

BLENDED

TEXT: SIAN MARTIN

Looking as I did, one question rang through my childhood like a dull bell, “So, where are you from?”

“I’m from London.”

Always the same answer, although it never got me more than a sceptical smile and a push for specifics:

“No. But where are you *really* from?”

“I’m from *North* London.”

Tourists insisted I was an Ethiopian Coptic princess, and Americans buttonholed me in Spanish even when I spoke back in my best of British: but “I’m from London” was my only sop to the curious. Back then in the seventies and eighties, London seemed the sole place my existence was probable, possible even.

Not that London was all bright rainbow bridges of multiculturalism, embodied in my little brown person; it had its fair share of dark tunnels too. The ghost of a suburban railway, running from Finsbury Park’s old gay cruise and up to the money trees of Muswell Hill, terminated in the subway that took me under the road to school. My mornings echoed with the calypso cadence of: “Why are black people black? Because Cadbury’s take them and they cover them with chocolate!” Schoolyard trebles bounced like hard sweets off the concrete and graffiti, melting me into confectionary with a



sidelong challenge to cry, so I scrunched up my mittened fists and grinned along. The popular playground outlet for my anger was in organised fights between the trio of ink-spots on the white page of my class photograph: Steven Collins, Jeanette Langhi and me. We fought each other like the slave gladiators in *Django Unchained*. We fought because everyone agreed we were by far the best at fighting. Flailing fists and kicking, encircled by the roaring children of chardonnay socialists, beneath the blind eyes of dinner ladies, under the tall shadow of Ally Pally¹, just before it burned down for the third time.

Otherwise, I was a good girl with 'bad' hair. My lone white mum cried as loud as me, hacking through my dread-locking foliage with a magnolia plastic comb. Luckily London is cheek by jowl; a city of villages, there's always another country down the road. Once over Crouch Hill, or under the railway bridge at Turnpike Lane, the trees thinned and skins darkened, immigrant vegetables coloured the shop fronts and spices thickened the air. And there were hairdressers. The miles of Green Lanes away from one side of Finsbury Park catered to Greek Orthodox 'Gorry' girls getting their heads coiffed like wedding cakes. On the other side of the park, round Stroud Green and following the Seven Sisters up to Tottenham, hair shops announced their expertise with Afro-Caribbean and European styles. Only the latter was a lie.

In the age of *The Black and White Minstrel Show*, Afro salons weren't a well-worn TV joke, and it was a tumbleweed and saloon moment as the door closed behind my desperate mother and me. She'd attempted to make an appointment, so they made us wait.

"Could you just... thin it or something?" begged my mum,

1. ALEXANDRA PALACE WAS BUILT IN 1873 AS A PUBLIC CENTRE OF RECREATION, EDUCATION AND ENTERTAINMENT, AND AS NORTH LONDON'S COUNTERPART TO CRYSTAL PALACE IN SOUTH LONDON.

pointing at my appalling hair, itself the brand of shame of the white woman who'd tried to take a black man and lost.

An agreement was reached to "steam my head open", "relax it", and "blow it out". No one wanted her there to eavesdrop, so they told my mum to call in 3 hours. It took 5. I couldn't understand the patois, but their meaning was as clear as when I overheard the Highgate mums at ballet, dripping sympathy that I'd "never take my place in a line of swans". The sympathy here was just as acid: "what kind of a mother leaves her child with a stranger for 5 hours?" and it burned as bad as the chemicals on my comb scraped scalp.

Next morning, in assembly, Mr de Souza, our Mauritian Napoleon of a headmaster, gave me a thumbs up of approval as I walked in with my new Shirley Bassey hair, ironed out to reach halfway down my back. Underneath this smooth miracle was a scalded nest of scabs for me to scratch and worry at for months.

It took me a few years to fathom what that was all about.

Less to find my trail ways by bus and tube across North London, (I barely crossed the river until I was 20. I had no need to venture to the East or the West), I went to secondary school on the Camden Road: some days getting home via Highgate, crawling pre bus lanes under Suicide Bridge, smoking hard and loud on the back seat, other days via the tunnel at Finsbury Park, armed with a knitting needle in my school bag. At school there were posh girls with unimaginable pocket money and poor girls with NF signs on their hands, prim in Pringle and box pleats, spitting on me in the lunch queue. Out of school, I was anyone I wanted. Every possible version of myself was somewhere past the old Ferrodo Bridge. The landscape levelled out from there.

I'd double back up the tuning fork of the Northern Line to hit pubs and parties in Hampstead, dressed in a cocktail dress, or buy a bottle in Golders Green and wait for word of a gathering. No one asked 13 year olds for ID back then. Jump on the Victoria Line to go lean on *The Bar* (literally, a steel barrier) with the impossibly cool

Highbury twins, or trek up blood spattered Upper Street in Islington to squat the *Hope and Anchor* with proto crusties. Further along, the unreconstructed arches of King's Cross emptied of busted taxis and opened up to rare groove warehouse parties where the Victorian bricks sweated anxiety at the lack of fire exits. Saturdays I was a Goth in *Camden Lock*; Saturday nights I went back to the *Electric Ballroom* as a Rockabilly in my mum's fifties bra. Hip Hop found me in a black mini skirt outside the *Astoria* on Tottenham Court Road. And I found myself in the steam and smoke and streetlight blur of a night bus window.

By fifteen I'd learned the premium of my skin. 'Half caste' was past. I was 'mixed race'; not half of anything: blended was what mattered. Bearing a passing resemblance to *Sade* or *Mel and Kim*², people assumed I had the goods, the thing that made north London somewhere special. I didn't need a line of swans to dance in, and I could handle my own hair. The first question was still the same as ever: "Where you from?"

"North London," remained my answer, but now the next question was: "Can you sing?"

2. MEL AND KIM WERE AN EIGHTIES BRITISH POP DUO, COMPRISING SISTERS MELANIE AND KIM APPLEBY OF BRITISH AND JAMAICAN DESCENT.

