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## I.

Since the one thing that can solve most of our problems is dancing, it only makes sense that here, following the shimmer of Black hands, raised in praise, the pastor invited us, the congregation, to pray, and we allowed that prayer to make space, allowed ourselves to explore the depths and heights of our beings, allowed ourselves to say things which were honest and true, God-like even. Allowed ourselves to speak to someone who is both us and the people we want to be, allowed ourselves to speak quietly, which is a call to give up the need to be sure, and ask, when was the last time we surrendered? When was the last time we were this open? And before we could try to answer, the drums start off, sudden and sure. A thick bassline follows, getting to the heart of things. The pianist plays secret chords from the soul. And before the intro is done, the choir magic themselves to the stage, and there's a microphone in hand, and a grin as the leader steps down, singing her prayer: *I'm trading my sorrows, I'm trading my shame*. She sings these words, knowing that if we're in this room, then we've probably known sorrow, probably known shame. We know death in its multitudes, but we're all very serious about being alive. And since the one thing that can solve most of our problems is dancing, we turn our mourning into movement. We breach the borders of our rows, spilling into the aisles, making our way to the area in front of the stage, making our way into that space.

I see my father, up ahead, amongst the congregation, his body free and flailing and loose. He's waving a handkerchief in his hand, like a beacon, as if to say, *I am here*. He's going and going and then we watch as Pops slows down a little, like he's misplaced a part of himself. A quick search for my mother. He finds her with ease, and signals. She waves him off, but he won't have it, making

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his way back to where we are standing, coaxing her out of the row, their soft hands in a tender embrace, pulling her close, lips to her ear, *you're safe here*; not just in this building, or this church, but in his arms. I gaze at my parents, and see that a world can be two people, occupying a space where they don't have to explain. Where they can feel beautiful. Where they might feel free.

I nudge Raymond. It's a joyous, brotherly laugh we share. I know that, like me, his faith is a daily wrangle, that he's had to build a church elsewhere in order to know himself. We share the same small motion, a little two-step on the spot, because despite everything, the music is undeniable. I've only ever known myself in song, between notes, in that place where language won't suffice but the drums might, might speak for us, might speak for what is on our hearts. In this moment, as the music gathers pace, looping round once more, passing frenzy, approaching ecstasy, that prayer taking flight, *I'm trading my sorrows, I'm trading my shame*, I'm pulled to nudge Raymond again, to try to say to him, *I wish we could always be this open, wish we might always feel some of this freedom*. I don't know I have the words. But since the one thing that can solve most of our problems is dancing, it only makes sense that here, when our parents signal for us, we join them.

Long after the church service, long after the day has lost its shine, the sun a soft glow, we make the short journey to Uncle T's, who helps us carefully load his speakers into Raymond's back seat, showing us how to snip a wire with pliers, strip it bare with our teeth, twist it into the speaker, his warning to bring them back intact a distant echo as we drive down to Tej's flat near Walworth Road. Pulling in, I see Adeline, having known her so long I know the way light holds her neck, know her rhythm even when she's still, and seeing the space between us, I go towards her, allowing a smile to emerge from the depths of my being, allowing our cheeks to meet during a tender embrace, and on separation, ask her, *when was the last time we did this?* Before she can say, *it's not been that long since we partied*, Tej's door swings open, and soon,

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we are not just one or two, but many. Soon, we're rowdy in conversation, allowing ourselves to say things which are honest and true, Godlike even. Soon, from indoors, we're hearing music we recognize, we're breaching the borders of rooms, spilling into the garden, making our way to the area in front of the decks, making our way into that *space*, plastic cups in hand, held high above our heads, like beacons, as if to say, *we are here*. Many of us gathered have long lost our faith but we do believe in rhythm. We do believe in the ability of a four-minute cut to stretch time until it is unrecognizable, each second its own forever. As Charmz's 'Buy Out Da Bar' is wheeled up once more, this action its own nostalgia, its own prayer, wanting to be the person you were just moments before, I'm thinking, I wish we could always be this open, in tender motion, shoulder to shoulder, heart to heart, *energy energy, gimme that energy energy*.

We're already nostalgic for yesterday, so soon it's grime cuts that Adeline spins from the decks. 'Too Many Man', 'I Spy', '21 Seconds'. 'Pow!' begins to play, a kick drum starting off, sudden and sure. A thick bassline follows, getting to the heart of things. Eerie chords ring round the garden. Before the intro is done, Raymond magics himself next to me, calling for the song to start again. There isn't time for what I want to say to him before the song starts fresh, the intro bare and empty of words, leaving space for us. The floor clears, bare and empty of bodies, a circle forming around us, something possessing Raymond and me as we push the edges further towards the confines of the garden. Look, I'm trying to tell you what it means to be in the eye of a mosh-pit: a small, beautiful world in the midst of chaos, free, amongst flailing limbs and half-shouted lyrics. Soon, after the fifth or sixth reload, we begin to tire. Soon, we're disappearing into the night, four abreast down Walworth Road, in search of food. Soon, it's Bagel King, the only place we know that's open forever. Soon, it's Raymond with an arm around my shoulder, mouth to my ear, saying, *you good, yeah*, and I nod into the space he makes. Soon, it's an arm wrapping around my body from behind, and I know

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it's Del. We've known each other so long she knows the way light holds my neck, she knows my rhythm, even when I'm still. Soon, it's a cappellas and phone speakers, and since the one thing which might solve most of our problems is dancing, an easy two-step on the pavement.

Soon, too soon, it's time to split. Those who are together disappear into the night, pulling even closer. Those single long for the knock of knees on a journey home, a brush of skin on the doorstep, the invitation inside a free yard. We're young and often struggle to express just what it is we need, but I know we all value *closeness*.

That's what I'm thinking as Del and I take the night bus back towards Peckham – Raymond has disappeared into the night, so it's just me and her. Asleep, her soft cheek resting on my shoulder for the short journey. Off the bus, down her road, a gentle light on her doorstep, like a beacon. It's the quietest it has been all evening. I gaze at her. Thrust my hands into my pockets, breaking the gaze with a glance at the ground, before stealing another look. She smiles at my shyness, and I smile back. It's here, when I'm with her, I know that a world can be two people, occupying a space where we don't have to explain. Where we can feel beautiful. Where we might feel free.

Del's lips make a brief home on my cheek, and we pull each other close. We give no goodbyes – we know death in its multitudes, and goodbye sounds like an end – instead, after our embrace, the soft pounding of fists accompanied by, *in a bit*, which is less a goodbye, more a promise to stay alive.

## 2.

A few hours later, sunshine sneaks through a split in the curtains. It's too early, even before I've checked the time. Ray's bed is empty, unmade. I will myself up and out, knowing I have to get to work. The world wobbles for a moment, then rights itself. Downstairs, Ray is laid out across the sofa, bottle of beer in hand, as if the party never stopped.

'Bit early for a drink,' I say, nodding to the bottle.

'Bit late for you to be waking up.'

'Touché. Where's Mum?'

'Out.'

'Where's Dad?'

'Out.'

Football highlights play on the TV screen. I know Ray has the capacity for conversation, or watching the highlights, but not both, so I briefly abandon this effort, instead heading to the kitchen, checking the fridge for food. Most of the Tupperware on the shelves contain meals Mum would've laboured over, something heavy and home-made, the sort of food which might fill the house with longing for a whole day, the sort which you might quickly devour, only to enter a strange stupor in which you can do nothing but nod and say how wonderful that meal was. Aware this is no condition in which to work, I keep looking for something lighter, finding a brown paper bag nestled in the fridge door. Inside, two patties. I heat them, and plate one for me, one for Ray. When I return, he swings his legs off the sofa, making space for me. We eat, quick, each bite a little too hot, but still, we eat.

'What you on today?'

Ray shakes his head, shrugs. 'Don't even know, you know. Might check Deb.'

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'Deb? Don't you mean Tej?'

'Nah, I'm in her bad books.'

'Why?'

'Cause I keep going to see Deb.'

'You're looking for trouble, man.'

'Me? Never,' he says, the grin boyish and unconvincing. He slumps back in the sofa, letting out an almighty yawn. 'What you saying?'

'Working. Actually, I need a favour.'

'If it's money, I haven't got it.'

'No – I need to borrow your suit. For prom.'

Ray screws up his face in confusion. 'Swear down your prom is tonight?'

'Yup.'

At this, Ray transforms, becoming our father, his chest puffing out, the tone of his voice low and sure.

*'You young people, all lastminute.com business, you like it too much!'*

Raymond needs no excuse to continue but he takes my laughter as cue, beginning our father's favourite monologue of 'When I was your age . . .' At my age, eighteen, Pops had already moved from Accra to London, had already started to build something of a life for himself, and often lets us know. Raymond grows more extravagant and absurd with his tone and gestures and content, until we're both falling about laughing, trailing off into a silence which isn't uncomfortable. From outdoors, we hear the patter of feet, balls bouncing, children making their way to spend their summer days in the park. Ray takes a swig from his bottle, considering, before asking, 'You going with Del?'

'It's not even like that.'

'Sure.'

Del and I have known each other since early years, even before the times our fathers would go to the Gold Coast bar and drink spirits, straight, hoping this sort of dumb courage might have brought them closer to something spiritual, closer to themselves.

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The way we know each other, it's different from seeing someone across a room, sharing a brief, coy smile, perhaps playing it cool and waiting for them to approach you, or asking a friend for an introduction. We have time. Over a decade now, since that day on a primary school trip to the farm, when I left my packed lunch on the long-departed coach. I was too ashamed to say anything. We weren't friends but she could see I was holding myself awkwardly, while everyone else unpacked their sandwiches. *I have extra*, she whispered – her father was always scared what he gave would not be enough – and, sitting together, as if we had done so many times, she unpacked the contents of her lunchbox, enough for a sandwich, some fruit and a doughnut each.

There's a trust between us, built from the time we've spent together: in our early years, racing each other up and down the same patch of playground until our legs could no longer carry us; taking trips to central in our early teens, her deep laughter the spine of our days, from Marble Arch to Oxford Circus to St James's Park – Del, the soul and spirit of the group, our glue, until she grew tired, and then, with our secret signal, what became known between us as her double wink – she can't wink, only blink, her eyes scrunched for a moment – we'd split, heading back towards Peckham, playing games to keep our tired bodies awake on the bus home. Nowadays, it is she and I, whenever we can, because it's easy, because we want to, because we can. Recently, when her aunt is out, we'll dig through her father's records. We've known each other so long, I know her go-tos, depending on her mood: Bill Withers's +*Justments*, for tenderness; *Bitches Brew*, for its beautiful looseness, its courage; *Curtis*, when she needs to move. We've known each other so long, I know when she hears a sequence or phrase which pleases, her features will soften, taken by something like wonder. We've known each other so long I don't know what name to give to this knowing.

'Don't be mad when someone else makes a move, that's all I'm saying. Man, if you're not on it, I might have to see what she's saying.'

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My body tenses before I have a chance to speak. The boyish grin is back.

'See? Don't wait, bro. *You young people, lastminute.com*. Do you want a beer?'

'Nah, I'm good.' Ray leaves me for a moment, leaves me with these feelings. When he returns with a beer for him, a juice for me, the clink of the bottlenecks, a deep swig from us both, Ray points at the screen, begins to tell me about the Ghanaian football team's prospects in the upcoming World Cup. I nod along with his commentary and try to stay present, and still my mind drifts elsewhere: somewhere with Del, perhaps at hers with a record playing, something slow and warm and beautiful, where it's she and I, and the time we have together. But Ray, always the brightest in every room, brings me back with ease, letting out a roar as someone scores on-screen, beginning to explain how and why the goal occurred.

As he speaks, I begin to realize that this kind of time with Ray is limited. It's summer now and September will come and then I'll be away at university. He'll stay and I'll go. I lean forwards in my seat, asking him questions. I cheer at the screen when he does. I ask more of his romantic escapades and laugh at the absurdity of his stories, let myself be warmed by his contagious grin.

I bask in my older brother's shine.

### 3.

Because it's summer, and we're young until September, I'm not the only one starting their day late. As I cut through the estate, a man who could be my mirror tries to shut the door softly, winces as it lets out a small bang. He sees me seeing him, and shrugs, smiling, as if to say, 'What am I to do?', before adjusting the collar on his overshirt, walking off with a slight and beautiful lean to his steps. I follow his path, passing a group holding up the wall in an underpass, trying to decide which motive to touch tonight. I hear one of them insist on a party in Deptford. They gently rib and tease until the truth spills: he only wants to go because his crush will be there, he's tired of waiting, he's hoping to make a move. Calls from the chorus of 'Why didn't you say that then?' Because it's summer, and we're all young until September, they'll do anything for their brothers, blood or otherwise. Onwards, past the multisport area, where the footballers have arrived early, taking up the whole small pitch, one young man controlling the ball with such a delicate touch, as if it is his and only his and the rest of the players are borrowers. Past Uncle T's where, because it's summer, dub rattles glass, a whistle cuts through the narrow gap in the window. I catch a glimpse of his soft dreads, pulled up in a bun, revealing a kind face and a mouth full of gold. He sings like he's singing to a lover at dusk, but I know it's just him in the room. Bob Marley's 'Waiting in Vain'. I raise a hand in greeting, and he calls back, and in that moment, memory, image and possibility slide across one another. As in: Uncle T singing to an old lover; my father in his twenties, trying to decide at which end of London to party, to find freedom; me in a few years, trying

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not to bang the door of a stranger I've made the night familiar with. What becomes of time when summer arrives?

★

We're sure my Auntie Yaa has the largest Afro-Caribbean shop in Peckham; in south London, maybe. Just off Rye Lane, head to the high street, on the corner, just before the library, and you'll find her there. She stocks everything that people, away from home, trying to build something here, need. Yams and plantain and kenkey and fufu powder, garden eggs and okra and Scotch bonnets, dried fish by the box, Supermalt by the crate. For her, for many of us, food is not just sustenance but memory, nostalgia; a way to quell longing, a way to build new foundations. Auntie sends stuff back home too, allowing people to ship pieces of themselves for their loved ones to hold. There's a regular, Dorcas, who once a month will send a box of cereals and confectioneries back to her sister in Ghana, ginger snaps and Weetabix and Tetley tea. Dorcas always says she was responsible for the shopping, so she hopes it will feel like she never left. Before sealing the box, she places a photo of herself atop the food, so it is her smile which greets her sister on arrival.

At the door, you'll find Uncle D, who is no blood relation to anyone and yet related to everyone. He's a joyous man in middle age, always wearing aviators with clear lenses. I've never known if he's officially employed by the shop, but early afternoon, you'll find him shuffling and sweeping, pointing out items to customers, smiling and laughing. Come evening time, a Guinness in hand, a bottle or two a day. I would say he's the shop's security but the one time when he might've been called into action, when Ray's friend Koby ran into the shop, breathless and begging for somewhere to hide, and a few minutes later, several boys came in, demanding we hand Koby over, Uncle stood broad and tall but Auntie shooed him away. Instead, she asked after each of the boys' parents, then enquired about *them*. Who was doing what at

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school, who had scored the winning goal in the match that weekend? Auntie understood that anger was a necessary emotion but often it was misdirected; and its misdirection was how the death we knew in multitudes multiplied further, and much of this misdirection emerged from not having *space*. She held this brief court and sent them home with shea butter for their hair, meat pies for their hunger.

I'm manning the counter when Del wobbles in, flushed from the heat. She balances the case of her double bass against a free patch of wall and, making her way through the small maze of tables, comes towards the counter. A chain with a tiny pendant – her father's – swings from her neck. The light has made her eyes wide and open, a slight smile on her features. She's beautiful. I want to say this to her, but outside of song and film, I've never heard this spoken. Still, in the moment, I'm closer to her, perhaps because I'm closer to myself, closer to knowing how I feel about her.

I must be staring because she asks, 'What?'

'Nothing.'

She doesn't push, instead taking a place at the counter. I undo the cap on a bottle of Fanta, half the bottle over ice. She drinks, deeply, before spinning in her seat to face the shop as I see it. There's a couple with eyes only for each other, their hands clasped in the middle of the table; another pair play cards, seemingly locked in stalemate; and a woman, pen in hand, scribbling into a notebook. 'Peace on Earth' by Ebo Taylor trails us in the background.

'What do you reckon is going on there?' I ask, quietly.

'He messed up and she's finally forgiven him.'

'How do you know it was him?'

'He always messes up. Don't be offended. Just how it goes.'

'Whatever. And the others?'

'I reckon . . . they're friends. About to move in together. Winner gets the largest room. And that woman is . . . writing a story.'

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'About?'

'Two young people in the summertime.'

'Sounds like us.'

'Might be.' She shrugs, smiling. 'But everyone's younger in the summertime.' She swings round to face me, as Auntie Yaa emerges from the back room, and I am briefly forgotten. They hold each other's faces in soft palms; greeting like sisters. Auntie Yaa lost her parents in similar fashion to Del; a mother who didn't make it through childbirth, a father who held on for as long as he could, but eventually lost the battle with his mirror. Auntie Yaa and Del, they are held together by some unknown I could never know.

'And how are you?'

'I'm fine, Auntie.'

'Have you heard yet?'

'Not yet.'

'You will.'

My and Del's heads dip. We've both applied for music school. Even with a student loan, it will only be possible with a scholarship, which, with each passing day without news, seems less and less likely. Only a handful are available. It feels arbitrary to rely on a small group to decide whether we are good enough, when, until this point, much of our judgement relied on *feeling*.

Del and I mostly jam with a group on evenings and weekends. We've been doing so for the past few years. We are told it's jazz we're playing but if asked what that means, we'd probably point to each other and shrug and grin. It's not that we don't know, it's just that we don't know how to explain this strange expression of improvisation, where we enter a space and lean into the unknown. Theo usually starts us off, something quick and sure, the knock of his drums a call to attention. Del will follow, her thick bass notes like walls, building a place for us to move into, and I'll dart inside this house she has made, sneaking notes through with my trumpet. All of us local, we converge wherever we can be housed: in school rehearsal rooms, music studios someone has slid us the

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