

RIO DAYNE BIO

England swings like a pendulum do

Bobbies on bicycles, two by two . . .

England in the sixties. A heady time. A transformative time. A time of optimism as Britain morphed from post World War II austerity to a bright new world of revolutionary music, fashion and culture. The Beatles. The Rolling Stones. Twiggy. Mary Quant. Terence Conran. All defined the new "Swinging England", radically transforming daily life and how Britons saw themselves. From plain and sensible to exciting and avant garde.

It's into this environment that Rio Dayne was born – and it's a fitting metaphor for her life.

The story begins with two young foreign students, one a tall, debonair gentleman from the newly independent Nigeria and a beautiful Rubenesque young woman from Jamaica, the former a PhD student at Cambridge; the latter a student nurse. For them, it was a romantic time, but also a studious time. There was no time for frivolities.

Focused on their goals, these two young people from opposite ends of the globe had come together, he enchanted by the woman's dazzling smile and joyful personality, she by his riveting brilliance. They fell in love and produced two children. A boy Peter, and a year later, a girl Angela. So disappointed was the young man when he learned he was the father of a girl, he left the room. So began Rio Dayne's life.

Then in the spring of 1967, when Rio was a year old, and Peter two, the former British colony of Nigeria erupted in civil war, the fallout of ethnic, economic and religious tensions exacerbated by the artificial boundaries drawn up by the British. It would change Angela's life forever.

Her father, for reasons never discussed, felt obliged to return. His young wife did not think this wise. Her motherly instincts would not let her uproot her babies to a war-torn nation wracked by enforced starvation in the secessionist state of Biafra. So Rio and her brother were sent to live with their grandmother in Jamaica to give the young mother time to re-order her life.

Angela, blessed with her father's genes, quickly sprouted into a tall, fine-boned, academically inclined child. This was not the norm in Jamaica. And her playmates let her know. Cow-eyes they called her. Mawgaw gal, which meant bony, sickly. Her grandmother would gaze upon this gazelle-like creature and remark, "My goodness child, where are you going?"

Then one day, Angela's father suddenly appeared in Jamaica. She was about four years old. It was only a brief visit, to see his children. The whole town was abuzz at this lanky, elegant stranger in a grey suit. He was looked upon as something akin to royalty.

"I was in awe," Rio says. "He was leaner, straighter, more eloquent than anyone had ever seen. I thought he could touch the sky. I was so proud. He seemed unreal to me."

She never saw him again. Never heard from him again.

Shortly after Rio started school her mother, Lena, re-married and immigrated to Canada and sent for her children. Canada! It was paradise, a vision inculcated in young Jamaicans throughout their lives. A place where people were proper and kind. It was a utopian vision, perhaps a personal fantasy, painted for the family back in Jamaica by Lena now that she had reached this prized destination. Rio was happy to go, to leave a place where she did not fit in.

Her mother worked hard to provide the best lifestyle possible for her children. It meant working several jobs and leaving the raising of Rio and Peter to nannies. Lena insisted that her children become "Canadian". Listening to Jamaican music was out of bounds.

"My mother was a formidable woman. We did not engage or interact. But we respected her," says Angela. "She was very 'British' with strict rules about behavior and etiquette. She ran a very tight ship."

But far from being a utopia, the harsh realities of being a child of color in a predominantly white school soon became apparent. The sense of being different deepened. Rio and her brother stood out from their schoolmates. And the fact that she was "different" was inadvertently reinforced at home. In Lena's eyes, for the right reason or course, as hitching one's wagon to a man, in her experience, had only led to disappointment.

"My mother told me over and over again that I would never get a man because I was skinny and tall," Rio says matter-of-factly. "I believed her."

"When I was a teen, I returned to Jamaica for the summer. All the girls had boyfriends. But not me. I had nothing to offer. To be considered attractive in the black community you had to have a big butt and huge gazookas."

Svelte and tall, with a delicate bone structure, Rio was an anomaly. Still, her mother's discouraging mantra was countered by another, much more positive -- an emphasis on learning.

"You will never get a man, but you will always have your books," Lena would tell her willowy daughter. "You will always have knowledge."

"And that is what gave me strength," Rio says, the confidence strong in a direct but open gaze. "I'm glad she did that."

There's a certain strength of character forged in not running with the "in" crowd, in having to create one's own sense of self. It builds independence of thought.

In high school Rio discovered Descartes. Logic fascinated her. "It allowed me to open my mind, to discuss life," she says, a hint of that early excitement still in her voice. She decided to pursue political science at Carleton University in Ottawa. Fired up by new ways of thinking and of looking at the world, she joined the Caribbean Association, not so much for the socializing, but as a milieu in which to discuss politics and world affairs. Or perhaps, deep down, to explore and acknowledge her roots.

The controversy over the Meech Lake Accord was in full swing as was the movement to free Mandela and other South African political prisoners. They were significant times. Yearning to understand her heritage, so long negated by her upbringing, Rio formed a discussion group solely for black women. At the same time, in contradistinction to the expectations set out for her by her upbringing, she began dating. But here was a hitch. Her boyfriend happened to be white and Jewish. This did not go down well with her black peers. She was ousted from the very group she had formed. Once again, the outsider, this time she was stunned.

"I felt so hollow. It was incomprehensible," she says. The taunts of her schoolmates had never affected her, they were merely descriptives in her view. But this more serious shunning by her own community cut deeply.

"I folded," she says. "I lost my passion about school. And I no longer trusted black people. I was so demoralized."

Rio returned to Toronto, moved in with brother Peter, now working for the city, and finished her degree by correspondence. Now more supportive, Lena told her disillusioned daughter that she had it in her to be somebody great.

Ready to tackle the working world, Rio landed a job with then mayor Art Eggleton's Committee on the Status of Women and from here to Clare Lewis' Task force on Race Relations and Policing.

But once again she raised the ire of the black community. The task force was a visible liaison between the black community and police services. At a Jane/Finch community meeting, Rio objected to the disparaging references about the white community, telling the black crowd that they needed to take ownership of some of their issues. She was accused of not being "black" and told to leave.

A stint at Bell Canada followed with a drastic drop in salary. "I had to dumb myself down," she says with a sigh. "I had to pretend I just out of high school and downplay my education and résumé. It's the only way I could get hired."

One evening, distraught at being dumped by her current boyfriend for someone "more attractive and barely out of high school," she met a girlfriend for drinks after work. While the two commiserated over why men preferred vacuous girls over intelligent women, Rio became aware of a tall, striking young man who had been trying to capture her attention. After some conversation they exchanged business cards. Not truly interested, she nevertheless met him for lunch a few days later. He was German, blond and chiseled, very serious, yet shy. "Decent," she allows, "and refreshingly sincere." But at 22 years old, five years her junior. And still living at home, running a small business.

Fourteen years later, they are now married with four children. The distinctive young man went on to become a successful trader with the Toronto Stock Exchange. Angela, in the meantime, landed a job with Emergency Management Ontario, an organization that, she says, recruited ex military men who had done tours in Ethiopia and Bosnia.

"I studied like the dickens. I knew the workings of government. And I got the job. It was in the non nuclear area. My portfolio was the Foreign Animal Disease Plan, working with federal and provincial departments to deal with issues like Foot and Mouth disease prevention in Canada. It was such a thrill to be back in an academic environment.

But in the meantime another dream was stirring.

"There is not a day that goes by when I'm not ogled, or approached by total strangers asking if I am a model," she says.

Picking up her children at school has become like performance art.

"I see the intrigued glances, the whispered exchanges. Other mothers actually tell me that they can't wait to see what I am wearing that day or to see how my look has changed. I do feel like a chameleon."

Perhaps it's a little like her father striding into that small town in Jamaica, turning heads as he made his way. She turns heads. She has a dramatic sense of fashion, a presence, a charisma.

"I did not seek this attention. It sought me," she says. "So I have decided to put it to use."

So she had some test shots done.

"She has a sense of drama, and looks beautiful in each character," says Ingrid Johannesson, former model turned fashion and music industry photographer.

"A lot of models reach a certain age and get bored with the industry. Rio is an exotic young face (among mature models). She has spunk and a youthful energy."

"She is comfortable in her own skin," adds Steve Benisty, photographic agent for Rick Day NYC, a New York studio specializing in editorial and catalogue work. "And it translates on camera. An older woman has an edge here."

But Canadian model agencies are not interested. They say there is no market for her look. Rio says her day to day experience belies this.

"People on the street, other mom's at my children's school, established white women approach me all the time," Rio says. "They constantly ask me if I'm a model or compliment me on my look."

And make a statement she does. Dressing is theatre to her. It's art. She can go from boardroom serious to sultry siren with a mere change of costume or expression. It's Nefretiti meets soccer Mom. Lara Croft morphing into Marie Antoinette. It's a versatility that has impressed seasoned photographers.

"Angela's sense of style and theatricality make the image-creating process fun and exciting," observes Jo Lui, a Los Angeles photographer.

She enjoys re-inventing herself day to day and from situation to situation. It's is so much a part of who she is and it all comes so effortlessly that she has decided to go pro. "She is unique," says Ingrid Johannesson. "She has many diverse looks. And she has a great fashion sense. She didn't work with a stylist (on the shoot). She provided her own wardrobe and created her own looks."

"I think I can be an inspiration to other women," Rio says, the conviction strong her voice. "

Not willing to buy into the idea that the interpretation of beauty and fashion is the prerogative of girls still in their teens, Rio is determined to challenge the industry.

"There is a huge disconnect between what the industry is saying and what I see. I am going to prove them wrong," she says with a steely resolve in her soft voice. "No market for women of color? No market for women over 30? There is no market because the industry has not been putting women like me out there. They are not recognizing our potential. I *know* there is a market because I *am* that market. I want to see that

reflected. I want to see my life up there – on billboards, in the pages of fashion magazines, on TV. Why don't we let the public decide what sells?"

She is ready for the adventure. Whether it's photographic modeling, voice work or TV, Rio Dayne is ready to dismantle more than a few outdated stereotypes. Her life has been one of change, of metamorphosis. So this is but another step in that ongoing transformation.

As Buckminster Fuller once said, "There is nothing in the caterpillar that tells you it's going to be a butterfly."