

Lambeth

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There is a Grain of Sand in Lambeth that Satan cannot find
Nor can his Watch Fiends find it: tis translucent & has many Angles

William Blake, *Jerusalem*

On her way out of the Sainsbury's Local, Joanie gives the bearded man a bottle of Highland Spring, a baguette, a packet of grated cheddar, a punnet of cherry tomatoes, a bag of Pink Lady apples, an egg-and-cress sandwich, and a KitKat. The man is a vegetarian; she checked on the way in. When she hands him the food in a plastic bag, he says –

Thanks. It would've been easier to give me the money.

Perhaps. But she wants to spend her change at the flower stand on the ragged cornflowers or the still, clenched lilies. She doesn't want to give him money, even if he wants money. Who is she to give him money?

She goes to the Continental Deli, where she buys two kinds of olives, fresh chillies and bright herbs for the green salad for supper. She chooses a bottle of Petit Chablis in M&S, and heads back along Brixton High Street for home. Approaching Iceland, she remembers she has forgotten root ginger and frozen fruits of the forest. She gets those, a veda loaf, salted Irish butter – Dromona Spreadeasy since it's made in Antrim – fizzy cola bottles and three lemons. The supermarket is cold.

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She walks to the tills via the cereal aisle: corn, rice, wheat, oats, barley, and the sugary kinds that her family never did. When she first came to London, she ate Shredded Wheat and warm milk with half a banana for every dinner; they had that before bed when she was little.

Last year, her university friend Nadège made a TV documentary about Iceland: they are meant to be the happiest workers in the country. The young woman at the counter looks cheerful. Joanie gives no indication that she has noticed the scar in a clean diagonal from forehead to jaw, as if someone wished to cross out her face but was interrupted midway. The young woman looks as though she may be of South Asian origin. Can she say that? Should she not have noticed? Anyway, the young woman is undoubtedly local.

Joanie emerges, now bearing three shopping bags – one canvas, one from M&S, one from Iceland – and proceeds. Ahead of her, five young girls walk, side by side, bloating across the wide pavement, traversing the rim of Electric Avenue. The one in the middle tosses a Coke can over her shoulder. Joanie gives a soft yelp as it rebounds off her chest. She is wearing her pale-pink tweed coat with the cream knitted collar and the mother-of-pearl buttons, which is dry-clean only, and which her ex-boyfriend bought her; fortunately, the can is empty. Without looking back, the girls walk on. She sets down and picks up her bags.

At Boots, she overtakes the girls. She rarely goes in there, due to the achingly slow queue and astonishing number of prescription-seekers in disquieted or altered states. Her dad was a pharmacist.

Having passed, she angles her face back to eye the girls

from the front. Taking care to erase any irritable edge from her voice, she speaks to the middle one –

You know, there's a bin over there.

She doesn't think she would have spoken if the swaggering thrower had not been white, and the ringleader. That's somehow clear. All of the other girls are black. It doesn't matter. She had simply noticed it. They are about twelve years old, and of varying sizes. The thrower spits on the ground and says –

Fuck off.

Joanie remains extremely calm. Mild as yoghurt, she gestures to the bin a second time –

Look, it's right there. See?

She knows as she speaks that she is pushing. She is aware of choosing to press. She doesn't know why she wants to press but feels alive for having done so. She walks on, past the entrance to the Reliance Arcade with its pleasing scent of popcorn, past the H&M and Barclays Bank, up to the curve that was once the grand Victorian pub of the Prince of Wales Hotel and is now occupied by KFC, from which she only eats when she comes home on the night bus, unsober. Their chicken makes her wheeze.

When the blow comes to the lower-left portion of her skull, behind the ear, she is thinking about whether to put pomegranate seeds or toasted pine nuts in the green salad. Her head rings at the thump of the clenched bones. Whirling round, she finds the smallest of the five girls, who looks about ten. She is puny, hopping from one foot to the other, fists raised to box. The girl looks over at the others, to the middle girl in particular, and turns back, ready. Joanie says –

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I'm not going to fight you.

The girl bounces in a semicircle around her. She pants –
Do I care? I'll mess you right here.

Joanie looks around. They are surrounded by people. It's rush hour on Brixton High Street, home time. A man in his thirties, in a sky-blue shirt, walks straight past without faltering. He saw the whole thing. He doesn't even hesitate, doesn't ask if she is okay. Fuck him. Fuck this dude, who has recently moved to Brixton but doesn't *live* here. He just sleeps here in his newly renovated flat, bought with a generous down payment. Had she witnessed this, she would never have walked by. She looks at the boxing girl. Her ears ring. Her cheeks bloom. She is acutely conscious of her pink tweed coat. Again, she says –

My god, I'm not going to fight you.

The other girls pass, snickering. They cross the road. The small girl remains, fists up, poised on the balls of her feet in exactly the same stance Joanie's mum taught her to take when playing tennis, to be ready for any way in which the ball might come flying.

The girls drift past the front of the Ritzy and through Windrush Square, which her friend Tommy, who worked for Ken Livingstone yet voted for Boris Johnson, helped redesign. It takes in the cinema, the library, and the Black Cultural Archives. The girls split around the great patient tree at the centre of the square that faces the entrance to Lambeth Town Hall, where Acre Lane meets Brixton Hill. There are flags dispersed through the branches of the tree: thick bands of green, white, black, and a red triangle balanced on one point. The girls merge again, heading for Effra Road. Cars and buses edge forward, and then flood in opposite directions.

Drawing a tight breath, Joanie angles her face up, attempting to focus on the ghost sign on a gable at the end of Rushcroft Road: *Bovril*. Above, a plane scrapes the blue ether. It softens into a fine white blur. A few clouds flock behind the sand-toned bell tower of St Matthew's. Two seagulls glide on the wind, parallel. She wants to say to this girl –

I know what I may look like, but I am not one of *them*. I've been here a decade. I have no money. I live on credit. I rent a room from my flatmate. It only accommodates a queen-size bed, a wardrobe, and a side cabinet that doubles as a wash basket. The walls are thin.

She wants to say to this girl –

This is not my fault.

She says –

Why did you do that?

The girl stares at her, an edge of lip caught under the white teeth, warm hard eyes, resolution dug into her forehead. Joanie remembers the ringleader back in her own school and the girls who vied to please her, committing mean acts, betraying self and others to ingratiate. She would go home to her mum each evening and complain –

All I want is a real friend. They're so mean, and you can't ever get away.

She turns from the girl and strides down Coldharbour Lane. The light is ebbing. Her chest thrums. She listens for footsteps coming behind. There are none. She glances back. The girl is gone. Joanie is going to the police station to tell them what this violent young girl did. Her head ripples. She walks fast. That wee girl punched her in the head for nothing. Who does that? And how could a ten-year-old body strike with such force?

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Her pace drops as she crosses Electric Lane, passes the Book Mongers and the big old building she sees from her bedroom window – the final squat to be cleared at the behest of the mayor. There's a sign outside: *Premium Apartments for Sale*. They have given it a fresh name. They are building, building everywhere, every day, even on a Sunday. Of late, Brixton has become a nightmare. She doesn't belong. This place belongs to the young girl. The wine bottle clanks in the M&S bag, clanks in her skull. She has forgotten to get flowers. She should go back and get the flowers. No, she'll text Vanessa and ask her to pick some up from the station. The air is glowing.

She makes a chicken-and-apricot tagine with jewelled couscous for dinner, puts the pomegranate and pine nuts in the couscous, and keeps the salad green. Over dessert, a homemade ice cream bombe drizzled with sweetened fruits of the forest, she tells her friends about the girl. They laugh at how she bobbed like a boxer. Joanie is careful to seem magnanimous.

Bea says –

That's an actual assault. You should have gone to the police.

Joanie replies –

I almost did. What would happen to her?

When she wakes next morning, her head pounds. While playing Giant Jenga and smoking double apple shisha, they had polished off the whole bottle of white port that Noel brought from Lisbon for her thirtieth birthday gift. She is no longer angry with the young girl. Joanie wonders where she lives. Up Brixton Hill in some estate, she supposes. What the girl did is beginning to gather sense. The place on Joanie's head, behind the left ear, is

tender, spongy. If she shaved off her hair, there would be a lump and a mark in some unnatural colour of flint, sickly yellow, dark dark red. She is still furious with the shit in the sky-blue shirt who walked past, pretending he hadn't seen. She remembers him distinctly. He had a bland peach face and neat hair the shade of glasspaper. He was carrying a briefcase. Who does that? Was he afraid they would beat his skull in?

She looks for the guy on the walk to the tube station on her way into work. She looks for him in the Starbucks queue, on the train platform, in the carriage. She looks for him while walking home after work. She looks for him on Guardian Soulmates, on Tinder. She feels strongly that it was his fault. It was not his fault. Also, it is.

She admires the young girl, the lambent grain in her eye and her raised fists with their angular knuckles. It is distressing, she thinks, that the ringleader was white.

All of the people in Joanie's building are white, with the exception of the girlfriend of the annoying Welsh lawyer, the one who screams *Cuuuuuunnnnt* at the television when his rugby team loses. Joanie hasn't seen her around in a while. At least four people in the building went to Oxford University. Its stamp is on the envelopes that come through the slit into the cage; they sort their own mail. The guy next door is in tech. He's a pillhead. The couple below are doctors of some sort. The two ground-floor flats are occupied by transient renters. They have been broken into three times.

Not long ago, on the evening before the last squatters were evicted from the last squat, there was a noisy party. The residents gathered on the roof to barbecue, smoke, dance, yell.

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She watched them from her bedroom that looks towards the covered market. Their music pumped deep into the night. The pane rattled to the thudding bass. Open paint tins were hurled from the roof, crashing, rolling back and forth. Her ears throbbed. It was impossible to sleep.

In the morning, paint dashed the walls and the ground of the courtyard. The entrance to the residence was barred by a close line of policemen. The mayor showed up briefly for photos. By evening, all of the people who had lived there were gone. Outside, their spirits draped the streets – a roaring quiet.

Someone keeps breaking into Joanie's hallway to take drugs. They mustn't like to do it out in the open. She discovers a crack pipe, slid under the hall carpet on the last flight up to the top floor, where she lives.

One night, she comes home to find the two adolescent foxes sniffing around the base of the skip. They pause, and she halts, and they gaze at each other. As she goes into her building, she then sees two young men at the base of the stairs, by the door of one of the flats. She says –

Hi.

As she passes, one of them drops something, a credit card, and she stoops to retrieve it –

Oh, here you are.

It is oddly bent. She smiles and he smiles as she hands it over. He says –

Fanks.

She climbs. It doesn't occur to her what they might be doing until she reaches the third floor. She keeps climbing and when she arrives at the top, she enters quickly, double-locks the door,

and texts the Welsh lawyer, who in turn rings the police. She loves it here. She loves it. One end of their street is so well preserved that the facade is used in Edwardian TV dramas. They have an independent wine parlour.

When her flatmate gets back from a festival, Joanie tells her what happened. Cam says –

I don't know why you texted *him*.

Joanie replies –

I don't either. I just did it without thinking. I'm mortified.

While searching the internet for the provenance of the ghost sign on the gable that edges the road, she finds a blog called Faded London, in which it is claimed that Bovril partly takes its name from a substance that appears in a novel first published anonymously in the late nineteenth century. *The Coming Race* depicts a highly evolved subterranean utopian society, endowed with a potent and enigmatic energy source called Vril, an all-penetrating fluid mastered by a people called the Vril-ya, who exploit it to heal, destroy. So ingenious is this energy form that a few young and gifted Vril-ya might use it to erase entire cities at will.