

Tonight I am singing a set at a café whose poetry-night theme is 'Solitude'. They've asked me to start with my three least-favourite songs: 'In my Solitude', 'Black Coffee' and 'Misty Blue'. When Michael from the band called to tell me about it last week, he anticipated my response, chanting 'Oh, whine, whine, whine,' along with me. 'Don't worry about it – next week it's Ronnie Scott's, with our own songs . . .'

I hastily assemble my things so that they're in the general vicinity of the full-length bedroom mirror – make-up bag, a selection of black stiletto heels, armfuls of dresses on hangers, hair tongs tangled in their own plug lead, sheer tights that are to the best of my knowledge unladdered. Aaron's side of our dresser is analytically tidy: a small city of glass-bottled gift colognes and sable-backed hairbrushes, mostly unused, alongside a depleted bundle of the tough, dried-wood chewing sticks he swears by – my teeth ache just looking at them. The only things on his bedside table are a water glass and a photograph of him and his best friend, aged ten. In the picture Geoffrey is cola-dark, with astonishing, vine-like sideburns. Aaron is defiantly pale and chubby-cheeked; his hair is slicked into some attempt at a

Jheri curl. They both have carelessly gappy smiles; they stand together in a heaving Accra sidestreet swept with umber dust, against a battered blue backdrop that says 'PepsiCo'.

I have yet to meet Geoffrey, who still lives in Accra. But the fact that Aaron always refers to him as 'Geoffrey', never 'Geoff' or 'G', makes me think of him as diffident and kind and slightly stuffy. A boy who felt the pressure of being a cabinet minister's son and tried his best to behave himself, growing up into the kind of man who rolls his English around in his mouth as plummily as he can.

I strip to my underwear and study myself in the mirror; it is a bronzed sorrel woman with a net of curly hair who looks back, and she does not look Jamaican or Ghanaian or Kenyan or Sudanese – the only firm thing that is sure is that she is black. Mami says only Cubans look like Cubans; put three Cuban girls together – white, black Latina, whatever – and you just see it. It is as if you could take away my colouring and I would be a white Cubana – a white Cubana not being, after all, particularly white.

My eyes are long rather than wide, meagrely lashed and slanted unhurriedly upwards at their corners. In my blood is a bright chain of transfusion; Spaniards, West Africans, indigenous Cubans, even the Turkos – the Cuban Lebanese. My shape is that of a slightly distorted heavy pear; slender, Chabella-like shoulders and a gently rising collarbone cast lines that soften and swell past a high waist to what Amy and I refer to as 'loot in the boot' – hips that escape spread fingerspans – then the line returns.

I prod my thigh and, standing on one leg, run my hand down my calf. I sink to the floor, sink to the middle of this slew of things that are supposed to tease out, bejewel,

enhance, improve on what I have. I coat my hands with cocoa butter and slowly, slowly start to reconcile myself with my skin, inch by inch. I am scared to touch my stomach, not because it is tender, but because it has begun to swell beyond the point where it can be comfortably rubbed with one hand. If I cup it with both hands the bump might rise to the space I allow it.

When Amy Eleni calls I am fiddling, trying to adjust the