

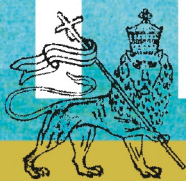
Penguin



Readers

WHITE
TEETH

ZADIE
SMITH



Contents

Note about the story	5
Before-reading questions	6
Chapter One – The strange second marriage of Archibald Jones	7
Chapter Two – Trouble with teeth	13
Chapter Three – Two families	20
Chapter Four – Three coming	25
Chapter Five – The root canals of Archie Jones and Samad Iqbal	32
Chapter Six – School days	38
Chapter Seven – Magid or Millat?	45
Chapter Eight – Millat and Irie, 1989–1990	52
Chapter Nine – Joyce and Marcus Chalfen	58
Chapter Ten – The root canals of Hortense Bowden	63
Chapter Eleven – Love letters	69
Chapter Twelve – Coming home	77
Chapter Thirteen – Magid returns	85

Chapter Fourteen – The mouse conference	92
Chapter Fifteen – The final bullet	102
During-reading questions	106
After-reading questions	109
Exercises	110
Project work	118
Essay questions	119
Glossary	120

Content warning: this book contains some content that may be distressing to readers, including a description of a suicide attempt and the use of racist language.

CHAPTER ONE

The strange second marriage of Archibald Jones

What is past is future.

Early in the morning on New Year's Day 1975, a man dressed in grey sat in his car in Cricklewood. Archibald Jones – known as “Archie” to his friends – had his head on the **steering wheel**. As the car slowly filled with engine **fumes**, he was hoping that death would not be too painful. In his left hand, he held his army **medals**, and in his right hand he held his marriage certificate, because he planned to take his mistakes with him. Archie had **flipped** a coin, and he was ready for death. In fact, he had planned it. He also knew that Cricklewood was not a place that a man usually came to die – it was more like a place that a man came through to go to other places in London. But, for Archie, it was right that he should die on this horrible city street where he now lived alone at the age of forty-seven in a one-bedroom flat above a fish-and-chip shop. He had not written a note to explain why he was doing this – and **right** now all he wanted was a bit of silence, a bit of *shush*, so that he could think.

Not that there was much to think about – a boring childhood, a bad marriage, a dull job with no future. There was the war of course – although he had only been in it for its final year. He and his old friend Samad Iqbal, they had some stories to tell. But no one really wanted to know about the war any more. After he

came home, Archie had tried to get a job as a war journalist on a newspaper – he'd told the editor all about his time in the army with Samad, but the man did not seem very interested and did not have any work to offer him.

After that, Archie realized that he had a good eye for how a thing should look – its shape – and that's how he had ended up working at MorganHero Printers for more than twenty years, designing the way that things were folded. He designed lots of things – paper, envelopes, **leaflets**. It was not much of an achievement, but things do need to be folded, or the wind will pick them up and take them to get lost somewhere down the street – a bit like life, really.

The Hussein-Ishmael Butchers was owned by Mo Hussein-Ishmael, a huge man with black hair that rose at the back like a duck's bottom. He began this morning, like every morning, by attacking **pigeons** with a large knife.

“Get out of it! **Piss off**, you **shit-makers!**” he shouted, **swinging** the knife in the air. He knew from experience that six pigeons were the most you could kill in one **swing**.

Then Mo put down the knife and looked out over Cricklewood in the early-morning light. He looked at the unwanted sofas in the street, used by drunks, the cheap cafés and the taxis, which were all covered in pigeon shit. One day Cricklewood would thank him for killing all the pigeons – he knew it. “The shit is not the shit,” he said to himself for the millionth time. “The *pigeon* is the shit.”

And then he saw Archie's car with the long **Hoover tube** reaching from the car's **exhaust pipe** through a small space

left at the top of the driver's window. "What the hell is that car doing there?" Mo shouted. "I've got fifteen dead animals coming at six thirty . . ." Then he walked towards the car and knocked hard on the driver's window. It came down slowly, and a pale face looked out at him.

"I am killing myself," the man said. "Leave me alone."

"No one kills himself outside my shop," Mo replied. "We are Muslim butchers. If you're going to die around here, we need to bleed you properly first."

Archie lifted his head from the steering wheel and looked through the fumes at the huge brown man in front of him. And suddenly he experienced a very important moment. He realized that, for the first time since his birth, Life had said *Yes* to Archie Jones. Not just an "OK" or a "You-might-as-well-carry-on-now-you've-started", but definitely a loud *Yes*. Life wanted Archie. He might not be one of her better **creations**, but she still wanted him, and Archie, much to his surprise, wanted Life.

He hurriedly pulled down both windows and breathed the clean air deeply, his hand holding Mo's arm as he thanked him again and again.

"All right, all right," said the butcher, pulling himself away. "Move on now. This is Cricklewood. You want Lonely Street, my friend."

Archie had tried to kill himself because his wife, Ophelia, an Italian woman with beautiful eyes, had just divorced him. But he had not done it because he loved her. No, it was because he had lived with her for so long and *not* loved her. Archie's marriage

had been like buying a pair of shoes that he had taken home and found did not fit. They looked OK, so he continued to wear them even though they were uncomfortable. Then suddenly, after thirty years, the shoes had picked themselves up and walked out of the house.

It had begun well, of course, like they always do. In the spring of 1946, he had walked out of the war and into a coffee house in Florence. She was a waitress – dressed in yellow – and looked like the sun as she served him a fresh coffee. She did not know that, deep inside, Archie did not like women much; he did not trust them, and he could only love them if he thought they were angels. He did not know then that Ophelia had two mad aunts, an uncle who talked to vegetables and a cousin who wore his clothes inside out. So they got married and moved to England, and she quickly realized her mistake. He drove her mad, and her angel's wings were soon packed off to the garage with all the other things that Archie had promised to mend one day in the future. Among those things was a broken Hoover.

Later that same New Year's morning, Archie drove around Kilburn in his car with his head hanging out of the open driver's window. "So this is how it feels when someone saves your life," he thought. He felt that he was being led to a completely new life. Usually women cannot do this, but some men are able to leave a family and a past. They just shake them off, like an unwanted coat, and move quietly back into society as changed men.

He drove past his flat and came to a fork in the road. Then he went to an area he had never been to before – Queen's Park.

Suddenly he saw a bed sheet hanging from a window. On it, someone had painted a sign – WELCOME TO THE END OF THE WORLD PARTY. Archie stopped the car and got out. Then he went to the door and knocked loudly.

Tim Westleigh, more usually known as Merlin, finally heard Archie's determined knocking through the fog of sleep and lifted himself off the kitchen floor. He walked around lots of sleeping bodies and made his way to the door. Then he opened it to see a middle-aged man in grey.

"What do you want?" Merlin asked. "Are you here to sell me something, or to talk about **God**? Cos I'm not interested." And he tried to shut the door.

Archie shook his head and stayed where he was. "I saw your sign," he said.

Merlin lit a cigarette and smiled. Then he looked up at the sheet. "Yeah, sorry, **man**," he said. "That was a bit of a disappointment – or a good thing. Depends on how you see it."

"A good thing," said Archie. "Definitely a *good* thing. I was just driving around looking for somewhere to have another drink – it's not been a great morning – when I saw the sign. So I flipped a coin and thought, why not?"

"The party's nearly over, man," Merlin replied. "And this is, well, you know, a **squat**. They're not really your kind of people. Bit young." But then he looked again at Archie, who was smiling back at him, and then he **shrugged**. "Oh, why not? It's New Year's Day. Come on in."

Archie moved past Merlin into a long hall with four rooms opening into it. There were stairs in the middle, and a door to

the garden at the end. The floor was covered in sleeping bodies, empty bottles and cigarette ends. In some of the rooms he could see people kissing, or feeding babies, or being sick. All things you expected to find in a squat if you read the newspapers. He thought about joining the people kissing (he had *all* this new time to use – *lots and lots* of it), but decided he wanted a drink instead. He went to the kitchen and poured himself a glass of beer, then sat with two black men and a Chinese girl.

A few hours later he could not remember a time when he did not know Clive and Leo and Wan-Si, and by 11 a.m. he loved them all very much. They were the children he'd never had – at least until midday when they started to argue about the war, and suddenly Archie found himself sitting at the bottom of the stairs with his head in his hands. He would have left and forgotten all of it, except then something happened by accident. That accident was Clara Bowden, who just at that moment chose to walk down the stairs.

“Cheer up, *bwoy*,” she said. “It might never happen.”

“I think it already has,” Archie replied, and shrugged.

Then he looked up, and the cigarette that he had just lit fell out of his mouth. Clara Bowden was *beautiful*. She was tall and black, with thick black hair that was tied back. She wore a red T-shirt over her slim body and tight yellow jeans.

Clara stood on the cigarette and gave him a huge smile that showed the only thing about her that was not perfect. She was missing all her front teeth.

“Archie Jones,” he said, offering her a cigarette.

Six weeks later, they were married.