

Scene

BREAK

Songs, sounds & Sylvie



Ola Awonubi

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Sylvie – full name Sylvania Gregson struggled with her briefcase as she skidded on the slippery platform. The train was late by ten minutes and in London ten minutes could make you have to wait another thirty minutes for another train that was going to be thirty minutes late only to get so frustrated that you decide to take another train as a shortcut and end up spending an hour in between platforms when that train is delayed as someone falls ill on the said train. Then you wait another thirty minutes in between stations.

She caught sight of herself in the railway café window. Her wild auburn shoulder length hair flying in the wind, snug in her blue windcheater, chunky jumper, sensible grey trousers and shoes. Just the way a 46 year old Music teacher should look like.

Sylvie let her mind dwell on the highlights of her day. Kimberley Crowley from Year ten had insisted in turning the back of the classroom into a makeshift hairdressers during English language and Jason Peters and Dwayne George went into mortal combat whilst she was trying to teach them - then a couple of girls joined the melee to protect their boyfriends. It was at the moment that someone had attempted to use the violins she had cajoled and persuaded the head to buy – because they would be such an asset to the music department, to flatten another students head. That was just the morning.

The day had gone progressively downhill after that ; sending four students off to see the Head and waiting behind for half an hour for detention with another three meant she did not want to see another child for the rest of her life. On days like this – the pain of not having a child felt rather dull, like an old wound that only sent out the occasional twitch.

Dave hadn't wanted them in the first few years of the marriage – after all, they were young and they had forever but when he died in a car accident, she had been left a young widow in her late twenties. Then one day she woke up and she was on the wrong side of thirty and her Mother was beginning to talk about her chances of marriage and motherhood in the past tense. Maybe she was right.

So she rehearsed and learnt her lines. Learnt so well that she began to believe them herself so when she gave her excuses about being single to her friends and family they would get off her back. She had a list of excuses ready for family gatherings like weddings, funerals and Christmas – whenever the clan got together. They ranged from - she was out of practise, she was too old for all that, she hadn't gotten over Dave. She really had got used to having her own independence. She liked meeting her little flat exactly as she left it, not finding socks thrown on the floor and not having to watch endless football games.

Everything except the truth - in fact everything but the uncomfortable truth; that hoping for another Mr Right, marriage and the possibility of motherhood – even at her late age was too painful for a realist like herself. Why get your hopes up for nothing was her mantra.

She got herself a cat who she indulged extravagantly– thus affirming her widowhood and middle aged status. She put everything into imparting her skill and expertise into the minds of her students. Some times she thought she had managed to reach some hidden part of them no one had reached before, then she would have another bad day and she would wonder why she really bothered. Was she getting through to them or just sending them to sleep?

You would have thought she would have been used to badly behaved children by now after twenty years of teaching but some children still had the ability to ruin her day. After jostling her way through the crowds she managed to squeeze her way through and get a seat near the window, took a deep breath and glanced around the carriage and took in the bored listless looks of the other commuters. It was Monday evening and the beginning of a new week of work. Irritation and resignation hung in whatever air was left in the packed confinement of the carriage.

Sylvie sneaked a look at the man in front of her who looked deep in his newspaper, admiring his thick curly hair – seeing how the sliver interlocked with this dark brown hair. Just like hers. Not the brown hair – the grey streaks is what captivated her. She wondered whether he was like most of the people in the carriage – trapped doing a job they sometimes hated with people they sometimes hated and going through the motions for five days a week because of the mortgage when they would rather be out playing golf, writing a book, sailing around the world, or just bringing up their children.

She stared at him remembering her dreams. She had once dreamed of singing opera. Hard to imagine that now. Her singing 'Verdi' or 'Tosca' to a packed audience. She had been classically trained. It could have been possible back then – now she was too tired and too suffocated with responsibilities – her work left her very little energy for anything else.

She sighed and rummaged around in her bag for some music scores she was preparing for a school production for end of term.

The man next to her looked up suddenly and she caught the smile in his pale blue eyes and suddenly she was engrossed in her book.

"I hope he doesn't think I fancy him or something."

She was on the second page of her whodunit when strident raucous heavy beats tore the air apart and her head snapped back up.

There were two teenage girls sitting on the next row. They were in their late teens. Dressed in almost similar attire of short bomber jackets cropped jeans painfully high boots and matching complexions that had probably come from the same bottle. Unnaturally long blonde hair with black roots, heavy blue and gold eyeshadow and blood red lipstick completed their wardrobe. They were screeching away to the stuff coming out from their mobile phones – to call it music while be an insult to any kind of musician anywhere. Their nasal singing reminded her of the kind of scantily dressed pop star that was always being carried out of some pub or event by some bouncer because she was too inebriated to walk straight. Or the manufactured type from one of those reality TV shows. Those were the kind of 'stars' her students emulated and wanted to be when they 'grew up'.

She closed her eyes trying to shut out the monotonous beat and the nasal whining growing louder and louder. She decided to open her eyes and looked around as she saw that people's initial semi amusement was turning to thinly veiled irritation but their British reserve held them back. They just shifted in their seats and sunk deeper into their newspapers. Mr Blue eyes glanced up to look at her once more and buried his head back into his paper.

Mustn't make a fuss or be impolite. Mustn't say exactly what I think.

She remembered when she first met Dave and that was the one of the things he loved about her- her ability to speak her mind at any time, her desire to stand up to anyone who was objectionable or being unfair. He loved her the more – he called it her 'Italian 'streak.

Sylvie watched the girls yelling away noting that the noise was getting louder and louder gathering impetus and like an impending storm it threatened to take over the whole carriage. She looked outside and saw that she had several stations to go before she got to her stop and she knew she could not take it that long before she burst.

Suddenly she was not seeing them but the whole of year ten and eleven during music classes and she knew exactly what she was going to do

She put down the book and took in as much air as she could into her lungs and then she exhaled. It was so relaxing – with every note she was expelling all the stress and irritation of the day. She saw peoples eyes widen, their jaws drop and some of them smile while others scowled not happy about their reverie further disturbed.

She saw Mr Blue eyes look of amazement as she sang putting her heart into every valley and peak of the song. When she heard them turn the volume of their mobile higher, she climbed further up the vocal register in soprano - she could do it. Had she not been classically trained? All the while she kept a fixed pleasant smile on her face.

Then she decided to take it to Mezzo – Soprano and people started clapping.

The girls had stopped laughing now and were fiddling about with their ear phones.

Sylvie climbed down from the mountain, took a breath, and looked straight at the girls.

“Thank you so much for sharing your err...music with us all. I just thought I should return the compliment and share some of mine with you”

At this point another cheer went up from the carriage.

One of the girls turned on her.” You’re flipping bonkers you are! You know that!” Heavily caked luminous blue eyeshadow circled eyes that had seen more pain than they should at that age. Her shiny pink lips spat out threats leaving the air blue with her language.

“Just get off the flipping train!” Growled one white haired lady.

“Shut your face you old hag. You’re not my grandmother and can’t tell me what to do.”

“Yeah. It shows that she never bothered to try telling you what to do. Heaven forbid that I should have a grandchild like you, young lady

“Oh put a sock in it!”

“For goodness sake show a little respect” it was Mr Blue eyes now.

“Am I even talking to you tho?” Said Blondie. “You know what right - you’re all losers... yeah.”

“Just get off the flipping train and leave us losers in peace!” Someone yelled across the carriage.

The girls got off at the next station leaving us with the memories of their hand signals telling us where to go.

“That showed them.” Someone chuckled.

Sylvie had not felt this good in ages.

Mr Blue eyes turned to her. “You were fantastic. You must be a trained singer. What opera did that come from ...I forget.”

“La Traviata; Act 1 Prelude.2” she replied cautiously.

He smiled and she blinked.

No man has smiled at me like that Well not since Dave had died. Or maybe they had but she had never noticed.

“I remember now. I used to kid myself that I was a bit of a theatre buff. Used to go with my wife but ever since she died five years ago haven’t listened to a thing. Until I heard you.”

Sylvie smiled. “Thank you. I’m glad you enjoyed it.”

Blue eyes twinkled. “No. Thank you.”

The train stopped and people spilled in and she looked up to watch them, aware of those blue eyes quietly appraising her face, her hair, the way she was folding the song sheet over and over until it was a neat tiny square.

“So, you go the theatre much yourself?”

She turned and saw that his eyes weren't exactly meeting hers. His tone was casual, too casual as if he was talking about the weather.

Hot day isn't it. Do you go to the theatre much yourself? Smooth.

Not often – sometimes with my kids....I mean my students.

“So you teach? Admirable.....you're much braver than me or maybe not. I work in the City....quite a bunch of miscreants as well.” He laughed and she saw his eyes checking out her left ring finger.

Sylvie laughed and let her eyes met his. Suddenly she felt as if she could face St Martins the next day.

She looked out of the window and realized that still had three more stops before she got down.

Ola Awonubi.



Ola Awonubi is an author known for her compelling short stories and novels that explore themes of love, identity, and cultural heritage. She studied for an MA in Creative Writing at the University of East London and has won awards for her short fiction, including first prize in the National Words of Colour competition and the Wasafiri New Writing Prize 2009/2. Her short stories have been featured in literary journals, anthologies, and online platforms, including *Brittle Paper*, *Afreada*, *REWRITE* and *The Ake Review*.

Awonubi's writing is deeply influenced by her Nigerian heritage and British upbringing, often exploring themes of displacement, cultural identity, and societal expectations. Her short story collection, *Naija Love Stories*, showcases twelve tales of love, relationships, and the Nigerian experience.

Beyond short stories, she has authored several novels, including *Love's Persuasion*, *I Love You Unconditionally*, and *A Nurse's Tale*, a historical fiction novel published by HarperCollins imprint One More Chapter. Her upcoming book, *The Marriage Monitoring Aunties' Association*, is set for release in July 2025 and is available for pre order at all book outlets.