

ZADIE SMITH

From
WHITE TEETH

There was a lamppost, equidistant from the Jones house and Glenard Oak Comprehensive, that had begun to appear in Irie's dreams. Not the lamppost exactly, but a small, handmade ad that was taped round its girth at eye level. It said:

LOSE WEIGHT TO EARN MONEY
081 555 6752

Now, Irie Jones, aged fifteen, was big. The European proportions of Clara's figure had skipped a generation, and she was landed instead with Hortense's substantial Jamaican frame, loaded with pineapples, mangoes, and guavas; the girl had weight; big tits, big butt, big hips, big thighs, big teeth. She was 182 pounds and had thirteen pounds in her savings account. She knew she was the target audience (if ever there was one), she knew full well, as she trudged schoolward, mouth full of doughnut, hugging her spare tires, that the ad was speaking to her. It was *speaking* to her. **LOSE WEIGHT (it was saying) TO EARN MONEY.** You, you, *you*, Miss Jones, with your strategically placed arms and cardigan, tied around the arse (the endless mystery: how to diminish that swollen enormity, the Jamaican posterior?), with your belly-reducing panties and breast-reducing bra, with your meticulous Lycra corseting—the much-lauded nineties answer to whalebone—with your elasticized waists. She knew the ad was talking to *her*. But

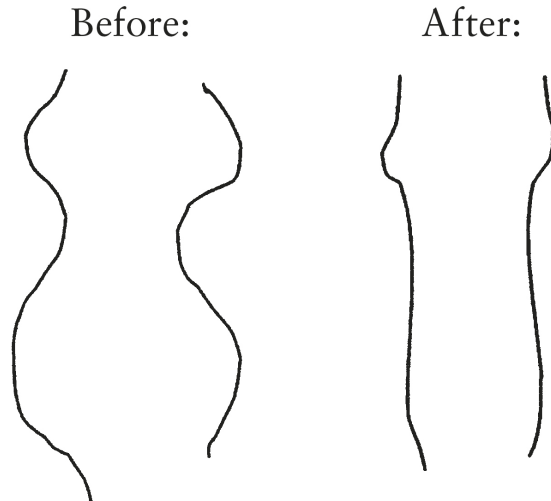
she didn't know quite what it was saying. What were we talking about here? Sponsored slim? The earning capacity of thin people? Or something altogether more Jacobean, the brainchild of some sordid Willesden Shylock, a pound of flesh for a pound of gold: *meat for money?*

Rapid. Eye. Movement. Sometimes she'd be walking through school in a bikini with the lamppost enigma written in chalk over her brown bulges, over her various ledges (shelf space for books, cups of tea, baskets, or, more to the point, children, bags of fruit, buckets of water), ledges genetically designed with another country in mind, another climate. Other times, the sponsored slim dream: knocking on door after door, butt-naked with a clipboard, drenched in sunlight, trying to encourage old men to pinch-an-inch and pledge-a-pound. Worst times? Tearing off loose, white-flecked flesh and packing it into those old curvaceous Coke bottles; she is carrying them to the corner shop, passing them over a counter; and Millat is the bindi-wearing, V-necked shopkeeper, he is adding them up, grudgingly opening the till with blood-stained paws, handing over the cash. *A little Caribbean flesh for a little English change.*

Irie Jones was obsessed. Occasionally her worried mother cornered her in the hallway before she slunk out of the door, picked at her elaborate corsetry, asked, "What's up with you? What in the Lord's name are you wearing? How can you breathe? Irie, my love, you're fine—you're just built like an honest-to-God Bowden—don't you know you're fine?"

But Irie didn't know she was fine. There was England, a gigantic mirror, and there was Irie, without reflection. A stranger in a stranger land.

Nightmares and daydreams, on the bus, in the bath, in class. Before. After. Before. After. Before. *After*. The mantra of the makeover junkie, sucking it in, letting it out; unwilling to settle for genetic fate; waiting instead for her transformation from Jamaican hourglass heavy with the sands that gather round Dunns River Falls, to *English Rose*—oh, you know her—she's a slender, delicate thing not made for the hot sun, a surfboard rippled by the wave:



Mrs. Olive Roody, English teacher and expert doodle-spotter at distances of up to twenty yards, reached over her desk to Irie's notebook and tore out the piece of paper in question. Looked dubiously at it. Then inquired with melodious Scottish emphasis, "Before and after *what?*"

"Er . . . what?"

"Before and after *what?*"

"Oh. Nothing, miss."

"Nothing? Oh, come now, Ms. Jones. No need for modesty. It is obviously more interesting than Sonnet 127."

"Nothing. It's *nothing.*"

"Absolutely certain? You don't wish to delay the class anymore? Because . . . some of the class need to listen to—are even a wee bit *interested in*—what I have to say. So if you could spare some time from your dooodling—"

No one but no one said "doodling" like Olive Roody.

"—and join the rest of us, we'll continue. Well?"

"Well what?"

"Can you? Spare the time?"

"Yes, Mrs. Roody."

"Oh, *good.* That's cheered me up. Sonnet 127, please."

"*In the old age black was not counted fair,*" continued Francis Stone in the catatonic drone with which students read Elizabethan verse. "*Or if it were, it bore not beauty's name.*"

Irie put her right hand on her stomach, sucked in, and tried to catch Millat's eye. But Millat was busy showing pretty Nikki Tyler how he could manipulate his tongue into a narrow roll, a flute. Nikki Tyler was showing him how the lobes of her ears were attached to the side of her head rather than loose. Flirtatious remnants of this morning's science lesson: *Inherited characteristics. Part One (a)*. Loose. Attached. Rolled. Flat. Blue eye. Brown eye. Before. After.

"Therefore my mistress' eyes are raven black, her brows so suited, and they mourners seem . . . My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun; Coral is far more red than her lips' red. If snow be white, why then her breasts are dun . . ."

Puberty, real full-blown puberty (not the slight mound of a breast, or the shadowy emergence of fuzz), had separated these old friends, Irie Jones and Millat Iqbal. Different sides of the school fence. Irie believed she had been dealt the dodgy cards: mountainous curves, buckteeth and thick metal retainer, impossible Afro hair, and to top it off mole-ish eyesight that in turn required Coke-bottle spectacles in a light shade of pink. (Even those blue eyes—the eyes Archie had been so excited about—lasted two weeks only. She had been born with them, yes, but one day Clara looked again and there were brown eyes staring up at her, like the transition between a closed bud and an open flower, the exact moment of which the naked, waiting eye can never detect.) And this belief in her ugliness, in her *wrongness*, had subdued her; she kept her smart-ass comments to herself these days, she kept her right hand on her stomach. She was all *wrong*.

Whereas Millat was like youth remembered in the nostalgic eyeglass of old age, beauty parodying itself: broken Roman nose, tall, thin; lightly veined, smoothly muscled; chocolate eyes with a reflective green sheen like moonlight bouncing off a dark sea; irresistible smile, big white teeth. In Glenard Oak Comprehensive, black, Pakistani, Greek, Irish—these were races. But those with sex appeal lapped the other runners. They were a species all of their own.

"If hairs be wires, black wires grow on her head . . ."

She loved him, of course. But he used to say to her: "Thing is, people rely on me. They need me to be Millat. Good old Millat."

Wicked Millat. Safe, sweet-as, Millat. They need me to be cool. It's *practically* a responsibility."

And it practically was. Ringo Starr once said of the Beatles that they were never bigger than they were in Liverpool, late 1962. They just got more countries. And that's how it was for Millat. He was so big in Cricklewood, in Willesden, in West Hampstead, the summer of 1990, that nothing he did later in his life could top it. From his first Raggastani crowd, he had expanded and developed tribes throughout the school, throughout North London. He was simply too big to remain merely the object of Irie's affection, leader of the Raggastanis, or the son of Samad and Alsana Iqbal. He had to please all of the people all of the time. To the Cockney wide-boys in the white jeans and the colored shirts he was the joker, the risk-taker, respected lady-killer. To the black kids he was fellow weed-smoker and valued customer. To the Asian kids, hero and spokesman. Social chameleon. And underneath it all, there remained an ever-present anger and hurt, the feeling of belonging nowhere that comes to people who belong everywhere. It was this soft underbelly that made him most beloved, most adored by Irie and the nice oboe-playing, long-skirted middle-class girls, most treasured by these hair-flicking and fugue-singing females; he was their dark prince, occasional lover or impossible crush, the subject of sweaty fantasy and ardent dreams . . .

And he was also their *project*: what *was* to be done about Millat? He simply *must* stop smoking weed. We *have* to try and stop him walking out of class. They worried about his "attitude" at sleep-overs, discussed his education hypothetically with their parents (*Just say there was this Indian boy, yeah, who was always getting into . . .*), even wrote poems on the subject. Girls either wanted him or wanted to improve him, but most often a combination of the two. They wanted to improve him until he justified the amount they wanted him. Everybody's bit of rough, Millat Iqbal.

"But you're different," Millat Iqbal would say to the martyr Irie Jones, "you're *different*. We go way back. We've got history. You're a *real* friend. They don't really *mean* anything to me."

Irie liked to believe that. That they had history, that she was different in a good way.

“Thy black is fairest in my judgement’s place . . .”

Mrs. Roody silenced Francis with a raised finger. “Now, what is he saying there? Annalese?”

Annalese Hersh, who had spent the lesson so far braiding red and yellow thread into her hair, looked up in blank confusion.

“Anything, Annalese, dear. Any little idea. No matter how small. No matter how paltry.”

Annalese bit her lip. Looked at the book. Looked at Mrs. Roody. Looked at the book.

“Black? . . . Is? . . . Good?”

“Yes . . . well, I suppose we can add that to last week’s contribution: Hamlet? . . . Is? . . . Mad? Anybody else? What about this? *For since each hand hath put on nature’s power, Fairing the foul with art’s false borrow’d face.* What might that mean, I wonder?”

Joshua Chalfen, the only kid in class who volunteered opinions, put his hand up.

“Yes, Joshua?”

“Makeup.”

“Yes,” said Mrs. Roody, looking close to orgasm. “Yes, Joshua, that’s it. What about it?”

“She’s got a dark complexion that she’s trying to lighten by means of makeup, artifice. The Elizabethans were very keen on a pale skin.”

“They would’ve loved you, then,” sneered Millat, for Joshua was pasty, practically anemic, curly-haired, and chubby, “you would have been Tom bloody Cruise.”

Laughter. Not because it was funny, but because it was Millat putting a nerd where a nerd should be. In his place.

“One more word from you, Mr. Ick-Ball, and you are out!”

“Shakespeare. Sweaty. Bollocks. That’s three. Don’t worry, I’ll let myself out.”

This was the kind of thing Millat did so expertly. The door slammed. The nice girls looked at each other in *that* way. (He’s just so out of control, so crazy . . . he *really* needs some help, some close

one-to-one *personal* help from a *good friend* . . .) The boys belly-laughed. The teacher wondered if this was the beginning of a mutiny. Irie covered her stomach with her right hand.

“Marvelous. Very adult. I suppose Millat Iqbal is some kind of hero.” Mrs. Roody, looking round the gormless faces of 5F, saw for the first time and with dismal clarity that this was exactly what he was.

“Does anyone else have anything to say about these sonnets? Ms. Jones! Will you *stop* looking mournfully at the door! He’s gone, all right? Unless you’d like to join him?”

“No, Mrs. Roody.”

“All right, then. Have you anything to say about the sonnets?”

“Yes.”

“What?”

“Is she black?”

“Is who black?”

“The dark lady.”

“No, dear, she’s *dark*. She’s not black in the modern sense. There weren’t any . . . well, Afro-Carri-bee-yans in England at that time, dear. That’s more a modern phenomenon, as I’m sure you know. But this was the 1600s. I mean I can’t be sure, but it does seem terribly unlikely, unless she was a slave of some kind, and he’s unlikely to have written a series of sonnets to a lord and then a slave, is he?”

Irie reddened. She had thought, just then, that she had seen something like a reflection, but it was receding; so she said, “Don’t know, miss.”

“Besides, he says very clearly, *In nothing art thou black, save in thy deeds* . . . No, dear, she just has a dark complexion, you see, as dark as mine, probably.”

Irie looked at Mrs. Roody. She was the color of strawberry mousse.

“You see, Joshua is quite right: the preference was for women to be excessively pale in those days. The sonnet is about the debate between her natural coloring and the makeup that was the fashion of the time.”

“I just thought . . . like when he says, here: *Then will I swear, beauty herself is black* . . . And the curly hair thing, black wires—”

Irie gave up in the face of giggling and shrugged.

“No, dear, you’re reading it with a modern ear. Never read what is old with a modern ear. In fact, that will serve as today’s principle—can you all write that down, please.”

5F wrote that down. And the reflection that Irie had glimpsed slunk back into the familiar darkness. On the way out of class, Irie was passed a note by Annalese Hersh, who shrugged to signify that she was not the author but merely one of many handlers. It said: “By William Shakespeare: ODE TO LETITIA AND ALL MY KINKY-HAIRED BIG-ASS BITCHEZ.”