



Synopsis:

Zadie Smith's dazzling debut caught critics grasping for comparisons and deciding on everyone from Charles Dickens to Salman Rushdie to John Irving and Martin Amis. But the truth is that Zadie Smith's voice is remarkably, fluently, and altogether wonderfully her own.

At the center of this invigorating novel are two unlikely friends, Archie Jones and Samad Iqbal. Hapless veterans of World War II, Archie and Samad and their families become agents of England's

irrevocable transformation. A second marriage to Clara Bowden, a beautiful, albeit tooth-challenged, Jamaican half his age, quite literally gives Archie a second lease on life, and produces Irie, a knowing child whose personality doesn't quite match her name (Jamaican for "no problem"). Samad's late-in-life arranged marriage (he had to wait for his bride to be born), produces twin sons whose separate paths confound Iqbal's every effort to direct them, and a renewed, if selective, submission to his Islamic faith.

Set against London's racial and cultural tapestry, venturing across the former empire and into the past as it barrels toward the future, *White Teeth* revels in the ecstatic hodgepodge of modern life, flirting with disaster, confounding expectations, and embracing the comedy of daily existence.

WHITE

NATIONAL BESTSELLER

TEETH

A NOVEL

ZADIE

"A preternaturally gifted new writer (with) a voice that's street-smart and learned, sassy and philosophical all at the same time." —Michiko Kakutani, *The New York Times*

SMITH

White Teeth

Zadie Smith

Copyright © 1999 by Zadie Smith

To my mother and my father

And for Jimmi Rahman

‘What’s past is prologue’

— *The Tempest*, Act II, scene i

Archie

1974, 1945

‘Every little trifle, for some reason, does seem incalculably important today, and when you say of a thing that “nothing hangs on it” it sounds like blasphemy. There’s never any knowing — how am I to put it? — which of our actions, which of our idlenesses won’t have things hanging on it for ever.’

Where Angels Fear to Tread, E. M. Forster

1 *The Peculiar Second Marriage*

of Archie Jones

Early in the morning, late in the century, Cricklewood Broadway. At 06.27 hours on 1 January 1975, Alfred Archibald Jones was dressed in corduroy and sat in a fume-filled Cavalier Musketeer Estate face down on the steering wheel, hoping the judgement would not be too heavy upon him. He lay forward in a prostrate cross, jaw slack, arms splayed either side like some fallen angel; scrunched up in each fist

he held his army service medals (left) and his marriage licence (right), for he had decided to take his mistakes with him. A little green light flashed in his eye, signalling 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 its conclusions. 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 windscreen, 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 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 box 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. Whilst 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 misjudged work experience 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 carrier 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 in 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 moustache, 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 6.30.

I got fifteen dead bovines turning up here at 6.30. I got to get it in the back. That’s my job. You see? There’s *meat* coming. So, I am

perplexed . . .’ Mo affected a look of innocent confusion. ‘Because I

thought this was clearly marked “Delivery Area”.’ He pointed to an

ageing wooden crate which 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 on 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 counselling. You want Lonely Street. This Cricklewood Lane.’

Archie, still choking on thankyou's, reversed, pulled out from the curb, and turned right.

Archie Jones attempted suicide because his wife Ophelia, a violet-eyed Italian with a faint moustache, 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 coffee house, 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 aubergines 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. Amongst 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 semi-detached in Hendon in search of that Hoover. It was his fourth trip to the attic in so many days, ferrying out the odds and ends of a marriage to his new flat, and the Hoover was amongst the very 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, SantaMaria

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 foetal 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 Hoover. 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 *muggins* here who has to—’

Which was overlapped by the nurse: ‘She can’t stay here alone, can

she . . . now *he's* buggered 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 whisky, novelty crackers and a paltry box of Quality Street — 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 levelling 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 vainglorious 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 windscreen 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 the 29th of December, 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 Pool House, playing poker with only three hands, two of Archie’s and one of

Samad's — Samad's right hand being a broken thing, grey-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 10p’s 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 life path that had taken him down numerous wrong turnings, led him deep into the wilderness and finally petered out completely, its breadcrumb course gobbled up by the birds.

Once the car started to fill with gas, 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* any more. It was like a club-foot, 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 moustache 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 leant 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 '55, even less now in '74. Nothing he did *then* mattered *now*. The

skills you learnt 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 *Morgan Hero*, 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 wrist watches. 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 gynaecologist called Horst Ibelgaufts. 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 Ibelgaufts himself. Notes like:

17 May 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 pedalling 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 Ibelgauf

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

28 December 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 Ibelgaufis

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 Ibelgaufis

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

Daria was his one. Terribly skinny, ribs like lobster cages 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 helplessly, 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 dodgy 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 which 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 roundabout in his car, his head stuck out the window while a stream of air hit the teeth at the back of his mouth like a wind sock.

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 3¾), laughing like a loon. At the traffic lights he flipped ten pence and smiled when the result seemed to agree that Fate was pulling him towards another life. Like a dog on a lead 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. Approaching a forked road, he slows down, checks his undistinguished face in the wing-mirror, and quite indiscriminately chooses a route he's never taken before, a residential street leading to a place called Queens 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 grey 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 men wear it. Tax men 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 moving 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-coloured 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 per cent, bona fide *blessing*.’

‘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 mad man. ‘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 dakshiki 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 storey, 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 which 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 whisky tonic in mind, he headed for the picnic table, where something the shape and colour of Jack Daniels 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 Daniels, the white woman shook her head and made the signal of a stubbed-out cigarette.

‘Tobacco sea, I’m afraid, darling. Some evil bastard put his fag out in some perfectly acceptable whisky. 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 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 pull 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 the Second World War, 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 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 interludes. Freed finally 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 gaff; maybe even a portion of allotment for growing fresh food. For a while (around 2 a.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, centre stage, for all to see.

A dark line would now be drawn underneath the whole incident, underneath the whole sorry day, had not something 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 plaited in a horseshoe which 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 halterneck which 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 a light brown suede, and she came striding down the stairs on them like some kind of vision or, as it seemed to Archie as 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 it. But it happened with Clara Bowden. She walked down the stairs in slow motion, surrounded by afterglow 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 smelt musty, womanly, like a bundle of your favourite clothes. Though she was disorganized physically — legs and arms speaking a slightly different dialect from her central nervous system — even her gangly demeanour 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 which 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.

2 Teething Trouble

But Archie did not pluck Clara Bowden from a vacuum. And it’s about time people told the truth about beautiful women. They do not shimmer down staircases. They do not descend, as was once supposed, from on high, attached to nothing other than wings. Clara was *from* somewhere. She had *roots*. More specifically, she was from Lambeth (via Jamaica) and she was connected, through tacit adolescent agreement, to one Ryan Topps. Because before Clara was beautiful she was ugly. And before there was Clara and Archie there was Clara and Ryan. And there is no getting away from Ryan Topps. Just as a good historian need recognize Hitler’s Napoleonic ambitions in the east in order to comprehend his reluctance to invade the British in the west, so Ryan Topps is essential to any

understanding of why Clara did what she did. Ryan is indispensable. There was Clara and Ryan for eight months before Clara and Archie were drawn together from opposite ends of a staircase. And Clara might never have run into the arms of Archie Jones if she hadn't been running, quite as fast as she could, away from Ryan Topps. Poor Ryan Topps. He was a mass of unfortunate physical characteristics. He was very thin and very tall, red-headed, flat-footed and freckled to such an extent that his skin was rarer than his freckles. Ryan fancied himself as a bit of a Mod. He wore ill-fitting grey suits with black polo-necks. He wore Chelsea boots after everyone else had stopped wearing them. While the rest of the world discovered the joys of the electronic synthesizer, Ryan swore allegiance to the little men with big guitars: to the Kinks, the Small Faces, the Who. Ryan Topps rode a green Vespa GS scooter which he polished twice a day with a baby's nappy and kept encased in a custom-built corrugated-iron shield. To Ryan's way of thinking, a Vespa was not merely a mode of transport but an ideology, family, friend and lover all rolled into one paragon of late forties engineering. Ryan Topps, as one might expect, had few friends. Clara Bowden was gangly, buck-toothed, a Jehovah's Witness, and

saw in Ryan a kindred spirit. A typical teenage female panopticon, she knew everything there was to know about Ryan Topps long before they ever spoke. She knew the basics: same school (St Jude's Community School, Lambeth), same height (six foot one); she knew he was, like her, neither Irish nor Roman Catholic, which made them two islands floating surrounded by the popish ocean of St Jude's, enrolled in the school by the accident of their postcodes, reviled by teachers and pupils alike. She knew the name of his bike, she read the tops of his records as they popped up over the brim of his bag. She even knew things about him he didn't know: for example, she knew he was the Last Man on Earth. Every school has one, and in St Jude's, as in other seats of learning, it was the girls who chose this moniker and dished it out. There were, of course, variations:

Mr Not for a Million Pounds.

Mr Not to Save My Mother's Life.

Mr Not for World Peace.

But, generally, the schoolgirls of St Jude's kept to the tried and tested formula. Though Ryan would never be privy to the conversations of the school's female changing rooms, Clara knew.

She knew how the object of her affections was discussed, she kept an ear out, she knew what he amounted to when you got down to it, down amongst the sweat and the training bras and the sharp flick of a wet towel.

‘Ah, Jaysus, you’re not listening. I’m saying, if he was the *last* man on earth!’

‘I *still* wouldn’t.’

‘Ah, bollocks you *would*!’

‘But listen: the whole bleedin’ world has been hit by the bomb, like in Japan, roight? An’ all the good-lookin’ men, all the *rides* like your man Nicky Laird, they’re all dead. They’ve all been burnt to a crisp. An’ all that’s left is Ryan Topps and a bunch of cockroaches.’

‘On me life, I’d rather sleep with the cockroaches.’

Ryan’s unpopularity at St Jude’s was equalled only by Clara’s. On her first day at the school her mother had explained to her she was about to enter the devil’s lair, filled her satchel with two hundred copies of the *Watchtower* and instructed her to go and do the Lord’s work. Week after week she shuffled through the school, head hung to the ground, handing out magazines, murmuring, ‘Only Jehovah saves’; in a school where an overexcitable pustule could send you to

Coventry, a six-foot black missionary in knee socks attempting to convert six hundred Catholics to the church of the Jehovah's Witnesses equalled social leprosy.

So Ryan was red as a beetroot. And Clara was black as yer boot.

Ryan's freckles were a join-the-dots enthusiast's wet dream. Clara could circumnavigate an apple with her front teeth before her tongue got anywhere near it. Not even the Catholics would forgive them for it (and Catholics give out forgiveness at about the same rate politicians give out promises and whores give out); not even St Jude, who got saddled way back in the 1st century with the patronage of hopeless causes (due to the tonal similarity between Jude and Judas), was prepared to get involved.

At five o'clock each day, as Clara sat in her house attending to the message of the gospels or composing a leaflet condemning the heathen practice of blood transfusion, Ryan Topps would scoot by her open window on his way home. The Bowden living room sat just below street level, and had bars on its window, so all views were partial. Generally, she would see feet, wheels, car exhausts, swinging umbrellas. Such slight glimpses were often telling; a lively imagination could squeeze much pathos out of a frayed lace, a

darned sock, a low swinging bag that had seen better days. But nothing affected her more deeply than gazing after the disappearing tailpipe of Ryan's scooter. Lacking any name for the furtive rumblings that appeared in her lower abdomen on these occasions, Clara called it the spirit of the Lord. She felt that somehow she was going to save the heathen Ryan Topps. Clara meant to gather this boy close to her breast, keep him safe from the temptation that besets us all around, prepare him for the day of his redemption. (And wasn't there somewhere, lower than her abdomen — somewhere down in the nether region of the unmentionables — was there not the half-conceived hope that Ryan Topps might save *her*?)

If Hortense Bowden caught her daughter sitting wistfully by the barred window, listening to the retreating splutter of an engine while the pages of the *New Bible* flicked over in the breeze, she koofed her up-side her head and thanked her to remember that only 144,000 of the Witnesses of Jehovah would sit in the court of the Lord on Judgement Day. Amongst which number of the Anointed there was no space for nasty-looking so-and-sos on motorcycles.

‘But what if we saved—’

‘Some people,’ Hortense asserted with a snort, ‘have done such a

hol' heap of sinning, it *late* for dem to be making eyes at Jehovah. It take effort to be close to Jehovah. It take devotion and dedication.

Blessed are the pure in heart for they alone shall see God. Matthew 5:8. Isn't dat right, Darcus?'

Darcus Bowden, Clara's father, was an odoriferous, moribund, salivating old man entombed in a bug-infested armchair from which he had never been seen to remove himself, not even, thanks to a catheter, to visit the outdoor toilet. Darcus had come over to England fourteen years earlier and spent the whole of that period in the far corner of the living room, watching television. The original intention had been that he should come to England and earn enough money to enable Clara and Hortense to come over, join him and settle down. However, on arrival, a mysterious illness had debilitated Darcus Bowden. An illness that no doctor could find any physical symptoms of, but which manifested itself in the most incredible lethargy, creating in Darcus — admittedly, never the most vibrant of men — a lifelong affection for the dole, the armchair and British television. In 1972, enraged by a fourteen-year wait, Hortense decided finally to make the journey on her own steam. Steam was something Hortense had in abundance. She arrived on the doorstep

with the seventeen-year-old Clara, broke down the door in a fury and — so the legend went back in St Elizabeth — gave Darcus Bowden the tongue-whipping of his life. Some say this onslaught lasted four hours, some say she quoted every book of the bible by memory and it took a whole day and a whole night. What is certain is, at the end of it all, Darcus slumped deeper into the recesses of his chair, looked mournfully at the television with whom he had had such an understanding, compassionate relationship — so uncomplicated, so much innocent affection — and a tear squeezed its way out of its duct and settled in a crag underneath his eye. Then he said just one word: *Hmph*.

Hmph was all Darcus said or ever was to say after. Ask Darcus anything; query him on any subject at any hour of the day and night; interrogate him; chat with him; implore him; declare your love for him; accuse him or vindicate him and he will give you only one answer.

‘I say, isn’t dat right, Darcus?’

‘*Hmph*.’

‘An’ it not,’ exclaimed Hortense, returning to Clara, having received Darcus’s grunt of approval, ‘dat young man’s *soul* you boddrin’

yourself wid! How many times must I tell you — you got no time for bwoys!’

For Time was running out in the Bowden household. This was 1974, and Hortense was preparing for the End of the World, which, in the house diary, she had marked carefully in blue biro: 1 January 1975. This was not a solitary psychosis of the Bowdens. There were eight million Jehovah’s Witnesses waiting with her. Hortense was in large, albeit eccentric, company. A personal letter had come to Hortense (as secretary of the Lambeth branch of the Kingdom Halls), with a photocopied signature from William J. Rangeforth of the largest Kingdom Hall in the USA, Brooklyn, confirming the date. The end of the world had been *officially* confirmed with a gold-plated letterhead, and Hortense had risen to the occasion by setting it in an attractive mahogany frame. She had given it pride of place on a doily on top of the television between a glass figurine of Cinderella on her way to the Ball and a tea-cosy embroidered with the Ten Commandments. She had asked Darcus whether he thought it looked nice. He had hmphed his assent.

The end of the world was nigh. And this was not — the Lambeth branch of the church of the Jehovah’s Witnesses was to be assured

— like the mistakes of 1914 and 1925. They had been promised the entrails of sinners wrapped around the trunks of trees, and this time the entrails of sinners wrapped around the trunks of trees *would* appear. They had waited so long for the rivers of blood to overflow the gutters in the high street, and now their thirst *would* be satiated. The time had come. This was the right date, this was the only date, all other dates that might have been proffered in the past were the result of some bad calculations: someone forgot to add, someone forgot to minus, someone forgot to carry the one. But now was the time. The real thing. 1 January 1975.

Hortense, for one, was glad to hear it. The first morning of 1925 she had wept like a baby when she awoke to find — instead of hail and brimstone and universal destruction — the continuance of daily life, the regular running of the buses and trains. It had been for nothing, then, all that tossing and turning the previous night; waiting for those neighbours, those who failed to listen to your warnings, to sink under a hot and terrible fire that shall separate their skin from their bones, shall melt the eyes in their sockets, and burn the babies that suckle at their mothers' breasts . . . so many of your

neighbours shall die that day that their bodies, if lined up side by side, will stretch three

hundred times round the earth and on their charred remains shall the true Witnesses of the

Lord walk to his side.

— *The Clarion Bell*, issue 245

How bitterly she had been disappointed! But the wounds of 1925 had healed, and Hortense was once again ready to be convinced that apocalypse, just as the right holy Mr Rangeforth had explained, was round the corner. The promise of the 1914 generation still stood:

This generation shall not pass, till all these things be fulfilled

(Matthew 24:34). Those who were alive in 1914 would live to see the Armageddon. It had been promised. Born in 1907, Hortense was getting old now, she was getting tired and her peers were dying off like flies. 1975 looked like the last chance.

Had not two hundred of the church's best intellectuals spent twenty years examining the bible, and hadn't this date been their unanimous conclusion? Had they not read between the lines in Daniel, scanned for the hidden meaning in Revelation, correctly identified the Asian wars (Korea and Vietnam) as the period spoken of by the angel, 'a time, and times, and half a time'? Hortense was convinced these