city. It was a perfect autumnal London afternoon, chill but bright, under certain trees there was a shedding of golden leaves. I walked past the cricket ground and the mosque, past Madame Tussauds, up Goodge Street

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and down Tottenham Court Road, through Trafalgar Square, and found myself finally in Embankment, and then crossing the bridge. I thought – as I often think as I cross that bridge – of two young men, students, who were walking over it very late one night when they were mugged and thrown over the railing, into the Thames. One lived and one died. I’ve never understood how the survivor managed it, in the darkness, in the absolute cold, with the terrible shock and his shoes on. Thinking of him, I kept to the right-hand side of the bridge, by the railway line, and avoided looking at the water. When I reached the South Bank the first thing I saw was a poster advertising an afternoon event with an Austrian film director ‘in conversation’, it was starting in twenty minutes at the Royal Festival Hall. I decided on a whim to try to get a ticket. I walked over and was able to buy a seat in the gods, in the very back row. I didn’t expect much, I only wanted to be distracted from my own problems for a while, to sit in darkness, and hear a discussion of films I’d never seen, but in the middle of the programme the director asked his interviewer to roll a clip from the movie *Swing Time*, a film I know very well, I only watched it over and over as a child. I sat up tall in my seat. On the huge screen before me Fred Astaire danced with three silhouetted figures. They can’t keep up with him, they begin to lose their rhythm. Finally they throw in the towel, making that very American ‘oh phooey’ gesture with their three left hands, and walking off stage. Astaire danced on alone. I understood all three of the shadows were also Fred Astaire. Had I known that, as a child? No one else paws the air like that, no other dancer bends his knees in quite that way. Meanwhile the director spoke of a theory of his, about ‘pure cinema’, which he began to define as the ‘interplay of light and dark, expressed as a kind of rhythm, over time’, but I found this line of thought boring and hard to follow. Behind him the same

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clip, for some reason, played again, and my feet, in sympathy with the music, tapped at the seat in front of me. I felt a wonderful lightness in my body, a ridiculous happiness, it seemed to come from nowhere. I'd lost my job, a certain version of my life, my privacy, yet all these things felt small and petty next to this joyful sense I had watching the dance, and following its precise rhythms in my own body. I felt I was losing track of my physical location, rising above my body, viewing my life from a very distant point, hovering over it. It reminded me of the way people describe hallucinogenic drug experiences. I saw all my years at once, but they were not piled up on each other, experience after experience, building into something of substance – the opposite. A truth was being revealed to me: that I had always tried to attach myself to the light of other people, that I had never had any light of my own. I experienced myself as a kind of shadow.

When the event was over I walked back through the city to the flat, phoned Lamin, who was waiting in a nearby café, and told him the coast was clear. He'd been fired, too, but instead of letting him go home, to Senegal, I'd brought him here, to London. At eleven o'clock he came round, in a hooded top, in case of cameras. The lobby was clear. In his hood he looked even younger and more beautiful, and it seemed to me to be a kind of scandal that I could find in my heart no real feelings for him. Afterwards, we lay side by side in bed with our laptops, and to avoid checking my email I googled, at first aimlessly, and then with an aim: I was looking for that clip from *Swing Time*. I wanted to show it to Lamin, I was curious to know what he thought of it, as a dancer now himself, but he said he had never seen or heard of Astaire, and as the clip played he sat up in bed and frowned. I hardly understood what we were looking at: Fred Astaire in black face. In the Royal Festival Hall I'd sat in the

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gods, without my glasses on, and the scene opens with Astaire in long shot. But none of this really explained how I'd managed to block the childhood image from my memory: the rolling eyes, the white gloves, the Bojangles grin. I felt very stupid, closed the laptop and went to sleep. The next morning I woke early, leaving Lamin in bed, hurried to the kitchen and switched on my phone. I expected hundreds of messages, thousands. I had maybe thirty. It had been Aimee who once sent me hundreds of messages a day, and now at last I understood that Aimee would never send me another message again. Why it took me so long to understand this obvious thing I don't know. I scrolled down a depressing list – a distant cousin, a few friends, several journalists. I spotted one titled: WHORE. It had a nonsense address of numbers and letters and a video attachment that wouldn't open. The body of the message was a single sentence: *Now everyone knows who you really are.* It was the kind of note you might get from a spiteful seven-year-old girl with a firm idea of justice. And of course that – if you can ignore the passage of time – is exactly what it was.

PART ONE

Early Days

One

If all the Saturdays of 1982 can be thought of as one day, I met Tracey at ten a.m. on that Saturday, walking through the sandy gravel of a churchyard, each holding our mother's hand. There were many other girls present but for obvious reasons we noticed each other, the similarities and the differences, as girls will. Our shade of brown was exactly the same – as if one piece of tan material had been cut to make us both – and our freckles gathered in the same areas, we were of the same height. But my face was ponderous and melancholy, with a long, serious nose, and my eyes turned down, as did my mouth. Tracey's face was perky and round, she looked like a darker Shirley Temple, except her nose was as problematic as mine, I could see that much at once, a ridiculous nose – it went straight up in the air like a little piglet. Cute, but also obscene: her nostrils were on permanent display. On noses you could call it a draw. On hair she won comprehensively. She had spiral curls, they reached to her backside and were gathered into two long plaits, glossy with some kind of oil, tied at their ends with satin yellow bows. Satin yellow bows were a phenomenon unknown to my mother. She pulled my great frizz back in a single cloud, tied with a black band. My mother was a feminist. She wore her hair in a half-inch Afro, her skull was perfectly shaped, she never wore make-up and dressed us both as plainly as possible. Hair is not essential when you look like Nefertiti. She'd no need of

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make-up or products or jewellery or expensive clothes, and in this way her financial circumstances, her politics and her aesthetic were all perfectly – conveniently – matched. Accessories only cramped her style, including, or so I felt at the time, the horse-faced seven-year-old by her side. Looking across at Tracey I diagnosed the opposite problem: her mother was white, obese, afflicted with acne. She wore her thin blond hair pulled back very tightly in what I knew my mother would call a ‘Kilburn facelift’. But Tracey’s personal glamour was the solution: she was her own mother’s most striking accessory. The family look, though not to my mother’s taste, I found captivating: logos, tin bangles and hoops, diamanté everything, expensive trainers of the kind my mother refused to recognize as a reality in the world – ‘Those aren’t shoes.’ Despite appearances, though, there was not much to choose between our two families. We were both from the estates, neither of us received benefits. (A matter of pride for my mother, an outrage to Tracey’s: she had tried many times – and failed – to ‘get on the disability’.) In my mother’s view it was exactly these superficial similarities that lent so much weight to questions of taste. She dressed for a future not yet with us but which she expected to arrive. That’s what her plain white linen trousers were for, her blue-and-white-striped ‘Breton’ T-shirt, her frayed espadrilles, her severe and beautiful African head – everything so plain, so understated, completely out of step with the spirit of the time, and with the place. One day we would ‘get out of here’, she would complete her studies, become truly radical chic, perhaps even spoken of in the same breath as Angela Davis and Gloria Steinem . . . Straw-soled shoes were all a part of this bold vision, they pointed subtly at the higher concepts. I was an accessory only in the sense that in my very plainness I signified admirable maternal restraint, it being considered bad taste – in the circles to

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which my mother aspired – to dress your daughter like a little whore. But Tracey was unashamedly her mother’s aspiration and avatar, her only joy, in those thrilling yellow bows, a frou-frou skirt of many ruffles and a crop top revealing inches of childish nut-brown belly, and as we pressed up against the pair of them in this bottleneck of mothers and daughters entering the church I watched with interest as Tracey’s mother pushed the girl in front of herself – and in front of us – using her own body as a means of obstruction, the flesh on her arms swinging as she beat us back, until she arrived in Miss Isabel’s dance class, a look of great pride and anxiety on her face, ready to place her precious cargo into the temporary care of others. My mother’s attitude, by contrast, was one of weary, semi-ironic servitude, she thought the dance class ridiculous, she had better things to do, and after a few further Saturdays – in which she sat slumped in one of the plastic chairs that lined the left-hand wall, hardly able to contain her contempt for the whole exercise – a change was made and my father took over. I waited for Tracey’s father to take over, but he never did. It turned out – as my mother had guessed at once – that there was no ‘Tracey’s father’, at least not in the conventional, married sense. This, too, was an example of bad taste.

Two

I want to describe the church now, and Miss Isabel. An unpretentious nineteenth-century building with large sandy stones on the façade, not unlike the cheap cladding you saw in the nastier houses — though it couldn't have been that — and a satisfying, pointy steeple atop a plain, barn-like interior. It was called St Christopher's. It looked just like the church we made with our fingers when we sang:

Here is the church

Here is the steeple

Open the doors

There's all the people.

The stained glass told the story of St Christopher carrying the baby Jesus on his shoulders across a river. It was poorly done: the saint looked mutilated, one-armed. The original windows had blown out during the war. Opposite St Christopher's stood a high-rise estate of poor reputation, and this was where Tracey lived. (Mine was nicer, low-rise, in the next street.) Built in the sixties, it replaced a row of Victorian houses lost in the same bombing that had damaged the church, but here ended the relationship between the two buildings. The church, unable to tempt residents across the road for God, had made a pragmatic decision to diversify into other areas:

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a toddlers' playgroup, ESL, driver training. These were popular, and well established, but Saturday-morning dance classes were a new addition and no one knew quite what to make of them. The class itself cost two pounds fifty, but a maternal rumour went round concerning the going rate for ballet shoes, one woman had heard three pounds, another seven, so-and-so swore the only place you could get them was Freed, in Covent Garden, where they'd take ten quid off you as soon as look at you – and then what about 'tap' and what about 'modern'? Could ballet shoes be worn for modern? What *was* modern? There was no one you could ask, no one who'd already done it, you were stuck. It was a rare mother whose curiosity extended to calling the number written on the home-made flyers stapled to the local trees. Many girls who might have made fine dancers never made it across that road, for fear of a home-made flyer.

My mother was rare: home-made flyers did not scare her. She had a terrific instinct for middle-class mores. She knew, for example, that a car-boot sale – despite its unpromising name – was where you could find a better quality of person, and also their old Penguin paperbacks, sometimes by Orwell, their old china pill-boxes, their cracked Cornish earthenware, their discarded potter's wheels. Our flat was full of such things. No plastic flowers for us, sparkly with fake dew, and no crystal figurines. This was all part of the plan. Even things I hated – like my mother's espadrilles – usually turned out to be attractive to the kind of people we were trying to attract, and I learnt not to question her methods, even when they filled me with shame. A week before classes were due to begin I heard her doing her posh voice in the galley kitchen, but when she got off the phone she had all the answers: five pounds for ballet shoes – if you went to the shopping centre instead of up into town – and the tap shoes could wait till later. Ballet shoes could be used for modern.

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What was modern? She hadn't asked. The concerned parent she would play, but never, ever the ignorant one.

My father was sent to get the shoes. The pink of the leather turned out to be a lighter shade than I'd hoped, it looked like the underside of a kitten, and the sole was a dirty grey cat's tongue, and there were no long pink satin ribbons to criss-cross over the ankles, no, only a sad little elastic strap which my father had sewn on himself. I was extremely bitter about it. But perhaps they were, like the espadrilles, deliberately 'simple', in good taste? It was possible to hold on to this idea right up to the moment when, having entered the hall, we were told to change into our dance clothes by the plastic chairs and go over to the opposite wall, to the barre. Almost everybody had the pink satin shoes, not the pale pink, piggy leather I was stuck with, and some – girls whom I knew to be on benefits, or fatherless, or both – had the shoes with long satin ribbons, criss-crossing round their ankles. Tracey, who was standing next to me, with her left foot in her mother's hand, had both – the deep pink satin and the criss-cross – and also a full tutu, which no one else had even considered as a possibility, no more than turning up to a first swimming lesson in a diving suit. Miss Isabel, meanwhile, was sweet-faced and friendly, but old, perhaps as old as forty-five. It was disappointing. Solidly constructed, she looked more like a farmer's wife than a ballet dancer and was all over pink and yellow, pink and yellow. Her hair was yellow, not blond, yellow like a canary. Her skin was very pink, raw pink, now that I think of it she probably suffered from rosacea. Her leotard was pink, her tracksuit bottoms were pink, her cover-up ballet cardigan was mohair and pink – yet her shoes were silk and yellow, the same shade as her hair. I was bitter about this, too. Yellow had never been mentioned! Next to her, in the corner, was a very old white man in a trilby sat playing an upright

piano, 'Night and Day', a song I loved and was proud to recognize. I got the old songs from my father, whose own father had been a keen pub singer, the kind of man – or so my father believed – whose petty criminality represents, at least in part, some thwarted creative instinct. The piano player was called Mr Booth. I hummed loudly along with him as he played, hoping to be heard, putting a lot of vibrato into my humming. I was a better singer than dancer – I was not a dancer at all – although I took too much pride in my singing, in a manner I knew my mother found obnoxious. Singing came naturally to me, but things that came naturally to females did not impress my mother, not at all. In her view you might as well be proud of breathing or walking or giving birth.

Our mothers served as our balance, as our foot-rests. We placed one hand on their shoulders, we placed one foot on their bended knees. My body was presently in the hands of my mother – being hoiked up and tied down, fastened and straightened, brushed off – but my mind was on Tracey, and on the soles of her ballet shoes, upon which I now read 'Freed' clearly stamped in the leather. Her natural arches were two hummingbirds in flight, curved in on themselves. My own feet were square and flat, they seemed to grind through the positions. I felt like a toddler placing wooden blocks at a series of right angles to each other. Flutter, flutter, flutter said Isabel, yes that's lovely Tracey. Compliments made Tracey throw her head back and flare her little pig nose awfully. Aside from that, she was perfection, I was besotted. Her mother seemed equally infatuated, her commitment to those classes the only consistent feature of what we would now call 'her parenting'. She came to class more than any other mother, and while there her attention rarely wavered from her daughter's feet. My own mother's focus was always elsewhere. She could never simply sit somewhere and let time pass, she had to be

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learning something. She might arrive at the beginning of class with, say, *The Black Jacobins* in hand, and by the time I came over to ask her to swap my ballet shoes for tap she would already be a hundred pages through. Later, when my father took over, he either slept or ‘went for a walk’, the parental euphemism for smoking in the churchyard.

At this early stage Tracey and I were not friends or enemies or even acquaintances: we barely spoke. Yet there was always this mutual awareness, an invisible band strung between us, connecting us and preventing us from straying too deeply into relations with others. Technically, I spoke more to Lily Bingham – who went to my school – and Tracey’s own standby was sad old Danika Babić, with her ripped tights and thick accent, she lived on Tracey’s corridor. But though we giggled and joked with these white girls during class, and although they had every right to assume that they were our focus, our central concern – that we were, to them, the good friends we appeared to be – as soon as it came to break-time and squash and biscuits Tracey and I lined up next to each other, every time, it was almost unconscious, two iron filings drawn to a magnet.

It turned out Tracey was as curious about my family as I was about hers, arguing, with a certain authority, that we had things ‘the wrong way round’. I listened to her theory one day during break, dipping a biscuit anxiously into my orange squash. ‘With everyone else it’s the dad,’ she said, and because I knew this to be more or less accurate I could think of nothing more to say. ‘When your dad’s white it means –’ she continued, but at that moment Lily Bingham came and stood next to us and I never did learn what it meant when your dad was white. Lily was gangly, a foot taller than everyone else. She had long, perfectly straight blond hair, pink cheeks and a happy, open nature that seemed, both to Tracey and me, the direct

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consequence of 29 Exeter Road, a whole house, to which I had been recently invited, eagerly reporting back to Tracey – who had never been – a private garden, a giant jam-jar full of ‘spare change’ and a Swatch watch as big as a human man hanging on a bedroom wall. There were, consequently, things you couldn’t discuss in front of Lily Bingham, and now Tracey shut her mouth, stuck her nose in the air and crossed the room to ask her mother for her ballet shoes.

Three

What do we want from our mothers when we are children? Complete submission.

Oh, it's very nice and rational and respectable to say that a woman has every right to her life, to her ambitions, to her needs, and so on – it's what I've always demanded myself – but as a child, no, the truth is it's a war of attrition, rationality doesn't come into it, not one bit, all you want from your mother is that she once and for all admit that she is your mother and only your mother, and that her battle with the rest of life is over. She has to lay down arms and come to you. And if she doesn't do it, then it's really a war, and it was a war between my mother and me. Only as an adult did I come to truly admire her – especially in the last, painful years of her life – for all that she had done to claw some space in this world for herself. When I was young her refusal to submit to me confused and wounded me, especially as I felt none of the usual reasons for refusal applied. I was her only child and she had no job – not back then – and she hardly spoke to the rest of her family. As far as I was concerned, she had nothing but time. Yet still I couldn't get her complete submission! My earliest sense of her was of a woman plotting an escape, from me, from the very role of motherhood. I felt sorry for my father. He was still a fairly young man, he loved her, he wanted more children – it was their daily argument – but on this issue, as on all things, my

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mother refused to budge. Her mother had birthed seven children, her grandmother, eleven. She was not going back to all that. She believed my father wanted more children in order to entrap her, and she was basically right about that, although entrapment in this case was only another word for love. How he loved her! More than she knew or cared to know, she was someone who lived in her own dreamscape, who presumed that everyone around her was at all times feeling exactly as she was. And so when she began, first slowly, and then with increasing speed, to outgrow my father, both intellectually and personally, she naturally expected that he was undergoing the same process at the same time. But he carried on as before. Looking after me, loving her, trying to keep up, reading *The Communist Manifesto* in his slow and diligent way. ‘Some people carry the bible,’ he told me proudly. ‘This is my bible.’ It sounded impressive – it was meant to impress my mother – but I had already noticed that he seemed to always be reading this book and not much else, he took it to every dance class, and yet never got any further than the first twenty pages. Within the context of the marriage it was a romantic gesture: they’d first encountered each other at a meeting of the SWP, in Dollis Hill. But even this was a form of misunderstanding for my father had gone to meet nice leftist girls in short skirts with no religion while my mother really was there for Karl Marx. My childhood took place in the widening gap. I watched my autodidact mother swiftly, easily, outstrip my father. The shelves in our lounge – which he built – filled up with second-hand books, Open University textbooks, political books, history books, books on race, books on gender, ‘All the “isms”,’ as my father liked to call them, whenever a neighbour happened to come by and spot the queer accumulation.

Saturday was her ‘day off’. Day off from what? From us. She

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needed to read up on her isms. After my father took me to dance class we had to keep going somehow, find something to do, stay out of the flat until dinner time. It became our ritual to travel on a series of buses heading south, far south of the river, to my Uncle Lambert's, my mother's brother and a confidant of my father's. He was my mother's eldest sibling, the only person I ever saw from her side of the family. He had raised my mother and the rest of her brothers and sisters, back on the island, when their mother left for England to work as a cleaner in a retirement home. He knew what my father was dealing with.

'I take a step towards her,' I heard my father complain, one day, in high summer, 'and she takes a step back!'

'Cyan do nuttin wid er. Always been like dat.'

I was in the garden, among the tomato plants. It was an allotment, really, nothing was decorative or meant simply to be admired, everything was to be eaten and grew in long, straight lines, tied to sticks of bamboo. At the end of it all was an outhouse, the last I ever saw in England. Uncle Lambert and my father sat on deckchairs by the back door, smoking marijuana. They were old friends – Lambert was the only other person in my parents' wedding photo – and they had work in common: Lambert was a postman and my father a Delivery Office Manager for Royal Mail. They shared a dry sense of humour and a mutual lack of ambition, of which my mother took a dim view, in both cases. As they smoked and lamented the things you couldn't do with my mother, I passed my arms through the tomato vines, allowing them to twist around my wrists. Most of Lambert's plants seemed menacing to me, they were twice my height and everything he planted grew wildly: a thicket of vines and high grass and obscenely swollen, calabash-type gourds. The soil is of a

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better quality in South London – in North London we have too much clay – but at the time I didn't know about that and my ideas were confused: I thought that when I visited Lambert I was visiting Jamaica, Lambert's garden was Jamaica to me, it smelt like Jamaica, and you ate coconut ice there, and even now, in my memory, it is always hot in Lambert's garden, and I am thirsty and fearful of insects. The garden was long and thin and it faced south, the outhouse abutted the right-hand fence, so you could watch the sun fall behind it, rippling the air as it went. I wanted badly to go to the toilet but had decided to hold on to the urge until we saw North London again – I was scared of that outhouse. The floor was wood and things grew up between the boards, grass blades, and thistles and dandelion clocks that dusted your knee as you hitched yourself up on to the seat. Spiders' webs connected the corners. It was a garden of abundance and decay: the tomatoes were too ripe, the marijuana too strong, woodlice were hiding under everything. Lambert lived all alone there, and it felt to me like a dying place. Even at that age I thought it odd that my father should travel eight miles to Lambert's for comfort when Lambert seemed already to have suffered the kind of abandonment my father feared so badly.

Tiring of walking through the lines of vegetables, I wandered back down the garden, and watched as the two men concealed their joints, poorly, in their fists.

'You bored?' asked Lambert. I confessed I was.

'Once dis house full of pick'ney,' said Lambert, 'but dem children got children now.'

The image I had was of children my own age with babies in their arms: it was a fate I connected with South London. I knew my

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mother left home to escape all that, so that no daughter of hers would ever become a child with a child, for any daughter of hers was to do more than just survive – as my mother had – she was to thrive, learning many unnecessary skills, like tap dancing. My father reached out for me and I crawled on to his lap, covering his growing bald spot with my hand and feeling the thin strands of wet hair he wore combed across it.

‘She shy, eh? You not shy of your Uncle Lambert?’

Lambert’s eyes were bloodshot, and his freckles were like mine but raised; his face was round and sweet, with light brown eyes that confirmed, supposedly, Chinese blood in the family tree. But I was shy of him. My mother – who never visited Lambert, except at Christmas – was strangely insistent that my father and I do so, though always with the proviso that we remain alert, never allowing ourselves to be ‘dragged back’. Into what? I wound myself around my father’s body until I was at the back of him and could see the little patch of hair he kept long at the nape of his neck, which he was so determined to maintain. Though he was only in his thirties, I’d never seen my father with a full head of hair, never known him blond, and would never know him grey. It was this fake nut-brown I knew, which came off on your fingers if you touched it, and which I had seen at its true source, a round, shallow tin that sat open on the edge of the bath, with an oily wheel of brown running round the rim, worn down to a bare patch in the middle, just like my father.

‘She needs company,’ he fretted. ‘A book’s no good, is it? A film’s no good. You need the real thing.’

‘Cyan do nuttin wid dat woman. I knew it from time she was small. Her will is a will of iron.’

It was true. Nothing could be done with her. When we got home

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she was watching a lecture from the Open University, pad and pencil in her hand, looking beautiful, serene, curled up on the couch with her bare feet under her bottom, but when she turned round I could see she was annoyed, we'd come back too early, she wanted more time, more peace, more quiet, so she could study. We were the vandals in the temple. She was studying Sociology & Politics. We didn't know why.

Four

If Fred Astaire represented the aristocracy, I represented the proletariat, said Gene Kelly, and by this logic Bill ‘Bojangles’ Robinson should really have been my dancer, because Bojangles danced for the Harlem dandy, for the ghetto kid, for the sharecropper – for all the descendants of slaves. But to me a dancer was a man from nowhere, without parents or siblings, without a nation or people, without obligations of any kind, and this was exactly the quality I loved. The rest of it, all the detail, fell away. I ignored the ridiculous plots of those movies: the opera-like comings and goings, the reversals of fortune, the outrageous meet cutes and coincidences, the minstrels, maids and butlers. To me they were only roads leading to the dance. The story was the price you paid for the rhythm. ‘Pardon me, boy, is that the Chattanooga choo choo?’ Each syllable found its corresponding movement in the legs, the stomach, the backside, the feet. In ballet hour, by contrast, we danced to classical recordings – ‘white music’ as Tracey bluntly called it – which Miss Isabel recorded from the radio on to a series of cassettes. But I could barely recognize it as music, it had no time signature that I could hear, and although Miss Isabel tried to help us, shouting out the beats of each bar, I could never relate these numbers in any way to the sea of melody that came over me from the violins or the crashing thump of a brass section. I still knew more than Tracey: I knew there was

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something not quite right about her rigid notions – black music, white music – that there must be a world somewhere in which the two combined. In films and photographs I had seen white men sitting at their pianos as black girls stood by them, singing. Oh, I wanted to be like those girls!

At quarter past eleven, just after ballet, in the middle of our first break, Mr Booth entered the hall carrying a big black bag, the kind country doctors once carried, and in this bag he kept the sheet music for class. If I was free – which meant, if I could get away from Tracey – I hurried over to him, following him as he slowly approached the piano, and then positioning myself like the girls I'd seen onscreen, I asked him to play 'All of Me' or 'Autumn in New York' or '42nd Street'. In the tap class he had to play the same half a dozen songs over and over and I had to dance to them, but before class – while the rest of the people in the hall were busy talking, eating, drinking – we had this time to ourselves, and I'd get him to work through a tune with me, singing below the volume of the piano if I was feeling shy, a little louder if not. Sometimes when I sang the parents smoking outside the hall under the cherry trees would come in to listen, and girls who were busy preparing for their own dances – pulling on tights, tying laces – paused in these actions and turned to watch me. I became aware that my voice – as long as I did not deliberately sing underneath the volume of the piano – had something charismatic in it, drawing people in. This was not a technical gift: my range was tiny. It had to do with emotion. Whatever I was feeling I was able to express very clearly, I could 'put it over'. I made sad songs very sad, and happy songs joyful. When the time came for our 'performance exams' I learnt to use my voice as a form of misdirection, the same way some magicians make you look at their mouths when you should be watching their hands. But I couldn't fool Tracey.

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I saw her as I walked off the stage, standing in the wings with her arms crossed over her chest and her nose in the air. Even though she always trumped everybody and her mother's kitchen corkboard heaved with gold medals, she was never satisfied, she wanted gold in 'my' category, too – song and dance – though she could hardly sing a note. It was difficult to understand. I really felt that if I could dance like Tracey I would never want for anything else in this world. Other girls had rhythm in their limbs, some had it in their hips or their little backsides but she had rhythm in individual ligaments, probably in individual cells. Every movement was as sharp and precise as any child could hope to make it, her body could align itself with any time signature, no matter how intricate. Maybe you could say she was overly precise sometimes, not especially creative, or lacking in soul. But no one sane could quarrel with her technique. I was – I am – in awe of Tracey's technique. She knew the right time to do everything.

Five

A Sunday in late summer. I was on the balcony, watching a few girls from our floor skipping Double Dutch down by the bins. I heard my mother calling me. I looked over and saw her entering the estate, hand in hand with Miss Isabel. I waved, and she looked up, smiled and shouted, ‘Stay there!’ I had never seen my mother and Miss Isabel together outside of class, and could tell even from this vantage point that Miss Isabel was being hustled into something. I wanted to go and confer with my father, who was painting a wall in the living room, but I knew my mother, so charming with strangers, had a short temper with her kin, and that ‘Stay there!’ meant exactly that. I watched this odd pair move through the estate and into the stairwell, refracted in the glass blocks as a scatter of yellow and pink and mahogany brown. Meanwhile the girls by the bins switched the direction of their skipping ropes, a new jumper ran bravely into the vicious swinging loop and began a new chant, the one about the monkey who got choked.

Finally my mother came upon me, examined me – she had a coy look on her face – and the first thing she said was: ‘Take your shoes off.’

‘Oh, we needn’t do it right now,’ murmured Miss Isabel, but my mother said, ‘Better to know now than later,’ and disappeared into the flat, reappearing a minute later with a large bag of self-raising

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flour, which she began sprinkling all over the balcony until there was a thin white carpet like first snowfall. I was to walk through this barefoot. I thought of Tracey. I wondered if Miss Isabel visited each girl's house in turn. What a terrible waste of flour! Miss Isabel crouched down to watch. My mother leant back against the balcony with her elbows resting upon it, smoking a cigarette. She was at an angle to the balcony, and the cigarette was at an angle to her mouth, and she was wearing a beret, as if wearing a beret were the most natural thing in the world. She was positioned at an angle to me, an ironic angle. I reached the other end of the balcony and looked back at my footprints.

'Ah, well there you are,' said Miss Isabel, but where were we? In the land of flat feet. My teacher slipped off a shoe and pressed her foot down for comparison: in her print you saw only the toes, the ball of the foot and the heel, in mine, the full, flat outline of a human tread. My mother was very interested in this result, but Miss Isabel, seeing my face, said something kind: 'A ballet dancer needs an arch, yes, but you can tap with flat feet, you know, of course you can.' I didn't think it was true, but it was kind and I clung to it and kept taking the class, and so continued to spend time with Tracey, which was, it dawned on me later, exactly the thing my mother had been trying to stop. She'd worked out that because Tracey and I went to different schools, in different neighbourhoods, it was only dance class that brought us together, but when the summer came and dance class stopped, it made no difference anyway, we grew closer until, by August, we found ourselves together almost every day. From my balcony I could see into her estate and vice versa, no phone calls had to be made, and no formal arrangements, and although our mothers barely nodded at each other in the street it became a natural thing for us to pass in and out of each other's building.

Six

We had a different mode of being in each flat. In Tracey's we played and tested new toys, of which there appeared to be an unending supply. The Argos catalogue, from whose pages I was allowed to choose three inexpensive items at Christmas, and one item for my birthday, was, to Tracey, an everyday bible, she read it religiously, circling her choices, often while in my company, with a little red pen she kept for this purpose. Her bedroom was a revelation. It overturned everything I thought I had understood about our shared situation. Her bed was in the shape of a pink Barbie sports car, her curtains were frilled, all her cabinets were white and shiny, and in the middle of the room it looked like someone had simply emptied Santa's sleigh on to the carpet. You had to *wade* through toys. Broken toys formed a kind of bedrock, on top of which each new wave of purchases was placed, in archaeological layers, corresponding, more or less, to whatever toy adverts were playing on the television at the time. That summer was the summer of the pissing doll. You fed her water and she pissed everywhere. Tracey had several versions of this stunning technology, and was able to draw all kinds of drama from it. Sometimes she would beat the doll for pissing. Sometimes she would sit her, ashamed and naked, in the corner, her plastic legs twisted at right angles to her little, dimpled bum. We two played the poor, incontinent child's parents, and in the dialogue Tracey gave me to say I sometimes

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heard odd, discomfiting echoes of her own home life, or else of the many soaps she watched, I couldn't be sure.

'Your turn. Say: "You slag – she ain't even my kid! Is it my fault she pisses 'erself?" Go on, your turn!'

'You slag – she's not even my daughter! Is it my fault if she pisses herself?'

'"Listen, mate, you take her! You take her and see how you do!" Now say: "Fat chance, sunshine!"'

One Saturday, with great trepidation, I mentioned the existence of pissing dolls to my mother, being careful to say 'wee' instead of 'piss'. She was studying. She looked up from her books with a mixture of incredulity and disgust.

'Tracey has one?'

'Tracey has *four*.'

'Come here a minute.'

She opened her arms, and I felt my face against the skin of her chest, taut and warm, utterly vital, as if there were a second, graceful young woman inside my mother bursting to get out. She had been growing her hair, it had been recently 'done', plaited into a dramatic conch-shell shape at the back of her head, like a piece of sculpture.

'You know what I'm reading about right now?'

'No.'

'I'm reading about the sankofa. You know what that is?'

'No.'

'It's a bird, it looks back over itself, like this.' She bent her beautiful head round as far as it could go. 'From Africa. It looks backwards, at the past, and it learns from what's gone before. Some people never learn.'

My father was in the tiny galley kitchen, silently cooking – he was the chef in our home – and this conversation was really addressed to

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him, it was he who was meant to hear it. The two of them had begun arguing so much that I was often the only conduit through which information could pass, sometimes abusively – ‘You explain to your mother’ or ‘You can tell your father from me’ – and sometimes like this, with a delicate, an almost beautiful irony.

‘Oh,’ I said. I didn’t see the connection with pissing dolls. I knew my mother was in the process of becoming, or trying to become, ‘an intellectual’, because my father often threw this term at her as a form of insult during their arguments. But I did not really understand what this meant, other than that an intellectual was someone who studied with the Open University, liked to wear a beret, frequently used the phrase ‘the Angel of History’, sighed when the rest of their family wanted to watch Saturday-night telly and stopped to argue with the Trotskyites on the Kilburn High Road when everybody else crossed the road to avoid them. But the main consequence of her transformation, for me, was this new and puzzling indirection in her conversation. She always seemed to be making adult jokes just over my head, to amuse herself, or to annoy my father.

‘When you’re with that girl,’ explained my mother, ‘it’s a kind thing to play with her, but she’s been raised in a certain way, and the present is all she has. You’ve been raised in another way – don’t forget that. That silly dance class is her whole world. It’s not her fault – that’s how she’s been raised. But you’re clever. Doesn’t matter if you’ve got flat feet, doesn’t matter *because you’re clever* and you know where you came from and where you’re going.’

I nodded. I could hear my father banging saucepans expressively.

‘You won’t forget what I just said?’

I promised I wouldn’t.

In our flat there were no dolls at all and so Tracey when she came was forced into different habits. Here we wrote, a little frantically,

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into a series of yellow, lined, A4 pads that my father brought home from work. It was a collaborative project. Tracey, because of her dyslexia – though we didn't know to call it that at the time – preferred to dictate, while I struggled to keep up with the naturally melodramatic twist and turn of her mind. Almost all our stories concerned a cruel, posh prima ballerina from 'Oxford Street' breaking her leg at the last minute, which allowed our plucky heroine – often a lowly costume fitter, or a humble theatre-toilet cleaner – to step in and save the day. I noticed that they were always blond, these plucky girls, with hair 'like silk' and big blue eyes. Once I tried to write 'brown eyes' and Tracey took the pen out of my hand and scratched it out. We wrote on our bellies, flat on the floor of my room, and if my mother happened to come by and see us like this it was the only moment she ever looked at Tracey with anything like fondness. I took advantage of these moments to win further concessions for my friend – Can Tracey stay for tea? Can Tracey stay the night? – though I knew if my mother actually paused to read what we wrote in those yellow pads Tracey would never be allowed into the flat again. In several stories African men 'lurked in the shadows' with iron bars to break the knees of lily-white dancers; in one, the prima had a terrible secret: she was 'half-caste', a word I trembled to write down, as I knew from experience how completely it enraged my mother. But if I felt unease about these details it was a small sensation when compared to the pleasure of our collaboration. I was so completely taken with Tracey's stories, besotted with their endless delay of narrative gratification, which was again perhaps something she had got from the soaps or else extracted from the hard lessons her own life was teaching her. For just as you thought the happy ending had arrived, Tracey found some wonderful new way to destroy or divert it, so that the moment of consummation – which for both

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of us, I think, meant simply an audience, on their feet, cheering – never seemed to arrive. I wish I had those notepads still. Of all the thousands of words we wrote about ballerinas in various forms of physical danger only one sentence has stayed with me: *Tiffany jumped up high to kiss her prince and pointed her toes oh she looked so sexy but that's when the bullet went right up her thigh.*

Seven

In the autumn Tracey went off to her single-sex school, in Neasden, where almost all the girls were Indian or Pakistani and wild: I used to see the older ones at the bus stop, uniforms adapted – shirt unbuttoned, skirt hitched up – screaming obscenities at white boys as they passed. A rough school with a lot of fighting. Mine, in Willesden, was milder, more mixed: half black, a quarter white, a quarter South Asian. Of the black half at least a third were ‘half-caste’, a minority nation within a nation, though the truth is it annoyed me to notice them. I wanted to believe that Tracey and I were sisters and kindred spirits, alone in the world and in special need of each other, but now I could not avoid seeing in front of me all the many kinds of children my mother had spent the summer trying to encourage me towards, girls with similar backgrounds but what my mother called ‘broader horizons’. There was a girl called Tasha, half Guyanese, half Tamil, whose father was a real Tamil Tiger, which impressed my mother mightily and thus cemented in me the desire never to have anything whatsoever to do with the girl. There was a buck-toothed girl called Irie, always top of the class, whose parents were the same way round as us, but she’d moved out of the estate and now lived up in Willesden Green in a fancy maisonette. There was a girl called Anoushka with a father from St Lucia and a Russian mother whose uncle was, according to my mother, ‘the most important revolutionary poet in

the Caribbean', but almost every word of that recommendation was incomprehensible to me. My mind was not on school, or any of the people there. In the playground I pushed drawing pins into the soles of my shoes and sometimes spent the whole half-hour of playtime dancing alone, contentedly friendless. And when we got home – before my mother, and therefore outside of her jurisdiction – I dropped my satchel, left my father cooking dinner and headed straight to Tracey's, to do our time-steps together on her balcony, followed by a bowl each of Angel Delight, which was 'not food' to my mother but in my opinion still delicious. By the time I came home an argument, the two sides of which no longer met, would be in full flow. My father's concern would be some tiny domestic issue: who'd vacuumed what when, who'd gone, or should have gone, to the launderette. Whereas my mother, in answering him, would stray into quite other topics: the importance of having a revolutionary consciousness, or the relative insignificance of sexual love when placed beside the struggles of the people, or the legacy of slavery in the hearts and minds of the young, and so on. She had by now finished her A levels, was enrolled at Middlesex Poly, up in Hendon, and more than ever we could not keep up, we were a disappointment, she had to keep explaining her terms.

At Tracey's, the only raised voices came from the television. I knew I was meant to pity Tracey for her fatherlessness – the blight marking every other door on our corridor – and to be thankful for my two married parents, but whenever I sat on her huge white leather settee eating her Angel Delight and peacefully watching *Easter Parade* or *The Red Shoes* – Tracey's mother would tolerate only Technicolor musicals – I couldn't help but notice the placidity of a small, all-female household. In Tracey's home, disappointment in the man was ancient history: they had never really had any hope in

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him, for he had almost never been at home. No one was surprised by Tracey's father's failure to foment revolution or do anything else. Yet Tracey was steadfast and loyal to his memory, far more likely to defend her absent father than I was to speak kindly of my wholly attentive one. Whenever her mother bad-mouthed him, Tracey would make sure to take me into her room, or some other private spot, and quickly integrate whatever her mother had just said into her own official story, which was that her father had not abandoned her, no, not at all, he was only very busy because he was one of Michael Jackson's backing dancers. Few people could keep up with Michael Jackson as he danced – in fact, almost nobody could, maybe there were only twenty dancers in the whole world who were up to it. Tracey's father was one such. He hadn't even had to finish his audition – he was that good they knew right away. This was why he was hardly ever home: he was on an eternal world tour. The next time he would be in town was probably next Christmas, when Michael played Wembley. On a clear day we could see this stadium from Tracey's balcony. It's hard for me to say now how much credence I gave this tale – certainly some part of me knew that Michael Jackson, at last free of his family, now danced alone – but just like Tracey I never brought up the subject in her mother's presence. As a fact it was, in my mind, at one and the same time absolutely true and obviously untrue, and perhaps only children are able to accommodate double-faced facts like these.