

White Teeth

A NOVEL

Zadie Smith

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To my mother and my father.

And for Jimmi Rahman

The Peculiar Second Marriage of Archie Jones

Early in the morning, late in the century, Cricklewood Broadway. At 0627 hours on January 1, 1975, Alfred Archibald Jones was dressed in corduroy and sat in a fume-filled Cavalier Musketeer Estate facedown on the steering wheel, hoping the judgment would not be too heavy upon him. He lay in a prostrate cross, jaw slack, arms splayed on either side like some fallen angel; scrunched up in each fist he held his army service medals (left) and his marriage license (right), for he had decided to take his mistakes with him. A little green light flashed in his eye, signaling a right turn he had resolved never to make. He was resigned to it. He was prepared for it. He had flipped a coin and stood staunchly by the results. This was a decided-upon suicide. In fact, it was a New Year's resolution.

But even as his breathing became spasmodic and his lights dimmed, Archie was aware that Cricklewood Broadway would seem a strange choice. Strange to the first person to notice his slumped figure through the windshield, strange to the policemen who would file the report, to the local journalist called upon to write fifty words, to the next of kin who would read them. Squeezed between an almighty concrete cinema complex at one end and a giant intersection at the other, Cricklewood was no kind of place. It was not a place a man came to die. It was a place a man came to in order to go other places via the A41. But Archie Jones didn't

want to die in some pleasant, distant woodland, or on a cliff edge fringed with delicate heather. The way Archie saw it, country people should die in the country and city people should die in the city. Only proper. *In death as he was in life* and all that. It made sense that Archibald should die on this nasty urban street where he had ended up, living alone at the age of forty-seven, in a one-bedroom flat above a deserted chip shop. He wasn't the type to make elaborate plans—suicide notes and funeral instructions—he wasn't the type for anything fancy. All he asked for was a bit of silence, a bit of *shush* so he could concentrate. He wanted it to be perfectly quiet and still, like the inside of an empty confessional or the moment in the brain between thought and speech. He wanted to do it before the shops opened.

Overhead, a gang of the local flying vermin took off from some unseen perch, swooped, and seemed to be zeroing in on Archie's car roof—only to perform, at the last moment, an impressive U-turn, moving as one with the elegance of a curve ball and landing on the Hussein-Ishmael, a celebrated halal butchers. Archie was too far gone to make a big noise about it, but he watched them with a warm internal smile as they deposited their load, streaking white walls purple. He watched them stretch their peering bird heads over the Hussein-Ishmael gutter; he watched them watch the slow and steady draining of blood from the dead things—chickens, cows, sheep—hanging on their hooks like coats around the shop. The Unlucky. These pigeons had an instinct for the Unlucky, and so they passed Archie by. For, though he did not know it, and despite the Hoover tube that lay on the passenger seat pumping from the exhaust pipe into his lungs, luck was with him that morning. The thinnest covering of luck was on him like fresh dew. While he slipped in and out of consciousness, the position of the planets, the music of the spheres, the flap of a tiger moth's diaphanous wings in Central Africa, and a whole bunch of other stuff that Makes Shit Happen had decided it was second-chance time for Archie. Somewhere, somehow, by somebody, it had been decided that he would live.



The Hussein-Ishmael was owned by Mo Hussein-Ishmael, a great bull of a man with hair that rose and fell in a quiff, then a ducktail. Mo believed that with pigeons you have to get to the root of the problem: not the excretions but the pigeon itself. *The shit is not the shit* (this was Mo's mantra), *the pigeon is the shit*. So the morning of Archie's almost-death began as every morning in the Hussein-Ishmael, with Mo resting his huge belly on

the windowsill, leaning out and swinging a meat cleaver in an attempt to halt the flow of dribbling purple.

"Get out of it! Get away, you shit-making bastards! Yes! SIX!"

It was cricket, basically—the Englishman's game adapted by the immigrant, and six was the most pigeons you could get at one swipe.

"Varin!" said Mo, calling down to the street, holding the bloodied cleaver up in triumph. "You're in to bat, my boy. Ready?"

Below him on the pavement stood Varin—a massively overweight Hindu boy on a misjudged traineeship program from the school round the corner, looking up like a big dejected blob underneath Mo's question mark. It was Varin's job to struggle up a ladder and gather spliced bits of pigeon into a small Kwik-Save shopping bag, tie the bag up, and dispose of it in the bins at the other end of the street.

"Come on, Mr. Fatty-man," yelled one of Mo's kitchen staff, poking Varin up the arse with a broom as punctuation for each word. "Get-your-fat-Ganesh-Hindu-backside-up-there-Elephant-Boy-and-bring-some-of-that-mashed-pigeon-stuff-with-you."

Mo wiped the sweat off his forehead, snorted, and looked out over Cricklewood, surveying the discarded armchairs and strips of carpet, outdoor lounges for local drunks; the slot-machine emporiums, the greasy spoons, and the minicabs—all covered in shit. One day, so Mo believed, Cricklewood and its residents would have cause to thank him for his daily massacre; one day no man, woman, or child on the Broadway would ever again have to mix one part detergent to four parts vinegar to clean up the crap that falls on the world. *The shit is not the shit*, he repeated solemnly, *the pigeon is the shit*. Mo was the only man in the community who truly understood. He was feeling really very Zen about this—very goodwill-to-all-men—until he spotted Archie's car.

"Arshad!"

A shifty-looking skinny guy with a handlebar mustache and dressed in four different shades of brown came out of the shop, with blood on his palms.

"Arshad!" Mo barely restrained himself, stabbed his finger in the direction of the car. "My boy, I'm going to ask you just once."

"Yes, Abba?" said Arshad, shifting from foot to foot.

"What the hell is this? What is this doing here? I got delivery at six-thirty. I got fifteen dead bovines turning up here at six-thirty. I got to get it in the back. That's my job. You see? There's *meat* coming. So, I am *per-*

plexed . . .” Mo affected a look of innocent confusion. “Because I thought this was clearly marked ‘Delivery Area.’” He pointed to an aging wooden crate that bore the legend NO PARKINGS OF ANY VEHICLE ON ANY DAYS. “Well?”

“I don’t know, Abba.”

“You’re my son, Arshad. I don’t employ you not to know. I employ *him* not to know”—he reached out of the window and slapped Varin, who was negotiating the perilous gutter like a tightrope-walker, giving him a thorough cosh to the back of his head and almost knocking the boy off his perch—“I employ *you* to know things. To compute information. To bring into the light the great darkness of the creator’s unexplainable universe.”

“Abba?”

“Find out what it’s doing there and get rid of it.”

Mo disappeared from the window. A minute later Arshad returned with the explanation. “Abba.”

Mo’s head sprang back through the window like a malicious cuckoo from a Swiss clock.

“He’s gassing himself, Abba.”

“What?”

Arshad shrugged. “I shouted through the car window and told the guy to move on and he says, ‘I am gassing myself, leave me alone.’ Like that.”

“No one gasses himself on my property,” Mo snapped as he marched downstairs. “We are not licensed.”

Once in the street, Mo advanced upon Archie’s car, pulled out the towels that were sealing the gap in the driver’s window, and pushed it down five inches with brute, bullish force.

“Do you hear that, mister? We’re not licensed for suicides around here. This place halal. Kosher, understand? If you’re going to die round here, my friend, I’m afraid you’ve got to be thoroughly bled first.”

Archie dragged his head off the steering wheel. And in the moment between focusing on the sweaty bulk of a brown-skinned Elvis and realizing that life was still his, he had a kind of epiphany. It occurred to him that, for the first time since his birth, Life had said Yes to Archie Jones. Not simply an “OK” or “You-might-as-well-carry-on-since-you’ve-started,” but a resounding affirmative. Life wanted Archie. She had jealously grabbed him from the jaws of death, back to her bosom. Although he was not one of

her better specimens, Life wanted Archie and Archie, much to his own surprise, wanted Life.

Frantically, he wound down both his windows and gasped for oxygen from the very depths of his lungs. In between gulps he thanked Mo profusely, tears streaming down his cheeks, his hands clinging to Mo’s apron.

“All right, all right,” said the butcher, freeing himself from Archie’s fingers and brushing himself clean, “move along now. I’ve got meat coming. I’m in the business of bleeding. Not counseling. You want Lonely Street. This Cricklewood Lane.”

Archie, still choking on thank-yous, reversed, pulled out from the curb, and turned right.



Archie Jones attempted suicide because his wife, Ophelia, a violet-eyed Italian with a faint mustache, had recently divorced him. But he had not spent New Year’s morning gagging on the tube of a vacuum cleaner because he loved her. It was rather because he had lived with her for so long and had *not* loved her. Archie’s marriage felt like buying a pair of shoes, taking them home, and finding they don’t fit. For the sake of appearances, he put up with them. And then, all of a sudden and after thirty years, the shoes picked themselves up and walked out of the house. She left. Thirty years.

As far as he remembered, just like everybody else they began well. The first spring of 1946, he had stumbled out of the darkness of war and into a Florentine coffeehouse, where he was served by a waitress truly like the sun: Ophelia Diagilo, dressed all in yellow, spreading warmth and the promise of sex as she passed him a frothy cappuccino. They walked into it blinkered as horses. She was not to know that women never stayed as daylight in Archie’s life; that somewhere in him he didn’t like them, he didn’t trust them, and he was able to love them only if they wore haloes. No one told Archie that lurking in the Diagilo family tree were two hysteric aunts, an uncle who talked to eggplants, and a cousin who wore his clothes back to front. So they got married and returned to England, where she realized very quickly her mistake, he drove her very quickly mad, and the halo was packed off to the attic to collect dust with the rest of the bric-a-brac and broken kitchen appliances that Archie promised one day to repair. And in that bric-a-brac was a Hoover.

On Boxing Day morning, six days before he parked outside Mo's halal butchers, Archie had returned to their semidetached in Hendon in search of that Hoover. It was his fourth trip to the attic in so many days, ferrying the odds and ends of a marriage out to his new flat, and the Hoover was one of the last items he reclaimed—one of the most broken things, most ugly things, the things you demand out of sheer bloody-mindedness because you have lost the house. This is what divorce is: taking things you no longer want from people you no longer love.

"So *you* again," said the Spanish home-help at the door, Santa-Maria or Maria-Santa or something. "Meester Jones, what now? Kitchen sink, sí?"

"Hoover," said Archie, grimly. "Vacuum."

She cut her eyes at him and spat on the doormat inches from his shoes. "Welcome, señor."

The place had become a haven for people who hated him. Apart from the home-help, he had to contend with Ophelia's extended Italian family, her mental-health nurse, the woman from the council, and of course Ophelia herself, who was to be found in the kernel of this nuthouse, curled up in a fetal ball on the sofa, making lowing sounds into a bottle of Bailey's. It took him an hour and a quarter just to get through enemy lines—and for what? A perverse Hoover, discarded months earlier because it was determined to perform the opposite of every vacuum's objective: spewing out dust instead of sucking it in.

"Meester Jones, why do you come here when it make you so unhappy? Be *reasonable*. What can you want with it?" The home-help was following him up the attic stairs, armed with some kind of cleaning fluid: "It's broken. You don't *need* this. See? See?" She plugged it into a socket and demonstrated the dead switch. Archie took the plug out and silently wound the cord round the machine. If it was broken, it was coming with him. All broken things were coming with him. He was going to fix every damn broken thing in this house, if only to show that he was good for something.

"You good-for-nothing!" Santa whoever chased him back down the stairs. "Your wife is ill in her head, and this is all you can do!"

Archie hugged the Hoover to his chest and took it into the crowded living room, where, under several pairs of reproachful eyes, he got out his toolbox and started work on it.

"Look at him," said one of the Italian grandmothers, the more glamorous one with the big scarves and fewer moles, "he take everything, *capisce?* He take-a her mind, he take-a the blender, he take-a the old stereo—he take-a everything except the floorboards. It make-a you sick . . ."

The woman from the council, who even on dry days resembled a long-haired cat soaked to the skin, shook her skinny head in agreement. "It's disgusting, you don't have to tell me, it's disgusting . . . and naturally, we're the ones left to sort out the mess; it's this idiot here who has to—"

Which was overlapped by the nurse: "She can't stay here alone, can she? . . . Now *he's* bugged off, poor woman . . . she needs a proper home, she needs . . ."

I'm here, Archie felt like saying, I'm right here you know, I'm bloody right here. And it was my blender.

But he wasn't one for confrontation, Archie. He listened to them all for another fifteen minutes, mute as he tested the Hoover's suction against pieces of newspaper, until he was overcome by the sensation that Life was an enormous rucksack so impossibly heavy that, even though it meant losing everything, it was infinitely easier to leave all baggage here on the roadside and walk on into the blackness. *You don't need the blender, Archie-boy, you don't need the Hoover. This stuff's all dead weight. Just lay down the rucksack, Arch, and join the happy campers in the sky.* Was that wrong? To Archie—ex-wife and ex-wife's relatives in one ear, spluttering vacuum in the other—it just seemed that The End was unavoidably nigh. Nothing personal to God or whatever. It just felt like the end of the world. And he was going to need more than poor whiskey, novelty crackers, and a paltry box of Quality Street candy—all the strawberry ones already scoffed—to justify entering another annum.

Patiently, he fixed the Hoover and vacuumed the living room with a strange methodical finality, shoving the nozzle into the most difficult corners. Solemnly he flipped a coin (heads, life, tails, death) and felt nothing in particular when he found himself staring at the dancing lion. Quietly he detached the Hoover tube, put it in a suitcase, and left the house for the last time.

But dying's no easy trick. And suicide can't be put on a list of Things to Do in between cleaning the grill pan and leveling the sofa leg with a brick. It is the decision not to do, to un-do; a kiss blown at oblivion. No matter what anyone says, suicide takes guts. It's for heroes and martyrs, truly vain-

glorious men. Archie was none of these. He was a man whose significance in the Greater Scheme of Things could be figured along familiar ratios:

Pebble: Beach.

Raindrop: Ocean.

Needle: Haystack.

So for a few days he ignored the decision of the coin and just drove around with the Hoover tube. At nights he looked out through the wind-shield into the monstropolous sky and had the old realization of his universal proportions, feeling what it was to be tiny and rootless. He thought about the dent he might make on the world if he disappeared, and it seemed negligible, too small to calculate. He squandered spare minutes wondering whether "Hoover" had become a generic term for vacuum cleaners or whether it was, as others have argued, just a brand name. And all the time the Hoover tube lay like a great flaccid cock on his back seat, mocking his quiet fear, laughing at his pigeon-steps as he approached the executioner, sneering at his impotent indecision.

Then, on December 29, he went to see his old friend Samad Miah Iqbal. An unlikely compadre possibly, but still the oldest friend he had—a Bengali Muslim he had fought alongside back when the fighting had to be done, who reminded him of that war; that war that reminded some people of fatty bacon and painted-on stockings, but recalled in Archie gunshots and card games and the taste of a sharp, foreign alcohol.

"Archie, my dear friend," Samad had said, in his warm, hearty tones. "You must forget all this wife trouble. Try a new life. That is what you need. Now, enough of all this: I will match your five bob and raise you five."

They were sitting in their new haunt, O'Connell's Poolroom, playing poker with only three hands, two of Archie's and one of Samad's—Samad's right hand being a broken thing, gray-skinned and unmoving, dead in every way bar the blood that ran through it. The place they sat in, where they met each evening for dinner, was half café, half gambling den, owned by an Iraqi family, the many members of which shared a bad skin condition.

"Look at me. Marrying Alsana has given me this new lease on living, you understand? She opens up for me the new possibilities. She's so young, so vital—like a breath of fresh air. You come to me for advice? Here it is. Don't live this old life—it's a sick life, Archibald. It does you no good. No good whatsoever."

Samad had looked at him with a great sympathy, for he felt very tenderly for Archie. Their wartime friendship had been severed by thirty years of

separation across continents, but in the spring of 1973 Samad had come to England, a middle-aged man seeking a new life with his twenty-year-old new bride, the diminutive, moon-faced Alsana Begum, with her shrewd eyes. In a fit of nostalgia, and because he was the only man Samad knew on this little island, Samad had sought Archie out, moved into the same London borough. And slowly but surely a kind of friendship was being rekindled between the two men.

"You play like a faggot," said Samad, laying down the winning queens back to back. He flicked them with the thumb of his left hand in one elegant move, making them fall to the table in a fan shape.

"I'm old," said Archie, throwing his cards in, "I'm old. Who'd have me now? It was hard enough convincing anybody the first time."

"That is nonsense, Archibald. You have not even met the right one yet. This Ophelia, Archie, she is not the right one. From what you leave me to understand, she is not even for this time—"

He referred to Ophelia's madness, which led her to believe, half of the time, that she was the maid of the celebrated fifteenth-century art lover Cosimo de' Medici.

"She is born, she lives, simply in the wrong time! This is just not her day! Maybe not her millennium. Modern life has caught that woman completely unawares and up the arse. Her mind is gone. Bugged. And you? You have picked up the wrong life in the cloakroom and you must return it. Besides, she has not blessed you with children . . . and life without children, Archie, what is it for? But there are second chances; oh yes, there are second chances in life. Believe me, I know. You," he continued, raking in the tops with the side of his bad hand, "should never have married her."

Bloody hindsight, thought Archie. It's always 20/20.

Finally, two days after this discussion, early on New Year's morning, the pain had reached such a piercing level that Archie was no longer able to cling to Samad's advice. He had decided instead to mortify his own flesh, to take his own life, to free himself from a path that had taken him down numerous wrong turnings, led him deep into the wilderness, and finally petered out completely, its bread-crumbs trail gobbled up by the birds.



Once the car started to fill with carbon monoxide, he had experienced the obligatory flashback of his life to date. It turned out to be a short, unedifying viewing experience, low on entertainment value, the metaphysical

equivalent of the Queen's Speech. A dull childhood, a bad marriage, a dead-end job—that classic triumvirate—they all flicked by quickly, silently, with little dialogue, feeling pretty much the same as they did the first time round. He was no great believer in destiny, Archie, but on reflection it did seem that a special effort of predestination had ensured his life had been picked out for him like a company Christmas present—early, and the same as everyone else's.

There was the war, of course; he had been in the war, only for the last year of it, aged just seventeen, but it hardly counted. Not frontline, nothing like that. He and Samad, old Sam, Sammy-boy, they had a few tales to tell, mind. Archie even had a bit of shrapnel in the leg for anyone who cared to see it—but nobody did. No one wanted to talk about *that* anymore. It was like a clubfoot, or a disfiguring mole. It was like nose hair. People looked away. If someone said to Archie, *What have you done in life, then?* or *What's your biggest memory?* well, God help him if he mentioned the war; eyes glazed over, fingers tapped, everybody offered to buy the next round. No one really wanted to *know*.

Summer of 1955, Archie went to Fleet Street with his best winkle-pickers on, looking for work as a war correspondent. Poncey-looking bloke with a thin mustache and a thin voice had said, *Any experience, Mr. Jones?* And Archie had explained. All about Samad. All about their Churchill tank. Then this poncey one had leaned over the desk, all smug, all suited, and said, *We would require something other than merely having fought in a war, Mr. Jones. War experience isn't really relevant.*

And that was it, wasn't it? There was no relevance in the war—not in 1955, even less now in 1974. Nothing he did *then* mattered *now*. The skills you learned were, in the modern parlance, not relevant, *not transferable*.

Was there anything else, Mr. Jones?

But of course there bloody wasn't anything else, the British education system having tripped him up with a snigger many years previously. Still, he had a good eye for the look of a thing, for the shape of a thing, and that's how he had ended up in the job at MorganHero, twenty years and counting in a printing firm in the Euston Road, designing the way all kinds of things should be *folded*—envelopes, direct mail, brochures, leaflets—not much of an achievement, maybe, but you'll find things need folds, they need to overlap, otherwise life would be like a broadsheet: flapping in the wind and down the street so you lose the important sections. Not that Archie had much time for

the broadsheets. If they couldn't be bothered to fold them properly, why should he bother to read them (that's what he wanted to know)?

What else? Well, Archie hadn't always folded paper. Once upon a time he had been a track cyclist. What Archie liked about track cycling was the way you went round and round. Round and round. Giving you chance after chance to get a bit better at it, to make a faster lap, to do it *right*. Except the thing about Archie was he *never did* get any better. 62.8 seconds. Which is a pretty good time, world-class standard, even. But for three years he got precisely 62.8 seconds on every single lap. The other cyclists used to take breaks to watch him do it. Lean their bikes against the incline and time him with the second hand of their wristwatches. 62.8 every time. That kind of inability to improve is really very rare. That kind of consistency is miraculous, in a way.

Archie liked track cycling, he was consistently good at it and it provided him with the only truly great memory he had. In 1948, Archie Jones had participated in the Olympics in London, sharing thirteenth place (62.8 seconds) with a Swedish gynecologist called Horst Ibelgauffs. Unfortunately this fact had been omitted from the Olympic records by a sloppy secretary who returned one morning after a coffee break with something else on her mind and missed his name as she transcribed one list to another piece of paper. Madam Posterity stuck Archie down the arm of the sofa and forgot about him. His only proof that the event had taken place at all were the periodic letters and notes he had received over the years from Ibelgauffs himself. Notes like:

May 17, 1957

Dear Archibald,

I enclose a picture of my good wife and I in our garden in front of a rather unpleasant construction site. Though it may not look like Arcadia, it is here that I am building a crude velodrome—nothing like the one you and I raced in, but sufficient for my needs. It will be on a far smaller scale, but you see it is for the children we are yet to have. I see them pedaling around it in my dreams and wake up with a glorious smile upon my face! Once it is completed, we insist that you visit us. Who more worthy to christen the track of your earnest competitor,

Horst Ibelgauffs?

And the postcard that lay on the dashboard this very day, the day of his Almost Death:

December 28, 1974

Dear Archibald,

I am taking up the harp. A New Year's resolution, if you like. Late in the day, I realize, but you're never too old to teach the old dog in you new tricks, don't you feel? I tell you, it's a heavy instrument to lay against your shoulder, but the sound of it is quite angelic and my wife thinks me quite sensitive because of it. Which is more than she could say for my old cycling obsession! But then, cycling was only ever understood by old boys like you, Archie, and of course the author of this little note, your old contender,

Horst Ibelgaufits

He had not met Horst since the race, but he remembered him affectionately as an enormous man with strawberry-blond hair, orange freckles, and misaligned nostrils, who dressed like an international playboy and seemed too large for his bike. After the race, Horst had got Archie horribly drunk and procured two Soho whores who seemed to know Horst well ("I make many business trips to your fair capital, Archibald," Horst had explained). The last Archie had ever seen of Horst was an unwanted glimpse of his humongous pink arse bobbing up and down in the adjoining room of an Olympic chalet. The next morning, waiting at the front desk, was the first letter of his large correspondence:

Dear Archibald,

In an oasis of work and competition, women are truly sweet and easy refreshment, don't you agree? I'm afraid I had to leave early to catch the necessary plane, but I compel you, Archie: don't be a stranger! I think of us now as two men as close as our finish! I tell you, whoever said thirteenth was unlucky was a bigger fool than your friend,

Horst Ibelgaufits

P.S. Please make sure that Daria and Melanie get home fine and well.

Daria was his one. Terribly skinny, ribs like lobster traps and no chest to speak of, but she was a lovely sort: kind; soft with her kisses and with double-jointed wrists she liked to show off in a pair of long silk gloves—set you back four clothing coupons at least. "I like you," Archie remembered saying help-

lessly, as she replaced the gloves and put on her stockings. She turned, smiled. And though she was a professional, he got the feeling she liked him too. Maybe he should have left with her right then, run to the hills. But at the time it seemed impossible, too involved, what with a young wife with one in the oven (an hysterical, fictional pregnancy, as it turned out, a big bump full of hot air), what with his game leg, what with the lack of hills.

Strangely, Daria was the final pulse of thought that passed through Archie just before he blacked out. It was the thought of a whore he met once twenty years ago, it was Daria and her smile that made him cover Mo's apron with tears of joy as the butcher saved his life. He had seen her in his mind: a beautiful woman in a doorway with a *come-hither* look; and realized he regretted not coming hither. If there was any chance of ever seeing a look like that again, then he wanted the second chance, he wanted the extra time. Not just this second, but the next and the next—all the time in the world.

Later that morning, Archie did an ecstatic eight circuits of Swiss Cottage traffic circle in his car, his head stuck out the window, a stream of air hitting the teeth at the back of his mouth like a windsock. He thought: *Blimey. So this is what it feels like when some bugger saves your life. Like you've just been handed a great big wad of Time.* He drove straight past his flat, straight past the street signs (Hendon 3¼ miles), laughing like a loon. At the traffic lights he flipped a ten-pence coin and smiled when the result seemed to agree that Fate was pulling him toward another life. Like a dog on a leash round a corner. Generally, women can't do this, but men retain the ancient ability to leave a family and a past. They just unhook themselves, like removing a fake beard, and skulk discreetly back into society, changed men. Unrecognizable. In this manner, a new Archie is about to emerge. We have caught him on the hop. For he is in a past-tense, future-perfect kind of mood. He is in a *maybe this, maybe that* kind of mood. When he approaches a forked road, he slows down, checks his undistinguished face in the rearview mirror, and quite indiscriminately chooses a route he's never taken before, a residential street leading to a place called Queen's Park. Go straight past *Go!*, Archie-boy, he tells himself; collect two hundred, and don't for Gawd's sake look back.



Tim Westleigh (more commonly known as Merlin) finally registered the persistent ringing of a doorbell. He picked himself off the kitchen floor,

waded through an ocean of supine bodies, and opened the door to arrive face-to-face with a middle-aged man dressed head-to-toe in gray corduroy, holding a ten-pence coin in his open palm. As Merlin was later to reflect when describing the incident, at any time of the day corduroy is a highly stressful fabric. Rent collectors wear it. Tax collectors, too. History teachers add leather elbow patches. To be confronted with a mass of it, at nine in the A.M., on the first day of a New Year, is an apparition lethal in its sheer quantity of negative vibes.

"What's the deal, man?" Merlin blinked in the doorway at the man in corduroy who stood on his doorstep illuminated by winter sunshine. "Encyclopedias or God?"

Archie noted the kid had an unnerving way of emphasizing certain words by turning his head in a wide circular movement from the right shoulder to the left. Then, when the circle was completed, he would nod several times.

"'Cos if it's encyclopedias we've got enough, like, *information* . . . and if it's God, you've got the wrong house. We're in a mellow place, here. Know what I mean?" Merlin concluded, doing the nodding thing and moving to shut the door.

Archie shook his head, smiled, and remained where he was.

"Erm . . . are you all right?" asked Merlin, hand on the doorknob. "Is there something I can do for you? Are you high on something?"

"I saw your sign," said Archie.

Merlin pulled on a joint and looked amused. "That sign?" He bent his head to follow Archie's gaze. The white bedsheet hanging down from an upper window. Across it, in large rainbow-colored lettering, was painted: WELCOME TO THE "END OF THE WORLD" PARTY, 1975.

Merlin shrugged. "Yeah, sorry, man, looks like it wasn't. Bit of a disappointment, that. Or a blessing," he added amiably, "depending on your point of view."

"Blessing," said Archie, with passion. "Hundred percent, bona fide *bliss*."

"Did you, er, dig the sign, then?" asked Merlin, taking a step back behind the doorstep in case the man was violent as well as schiz. "You into that kind of scene? It was kind of a joke, you see, more than anything."

"Caught my eye, you might say," said Archie, still beaming like a madman. "I was just driving along looking for somewhere, you know, somewhere to have another drink, New Year's Day, hair of the dog and all

that—and I've had a bit of a rough morning all in all—and it just sort of *struck* me. I flipped a coin and thought: why not?"

Merlin looked perplexed at the turn the conversation was taking. "Er . . . party's pretty much over, man. Besides, I think you're a little *advanced* in years . . . if you know what I mean . . ." Here Merlin turned gauche; underneath the dashiki he was at heart a good, middle-class boy, instilled with respect for his elders. "I mean," he said after a difficult pause, "it's a bit of a younger crowd than you might be used to. Kind of a commune scene."

"*But I was so much older then,*" sang Archie mischievously, quoting a ten-year-old Dylan track, arching his head round the door, "*I'm younger than that now.*"

Merlin took a cigarette from behind his ear, lit it, and frowned. "Look, man . . . I can't just let anyone in off the street, you know? I mean, you could be the police, you could be a freak, you could—"

But something about Archie's face—huge, innocent, sweetly expectant—reminded Tim what his estranged father, the vicar of Snarebrook, had to say about Christian charity every Sunday from his pulpit. "Oh, what the hell. It's New Year's Day, for fuckssake. You best come in."

Archie sidestepped Merlin, and moved into a long hallway with four open-doored rooms branching off from it, a staircase leading to another story, and a garden at the end of it all. Detritus of every variety—animal, mineral, vegetable—lined the floor; a great mass of bedding, under which people lay sleeping, stretched from one end of the hallway to the other, a red sea that grudgingly separated each time Archie took a step forward. Inside the rooms, in certain corners, could be witnessed the passing of bodily fluids: kissing, breast-feeding, fucking, throwing up—all the things Archie's Sunday Supplement had informed him could be found in a commune. He toyed for a moment with the idea of entering the fray, losing himself between the bodies (he had all this new *time* on his hands, masses and masses of it, dribbling through his fingers), but decided a stiff drink was preferable. He tackled the hallway until he reached the other end of the house and stepped out into the chilly garden, where some, having given up on finding a space in the warm house, had opted for the cold lawn. With a whiskey tonic in mind, he headed for the picnic table, where something the shape and color of Jack Daniel's had sprung up like a mirage in a desert of empty wine bottles.

"Mind if I . . . ?"

Two black guys, a topless Chinese girl, and a white woman wearing a toga were sitting around on wooden kitchen chairs, playing rummy. Just as Archie reached for the Jack Daniel's, the white woman shook her head and mimed stubbing out a cigarette.

"Tobacco sea, I'm afraid, darling. Some evil bastard put his fag out in some perfectly acceptable whiskey. There's Babycham and some other inexorable shit over here."

Archie smiled in gratitude for the warning and the kind offer. He took a seat and poured himself a big glass of *liebfraumilch* instead.

Many drinks later, and Archie could not remember a time in his life when he had not known Clive and Leo, Wan-Si and Petronia, intimately. With his back turned and a piece of charcoal, he could have rendered every puckered goosepimple around Wan-Si's nipples, every stray hair that fell in Petronia's face as she spoke. By 11:00 A.M., he loved them all dearly, they were the children he had never had. In return, they told him he was in possession of a unique soul for a man of his age. Everybody agreed some intensely positive karmic energy was circulating in and around Archie, the kind of thing strong enough to prompt a butcher to roll down a car window at the critical moment. And it turned out Archie was the first man over forty ever invited to join the commune; it turned out there had been talk for some time of the need for an older sexual presence to satisfy some of the more adventurous women. "Great," said Archie. "Fantastic. That'll be me, then." He felt so close to them that he was confused when around midday their relationship suddenly soured, and he found himself stabbed by a hangover and knee-deep in an argument about World War II, of all things.

"I don't even know how we got into this," groaned Wan-Si, who had covered up finally just when they decided to move indoors, Archie's corduroy jacket slung round her petite shoulders. "Let's not get into this. I'd rather go to bed than get into this."

"We *are* into it, we *are* into it," Clive was ranting. "This is the whole problem with his generation, they think they can hold up the war as some kind of—"

Archie was grateful when Leo interrupted Clive and dragged the argument into some further subset of the original one, which Archie had started (some unwise remark three-quarters of an hour ago about military service building up a young man's character) and then immediately regretted when it required him to defend himself at regular intervals. Freed fi-

nally of this obligation, he sat on the stairs, letting the row continue above while he placed his head in his hands.

Shame. He would have *liked* to have been part of a commune. If he'd played his cards right instead of starting a ding-dong, he might have had free love and bare breasts all over the place; maybe even a portion of allotment for growing fresh food. For a while (around 2:00 P.M., when he was telling Wan-Si about his childhood) it had looked like his new life was going to be fabulous, and from now on he was always going to say the right thing at the right time, and everywhere he went people would love him. *Nobody's fault*, thought Archie, mulling over the balls-up, *nobody's fault but my own*, but he wondered whether there wasn't some higher pattern to it. Maybe there will always be men who say the right thing at the right time, who step forward like Thespis at just the right moment of history, and then there will be men like Archie Jones, who are just there to make up the numbers. Or, worse still, who are given their big break only to come in on cue and die a death right there, center stage, for all to see.

A dark line would now be drawn underneath the whole incident, underneath the whole sorry day, had something not happened that led to the transformation of Archie Jones in every particular that a man can be transformed; and not due to any particular effort on his part, but by means of the entirely random, adventitious collision of one person with another. Something happened by accident. That accident was Clara Bowden.

But first a description: Clara Bowden was beautiful in all senses except, maybe, by virtue of being black. The classical. Clara Bowden was magnificently tall, black as ebony and crushed sable, with hair braided in a horseshoe that pointed up when she felt lucky, down when she didn't. At this moment it was up. It is hard to know whether that was significant.

She needed no bra—she was independent, even of gravity—she wore a red halter that stopped below her bust, underneath which she wore her belly button (beautifully) and underneath that some very tight yellow jeans. At the end of it all were some strappy heels of light-brown suede, and she came striding down the stairs on them like some kind of vision, or, as it seemed to Archie when he turned to observe her, like a reared-up thoroughbred.

Now, as Archie understood it, in movies and the like it is common for someone to be so striking that when they walk down the stairs the crowd

goes silent. In life he had never seen this. But it happened with Clara Bowden. She walked down the stairs in slow motion, surrounded by after-glow and fuzzy lighting. And not only was she the most beautiful thing he had ever seen, she was also the most comforting woman he had ever met. Her beauty was not a sharp, cold commodity. She smelled musty, womanly, like a bundle of your favorite clothes. Though she was disorganized physically—legs and arms speaking a slightly different dialect from her central nervous system—even her gangly demeanor seemed to Archie exceptionally elegant. She wore her sexuality with an older woman's ease, and not (as with most of the girls Archie had run with in the past) like an awkward purse, never knowing how to hold it, where to hang it, or when to just put it down.

"Cheer up, bwoy," she said in a lilting Caribbean accent that reminded Archie of That Jamaican Cricketer, "it might never happen."

"I think it already has."

Archie, who had just dropped a fag from his mouth that had been burning itself to death anyway, saw Clara quickly tread it underfoot. She gave him a wide grin that revealed possibly her one imperfection. A complete lack of teeth in the top of her mouth.

"Man . . . dey get knock out," she lisped, seeing his surprise. "But I tink to myself: come de end of de world, d'Lord won't mind if I have no toofs." She laughed softly.

"Archie Jones," said Archie, offering her a Marlboro.

"Clara." She whistled inadvertently as she smiled and breathed in the smoke. "Archie Jones, you look justabout exackly how I feel. Have Clive and dem people been talking foolishness at you? Clive, you bin playing wid dis poor man?"

Clive grunted—the memory of Archie had all but disappeared with the effects of the wine—and continued where he left off, accusing Leo of misunderstanding the difference between political and physical sacrifice.

"Oh, no . . . nothing serious," Archie burred, useless in the face of her exquisite face. "Bit of a disagreement, that's all. Clive and I have different views about a few things. Generation gap, I suppose."

Clara slapped him on the hand. "Hush yo mout! You're nat dat ol'. I seen older."

"I'm old enough," said Archie, and then, just because he felt like telling her, "You won't believe me, but I almost died today."

Clara raised an eyebrow. "You don't say. Well, come and join de club. Dere are a lot of us about dis marnin'. What a *strange* party dis is. You know," she said, brushing a long hand across his bald spot, "you look pretty djam good for someone come so close to St. Peter's Gate. You wan' some advice?"

Archie nodded vigorously. He always wanted advice, he was a huge fan of second opinions. That's why he never went anywhere without a ten-pence coin.

"Go home, get some rest. Marnin' de the world new, every time. Man . . . dis life no easy!"

What home? thought Archie. He had unhooked the old life, he was walking into unknown territory.

"Man . . ." Clara repeated, patting him on the back, "dis life no easy!"

She let off another long whistle and a rueful laugh, and, unless he was really going nuts, Archie saw that *come-hither* look, identical to Daria's; tinged with a kind of sadness, disappointment; like she didn't have a great deal of other options. Clara was nineteen. Archibald was forty-seven.

Six weeks later they were married.