

Lozells Road

The JCB bites into the concrete and another part of you is broken away. Its teeth catch the sun blinding me for a second, and I see riot shields.

I close my eyes and smell the fires forty years gone. You held my hand and told me not to worry. You said everything would be okay. Getting the kids in was just a precaution, their parents would only fret. My heart filled my chest, thudding away possessed, and not just because of the trouble. I don't think you ever understood the effect you had on me. Even when you held me in the art room, behind the drying racks, it was all just a bit of fun. But sometimes, fun gets out of hand.

I don't want to think of that now, not yet. I want to walk the streets where it all began and conjure your face from the flames. To remap your smile and the way it filled out your cheeks, your eyes bedevilled and alive, but I can't. All I see are their faces. After all this time, it's still them huddled together in the charcoaled remains of the post office, their bodies wax and ash dummies welded together amongst the burnt timber and brick.

I shudder and walk down Heathfield Road towards Aston Cross. The years haven't touched this place, not since the

trouble. 1985 is everywhere, the heat waiting in the redbrick for a spark, a harsh word, a nudge from a policeman.

I stand at the junction and look around. The pub never returned. They sifted through the ashes of its remains, no words and no tears; another piece of the past stubbed out. Having waged war on the community they then built a community centre where the pub was, but I see no sign of community, and that's as it should be. I'm just an old woman looking for ghosts.

That morning we went shopping along the Lozells Road buying onions, chillies, peppers, garlic and ginger. We cooked a lot of curries back then. The children were wrapped up in their sensory adventures, their ticks and twiddles marking them out as 'special', they didn't see the argument by the car, outside the cafe, and I would've forgotten it if it wasn't for what happened later. It was just another argument on the street. It happened all the time: bad parking, bad attitude.

Over coffee, I told you about it. You said it was nothing, the usual Lozells Road Disco playing out to the beat of the city, white man against black. You never said where that left me, a white woman hanging on your every word.

I head back to the site of the old school. A young black girl, scrunched hair, leggings and attitude, kisses her teeth as I walk past. It's nothing, just the Lozells mantra, but

it gets me. I turn around ready to unleash a head full of jumbled thoughts, but she's walking away cussing into her phone. I let it go. The digger claws at a wall and pulls it away, the dull chink of brick on brick and forty years of dust. Rafters and felt catch the breeze the felt flapping lazily, and below, in the gloom, is where it all began. From here, behind the wire fencing, I can see the dull shine of the cleaning area where we'd put the screens after printing. The huge stainless steel washout booth catches the sun and winks at me before the roof collapses on it.

We were there that lunchtime busy preparing for the afternoon. Your hands were on my hips as you pressed up behind me, your heady musk intoxicating. You told me not to worry. "The door's bolted; we're exposing screens for printing," you whispered as you kissed my neck. Sirens called and replied across the city, but all I could focus on was your breath, hot, insistent, and your hands moving, revealing. You collapsed on top of me, exhausted, as the hammering on the door began. The Head, oblivious to my shame, feigned interest as you explained the delicate nature of silk screen printing. He brushed you aside and focused on me as he reiterated the need for our first club to go well. "Parents will collect the children at 5:30 sharp." Everything was always sharp with him. "And this will be a success. The Art Club will be our flagship

for extra curricular provision." A good idea, but terrible timing.

As I look around now, it's easy to imagine it starting all over again, so little has changed. What would it take to ignite it all? What small spark will catch on these dry, brittle lives?

Ten children stayed behind. A couple struggled with the change of routine but were soon caught up with the smell of the ink and the rhythm of the squeegee zipping across the screens, the thick stub of rubber making a satisfying swish as they used it to drag and push the ink across the silk mesh. I only had one thing to remember, stock up on the bleach. To this day, the smell of bleach plucks memories of ink, photographic emulsion and the dry throat tang of fire in the air. "We cant have screens clogged an no use," you said. I went to get some from the Lozells Road.

Standing here now, I can see right through the shell of the old school, out onto Archibald Road and up to Lozells. A few minutes walk there and back. When I returned, all those years ago, the whole world had changed.

Latif was restless when I paid for the bleach. His eyes flitted and danced over the shop and its contents as if he was afraid they might disappear. He told me of an incident outside the Acapulco Cafe, the police and a group of men. My head was so full of you that I hadn't even noticed. I hadn't

seen the growing storm. There was a smash of glass, from down the street, followed by the cheer of a feral pack let off the leash. Latif pushed me out the door and urged me to run. The shop's shutters clattered closed behind. I was transfixed. Two policemen backed away from the swelling ranks of Lozell's youth. They had a black man wedged between them and refused to give him up. Sirens sang out from Birchfield and Soho, reinforcements on the way. Another smash of glass as a shop front shattered and then another. I turned to run.

"Where ya goin' Princess?" Three men, dark skin, dreads, nicotine smiles with fire in their eyes.

"Ya'll miss the party," said the one nearest to me, "there's treasure to be plundered, we's taking back what's ours."

"We got white gold here," said another.

Terror tip-toed up my spine and laid a frost at the base of my skull. "If you want treasure you should hit the Post Office." I pointed down the street, towards Aston Cross and as I did, another shop front shattered at the hands of the mob. They turned as one and I ran.

Back in school, as the adrenaline faded, I shook like a junkie as I handed you the bleach. Everyone knew now, this was not the Lozells Road Disco, this was a riot.

We were to stay locked down. No one knew if it was the whole city or just us. Jenkins, the red-faced idiot, brought

in a radio and tuned into the chaos outside. Garbled news reports of fires and looting had you at each others throats; a sunburnt Welshman has no right to pass judgement on people he does not understand you said, and no one disagreed. You snatched the radio from him and tuned it to a pirate station playing dub reggae. It had a calming effect on the kids; one boy rested his head on top of the radio to absorb the rhythm. We drank a lot of tea, sang along, and came close to running out of drawing paper.

The digger continues to claw at the building and exposes the staff room. On the evening of the riot, we took turns to duck in and out of there for refills of tea and rushed cigarettes. Now, its contents are quickly dragged away and deposited on the growing mound of rubble.

One girl, in particular, struggled with the noise and the extended school day. After all these years, her name escapes me, but I can still see her face wet with tears, the way she rocked her body and the sad moan that became an incantation as she swayed. You held her in your arms and moved with her your shush like radio static, your arms a rich brown against the white of her blouse.

By six, the fires were raging. The sky had become a Bruegel inferno of orange and charcoal. Glowing embers caught the wind, the seeds of chaos germinating more destruction, more violence. Large groups of people, scarves around faces,

bottles in hand, swarmed past the school. No one had seen the Headmaster. He was in his office coordinating our response. Hiding, you said.

My hands begin to tremble after all these years. The school now a collapsing shell, but it's still there, the fear, the shame. The digger driver jumps out of his cab and walks across the rubble to a flat-back truck parked at the edge of the site. Two others join him, and they share a flask of something. I look at the remains of the school and wonder if anything of the past is retained there. Can memories, experiences sink into stone? Can they be absorbed by the brick, like heat, then radiated out? Are they leaking into me as I stand here? I pull my coat tighter and rub some life into my dry hands. I walk around the site and discover the old entrance. The roof is ripped away leaving just the side walls leading nowhere.

The workmen finish their tea and get back to destroying the school. A large board next to the site carries a company logo with radioactive colours and the promise of luxury apartments.

It took three days for the riots to burn out. Afterwards, the school stayed closed to the children while we went in and made it safe. You never came back. I asked around and received the same disdain as the journalists. If you wanted to be gone you should be gone, they said kissing their teeth. In school,

over dry sandwiches and weak tea, I saw a headline in The Birmingham Mail, 'Brothers Found Dead In Post Office'. I walked down the Heathfield Road. A policeman stood outside the blackened building as ash rose from the gutted remains. He told me to move on, that it wasn't safe, but I couldn't. The wood had burnt, blistered and twisted the joists, architraves and floorboards, and I imagined I could see blackened arms and ribs, the brothers in a final embrace.

The wind picks up and drags a tear down my cheek. The police said they'd have gone there eventually and that I shouldn't blame myself, but it doesn't work like that. It was me who mentioned the Post Office. I know they'd have made their way there, as they took all the other shops out. But it doesn't help. I wanted the men gone and because of that, the brothers died.

"You alright love?" one of the builders, handsome and with your colouring.

I tell him I'm fine and turn to walk away, but he won't have it. He makes me sit in the cab of his truck and drink some sweet tea. He has a way with him a warmth and honesty that has me telling him everything.

"That's long gone now," he says. "They moved the school years ago, over near Holt now I think. A bloody big modern thing." He flicks the last of his tea onto the rubble, "You live round here then?"



"No, but it's hard to forget."

"Is that why you're here?"

"I suppose so."

I ask him what he thinks about events leaving an impression on a place. About emotions stored in concrete and brick. He doesn't laugh. He says anything's possible. I thank him for the tea and leave.

Just before the Birchfield Road, I lean against a wall and watch the shadow of the flyover swallow a bus.

Why did I come? All that time slowly bleached away, the memories almost transparent and yet you and the brothers vivid still. Sometimes it's not the brothers twisted together in the ash, it's us in one final brittle embrace. The heat of us ignites everything, burns it all up, blasts everything away until there's only us, two blackened husks slowly flicked at by the wind until there's nothing left.

I never found out why you left. There were rumours of course, there always would be. After all, you were a handsome man, and you had a way with people that danced and flirted at possibilities. I don't know if anyone suspected what was going on in the art room. After the riots, it didn't matter. The brother's deaths masked my real agony and I see that now. The core of it was grief, but not from the realisation that my words might have led to the their deaths. It was far more mundane and selfish: you left me, and I never got over it.

Sample from *Night Swimming* by Garrie Fletcher