

Buried

Maame Blue

They bury you in smiles.

Shining beige, eggshell and never-quite-white teeth gleam back at you from excited teenage mouths. First day at a new school and you're only a girl. Only black. The only one. A milk chocolate button placed delicately on top of a mountain of cloud-white whipped cream. The new kid on the south-east Essex block who likes sweets and jollof rice.

'Are they nice to you?'

'Yeah, they're okay.'

You're fourteen when you leave the heady suburbs of New Cross and hop two trains and a bus to what feels like the other side of nowhere. Grays, Essex. Population, Neutral.

There's no colour there. Only a wading through something slow that trickles down your throat like embalming fluid, settling in your lungs. And then the other stuff comes.

'When you tan, do you get lighter?'

'Wow, your palms look the same as ours!'

'I like a little spice every now and then.'

Before anything is known of micro and aggression. Before you kiss the first boy who is kind to you, knowing he is thinking of other boys. Before the blonde and brown-haired girls twist your braids around their fingers because curiosity cannot be satisfied without touch. Before all of it, there is hope.

Hope for a fresh start in a new house with a garden and your own room and a bright future. But disappointment is already an old friend. So you feign

invisibility in a storm of screaming guardians. You climb for attic salvation, where darkness becomes your quiet kin. You read AQA English Literature under torchlight and write angry eulogies into a diary with an ornamental lock.

School is performative. You're no longer one of a crew, running through Lewisham shopping centre or 'studying' at the same library where cute older boys with mopeds hang out.

Now you're the confidante. Everyone's Black Friend. With a rosy-cheeked best mate who loves to regale you with her knowledge of R & B. You can't reveal your adoration of My Chemical Romance *and* Destiny's Child. You have to be one thing or nothing at all.

'You're just waiting to be whatever you want to be, right?'

Your English teacher, perceptive and lovingly self-deprecating. With the kind of voice that stays with you long after you've drowned out all the others.

Your own voice is lost between the rage of puberty, the instability of home, the forward march towards a future elsewhere and all the difference.

The different you.

You are different.

From novelty to status quo to mediator to girl-for-now-but-not-forever to your brown skin, born of you and not the other way around, standing in the bleak grey sun of a Morrisons car park, wishing you could run to the train station behind you, 100 yards away, back to the big swirling rainbow of the London that you know.

There is safety in its contrasts. A chest of changing colours that envelops you.

Not like here. Not like watching your own burial under a grey sky.

Maame Blue

Maame Blue is a Ghanaian writer and co-host of *Headscarves and Carry-ons* – a podcast about black women living abroad – who splits her time between London and Melbourne. Her work has appeared in various places including *Black Ballad*, *The Independent*, *AFREADA*, *Litro Magazine*, *Storm Cellar Quarterly* (USA) and *The Good Journal*; and in 2020 she joined a scriptwriting team to remix a telenovela for African broadcast. Her short story 'Howl' was also published in the *New Australian Fiction 2020* anthology, and her debut novel *Bad Love* was long-listed for the *Guardian* Not The Booker Prize and chosen by Cheltenham Literature Festival as one of their top three debuts of 2020. She has works forthcoming in 2021 and is cautiously working on her second novel.

A recording of this talk can be found on the WritersMosaic website at

writersmosaic.org.uk

© Maame Blue