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Girl, Woman, Other

'Beautiful'
GUARDIAN

'Triumphant'
SUNDAY TIMES

'Exceptional'
STYLIST





Chapter One

Amma

I

Amma
is walking along the promenade of the waterway that bisects her
city, a few early morning barges cruise slowly by
to her left is the nautical-themed footbridge with its deck-like
walkway and sailing mast pylons
to her right is the bend in the river as it heads east past Waterloo
Bridge towards the dome of St Paul's
she feels the sun begin to rise, the air still breezy before the city
clogs up with heat and fumes
a violinist plays something suitably uplifting further along the
promenade
Amma's play, *The Last Amazon of Dahomey*, opens at the National
tonight

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I

she thinks back to when she started out in theatre
when she and her running mate, Dominique, developed a reputation for heckling shows that offended their political sensibilities
their powerfully trained actors' voices projected from the back of the stalls before they made a quick getaway
they believed in protest that was public, disruptive and downright annoying to those at the other end of it
she remembers pouring a pint of beer over the head of a director whose play featured semi-naked black women running around on stage behaving like idiots
before doing a runner into the backstreets of Hammersmith
howling

Amma then spent decades on the fringe, a renegade lobbing hand grenades at the establishment that excluded her
until the mainstream began to absorb what was once radical and she found herself hopeful of joining it
which only happened when the first female artistic director assumed the helm of the National three years ago
after so long hearing a polite no from her predecessors, she received a phone call just after breakfast one Monday morning when her life stretched emptily ahead with only online television dramas to look forward to
love the script, must do it, will you also direct it for us? I know it's short notice, but are you free for coffee this week at all?

Amma takes a sip of her Americano with its customary kick-starter extra shot in it as she approaches the Brutalist grey arts complex ahead
at least they try to enliven the bunker-like concrete with neon

light displays these days and the venue has a reputation for being progressive rather than traditionalist

years ago she expected to be evicted as soon as she dared walk through its doors, a time when people really did wear their smartest clothes to go to the theatre

and looked down their noses at those not in the proper attire

she wants people to bring their curiosity to her plays, doesn't give a damn what they wear, has her own *sod-you* style, anyway, which has evolved, it's true, away from the clichéd denim dungarees, Che Guevara beret, PLO scarf and ever-present badge of two interlocked female symbols (talk about wearing your heart on your sleeve, girl)

these days she wears silver or gold trainers in winter, failsafe Birkies in summer

winter, it's black slacks, either baggy or tight depending on whether she's a size 12 or 14 that week (a size smaller on top)

summer, it's patterned harem pants that end just below the knee

winter, it's bright asymmetric shirts, jumpers, jackets, coats

year-round her peroxide dreadlocks are trained to stick up like candles on a birthday cake

silver hoop earrings, chunky African bangles and pink lipstick are her perennial signature style statement

Yazz

recently described her style as 'a mad old woman look, Mum', pleads with her to shop in Marks & Spencer like normal mothers, refuses to be spotted alongside her when they're supposed to be walking down the street together

Yazz knows full well that Amma will always be anything but normal, and as she's in her fifties, she's not old yet, although try

telling *that* to a nineteen-year-old; in any case, ageing is nothing to be ashamed of

especially when the entire human race is in it together

although sometimes it seems that she alone among her friends wants to celebrate getting older

because it's such a privilege to not die prematurely, she tells them as the night draws in around her kitchen table in her cosy terraced house in Brixton

as they get stuck into the dishes each one has brought: chickpea stew, jerk chicken, Greek salad, lentil curry, roasted vegetables, Moroccan lamb, saffron rice, beetroot and kale salad, jollof quinoa and gluten-free pasta for the really irritating fusspots

as they pour themselves glasses of wine, vodka (fewer calories), or something more liver-friendly if under doctor's orders

she expects them to approve of her bucking the trend of middle-aged moaning; instead she gets bemused smiles and what about arthritic flare-ups, memory loss and hot sweats?

Amma passes the young busker

she smiles with encouragement at the girl, who responds in kind

she fishes out a few coins, places them in the violin case

she isn't ready to forgo cigarettes so leans on the riverside wall and lights one, hates herself for it

the adverts told her generation it would make them appear grown-up, glamorous, powerful, clever, desirable and above all, cool

no one told them it would actually make them dead

she looks out at the river as she feels the warm smoke travel down her oesophagus soothing her nerves while trying to combat the adrenaline rush of the caffeine

forty years of first nights and she's still bricking it
what if she's slated by the critics? dismissed with a consensus of
one-star reviews, what *was* the great National thinking allowing this
rubbishy impostor into the building?

of course she knows she's not an impostor, she's written fifteen
plays and directed over forty, and as a critic once wrote, Amma
Bonsu is a safe pair of hands who's known to pull off risks

what if the preview audiences who gave standing ovations were
just being kind?

oh shut up, Amma, you're a veteran battle-axe, remember?

look

she's got a fantastic cast: six older actresses (seen-it-all vets), six
mid-careerists (survivors-so-far) and three fresh faces (naïve hope-
fuls), one of whom, the talented Simone, will wander in bleary-eyed
to rehearsals, having forgotten to unplug the iron, turn off the stove
or close her bedroom window and will waste precious rehearsal time
phoning her flatmates in a panic

a couple of months ago she'd have sold her grandmother into slav-
ery to get this job, now she's a spoilt little prima donna who ordered
her director to pop out and fetch her a caramel latte a couple of weeks
ago when it was just the two of them in a rehearsal room

I'm so exhausted, Simone whinged, implying it was all Amma's
fault for making her work so hard

needless to say, she dealt with Little Miss Simone Stevenson in the
moment

Little Miss Stevenson – who thinks that because she's landed at the
National straight out of drama school, she's one step away from con-
quering Hollywood

she'll find out
soon enough

at times like these Amma misses Dominique, who long ago
absconded to America

they should be sharing her breakthrough career moment together
they met in the eighties at an audition for a feature film set in a
women's prison (what else?)

both were disillusioned at being put up for parts such as a slave,
servant, prostitute, nanny or crim

and still not getting the job

they railed against their lot in a grotty Soho caff while devouring
fried egg and bacon slathered between two slabs of soggy white
bread washed down with builder's tea alongside the sex workers who
plied their trade on the streets outside

long before Soho became a trendy gay colony

look at me? Dominique said, and Amma did, there was nothing
subservient, maternal or criminal about her

she was über-cool, totally gorgeous, taller than most women,
thinner than most women, with cut-glass cheekbones and smoky
eyes with thick black lashes that literally cast a shadow on her face

she wore leathers, kept her hair short except for a black fringe
swept to one side, and rode about town on a battered old butcher's
bike chained up outside

can't they see I'm a living goddess? Dominique shouted with a flam-
boyant gesture, flicking her fringe, adopting a sultry pose as heads turned

Amma was shorter, with African hips and thighs

perfect slave girl material one director told her when she walked
into an audition for a play about Emancipation

whereupon she walked right back out again

in turn a casting director told Dominique she was wasting his time
when she turned up for a Victorian drama when there weren't any
black people in Britain then

she said there were, called him ignorant before also leaving the room
and in her case, slamming the door

Amma realized she'd found a kindred spirit in Dominique who
would kick arse with her

and they'd both be pretty unemployable once news got around
they went on to a local pub where the conversation continued and
wine flowed

Dominique was born in the St Pauls area of Bristol to an Afro-
Guyanese mother, Cecilia, who tracked her lineage back to slavery,
and an Indo-Guyanese father, Wintley, whose ancestors were inden-
tured labourers from Calcutta

the oldest of ten children who all looked more black than Asian
and identified as such, especially as their father could relate to the
Afro-Caribbean people he'd grown up with, but not to Indians fresh
over from India

Dominique guessed her own sexual preferences from puberty,
wisely kept them to herself, unsure how her friends or family would
react, not wanting to be a social outcast

she tried boys a couple of times
they enjoyed it
she endured it

aged sixteen, aspiring to become an actress, she headed for Lon-
don where people proudly proclaimed their outsider identities on
badges

she slept rough under the Embankment arches and in shop doorways along the Strand, was interviewed by a black housing association where she lied and cried about escaping a father who'd beaten her

the Jamaican housing officer wasn't impressed, so you got beats, is it?

Dominique escalated her complaint to one of paternal sexual abuse, was given an emergency room in a hostel; eighteen months later, after tearful weekly calls to the housing office, she landed a one-bedroom housing association flat in a small fifties block in Bloomsbury

I did what I had to find a home, she told Amma, not my finest moment, I admit, still, no harm done, as my father will never know

she went on a mission to educate herself in black history, culture, politics, feminism, discovered London's alternative bookshops

she walked into Sisterwrite in Islington where every single author of every single book was female and browsed for hours; she couldn't afford to buy anything, and read the whole of *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* in weekly instalments, standing up, as well as anything by Audre Lorde she could get her hands on

the booksellers didn't seem to mind

when I was accepted into a very orthodox drama school, I was already politicized and challenged them on everything, Amma

the only person of colour in the whole school

she demanded to know why the male parts in Shakespeare couldn't be played by women and don't even get me started on cross-racial casting, she shouted at the course director while everyone else, including the female students, stayed silent

I realized I was on my own

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the next day I was taken aside by the school principal
you're here to become an actor not a politician
you'll be asked to leave if you keep causing trouble
you have been warned, Dominique

tell me about it, Amma replied, shut up or get out, right?
as for me, I get my fighting spirit from my dad, Kwabena, who was
a journalist campaigning for Independence in Ghana
until he heard he was going to be arrested for sedition, legged it
over here, ended up working on the railways where he met Mum at
London Bridge station

he was a ticket collector, she worked in the offices above the
concourse

he made sure to be the one to take her ticket, she made sure to be the
last person to leave the train so she could exchange a few words with him

Mum, Helen, is half-caste, born in 1935 in Scotland
her father was a Nigerian student who vanished as soon as he finished
his studies at the University of Aberdeen

he never said goodbye
years later her mother discovered he'd gone back to his wife and
children in Nigeria

she didn't even know he had a wife and children

Mum wasn't the only half-caste in Aberdeen in the thirties and forties
but she was rare enough to be made to feel it

she left school early, went to secretarial college, headed down to
London, just as it was being populated by African men who'd come
to study or work

Mum went to their dances and Soho clubs, they liked her lighter
skin and looser hair

she says she felt ugly until African men told her she wasn't
you should see what she looked like back then
a cross between Lena Horne and Dorothy Dandridge
so yeh, really ugly

Mum hoped to spend their first date going to see a film and then
on to her favourite spot, Club Afrique, right here in Soho, she'd
dropped enough hints and loved to dance to highlife and West African
jazz

instead he took her to one of his socialist meetings in the back-
room of a pub at the Elephant and Castle

where a group of men sat guzzling beers and talking independence
politics

she sat there trying to act interested, impressed by his intellect
he was impressed with her silent acquiescence, if you ask me

they married and moved to Peckham

I was their last child and first girl, Amma explained, blowing
smoke into the already thickening fug of the room

my three older brothers became lawyers and a doctor, their obedi-
ence to the expectations of our father meant I wasn't pressurized to
follow suit

his only concern for me is marriage and children

he thinks my acting career is a hobby until I have both

Dad's a socialist who wants a revolution to improve the lot of all
of mankind

literally

I tell Mum she married a patriarch

look at it this way, Amma, she says, your father was born male in

Ghana in the 1920s whereas you were born female in London in the 1960s

and your point is?

you really can't expect him to 'get you', as you put it

I let her know she's an apologist for the patriarchy and complicit in a system that oppresses all women

she says human beings are complex

I tell her not to patronize me

Mum worked eight hours a day in paid employment, raised four children, maintained the home, made sure the patriarch's dinner was on the table every night and his shirts were ironed every morning

meanwhile, he was off saving the world

his one domestic duty was to bring home the meat for Sunday lunch from the butcher's – a suburban kind of hunter-gatherer thing

I can tell Mum's unfulfilled now we've all left home because she spends her time either cleaning it or redecorating it

she's never complained about her lot, or argued with him, a sure sign she's oppressed

she told me she tried to hold his hand in the early days, but he shook her off, said affection was an English affectation, she never tried again

yet every year he gets her the soppiest Valentine card you can buy and he loves sentimental country music, sits in the kitchen on Sunday evenings listening to albums of Jim Reeves and Charley Pride

tumbler of whisky in one hand, wiping tears away with the other

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Dad lives for campaigning meetings, demos, picketing Parliament and standing in Lewisham Market selling the *Socialist Worker*

I grew up listening to his sermons during our evening meal on the evils of capitalism and colonialism and the merits of socialism

it was his pulpit and we were his captive congregation

it was like we were literally being force-fed his politics

he'd probably be an important person in Ghana if he'd returned after Independence

instead he's President for Life of our family

he doesn't know I'm a dyke, are you kidding? Mum told me not to tell him, it was hard enough telling her, she said she suspected when pencil skirts and curly perms were all the rage and I started wearing men's Levis

she's sure it's a phase, which I'll throw back at her when I'm forty

Dad has no time for 'the fairies' and laughs at all the homophobic jokes comedians make on telly every Saturday night when they're not insulting their mother-in-law or black people

Amma spoke about going to her first black women's group in Brixton in her last year at school, she'd seen a flyer at her local library

the woman who opened the door, Elaine, sported a perfect halo of an afro and her smooth limbs were clad tightly in light blue denim jeans and tight denim shirt

Amma wanted her on sight, followed her into the main room where women sat on sofas, chairs, cushions, cross-legged on the floor, drinking cups of coffee and cider

she nervously accepted cigarettes as they were passed around, sat on the floor leaning against a cat-mauled tweedy armchair, feeling Elaine's warm leg against her arm

she listened as they debated what it meant to be a black woman
what it meant to be a feminist when white feminist organizations
made them feel unwelcome

how it felt when people called them nigger, or racist thugs beat
them up

what it was like when white men opened doors or gave up their
seats on public transport for white women (which was sexist), but not
for them (which was racist)

Amma could relate to their experiences, began to join in with the
refrains of, we hear you, sister, we've all been there, sister

it felt like she was coming in from the cold

at the end of her first evening, the other women said their good-
byes and Amma offered to stay behind to wash up the cups and
ashtrays with Elaine

they made out on one of the bumpy sofas in the glow of the street-
light to the accompaniment of police sirens haring by

it was the closest she'd come to making love to herself

it was another coming home

the next week when she went to the meeting

Elaine was canoodling with another woman

and blanked her completely

she never went again

Amma and Dominique stayed until they were turfed out, had
worked their way through numerous glasses of red wine

they decided they needed to start their own theatre company to
have careers as actors, because neither was prepared to betray their
politics to find jobs

or shut their mouths to keep them
it seemed the obvious way forward
they scribbled ideas for names on hard toilet paper snaffled from
the loo

Bush Women Theatre Company best captured their intentions
they would be a voice in theatre where there was silence
black and Asian women's stories would get out there
they would create theatre on their own terms
it became the company's motto
On Our Own Terms
or Not At All.

2

Living rooms became rehearsal spaces, old bangers transported
props, costumes came from second-hand shops, sets were extracted
from junk yards, they called on mates to help out, everyone learning
on the job, ad hoc, throwing their lot in together

they wrote grant applications on old typewriters with missing
keys, budgets felt as alien to Amma as quantum physics, she balked
at becoming trapped behind a desk

she upset Dominique when she arrived for admin sessions late and
left early claiming headaches or PMT

they rowed when she walked into a stationery shop and ran straight
out again claiming it had brought on a panic attack

she had a go at Dominique when she didn't deliver the script she'd
promised to write but was out late night clubbing instead, or forgot
her lines mid-show

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six months after its inception, they were constantly at loggerheads they'd hit it off as friends, only to find they couldn't work together

Amma called a make-or-break meeting at hers
they sat down with wine and a Chinese takeaway and Dominique admitted she got more pleasure setting up tours for the company than putting herself in front of an audience, and preferred being herself to pretending to be other people

Amma admitted she loved writing, hated admin and was she really any good as an actor? she did anger brilliantly – which was the extent of her range

Dominique became the company manager, Amma the artistic director

they employed actresses, directors, designers, stage crews, set up national tours that lasted months

their plays, *The Importance of Being Female*, *FGM: The Musical*, *Dis-arranged Marriage*, *Cunning Stunts*, were performed in community centres, libraries, fringe theatres, at women's festivals and conferences

they leafleted outside venues as audiences left and arrived, illegally plastered posters on to billboards in the dead of night

they started getting reviews in the alternative media, and even produced a monthly *Bush Women* samizdat

but due to pathetically poor sales and, to be honest, pathetically poor writing, it lasted for two issues after its grand launch one summer's evening at Sisterwrite

where a group of women rolled up to enjoy the free plonk and spill out on to the pavement to light up and chat each other up

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Amma supplemented her income working in a burger bar at Piccadilly Circus

where she sold hamburgers made of reconstituted cardboard topped with rehydrated onions and rubbery cheese

all of which she also ate for free in her breaks – which gave her spots

the orange nylon suit and hat she wore meant customers saw her as a uniformed servant to do their bidding

and not her wonderful, artistic, highly individualistic and rebellious self

she slipped free crusty pies filled with apple-flavoured lumps of sugar to the runaway rent boys she befriended who operated around the station

with no idea that in years to come she'd be attending their funerals

they didn't realize unprotected sex meant a dance with death
nobody did

home was a derelict factory in Deptford with concrete walls, a collapsing ceiling and a community of rats that defeated all attempts at extermination

thereafter she moved into a series of similarly squalid squats until she found herself living in the most desirable squat in the whole of London, a Soviet-sized former office block at the back of King's Cross

she was lucky enough to be one of the first to hear of it before it filled up

and stayed upstairs when bailiffs set a hydraulic excavator at the main door

which triggered violent countermeasures and prison sentences for the head-bangers who thought a bailiff down deserved a good kicking they called it the Battle of King's Cross
the building was thereafter known as the Republic of Freedomia they were lucky, too, because the owner of the property, a certain Jack Staniforth, living tax-free in Monte Carlo, loaded from the profits of his family's business in Sheffield cutlery, turned out to be sympathetic to their cause once news reached him from his estate holding company he'd fought for the International Brigade in the Spanish Civil War and a bad-investment of a building in one of London's seediest districts was a forgettable footnote to his accounts
if they looked after the place, he wrote
they could stay for free

they stopped the illegal tapping of electricity and opened an account with the London Electricity Board
likewise with the gas, hitherto powered by a single fifty pence piece jammed into a meter
they needed to set up a management system and gathered one Saturday morning in the lobby to thrash it out
the Marxists demanded they set up a Central Committee of the Workers' Republic of Freedomia, which was a bit rich, Amma thought, seeing as most of them had taken 'a principled stand against the running dogs of capitalism' as an excuse to not work
the hippies suggested they form a commune and share everything, but they were so chilled and laid back, everybody talked over them
the environmentalists wanted to ban aerosols, plastic bags and deodorant, which turned everyone against them, even the punks who weren't exactly known for smelling minty

the vegetarians demanded a non-meat policy, the vegans wanted it extended to non-dairy, the macrobiotics suggested everyone eat steamed white cabbage for breakfast

the Rastas wanted cannabis legalized, and a reserved plot on the land out back for their Nyabinghi gatherings

the Hari Krishnas wanted everyone to join them that very afternoon banging drums down Oxford Street

the punks wanted permission to play shouty music and were duly shouted down

the gay guys wanted anti-homophobic legislation enshrined into the building's constitution, to which everyone replied, what constitution?

the radical feminists wanted women-only quarters, self-governed by a co-op

the lesbian radical feminists wanted their own quarters away from the non-lesbian radical feminists, also self-governed by a co-op

the black radical lesbian feminists wanted the same except with the condition that no whiteys of any gender were allowed inside

the anarchists walked out because any form of governance was a betrayal of everything they believed in

Amma preferred running solo, and mixing with others who didn't try to impose their will on anyone else

in the end a straightforward rotating management committee was formed with various rules against drug-dealing, sexual harassment and voting Tory

the plot out back became a communal space featuring scrap metal sculptures

courtesy of the artists

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Amma managed to lay claim to a typing pool so large she could jog around it

with its own private toilet and sink that she kept blissfully clean and suffused with floral scents

she coated the walls and ceiling with a striking blood-red paint, ripped up the corporate-grey carpet, threw a few raffia mats on the wooden floor, installed a second-hand cooker, fridge, bean bags, a futon, and a bath reclaimed from a junk yard

her room was big enough for parties and big enough for people to crash the disco beats of Donna Summer, Sister Sledge, Minnie Riperton and Chaka Khan swirling on vinyl got her parties going

Roberta, Sarah, Edith, Etta and Mathilde Santing were the soundtracks to her end of night seductions

behind the eighteenth-century black lacquer Chinese screen, rescued from a skip outside the old Chinese Embassy

she worked her way through many of the women of Freedomia she wanted one-night stands, most wanted more than that it got to the point where she dreaded passing her former conquests

in the corridors, like Maryse, a translator from Guadeloupe if she wasn't knocking on Amma's door in the middle of the night begging to be let in, she was lurking outside it to harass whoever was getting what she wanted

this progressed to name-calling from her window whenever she saw Amma approach the building, all of it coming to a head when she tipped a bucket of vegetable peel over Amma one day as she passed beneath her window

infuriating both the environmentalists and the management committee who took it upon themselves to write to Amma that she 'stop shitting on her own doorstep'

Amma wrote back how it was interesting that quickly people turned into *totalitarian fascists* once they'd been given a little power

but she'd learned her lesson and wasn't short of attention; groupies queued up for Amma and Dominique as the main players of Bush Women Theatre

everyone from baby dykes in their late teens to women who could be their mothers

Amma didn't discriminate, she bragged to her friends that her tastes were truly egalitarian as they traversed culture, class, creed, race, religion and generation

which, happily, gave her a bigger playing field than most

(she kept her predilection for big tits quiet because it was unfeminist to isolate body parts for sexual objectification)

Dominique was more selective and monogamous, serially so, she went for actresses, usually blonde, whose microscopic talent was overshadowed by their macroscopic beauty

or models whose looks *were* their talent

women-only bars were their hangouts

Fallen Angel, Rackets, the Bell, the Drill Hall Theatre bar on a Monday where the lesbianarati hung out, and Pearl's shebeen in Brixton on a Friday night run by Pearl, a middle-aged Jamaican woman who stripped her basement of furniture, set up a sound system and charged at the door

Amma experienced commitment to one person as imprisonment, she hadn't left home for a life of freedom and adventure to end up chained to another person's desires

if she slept with a woman more than two or three times, they usually went from attractively independent to increasingly needy within the space of a *week*

she'd become their sole source of happiness as they moved to assert their authority over her autonomy, by any means necessary sulks, tears, accusations of selfishness and heartlessness

Amma learnt to head all women off, to state her intentions upfront, to never sleep with the same person twice, or pushing it, thrice even when she wanted to

sex was a simple, harmless, human pleasure and until her late thirties she got a lot of it

how many were there? one hundred, another fifty? surely not more than that?

a couple of friends suggested she try therapy to help her settle down, she replied she was practically a virgin compared to male rock stars who boasted conquests of thousands and were admired for it

did anyone tell them to go and get psychoanalysed?

unfortunately one or two of her earlier conquests have been harassing her on social media of late where the past is just waiting to smack you in the face

like the woman who posted that Amma had been her first when they slept together thirty-five years ago and had been so trashed she vomited all over her

it was so traumatic I never got over it, she wailed

or the woman who chased her up Regent Street shouting at her for not returning her calls from around the same time

who do you think you are, you pretentious show-off theatre luvvie? you're nothing, that's what you are, *nothing*

you must be off your meds, love, Amma shouted back, before
escaping into the subterranean warren of Topshop

Amma long ago lost interest in bed-hopping; over time she began
to crave the intimacy that comes from being emotionally, although
not exclusively, close to another person

non-monogamous relationships are her thing, or is it called poly-
amory now? as Yazz describes it, which as far as she can tell is
non-monogamy in all but name, *child*

there's Dolores, a graphic designer based in Brighton, and Jackie,
an occupational therapist in Highgate

they've been in the picture seven and three years respectively and
are both independent women who have full lives (and children) out-
side of their relationship with her

they're not clingy or needy or jealous or possessive, and they actu-
ally like each other so yes, sometimes they indulge in a little ménage
à trois

upon occasion

(Yazz would be horrified if she knew this)

the middle-aged Amma sometimes feels nostalgic for her younger
days, remembers the only time she and Dominique went on a pilgrim-
age to the legendary Gateways

hidden down a Chelsea basement in the last years of its fifty-year
existence

it was almost empty, two middle-aged women stood at the bar
wearing men's haircuts and suits and looking as if they'd walked
straight out of the pages of *The Well of Loneliness*

the dance floor was dimly lit, and two very old and very small

women, one in a black suit, the other in a forties-style dress, danced cheek-to-cheek to Dusty Springfield singing ‘The Look of Love’

and there wasn’t even a glittery disco ball spinning from the middle of the ceiling, sprinkling stardust on to them.

3

Amma throws her coffee in a bin and walks directly towards the theatre, past the concrete skateboarding area emblazoned with graffiti

it’s way too early for the youngsters to begin their death-defying leaps and twists without helmets or protective knee pads

the young, who are so fearless

like Yazz, who goes out cycling without a helmet

who storms off when her mother tells her that wearing a helmet might be the difference between

a/ getting a headache

b/ learning to talk again

she enters the stage door, greets the security guard, Bob, who wishes her well for tonight, makes her way through the corridors and up the stairs and eventually on to the cavernous stage

she looks out at the empty, auditory wilderness of the fan-shaped auditorium, modelled on the Greek amphitheatres that ensured everyone in the audience had an uninterrupted view of the action

over a thousand people will fill the seats this very evening

so many people gathered to see her production is quite unbelievable

the entire run almost sold out before a single review has been filed

how’s that for demand for something quite different?

*

The Last Amazon of Dahomey, written and directed by Amma
Bonsu

where in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries women warriors
served the king

women who lived in the king's compound and were supplied with
food and female slaves

who left the palace preceded by a slave girl ringing a bell warning
men to look away or be killed

who became the palace guard because men couldn't be trusted not
to chop off the king's head or castrate him with a cutlass while he
slept

who were trained to climb naked over thorny acacia branches to
toughen up

who were sent into the hazardous forest for nine days to survive on
their own

who were crack shots with muskets and could behead and disemb-
owel their enemies with ease

who fought the Yoruba next door and the French who came to
colonize

who grew to an army of six thousand, all formally married to the
king

who were not otherwise permitted sexual relations and any male
child born to them was killed off

on first hearing about this Amma decided they must have been at
it among themselves because wasn't that the case when the sexes are
segregated?

and the idea of her play was born

the last Amazon is Nawi, who enters the stage as a vulnerable
teenage bride presented to the king; unable to bear his child, she's

cast out of his bedchamber and forced to join his female combat troops where she survives the hazardous induction and rises up the ranks through her powerful physicality and cunning battle strategies to become a legendary Amazon general who shocked foreign observers with her fearless ferocity

Amma shows Nawi's loyalty to her many women lovers long after she tires of them, making sure the king assigns them lightweight domestic duties rather than kick them out of the compound to a life of destitution

at the end of the play, old and alone, Nawi reconnects with her past lovers, who fade in and out as spectres, courtesy of holograms

she relives the wars where she made her name, including the ones the king instigated to provide captives for the abolished slave trade in the Americas, with outlaw slave ships outrunning the blockades in order to do business with him

she's proud of her achievements

video projections show her battles in action, thunderous armies of charging Amazons brandishing muskets and machetes

hollering and swelling towards the audience

spine-chilling, terrifying

in the end

there is Nawi's death

lights slowly fading

to blackout

Amma wishes Dominique could have flown over to see a play she was the first to read ten years ago when Amma wrote it

a play that's taken this long to get staged because every company she sent it to turned it down as not being right for them

and she couldn't bear the thought of resurrecting Bush Women Theatre to put it on

when Dominique left, she was left to steer the battleship alone which she did for a few years, feeling abandoned, never finding someone to replace Dominique who had provided the practical solutions to Amma's creative ideas

she dismantled the company in the end
and went freelance

Shirley

her oldest friend will be here tonight, she's attended every one of Amma's shows since she was a teenager, has been a constant in her life since they met as eleven-year-olds at grammar school when Shirley, the only other brown girl in the school, made a beeline for her in the playground when Amma was standing alone one lunchtime amid the excitement of green-uniformed girls screeching and whooping and having fun skipping with ropes and playing hopscotch and games of tag

there was Shirley standing before her

Shirley, with perfectly straightened hair, her face so shiny (Vaseline, Amma later discovered), with her perfectly-knotted school tie, white socks pulled up to her knees

so composed, so neat, so nice-looking

unlike Amma's own messy hair, mainly because she was unable to stop unpicking the two braids her mother plaited for her every morning

or stop her socks slipping down to her ankles because she couldn't help rubbing one foot against the other leg

and her school cardigan was three sizes too big because her mother had made it to last three years

hello, she said, my name's Shirley, do you want me to be your friend?
Amma nodded, Shirley took her hand and led her to the group she'd just left who were playing rubber band skipping

they were inseparable after that, Shirley paid attention in class and could be relied on to help out with homework

Shirley listened for hours to Amma talking about the crushes she had on boys, and later, after a transitional bisexual period (with brief crushes on Shirley's brothers Errol and Tony), girls

Shirley never had a negative word to say about her sexuality, covered for her when she bunked off school and listened avidly to her tales from the youth theatre – the smoking, snogging, drinking, acting – in that order, even when their paths forked after school, Shirley into teaching, Amma into theatre, they maintained their friendship

and even when Amma's arty friends said Shirley was the dullest person on the planet and did she have to invite *her*? Amma stood up for Shirley's ordinariness

she's a good person, she protested

Shirley babysat Yazz whenever she was asked (Amma also babysat Shirley's girls once or twice, maybe?)

Shirley never once complained when Amma needed to borrow money to pay off her debts, which she sometimes wrote off as birthday presents

it felt one-way for a long time, until Amma reasoned she made Shirley's safe and predictable life more interesting and scintillating and *that* was what she gave back

then there were the members of her group or *squad*, as Yazz corrects her, no one says group of friends, Mum, it's so, like, prehistoric?

she misses the people they used to be, when they were all discovering

themselves with no idea how much they might change in the years to come

her group came to her opening nights, were at the end of a phone (landline, of course – how *did* that work back then?) for a spontaneous night out

were there to share and stir-up dramas

Mabel was a freelance photographer who went straight once she hit her thirties, ditched all her lesbian friends as part of her reinvention as probably the first black, Barbour-wearing, horse-riding housewife in the Shires

Olivine went from being un-castable in Britain because she was so dark to landing a major crime series in Hollywood and living the life of a star with ocean views and glossy magazine spreads

Katrina was a nurse who returned to Aberdeen where she belonged, she said, became a born-again Anglophile, married Kirsty, a doctor, and refuses to come down to London

Lakshmi will be here tonight, a saxophonist who composed for their shows, before deciding there was nothing worse than a song and a tune and began to put the niche into avant garde and play what Amma privately thinks of as bing-bang-bong music, usually headlining weird festivals in remote fields with more cows than punters in attendance

Lakshmi has also developed an improbable guru persona for the gullible students she tutors at music college

who gather around the hearth of her council flat sipping cheap cider from tea cups

while she sits cross-legged on the sofa in flowing robes, long hair streaked with silver

denouncing chord progressions in favour of micro-tonal improvisation and poly-tempic, poly-rhythmic and multi-phonetic structures and effects

while declaring that composition is dead, girls and boys
I'm all about the contemporary extemporary

even though Lakshmi is approaching sixty, her chosen lover, male or female, remains in the 25–35 age range, at the upper end of which the relationship ends

when Amma calls her on it, she comes up with a reason *other* than that they're no longer quite so impressionable, fresh-faced and taut-skinned

then there was Georgie, the only one who didn't survive into the nineties

a plumber's apprentice from Wales, she was abandoned by her Jehovah's Witness family for being gay

she became the lost orphan child they all took under their wing

the only woman in a council's plumbing team, she had to endure constant innuendo from her male colleagues with their jokes about screw hole locators, blow bags, nipples and ballcocks

as well as comments on what they'd like to do with her arse when she was fixing something under a sink or peering down a gutter

Georgie

drank two litres of Coca Cola a day and mixed it with spirits and drugs at night

she was the least lucky of their group in attracting women, and sadly, stupidly, thought she'd be on her own forever

many a night out ended in tears with Georgie saying she was too ugly to pull, which wasn't true, they all endlessly reassured her how attractive she was, although Amma considered her more Artful Dodger than Oliver Twist

which in the lesbian world wasn't such a bad thing

Amma can never forget the last time she saw her, both of them sitting on the kerb outside the Bell as the revellers drifted drunkenly off while Amma forced a finger down Georgie's throat to make her regurgitate the pills she'd taken in the toilets

for the first time in their friendship, Amma actually showed her frustration with her friend for being such a hopeless case, for being so insecure, for not being able to cope with adulthood, for getting off her face all the time, it's time to grow up, Georgie, it's time to grow the fuck up!

a week later she went over the top floor balcony on the Pepys Estate in Deptford where she lived

to this day, Amma wonders how Georgie died
did she fall (accident), fly (tripping), throw herself off (suicide) or was she pushed (unlikely)

she still feels guilty, still wonders if it was her fault

Sylvester always shows up on first nights, if only for the free booze at the after-party

even though a few days ago he accused her of selling out when he cornered her outside Brixton tube station on her way home from rehearsal

and persuaded her to have a drink with him at the Ritzy where they sat in the upstairs bar surrounded by posters of the independent

films they'd been going to see together since they first met as students at drama school

films like *Pink Flamingos*, starring the great drag queen, Divine, *Born in Flames*, *Daughters of the Dust*, *Farewell My Concubine*, Pratibha Parmar's *A Place of Rage* and *Handsworth Songs* by the Black Audio Film Collective

films that inspired her own aesthetics as a theatre-maker although she's never admitted her equally lowbrow tastes to Sylvester, who's too much of a political purist to understand such as her addictions to *Dynasty* and *Dallas*, the original series and their recent incarnations or *America's Top Model* or *Millionaire Matchmaker* or *Big Brother* and the rest . . .

Amma looked around the bar at the other alternatives who'd moved into Brixton when it was crime-addled but affordable

these people were her people, they'd lived through two riots and were proud of their multiracial social circles and bloodlines, like Sylvester, who'd gone on a pilgrimage here to visit the gay community centre that came and went and met the man who became his life partner, Curwen, newly arrived from St Lucia

they used to make such a striking couple

Sylvester, or Sylvie, was then blond and pretty, he spent most of the eighties wearing dresses, his long hair flowing down his back

he was out to challenge society's gender expectations, long before the current trend, he's taken to complaining, *I was there first*

Curwen, freckled and light brown, might wear a turban, kilt, lederhosen and full make-up

when he felt like it

to challenge various other expectations

he said

Sylvester's now grey, balding, bearded, and is never seen in anything other than a threadbare Chinese worker's suit
which he claims is an original from eBay
whereas Curwen wears a retro donkey jacket and denim dungarees

two young men sat at the table next to them, awkward and incongruous with their office haircuts, smooth cheeks, crisp suits, polished shoes

Amma and Sylvester exchanged looks, they hated the interlopers who were colonizing the neighbourhood, who patronized the chi-chi eateries and bars that now replaced a stretch of the indoor market previously known for stalls selling parrot fish, yam, ackee, Scotch bonnet peppers, African materials, weaves, Dutch pots, giant Nigerian land snails and pickled green eggs from China

these upmarket places also employed security guards to keep the locals out

because while their clientele loved slumming it in SW₂ or SW₉
they couldn't hide the fact that SW₁ and SW₃ were in their DNA
Sylvester was very active in the Keep Brixton Real Campaign
he'd lost none of his revolutionary zeal
which wasn't necessarily a good thing

Amma sipped her seventh coffee of the day, this one laced with Drambuie, while Sylvester slugged beer from a bottle, the only way a revolutionary should drink it, according to him

he still ran his socialist theatre company, The 97%, which toured to fringe venues and 'hard-to-reach communities', which she should also *still* be doing

Amma, you should be taking your plays to community centres and libraries, not to the middle-class bastards at the National

she replied that the last time she took a show to a library, the audience was mainly made up of homeless people who were sleeping at best, snoring at worst

it was about fifteen years ago, she vowed never to again

social inclusion is more important than success, or should it be called *sick-cess*? Sylvester replied, and Amma couldn't convince him she was right to move on to bigger things as he kept knocking back the beers *she* paid for (well, you must be earning a lot now you've hit the big time)

she argued it was her right to be directing at the National and it was the theatre's job to make sure they attracted audiences beyond the middle-class day-trippers from the Home Counties, reminding him this included his parents, a retired banker and homemaker from Berkshire, who came to London for its culture, parents who supported him, even when he came out as a teenager

he'd once let slip while drunk that he got a monthly allowance

(she was far too nice to ever remind him of this)

the thing is, she said, while troublemaking on the periphery's all well and good, we also have to make a difference inside the mainstream, we all pay taxes that fund these theatres, right?

Sylvester offered up the smug expression of a tax-dodging outlaw at least I do *now*, she said, and you *should*

he sat back, his eyes watery from the beers, silently judging her, she knew that look, the drink was about to bring out a viciousness otherwise absent from her good friend

admit it, Ams, you've dropped your principles for ambition and you're now establishment with a capital E, he said, you're a turncoat

she stood up, gathered up her African print patchwork bag and left the premises

a little further down the high street she looked back and saw him
leaning against the wall of the Ritzy rolling up a cigarette
still rolling up
you stay there, Sylvie.

4

Amma walked to her house in the dark, still grateful she'd become
a homeowner so late in life, at a time when she was practically
homeless

first of all Jack Staniforth died and his son Jonathan, who'd been
chomping at the bit for years at his father's simply scandalous deci-
sion not to financially capitalize on the King's Cross regeneration
scheme that would one day run trains direct from London to Paris
gave the Citizens of Freedomia three months' notice

devastated, Amma nonetheless had to admit she'd had a spectacu-
larly good run as she'd never paid a single copper penny in rent in
what had become one of the most expensive cities on the planet

she cried when she left her former office with its jogging sized
dimensions and windows overlooking the trains that rolled into the
station from the north of England

she couldn't afford commercial rents and wasn't eligible for subsi-
dized housing

Amma sofa surfed until she was offered someone's spare room
she'd come full circle

then her mother died, devoured from the inside by the ruthless,
ravenous, carnivorous disease that started off with one organ before
moving on to destroy the others

Amma saw it as symptomatic and symbolic of her mother's oppression

Mum never found herself, she told friends, she accepted her subservient position in the marriage and rotted from the inside
she could barely look at her father at the funeral

not long after, he too died of heart failure in his sleep; Amma believed he'd willed it upon himself because he couldn't live without her mother, who'd propped him up since his early days in England

she surprised herself at the strength of her grief

she then regretted never telling him she loved him, he was her father, a good man, of course she loved him, she knew that now he was gone, he was a patriarch but her mother was right when she said, he's of his time and culture, Amma

my father was devastated at having to flee Ghana so abruptly, she eulogized at his memorial, attended by his elderly socialist comrades

it must have been so traumatic, to lose his home, his family, his friends, his culture, his first language, and to come to a country that didn't want him

once he had children, he wanted us educated in England and that was it

my father believed in the higher purpose of left-wing politics and actively worked to make the world a better place

she didn't tell them she'd taken her father for granted and carried her blinkered, self-righteous perspective of him from childhood through to his death, when in fact he'd done nothing wrong except fail to live up to her feminist expectations of him

she had been a selfish, stupid brat, now it was too late

he'd told *her* he loved her, every year on her birthday when her mother was alive, when he signed the card she bought and sent for him

her successful older brothers kindly gave her the greatest share of the family home in Peckham

which paid for a substantial deposit on a small terraced house with a box garden in Railton Road, Brixton
a place to call her own.

5

Yazz

was born nineteen years ago in a birthing pool in Amma's candle-lit living room

surrounded by incense, the music of lapping waves, a doula *and* midwife, Shirley and Roland – her great friend, who'd agreed to father her child when the death of her parents triggered an unprecedented and all-consuming broodiness

luckily for her, Roland, five years into his partnership with Kenny, had also been thinking about fatherhood

he took Yazz every other weekend, as agreed, which Amma regretted when she found herself missing her newborn instead of feeling deliriously free from Friday afternoons to Sunday evenings

Yazz was the miracle she never thought she wanted, and having a child really did complete her, something she rarely confided because it somehow seemed anti-feminist

Yazz was going to be her countercultural experiment

she breastfed her wherever she happened to be, and didn't care who was offended at a mother's need to feed her child

she took her everywhere, strapped to her back or across her front in a sling, deposited her in the corner of rehearsal rooms, or on the table at meetings

she took her on tour on trains and planes in a travel cot that looked more like a carry-all, once almost sending her through the airport scanner, begging them not to arrest her over it

she created the position of seven godmothers and two godfathers to ensure there'd be a supply of babysitters for when her child was no longer quite so compliant and portable

Yazz was allowed to wear exactly what she liked so long as she wasn't endangering herself or her health

she wanted her to be self-expressed before they tried to crush her child's free spirit through the oppressive regimentation of the education system

she has a photo of her daughter walking down the street wearing a plastic Roman army breastplate over an orange tutu, white fairy wings, a pair of yellow shorts over red and white stripy leggings, a different shoe on each foot (a sandal and a welly), lipstick smudged on her lips, cheeks and forehead (a phase), and her hair tied into an assortment of bunches with miniature dolls hanging off the ends

Amma ignored the pitying or judgemental looks from passers-by and small-minded mothers at the playground or nursery

Yazz was never told off for speaking her mind, although she was told off for swearing because she needed to develop her vocabulary

(Yazz, say you find Marissa unpleasant or unlikeable rather than describing her as a shit-faced smelly bottom)

and although she didn't always get what she wanted, if she argued her case strongly enough, she was in with a chance

Amma wanted her daughter to be free, feminist and powerful

later she took her on personal development courses for children to give her the confidence and articulacy to flourish in any setting

big mistake

Mum, Yazz said at fourteen when she was pitching to go to Reading Music Festival with her friends, it would be to the detriment of my juvenile development if you curtailed my activities at this critical stage in my journey towards becoming the independent-minded and fully self-expressed adult you expect me to be, I mean, do you really want me rebelling against your old-fashioned rules by running away from the safety of my home to live on the streets and having to resort to prostitution to survive and thereafter drug addiction, crime, anorexia and abusive relationships with exploitative bastards twice my age before my early demise in a crack house?

Amma fretted the whole weekend her little girl was away
adult men had been ogling her daughter since before puberty
there are a lot more paedophiles out there than people realize

a year later Yazz was calling her a feminazi when she was on her way out to a party and Amma dared suggest she lower her skirt and heels and raise the scoop neck of her top so that at least 30% of her body mass was covered, as opposed to the 20% currently given a decency rating

not to mention *The Boyfriend*, glimpsed when he dropped her off in his car

as soon as Yazz was in the door, Amma was waiting in the hallway to ask her the sort of harmless question any parent would ask

who is he and what does he do? hoping Yazz would say he was in the sixth form, a relatively harmless schoolboy then

Yazz replied with dead-pan insolence, Mum, he's a thirty-year-old psychopath who abducts vulnerable women and locks them in a cellar for weeks on end while he has his wicked way with them before chopping them into pieces and sticking them in the freezer for his winter stews

before waltzing upstairs to her room leaving a whiff of whacky-backy

nor is the child she raised to be a feminist calling herself one lately feminism is so herd-like, Yazz told her, to be honest, even being a woman is passé these days, we had a non-binary activist at uni called Morgan Malenga who opened my eyes, I reckon we're all going to be non-binary in the future, neither male nor female, which are gendered performances anyway, which means your *women's* politics, Mumsy, will become redundant, and by the way, I'm humanitarian, which is on a much higher plane than feminism

do you even know what that is?

Amma misses her daughter now she's away at university
not the spiteful snake that slithers out of her tongue to hurt her mother, because in Yazz's world young people are the only ones with feelings

but she misses the Yazz who stomps about the place
who rushes in as if a hurricane's just blown her into a room –
where's my bag/phone/bus pass/books/ticket/head?

the familiar background sounds when she's around, the click of the bathroom door when she's in it, even though it's just the two of them in the house, a habit begun at puberty which Amma finds affronting
the exactly ten crunches of the pepper mill over the (canned!) tomato or mushroom soup that she prefers to Amma's lovely homemade ones

the murmur of music and radio chatter coming from her bedroom
in the morning

the sight of her daughter curled up on the sofa under a duvet in the
living room on Saturdays, watching television, until she's ready to go
out at midnight

Amma can just about remember that she too used to go out late
and return home on the morning bus

the house breathes differently when Yazz isn't there
waiting for her to return and create some noise and chaos
she hopes she comes home after university
most of them do these days, don't they?
they can't afford otherwise
Yazz can stay forever
really.



Yazz

I

Yazz

sits on the seat chosen by Mum in the middle of the stalls, one of the best in the house, although she'd rather be hidden away at the back in case the play is another embarrassment

she's tied her amazingly wild, energetic, strong and voluminous afro back because people sitting behind her in venues complain they can't see the stage

when her afro'd compatriots accuse people of racism or microaggressions for this very reason, *Yazz* asks them how they'd feel if an unruly topiary hedge blocked their view of the stage at a concert?

two members of her uni squad, the Unfuckwithables, are seated either side of her, Waris and Courtney, hard workers like her because they're all determined to get good degrees because without it they're stuffed

they're all stuffed anyway, they agree

when they leave uni it's gonna be with a huge debt and crazy competition for jobs and the outrageous rental prices out there mean her generation will have to move back home *forever*, which will lead to even more of them despairing at the future and what with the planet about to go to shit with the United Kingdom soon to be disunited from Europe which itself is hurtling down the reactionary road and making fascism fashionable again and it's so crazy that the disgusting perma-tanned billionaire has set a new intellectual and moral low by being president of America and basically it all means that the older generation has RUINED EVERYTHING and her generation is doooooomed

unless they wrest intellectual control from their elders
sooner rather than later

Yazz is reading English Literature and plans to be a journalist with her own controversial column in a globally-read newspaper because she has a lot to say and it's about time the whole world heard her

Waris from Wolverhampton, seated to her right, is reading Politics and wants to become a Member of Parliament, to *re-pre-sent*, and will go down the community activism route first, à la Barack 'Major Role Model' Obama

Come Back Barack!

Courtney from Suffolk, seated to her left, is reading American Studies because she's really into African-American men, and she chose her course because of the option to study in the States for her third year where she hopes to pick up a husband

the theatre is predominated by the usual greyheads (average age one hundred)

Mum's friends and diehard fans are dotted all over, they should be

grey but are more likely to shave it off, dye it or cover it up with head-wraps

she looks over at Sylvester, slumped in his seat, scruffy as hell in his tatty blue 'Communist China' overalls, his beard makes him look more like an Amish farmer than an urban hipster

way too old for it, Sylvie

his arms are crossed and he's scowling like he really wants to *not* enjoy the play before it's even begun, when he notices her ogling him, puts on a smiley face and waves, probably embarrassed that she's read his mind

she waves too, putting her nice-to-see-you-face back on

he's one of her godfathers, but was demoted to the C List when he sent her the same birthday card three years in a row – a cheap recycled charity one at that, as for birthday presents, he stopped them when she turned sixteen, as if she had no need for financial support once she could legally have sex

the A List goddies part with money, lots of it, every year on her birthday, they're the best as they really want to keep in with her as their conduit to the younger generation

a couple of goddies have disappeared altogether on account of falling out with Mum over some pointless melodrama

Mum says Sylvester should stop sniping at other people's success (hers) and that as he won't change with the times, he's been left behind

you mean the way you felt not so long ago, Mum?

ever since she landed the National gig she's got very snooty about struggling theatre mates, as if she alone has discovered the secret to being successful

as if she hasn't spent way too many years of her life watching crap television while waiting for the phone to ring

this is the problem with having a daughter with X-ray vision
she can see through the parental bullshit

Uncle Curwen isn't with Sylvester tonight because he believes politics is way more dramatic than anything on stage at a theatre: 'Brexit & Trumpquake! – behold the comedy of errors of our time' being his latest mantra

as a Lambeth Labour councillor, he's usually at meetings fire-fighting, or as Sylvester counteracts, causing them, because he likes to drag the carpet from underneath Curwen's political self-importance

who needs enemies when your life partner undermines you on a regular basis?

Curwen uses antiquated expressions like 'right on' and likes to keep it real by frequenting the dingiest pub in Brixton where the old timers sit around still moaning about Maggie Thatcher and the Miners' strike, one of the few pubs that haven't been turned into a wine bar, gastro-pub or champagne bar, as Mum whinges

as if she herself wasn't part of the gentrification of Brixton years ago

as if she herself isn't a frequenter of the artsy hotspots like the Ritzy

as if she herself didn't take Yazz to one of the very champagne bars she supposedly scorns to celebrate passing her 'A' levels a year early

just this once, Mum whispered as they entered the part of the indoor market that's now frequented by posh banker types who looked at them as they walked down the lane between bars as if they were looking at natives on their cultural safari

yet who was it who was spotted at the Cereal Lovers Café in Stockwell by one of Yazz's mates not so long ago?

a café that specializes in selling over a hundred types of breakfast cereal at extortionate prices