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**'WE'RE A
REGULAR
OLD MARRIED
COUPLE'**

Iman on the business of beauty, racism
and 20 years as Mrs David Bowie



Iman in New York, 2011



Iman with her husband David Bowie in Mustique, 1996

She fled Somalia as a refugee, forged her passport to escape to America, became a model charging \$50,000 a day, launched a \$25m-a-year cosmetics brand and then married a rock star. Meet Iman

By Helena de Bertodano

I am NOT married to David Bowie," says Iman adamantly, shaking her head and wagging her finger at me firmly. Oh, I say, somewhat taken aback. "No, no, I don't even know him." She takes a sip of her coffee and it crosses my mind that maybe this isn't Iman at all, but someone who has been sent along to do the interview for her. Then she grins, looking unmistakably like the Somali supermodel who was the first black woman to front major advertising campaigns, who became a Revlon girl and muse to Yves Saint Laurent, and who refused to work if she was offered less than the other models. "I am married to David Jones. They are two totally different people."

Jones, of course, is the name Bowie was born with – Jones/Bowie and Iman have been together for two decades and have a 10-year-old daughter, Alexandria, whose surname is also Jones. "Twenty years and counting," says Iman proudly. "We're just a regular old married couple." Her David, she says, is not the glam-rock legend who gave the world Ziggy Stardust but "the sanest, safest gentleman in the world".

"He's very funny, very endearing and shy," she insists.

Iman was born Iman Mohamed Abdulmajid in Somalia in 1955. She was the daughter of the ambassador to Saudi Arabia, fluent in five languages, when the photographer Peter Beard discovered her, aged 19, in Nairobi – where she was studying political science and already married – and persuaded her to come to America. Beard

pretended he had found her herding goats and she didn't speak a word of English.

"It was a good story," says Iman today, chuckling. "It was a bit like *My Fair Lady* – it was insulting but I can't let Peter take the fall for that alone. I knew exactly what was going on." Whether or not the fashion industry was taken in by the ruse, Iman certainly made an immediate impression on magazine editors: she quickly became a cover girl, commanding fees of up to \$50,000 (£31,000) a day.

In 1994, she set up Iman Cosmetics, now a \$25-million-a-year (£15 million) operation. She also started a clothing line called Global Chic, sold over the Home Shopping Network. And although she tried her hand at acting, appearing in both *Out of Africa* and *Exit to Eden*, she is more successful as a judge on the US reality hit *The Fashion Show*. With shades of Simon Cowell, she shoots from the hip. A recent contestant presented a yellow dress which another judge suggested looked, er, "inexpensive". Iman interjected brutally: "You mean *cheap*. It is a fashion emergency and it needs an evacuation. Next."

We meet in the lobby café of the Mercer Hotel in SoHo, New York, near the loft apartment where she and Bowie live. As Iman walks in, heads flip to watch her stride across the room and the waiters, who until now have ignored my table, are suddenly all over us, jostling to take orders. Iman sinks into an armchair, asking one of the starstruck attendees for a tissue to blow her nose. "I am recovering from a cold," she says, "and I am so *bored* with this weather."

Once she is settled with a strong coffee and a box of Kleenex, she relaxes and becomes vivacious and charming, bellowing

with laughter and leaning over every few minutes to clasp my hand as she makes a point. "I am 55 now," she says – it becomes a sort of mantra throughout the interview: she seems to wear her age as a badge of honour. "Yes, I'm an old woman," she adds, laughing, perhaps knowing that she could scarcely look less like one. Her face is as beautiful as ever, almost unlined. She wears barely a trace of make-up and looks in perfect shape in her fitted navy and white striped turtleneck, black Seven jeans and Alexander Wang boots. She says she does not mind ageing. "I think that maybe is because I am not from the West. Birthdays are really not a big deal for us. And death is not a big deal for us. It doesn't make sense to me why people in the West are so fearful about ageing. It's a process. Whatever you do surgically to change the ageing process, you still are what you are inside."

Apart from a breast enlargement nearly 30 years ago, Iman has shunned all cosmetic surgery. "I will never do plastic surgery again. I do have friends that do fillers and Botox and this and that, tweaking everything, and they feel fantastic. So it's a personal choice. For me it's a no. Needles and I are not good together."

In fact, she had part of her face reconstructed in her late twenties after a car crash in New York. "The left side of my face smashed into the partition of a taxi. It was kind of scary. They put in wires and plates and now it's a little bit higher here," she says, pointing to her left cheekbone. "One eye is now smaller than the other and I have literally non-existent eyebrows, as that is where they cut my face to go inside." No traces of surgery are visible.

Iman insists she has never thought of herself as a beautiful woman. "I wish that



'HE IS ALWAYS FOLLOWING ME AROUND AT HOME TELLING ME WHAT HE HAS JUST READ. HE KEEPS ME UP TO DATE'

I looked better," she implores. "I've always had low self-esteem because I come from a country where women are very beautiful – nobody ever told me that I was even pretty when I was growing up. Nobody ever asked me for a date. Until I became a model nobody ever said to me that I was beautiful, and if you don't feel beautiful when you are young, you carry that with you always. You try to lift yourself and take care of yourself, but at the same time you always remember it and that feeling [of low self-esteem] never goes away."

I must be looking very sceptical because she adds emphatically, "It's true – it's like somebody who is fat and loses weight and they say, 'Well, inside I still feel fat.' It's not what you are now, it's what you were when you were young."

She describes how she feels "like a midget" with Naomi Campbell. Iman is 5ft 9in, although she seems much taller. "It's just my heels," she explains. "I always have to tell Naomi to sit down when we meet up. But I'm taller than Kate [Moss]."

Clockwise from left: Iman and David Bowie announce their engagement, 1991; giving a speech in New York, March 2011; modelling Yves St Laurent, 1989; newly arrived in New York, 1975

With two older brothers and two younger sisters, Iman remembers her childhood as happy. "It didn't start privileged, we were rather poor when I was born. We never went to bed hungry but we slept on mats on the floor and went to the local school. Everything was very ordinary until my father became an ambassador to the Middle East and overnight we had chauffeur-driven cars. Then overnight again, we became refugees." She is referring to the revolution of 1969, when her family was forced to flee the country to Kenya.

Her eyes fill with tears as she describes how her parents ache to return to their homeland. "They live in Virginia because there's a big Somali community there." Iman bought her parents a house and paid for her siblings' education, but wishes she could do more for them. "They yearn, yearn, yearn to be back in Somalia – it saddens me so much that they cannot be buried there."

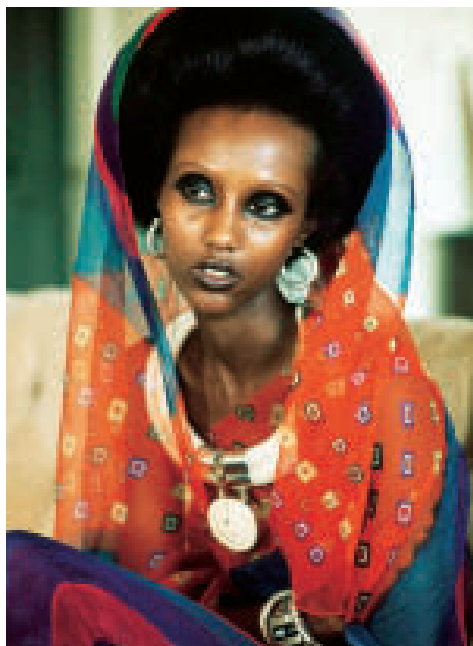
Iman herself did return to Somalia in 1992 to shoot a BBC documentary about famine in the country. "It was shocking. While I was there, I went to my old house and found some of my old report cards." Overcome with emotion, she stops talking and blows her nose.

The turmoil in the Middle East has her gripped. "Although I don't know many people in Egypt now, I have such an affinity for it – I was there [at high school] in 1967 during the crisis with Israel when the planes came in." She says she named her daughter Alexandria after the Egyptian city. "It was my favourite place." She pauses, then adds, "I believe that the future of Africa lies in women's hands – it is crucial to empower the women."

Although she may not have been a goatherd, she had experienced a sheltered upbringing by Western standards. "I had never worn make-up or high heels, and had never seen a fashion magazine," she says. I ask her what her childhood ambition was. "I wanted to go into politics and change the world. I was my father's daughter."

Nevertheless she leapt at the opportunity of a life in the States, forging her passport and not revealing her plans to her parents or her young husband, with whom she was no longer in love: "Going to America was a chance to escape my marriage." Beard had already secured her the prestigious agent Wilhelmina, and soon she was modelling for *Vogue*. Yves St Laurent called her his dream woman, devoting his African Queen collections to her and sending her down the runway with a leashed leopard by her side. "He literally cut bolts of fabric on my body," says Iman. ➔

PREVIOUS SPREAD: PORTRAIT BY MARCUS KLING AND INDIRANI. STYLIST: G.K. REID. HAIR: CHUCKY AMOS. MAKE-UP: GORDON ESPINET USING MAC COSMETICS. DRESS AND STONE CLIFF. BOTH TOM FORD; NECKLACE: NEW YORK VINTAGE. CAMERA PRESS/DEBBY MOORE. THIS SPREAD: CATWALKING.COM, MICHAEL BRENNAN/SCOPE. FEATURES: REX FEATURES, GETTY IMAGES



At times she did experience some racism and quite often felt she was playing second fiddle to blonde, blue-eyed models. "I sometimes felt like a second-class object. One magazine editor said I was successful because I looked like a white woman dipped in chocolate."

She quit full-time modelling in 1989 but says the transition into the business world was tough. "It took me more than ten years to be taken seriously as an executive. When you go to a board meeting, you are still a model to them. I needed to divorce from my old self."

Her life with David, she says, is very low-key. "We're not Brad and Angelina!" By the time they met, their nightclubbing days were long over. "We each did all that in the Seventies. I did the partying at Studio 54, leaving at 8am in the morning, taking a shower and going to work. The horror, the horror, the horror," she says, sinking her head into her hands. Did she have fun? "I don't even know," she says, almost crying with laughter. "I can't even remember!" In June 2010 she ventured out for a late evening to celebrate winning the Council of Fashion Designers' Fashion Icon award. "My friends threw a dinner party for me at a restaurant and I was out till two in the morning. It took me three days to recover. My feet hurt, everything hurt. I haven't been out since. At my age, every bit of sleep counts."

Accepting the award, Iman thanked her parents "for giving me a neck longer than any other girl on any go-see anywhere in the world", and the industry for giving her "the right to finally say to my husband, 'Move over. You're not the only icon in the house.'"

Maybe this is one of the reasons why their marriage has been so successful – she and Bowie are on an equal footing when it comes to fame. But Iman puts it down to timing, the fact that they had both lived full lives before meeting each other. "It wasn't a first marriage for either of us." David had previously been married to Angie, the mother of his son Duncan (previously known as Zowie, then Joe). And Iman had divorced both her Somali husband and then the American basketball player Spencer Haywood, with whom she had a daughter, Zulekha, now 32. "Neither David nor I had successful marriages before meeting each other. I think it helps that we got together later in life when you know what you don't want and what you do want out of a relationship. It helps to have respect and a sense of humour. Apart from that it's just good luck."

Before meeting David, Iman says she was "a huge fan" of his music. "I went to his concerts and was always invited to the parties afterwards but I never went. You know why girls like me are invited to those parties and I was like: 'No.'"

Eventually their mutual hairdresser in Los Angeles set them up on a date in 1990, inviting them both to a "dinner party" where they discovered that they were almost the only guests. "It's pathetic," says Iman. "How do a model and a rock star meet? Through their hairdresser. It's such a cliché."

Although David has said he knew by the end of the evening that he wanted to marry her, for Iman the process was slower. "I did not want to get involved with a rock star. No way. It is not a sane thing to do." So what changed her mind? "David did. We had so much in common and he wooed me... I remember once we went out to dinner and the laces on my trainers came undone, and David was down on his knees in the middle of the street, tying them for me. I thought to myself, 'This one's a keeper.'"

He proposed to her on a candlelit boat on the Seine and still gives her flowers on the 14th of every month, the date they met.

Bizarrely, Bowie has an older half-sister called Iman, too. As he writes in a moving

introduction to her autobiography, *I Am Iman*: "If you care to listen I will tell you that I, David Robert Jones, a Protestant Caucasian boy from South London in jolly old England, have a wife and a sister both called Iman." When David was 7, his sister Annette fell in love with an Egyptian, converted to Islam and changed her name to Iman – although the family lost touch with her and David knew none of this until decades later. "How weird is that?" asks Iman. "She became Iman the year I was born." In Somalia, she says, Iman is usually a man's name. "People say, 'What's in a name?' A lot's in a name. The original name given to me was Zahra. If I was a Zahra, I would be such a flowery girl, but I had a man's name so my character is very different." In what way? "I have a masculine side. In the fashion world, they used to say I was very forward."

But since the surgery he has drastically reduced his musical output and spends most

‘IT TOOK YEARS TO BE TAKEN SERIOUSLY AS AN EXECUTIVE. IN A BOARD MEETING, YOU ARE STILL A MODEL TO THEM’

of the day reading voraciously, either books or the internet. "He is always following me around at home telling me what he has just read – he keeps me up to date on everything. He's lovely in that way." Instead of his own work, he takes joy in the work of his son. "To him it's amazing to see Duncan flourish as a director. Duncan lives in LA and they skype each other every day. They are so close and look so alike." Next year she and Bowie will celebrate their 20th wedding anniversary. She shows me a huge 19th-century rose-cut diamond ring on her finger. "David gave me this for our 15th anniversary." How on Earth will he mark their 20th anniversary? "I don't know," says Iman. We both rack our brains but fail to remember what the traditional 20th wedding anniversary gift is. "It had better not be a fabric," she jokes. Nowadays, says Iman, she does not attract much attention when she goes out. "Occasionally someone will come up to me and say, 'You look just like Iman.' And I say, 'I am Iman.' But usually I am just Lexi's mom or David's wife. And I'm fine with that. I know who I am – I don't need anyone else to tell me." ■

The picture she paints of Bowie is far removed from the enigma of popular imagination. "He's not an enigma at home," she chuckles. David, she says, loves nothing better than to read the British papers every morning and listen to the BBC: "He doesn't