

Salad cream sandwiches

Selina Nwulu

I loved them. And though the idea of their taste makes me retch today, salad cream sandwiches were a staple of my childhood. An easy snack I could make myself, sometimes with a Kraft cheese slice, if I was feeling particularly fancy. It was when I was eating them at my house with my classmate, Riley, that the sandwiches gave me the seal of approval I didn't realise I had been auditioning for.

'Your food is like everyone else's, isn't it? Just normal. Everyone told me the food in your house would be awful.'

Riley, the brave warrior who'd come into the foreign territory of my house, where others hadn't dared to tread. I still remember feeling crushed by what I'd thought was a good time between friends but was actually a fact-finding mission, an expedition into how the only black family in the area lived.

Memories of my upbringing in Rotherham are punctuated by similar experiences — the rumours that I carried a knife in my sock, gossip that only got back to me years down the line (after all, who would dare ask?) after a friend mentioned it in passing, assuming I'd known. This reputation was a mixed blessing; when I straightened up and puffed out my chest towards any bully, they would cower, but when I tried to talk to a boy about God, on discovering his dad was a vicar, he was too panicked by the idea of me to have a conversation, instead shuffling off, never turning his back towards me. These were my first lessons in the illogical nature of racism, which tells a tired narrative in the face of all evidence. How the colour of my skin overshadowed my bookish nature and my troublesome addiction to

fruit pastilles (must have been the reason why I carried the knife).

Growing up in Rotherham in the 1990s was difficult, more so than I could admit at the time, having no real point of comparison. The children's song 'Black and White' was a routine nightmare during assembly. When we would sing the lyric, 'A child is black, a child is white', half the school and their mother would crane their heads to see if, yes, I was still there and, yes, still black, while I tried to disappear. Come Comic Relief and teachers would speak about starving children in Africa; one teacher in particular kindly let everyone in the class know that if they were curious about what those children looked like, they need look no further than their black classmate sitting in the corner, trying to disappear.

Riley's comment clarified why I didn't have many friends over at my house. Because outside the intermission of salad cream sandwiches, we did eat differently. When you are surviving, there's no room to celebrate the steaming bowls of jollof rice, yam and stew and egusi soup. Better to be the girl with the salad cream sandwiches. Pride in the other stuff would come later ... much later.

Selina Nwulu

Selina Nwulu is a writer, poet and essayist. She has written for outlets including *The Guardian*, *New Humanist* and *Red Pepper* and has toured her work nationally and internationally. She has also been featured in *Vogue*, *ES Magazine*, *i-D* and *Blavity* amongst others.

Selina was Young Poet Laureate for London 2015-16, a prestigious award that recognises talent and potential in the capital. Her first chapbook collection, *The Secrets I Let Slip*, was published in 2015 by Burning Eye Books and is a Poetry Book Society recommendation.

From 2017-2018, Selina was Writer and Creator in Residence at the Wellcome Trust, looking creatively at food and how it connects to our health

and matters of social and environmental justice. In 2019, she worked with Somerset House on a project around loneliness and climate change for the Earth Day Season.

Selina has read her work extensively both internationally and throughout the UK in a number of cultural institutions such as Somerset House, BBC Radio 4 and Southbank Centre. Her work was recently published in the critically acclaimed anthology *New Daughters of Africa* and she was shortlisted for the Brunel International African Poetry Prize 2019.

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

writersmosaic.org.uk

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