

It All Turned to Dust

1981. Brixton. Race Riots. Uprising. Michael Jackson. The Stone Roses. Lennon shot. Royal engagement. The bells are ringing. The youths are revolting. Thatcher the milk snatcher. I had heard that being chanted by men carrying placards when I was walking back from school. Mother had hurried me along though. I often heard my mum express support for Thatcher, she said we needed these hard-line politics and referred to it as 'tough love'. My mother had a lot of free time to discuss politics now that she had lost her job. She said she had been ousted out by 'dirty negroes' who were willing to work for pennies under the wage. She had been working an office job and was now trying to remediate her time into rearranging the furniture and dusting down dad's briefcase ritualistically ten times a day. Today, she had only managed eight dusting downs.

'How was school then love?' My mother asked whilst maintaining eye contact directly with the floor, obviously looking for corners to dust and crevices to clean. I retorted almost excitably that there was a new child in my class whom I had been given the responsibility of looking after as he lived simply down the road. My mother nodded along, finally expressing a slither of interest, she asked for his name and then inevitably his colour.

'Linton' I said whilst following the corners of the room with my eyes, attempting to look anywhere but at my mother. I then hesitated, hoping she would forget the latter part of her question. I knew I had to reply, to admit to her that Linton was black. I shuffled and my voice shook as I whimpered out, 'black mother, Linton is black'. I immediately knew I should have lied, I should have said anything but the truth. My mother, this woman I loved so much, who I believed and relied on retorted that I was to simply not socialise with the 'others'. I did not understand it. All I ever did was listen to her. She was my mother after all

and why would she cause harm, why would she want to stop me being friends with someone if they were not somehow bad? I complied because I simply did not know how not to.

I remember going to school the next day, avoiding eye contact with Linton. I saw the other boys picking on him. Harvey and Oliver would prod him, throw balls and pens at him. I saw him come into school with his head downcast and when he looked up to answer to the register, he sported a bruised complexion and a gash so deep I knew it would scar. I just sat there. There was a human that I could see was hurting, his loneliness penetrated my every thought. He would walk with his head down and all I wanted to do was reach out with some sort of guiding hand and caress the crevices of his face and gently edge his head up and up and up until his eyes met mine. I wanted to meet him all over again. I wanted to know Linton without the forces of our families, without Thatcher's politics, without it all. I sometimes imagined an empty white room. No furniture. Nothing but the sunlight peeping through the stained-glass windows. I would walk in, link my arm through Linton's and we would discuss stately affairs like our favourite Michael Jackson songs and how we would style Maggie's hair for her. But I would snap out of my daydreams quick enough to recognise that Linton and I were two different spheres. Race tensions were worse than ever and so our eyes would meet and then disperse as if we had been strangers all along.

It wasn't until 1984 that I ever saw Linton again. He had left school at the end of that year, it was rumoured that his brother had been in trouble with the police and he had to get a job to help his mother. There were also the cruel rumours of course, that he had died of AIDS or been shot by the police for stealing. I tried not to listen to the rumours, the idea pained me, a sharp stabbing pain that wavered and then rushed through my body, stopping only to bruise my heart and prick my conscience. Louise was infatuated with Sting. She said she would always marry a man with muscles like that and a certain 'je ne sais quoi'. Louise had also

taken up French. She said it was her ticket out of London and that Paris was now where the famous flocked to for wine and parties. In the process of perfecting her Parisian pursuit, she had taken up smoking. Chaining one after the other. She lifted up her top to enquire whether I thought she had lost any weight. I naturally retorted that she had without even lifting my eyes up from the ash stain on the carpet.

‘Come on, you have to come Grace, I need you there!’. Louise’s voice echoes around the intersections of my head. She had been attempting to persuade me to accompany her to the SARM studios tonight as Sting was going to be recording a song for Band Aid. My father had chortled when I told him I was thinking of going. He had said that Bob Geldof was ‘a jumped-up leftie’ who would do much better forking out from his own pocket than prancing around a studio. I quite like Bob Geldof though. I thought what he was doing was noble. I guess I was not the same child, I was rebelling. I wasn’t going to be the same kid that ignored Linton to satisfy their mother. I was going to go to SARM Studios with Louise. I was going to wear my lace leggings under a tutu, just like the one Madonna sported. I was going to wear chains and a bow in my hair. Louise passed me a drink from a paper bag. The brandy brazenly swilled the corners of my throat, greeting my tongue with a sweetness but my throat with a coarseness. I gulped it down and Louise could see the struggle painted on my face. She replied that it was the only bottle that was open in the house so her parents would not see. I knowingly smiled because I knew that her father was always too pissed to spy which bottles he had been drinking from. I was surprised there was any alcohol left.

It was then that I saw Linton. Louise had a slither of recollection of who he was but I assume she would have rather forgotten considering the rude remarks she had made about the ‘riff raff of Negro Hill’. I don’t know what came over me, what compelled to get up with the force I did. I caught myself hitching my skirt up and ruffling my hair. Linton had definitely

changed. He was a lot bigger now as in muscly. He had his head held up high now and it ignited some sort of pride within me. As if I had been part of the process, witnessing him grow from a small shielded stem into a blooming flower, his petals each stretched out proudly, upturned, for the world to see. But really, I had not done anything at all except be a bystander. Except look on as he would be picked on, made to feel ashamed of his colour. I didn't know any different, I only knew what I was taught, what was around me, what the men with placards would shout and what my mother would protest as she dusted the briefcase that my father would transport to and fro from work, commuting only to return back with stories of how the 'others' were obstructive, rude and intimidating in all parts of London.

Linton looked back at me, when our eyes met, a spark shattered the very tender lines of my body. It was as if every corner of my vessel woke up only to be thrown back down. I was overwhelmed but also underwhelmed. How oxymoronic, that I could be feeling these two contrasts as the same time. I was expecting love at first sight but instead, it was awkward. He knew. He obviously remembered. Just as I had. I could have done so much more. I could have made him feel like he belonged, just as I knew he did. The silence was shattering; it was louder than any bang I had heard or any baby's cry I had witnessed. I only broke it to comment on how he had grown up. He merely nodded back. I could see he was hurt. I was only grateful he was alone. I had left Louise at this point. She was lagging behind, chugging the brandy, only looking up to look back down. I simply held contact with Linton, staring into the deep browns of his eyes layered by drooping lids and a tantalising white sclera. Like some sort of white pool, a white similar to the room I envisioned I would meet Linton in. Oh, how, colours had caused so much chaos. Circling his eyes were the bags hanging below, etching a story, late nights and hard work, bad days and trials. His face had hollowed out over the years and his lips remained plump. I hoped they would part and words would escape,

marking a journey towards my patient ears. But it was me who did the talking. I channelled in my focus and blurted out, 'Sorry Linton'. It was almost pathetic, how I trembled out the words, how my eyes averted to the ground and how the shrill silence prolonged as it bounced off the surfaces around us, each ball of noise like a ping pong game, hitting every new limb. With a knowing, Linton placed his hands on my face. The warmth of his palm burned away all the iciness around us. His fingers caressed my pointed chin and my heart rendered his, just for that very moment. His lips finally parted as he zoned in on my dimmed blue eyes. 'Grace, a change is coming'. He said it with such confidence and for that very moment, I believed him more than I had ever believed anyone before. What did he mean by change? When was it coming? I remembered a shy retiring Linton first joining school and how I spent the day with him, laughing with him, sharing my lunch and how he came in the next day, expecting me to say hello but instead I looked away. I wanted him to blame me, to somehow show me the same disregard I showed him but ultimately he was better than that. He now stood before me like a rebel, like he was about to change everything I thought I ever knew and I would have let him take my hand right there and show me how life could be. My thoughts were only interrupted by Louise racing over to pull my arm. Maybe it was the right time to go. Maybe everything we needed to say had been said. There was going to be a next time anyway, surely.

Eight days later, *'Do they Know It's Christmas'* was released. I had heard my mother humming along. She hated how catchy it was. She wouldn't hum along in the presence of my father.

Three days afterwards, Linton had been killed. In a case of mistaken identity, he had been killed by police officers in Notting Hill, near Ms. Rylan's café which sold tarts and rolls. He was simply hanging out with his friends, they might have been smoking. They might not

have been. It didn't matter. It didn't make a difference. No one knows the details, apparently Linton's mother didn't even shed a tear. They said she was somewhat accustomed to burying her own children. That part of the story really hurt me, I wondered how my own mother would react if I was shot. But of course, that wouldn't happen to me would it. It only happened to people like Linton. People who were different. I perched by my window, I watched Ms. Rylan placing a bouquet by the lamppost. I watched my mother pretend like I had never uttered Linton's name. I witnessed my father only comment to say he was young. Louise reported the story to me like she had just bought a new dress rather than lost our classmate. Was this the change? Would it all be different now? Was this finally enough for people to stop and pay attention? Would they all finally understand now?

I placed my shaking hand, cold with in trepidation against my chin, grazing my face up and down in a nostalgic fashion, just as Linton had done. I looked in the mirror and imagined him standing behind me, his hand wrapped around my back, his eyes gleaming and my face beaming. I imagined an alive Linton, all the opportunities that were open to him. He could have had children; he could have been anything he wanted to be. He could have been happy. Now he was a vessel, he was another body, a nobody. The name 'Linton' bounced off the tip of my tongue, colliding with the corners of the room. My face; damp, my world; intolerant.