

## STREAMLINING

MULI AMAYE

“So, like, nobody gets buried these days, yeah. We gotta look after the earth’s resources, innit?”

“Oh, so you mean that cremation is better because it only releases toxins into the air and around the ozone layer and that’s good for the earth?”

Jocie hated it when her brother started going on like this. As if he actually knew things that mattered, when the truth was that he’d half-listened to a conversation with some white girl into hippy shit he wanted to shag. Besides, they hadn’t been talking about burying anyone. Nobody had died. It was just the kind of discussion they had when they were on the way to visit Mother - even thinking the word “mother” filled Jocie with dread. It was ridiculous. She’d left home when she was seventeen for God’s sake. Fifteen years ago.

At the next traffic lights, near Belle Vue, or what used to be Belle Vue, she twisted the mirror round and checked her hair. It was braided neatly, not too big not too small. Her scalp was well oiled and looked healthy. She ran her finger over her eyebrows and rubbed at the dark shadows under her eyes. She should have used her Touche Éclat but it was her summer shade and it was too dark for her paler winter face. There hadn’t been time to go shopping.

“C’mon, Sis, lights won’t get any greener.”

“Why do you always say that? It’s a ridiculous saying.”

“You mean it’s what Dad used to say?”

She didn’t mean that. At least she didn’t think she did. Besides, it was funny when Dad had said it. His accent made it fuller, coloured it in somehow.

But her brother had put his Dr Dre’s back on his ears and was strumming his long fingers on the dash. He looked out of place in her Tigra. Like he’d squashed himself into a child’s pedal car, his knees nearly touching his ears. Brandon never seemed to worry about visiting Mother. Took it all in his stride. That was because Mother doted on him. He couldn’t do anything wrong. If he turned up in a creased shirt, it was his girlfriend’s fault. If his hair wasn’t neat, it was the barber’s fault. If he had a hangover, it was his mates’ fault. Jocie could only imagine what it would be like not to be responsible for herself and others. Her brother wasn’t a bad person. He just didn’t know he was irresponsible; the word wasn’t in his vocabulary.

Her earliest memories were about being responsible: for waking up Brandon with her crying; for giving Mummy a headache with all her chatter; for making Daddy leave because she was always naughty. Jocie knew about responsibility. Maybe she should resent her brother, but she couldn’t. It wasn’t his fault he’d been born with a penis.

The traffic was really heavy. She hated coming to Reddish. It was a nightmare on match days now that Man City had moved from Maine Road. And of course today was a match day. The place had become scruffy. There were closed-down shops along the main road. The furniture stores still had the same old shit outside, covered in layers of dust. She couldn’t understand why her mum wouldn’t move over to somewhere in South Manchester. It wasn’t like she couldn’t afford it. Her

house was massive, the mortgage paid off ten years before. She could easily get a small flat out in West Didsbury or somewhere like that.

The feeling of dread was working its way through her system. It started in her bladder area - her root chakra according to Anna - then clomped through her innards in wooden clogs until it reached her solar plexus. It was a little bit like when her cat padded on her lap, only this was inside and the cat was a lion wearing steel toecaps.

“What ya grinning at, Sis?”

“I was thinking about cats. In workmen’s boots.”

45 “Yeah, whatever. What’s with the traffic? I’ve gotta get back.

TJ’s coming over. We wanna lay down some beats.”

Seriously, he just said that - like he’s a teenager from the ghetto! For God’s sake, he’s thirty-one and has a job in insurance. It was all Mother’s fault. Jocie pulled herself upright. She’d thought it. Now she had to deal with that word. Fault. Oh, and she could add blame to the mix. All the taboo words that were so easy not to use when you sat in a pale green office with the smell of lavender and old people surrounding you - tissues placed discreetly within reach and an understanding counsellor who’s on your side anyway because you’re paying her. It all made sense at that point. Life was just life. People ended up where they ended up. Nobody’s fault; no one to blame. It was slightly different when she was on her way to see Mother.

55 “I forgot there was a match on.”

Jocie didn’t mind that they were delayed and she was pleased that, annoying as he was, Brandon was with her. She usually had to cajole and come up with something to get him to go along with her. It was not usually as easy as it had been today.

“What do you want, Bran?”

60 “Eh, what do you mean? I just said I’ve got to get back.”

“Yeah, but why are you coming? Do you want money from her?”

She pulled up at the next set of lights, outside the new Tesco superstore, shifted in her seat and stared at him. He had his bottom lip pushed out, just like when he was a kid and he’d been caught out and thought he was going to get into trouble. Except it was always her fault because she hadn’t watched out for him, told him, or told on him. He was looking straight out of the windscreen, his earphones back in place. He wasn’t tapping any more but his head was jerking to some kind of rhythm. Typical.

Jocie swivelled back in her seat. The car behind beeped its horn and she gave him the finger in her mirror before pulling away. So Brandon wasn’t doing her a favour after all. When was she going to stop being such a sucker? After Dad left, she would daydream about him still being there. About having someone who laughed at the same things as her, who understood what she meant when she made some profound statement about life. Someone who was on her side. Of course, it wouldn’t have been like that. Dad had been quiet for years before he left. He’d even stopped arguing. Just upped and left one day. You’d think that would have made Mother happy, the way she went on at him. But it made her worse. For Jocie and Brandon it was like he ceased to exist,

had never been there. Mother said he'd gone back home, had a woman waiting for him. But that was rubbish. He hadn't been back to Africa in all of Jocie's twelve years, so how could somebody have been waiting for him.

God, she was in a stinker of a mood, and she shouldn't be. She'd had a good week at work. The contract they'd been chasing had come in; she'd closed the deal and was due a bonus at the end of the month. Her team was performing above par, too. All of them. No sickness, no resistance to new ideas. She was good at her job. She'd worked her way up to manage the creative team. The ones who coined the magic words for clients and made them all money. She'd made so many cutting-edge changes. Weeded out the slackers and off-loaded them onto other teams. Nicely, of course. Streamlining she called it. Saving the company money. In reality, she dumped anyone who challenged her with attitude. She didn't mind being challenged on a decision if another, better idea was offered. But some people criticised and bitched for the sake of it.

"Sis, we're moving. Are you asleep or what?"

She slotted the gear stick into first and rolled forward, turning right into Reddish Lane. Work soothed her. It's what she did, who she was. If she was being eulogised at her funeral, they would say, "There goes Jocelle Owako, a brilliant mind. Such a loss to the business world, but what a legacy she left behind."

"You're grinning again."

"I was thinking about my funeral."

"You're so weird. Who thinks about that? You've always been weird."

The grin left Jocie's face and the familiar tension returned to her solar plexus. It sat like there like a lump. Breathe into your feelings, her yoga tutor said. Bring yourself into the centre and breathe deeply. Concentrate on each breath fully. Let go.

In a room full of middle-class women and the odd right-on-man, all with serene, shiny faces and bodies that could contort in any direction, it was easy to do that. Thrusting a warrior pose or stretching into the downward dog, gazing at the ridges on her extra thick yoga mat brought her easily into the zone of Zen. But sitting next to an overgrown teenager on the way to visit a mother who could slice through lead with one look was a different matter.

Jocie took a deep breath. She turned left into the cul-de-sac that housed Mother. Brandon undid his seat belt and without looking at her, bounced from the car and slammed the door. Too hard. She watched over the privets as the front door opened and he was enveloped in a bear hug. Reaching behind her seat she pulled out her handbag and slowly climbed from the car. The shopping she'd bought was in the boot and she shouted after Brandon to help her. Instead, he walked into the house. Mother stood on the step, a fixed smile on her face, scanning as much of Jocie as she could see.

"Well, are you just going to stand there? What are you gawping at? Did you get a fresh mango? I want to make some jam. Come on, hurry up I don't want to heat the street."

Jocie dragged the two bags from the boot and one of them snagged on the catch. Oranges and mangoes spilled into the gutter. The melon rolled towards the step where mother was standing. There was a subtle change in the air. Brandon appeared behind mother and pulled childish faces,

wagging his finger in a ludicrous manner. Jocie wanted to scream. The volcano in her solar plexus was reaching critical mass and expanding into her chest.

120 “Well, don't just stand there like a lemon. Pick up my fruit. It'll be full of germs. Honestly, you'd think I'd taught you nothing. You were always like this. Gormless. I'm going to have to soak it in vinegar water to get the rubbish off it. You make my life so difficult. You're supposed to be helping me.”

Jocie stood and stared. She stared at her mother's bitter, twisted mouth spewing things that didn't make any sense; at her brother who was doing monkey impressions. She started to laugh. Bending down she picked up the fruit from the gutter and placed it in the other bag. She picked up  
125 the melon. All the while she was laughing, tears were beginning to streak down her face. She laughed so hard, she thought she might pee herself, but she couldn't stop. Placing the bag on the step she stayed bent over, clutching her sides. Her mother slapped her on the back and still she laughed. She got to the point where she could hardly catch her breath.

Eventually the feeling subsided and she straightened up, wiping her cheeks with her sleeve.  
130 Looking Mother in the eye, she gave her a quick hug and a peck on the cheek. She gave her brother two fingers behind Mother's back, turned and walked back down the path. It was only when she opened the car door that Brandon suddenly came alive.

“Oi, where you going? I need to get back. What you doing?”

Jocie pretended not to hear, calmly put the key in the ignition and switched the engine on. She  
135 executed a neat three-point turn and, without glancing back at them, she drove away. Breathe. She told herself. Be in the present.