



BRING ON THE MARTIANS, KID JJ Amaworo Wilson

Past coldwater flats they walk, and three fat pigeons flap out of their way, landing on a concrete ledge which says No Parking Here At Any Time. But they park themselves anyway and their orange eyes follow the mob.

Some of the men arrive by tube and others take the top seats of the bus and others walk from their council estates and broken-window flats where the walls flake like eczema and the radio squeezes out Eminem and Kylie. This is the sound of a new century.

Walking faster now, they pass a pair of Hare Krishna baldheads and a cat that shoots under a parked Volvo, and the names and billboards shouting Farrakhan and Robbie Williams. And Louis Armstrong singing What a Wonderful World and his voice hanging on the wind, all chocolaty in the evening air. And pavement crawlers turning their heads, frightened eyes, and a black preacher shouting 'Jesus loves you' and doing a double-take as they walk past, all muscle and bone.

Sure he does, thinks the boy.

From different angles they come but all headed the same way, the tramps of Coldharbour Lane turning the corner with scraps of mango and fishbone on the soles of their shoes, and a set of four brothers, heavy-shouldered, sliding in off Broadbar Street where the rumbling bass from the CD store takes you under, and they join the march, heading for the bullseye. And in the middle, Tyler, six foot two of confusion and lean mass, seventeen years old and ready, in his Nikes and Levi's, ready for anything.

What is it his daddy told him? He said,

'They makin toy pets for kids in Japan. They're little toys,' he said. 'If you squeeze them right they shit themselves or piss a stream of water. How d'you like that? What comin next, huh? What comin next? Blow-up terrorist dolls. They walk around on batteries and when they get in a crowd they explode. Oh boy.'

Armstrong singing, 'And I think to myself, what a wonderful world.' Just like Tyler's dad says.

There's eighty of them now, and for a moment they seem to be walking in step before it all breaks up like a slow handclap that becomes applause. A man in a red skullcap is pointing upwards and Tyler sees his mouth making words, and high above them is a helicopter which is floating on air, its blades buzzing. From the chopper there are lenses pointing down, glass and plastic nozzles, and a walkie-talkie voice saying,

'What's the situation down there?'

And it's a blue blue day in June, the sun making long shadows of streetlamps, leaving the imprint of the helicopter on a flat roof. Tyler sweats and moves to the front and Skullcap sees him and says,

'Me lovin it already and me nuh brek a head.'

And the walkie-talkie voice saying,

'About a hundred of them heading towards the tube. We have to close it.'

And now a train zips across the bridge, with its roar of metal and air, fifty feet up, and the lumbering 133 moseys along the street, for Tooting Broadway, taking the kids in their bastardized uniforms and the housewives all the way home, their faces numbed and flat in the two-storey windows.

The men are marching down Brixton High Road with the wind round their feet, past shops that tell you they're shops – Virgin Shop, Body Shop – and a pair of black girls, all mouth and swagger and double-decker hairdos, who turn and stare, and a gaggle of Japanese, wondering what's coming next, what's coming next.

They pass under the flyover where it says Sanders goldsmiths, silversmiths, clockmakers, watchmakers, and move towards Brixton station which is held together by scaffolding and temporary walls of blue wood connecting it to the street. There the homeless have left their little nests – piles of blankets and clothes moulded, smelling high, crawling with lice and bugs while the owners stagger in circles, their cans of Special Brew held like consolation prizes. They raise their suncrusted faces with the cuts and scabs and medieval sores, and see the marchers heading their way.

The station belches up half of London's misfits, its weirdified runts with their specialised addictions – morphine, meths, you name it - and here they all are, swelling the jaws of Brixton station with its twin tunnels of steps, and one of them says,

'It's a riot. Fancy it?'

And his mate says,

'They's all blacks. I don't have nuffink to do wiv em.'

And suddenly there's a man in a BR uniform behind them, a radio in his hand, and he's saying,

'Get inside! Get inside!'

Two other workers are pulling shut the metal gates of the station, while this other one herds the people through.

'Down the stairs!' he says, and as the gates clang shut, Tyler and Skullcap and one hundred and fifty men walk past, clutching their metal and brick. Above them the helicopter buzzes like a giant insect, and the walkie-talkie crackles into life again.

'About hundred and fifty now.'

And the pilot swings the chopper's tail round. The camera lens focuses on the mob and then zooms to the van of caged coppers with their helmets and coshes.

'They're past the tube station. Streets clear now.'

Skullcap is leading them. He says to Tyler,

‘Dey kyant keep doin it. We’s nuh gonna tek it. Dey beat us, we beat em worse. Y’ gyet me?’

‘Yeah,’ says Tyler and he remembers what his father told him two days before:

‘The police take the black man into the station, he never come out. Or he come out in a box, half his face missin, the other half swelled up like watermelon.’

And the papers are full of it. London is full of it, because one of its black sons lies dead on a slab, where the policemen put him. And London is expecting two hundred, three hundred men to come marching down Brixton High Road on a blue day in June, the serene face of the dead man staring out from banners and posters ten foot in the sky. An icon at twenty-three, in black and white.

They are past the fork in the road with McDonalds on one corner, all logo and wide glass, and KFC opposite, with its own smiling icon in bow tie and glasses, and they are past a plaque that says Brixton Community Law Centre where a bird has shat for all its worth over the word Law, and to their left the raised green plots by the Ritzy where the tramps and the broken faces are found. The sun is going down on Brixton.

Skullcap is the first to see them. He picks out the shapes jumping from the van, forming a Roman phalanx of shields, and he never pauses. They are fifty yards away and a cry goes up: ‘Murderers!’ and soon it becomes a chant, and forty, thirty yards away the marchers slow down and some of them begin hurling things at the wall of shields – a brick, a rock, and then one man splits off to the left, a bottle in his hand, and as the fuse burns down he holds it there, watching it, his body suspended like a discus-thrower carved in stone, and suddenly he lets it fly and it explodes in front of the scattering police with a flash of orange, and there it stays burning.

Ten yards away now and Skullcap is yelling and squat and taunting in some ritual that looks like a Maori wardance, and what he is saying is, ‘Come an gyet me! Kill me, ya dogs!’

And behind him Tyler feels the first pangs of fear, until he turns for a second and sees his people advancing with a fury in their faces he's never seen before. And the chant of 'Murderers!' is driving them on.

And suddenly they are there, close enough to see the eyes behind the helmets, almost to smell the plastic of the shields and the breath of the parched, fearful coppers. Skullcap kicks out and makes contact and the policeman rocks back but doesn't fall. They are out of line now, and Skullcap wades in with his boots. They swing at the back of his legs and he goes down. Tyler is pushed onward, till he feels the thump of a shield on his shoulder which sends him spinning into the pavement. And everything seems to be happening at once. Stars in his face, a helicopter edging out of the eye of the sun, feet all around him kicking and running and someone shouting, 'Hold!!' and Skullcap with his hands behind his back and his face on the pavement, saying, 'Alrayt, ya dogs, alrayt,' and his hat lying lost and tiny in the road, and the chant gone dead, replaced by shouts and whacks and the sound of boots. Tyler rolls to his side. He sees a pair of policemen dragging a man by the neck and a rioter throwing karate kicks while he retreats, and near him another molotov makes its crack and whoosh of flame. And Tyler sees the mob is breaking up, flying off in different directions. He gets up with an ache in his shoulder and a copper raises his baton as Tyler backs off. Jesus loves you, Jesus loves you, Jesus loves you.

He u-turns and breaks into a jog, heading for the market. An armchair goes through a window and the fragments of glass dazzle in the shop's interior. A man is kicking at the jagged parts left by the frame and he pulls a TV out the shop window, and a dog's got loose on Electric Avenue, screaming 'Rout! Rout! Rout!'

Across the street two coppers are swinging at a rasta backed against a wall, his hands outstretched in front of his face, and a gang of kids – Tyler's age and younger – are aiming bricks at the line of shields that's walking towards them, bricks that hit the road and cartwheel slower and slower or shatter and spray with a 'clack' into the policemen's shields. And the voice in the chopper says,

'They're going back down the High Road. Looters going for the shops.'

And the mob rolls a four-door Honda onto its side and sets it alight and now the flames come licking out the gaps where windows should be. And three pigeons — illegally parked — now swoop under a bridge, in pigeon laughter, admirers of the mayhem.

Tyler goes past the heat and blurred air and looks down Atlantic Road where the rays of sun are getting picked up on the archways of the low-slung shops.

Tyler could run forever. He has the internal engine of a wild cat. But now his head is spinning and all he wants to do is sit in a corner somewhere cool and silent and colourless. He fades into a doorway, panting, and hears the dog and the chopper and sirens and more glass breaking. The last rioters are running down the street in pairs or alone. One man is carrying a television, another a stereo, and they are laughing as they run. Tyler feels himself bathed in sweat from head to toe, and he feels the nagging beat of pain at his right shoulder. But it's his head that's stopped him, got him propped up in this strip of shadow when he should be stretching out for home, past all the gutters and the nooks where the cats know his walk, and the monolith estates that stare each other out across the street, and all the signs he doesn't read and the spiked fences and the walls topped with jags of broken-bottle glass. But here he is, watching the hovering chopper that's watching him, and unable to move, locked in there, somehow chained to this space. As the police enter the street he sits on the stone floor, his head buzzing with the noise. They are coming in fours, chasing the final runners and the mad-eyed looters.

Tyler sees the coppers and he thinks of his father, legs crossed on a park bench, telling him,

'They found life on Mars. An ocean of ice under the rock. Life on Mars. You know why we want it so bad? Because man failed. Man is the universe's great disappointment. Bring on the Martians, kid.'

And he's out of there, his feet pounding the pavement, his eyes fixed on the curve of Atlantic Road. He jogs the five kilometres home, holding his bruised shoulder, and jumps up the outer stairs of the monolith. He's caressed by a breeze, and from his front door he sees the lights of the estate, like a million TV sets plugged in and showing their own sad films,

or one screen split infinitely. And they all have the same soundtrack of wind in leaves and sirens unwinding in the distance, going gradually further and further out of tune.

Where's the eccentric old man? Where's he got to, the guy that goes shopping in his slippers and dressing gown, who talks aloud to himself on crowded platforms? Where's he gone, the old loony tunes? He's on the late shift at the cake factory, gorging himself on custard pies.

Tyler kisses his mother and goes to his bedroom.

'Say your prayers,' she says.

'Mhm.'

But he doesn't.

She knows nothing about the riot or his bruised shoulder or the things going on in his head. He draws the duvet up to his chest, breathes deeply and sees the sliver of moon up there getting brushed into a blur by clouds. Such a beautiful day. Clear sky for the chopper he saw. Sun beaming on full blast. He's taken four aspirins already but the pain in his shoulder won't go away. And he lies there, re-living each step.

When you watch yourself not sleeping you can never sleep. When the mind monitors its own consciousness it cannot drift away. So he lies awake long after the cats have finished their yowling, long after the spillouts from the bars have staggered home. He's barely into his first dream when the key turns and the latch makes its click.

A minute passes and then Tyler's door opens slowly. The whispering voice of his father.

'You awake?'

Tyler's eyes open. He turns to one side.

'Hey, kid, I saw you on TV. You looked scare as a cat. You didn't nick nothin with all them other idiot, did you?'

His father's crouching now, next to the bed, in a ruffled black suit, a chain of keys hanging off his belt loop.

'My little hero.'

'I'm not little.'

‘So how it feel?’

‘I don’t know, dad.’

Tyler yawns. His father says,

‘It all kickin off now. It goin wild. They gone an call it globalization. You get that? Globalization. It mean the governments kill enough they own people, half the country goin to leave. Go somewhere else. That what globalization mean. An then they find they not wanted wherever else they go. Down at the factory, Serbs, Albanians, Ugandans, Palestinians. Half the world down there puttin cherries on cakes. They say it better than stayin at home an gettin blown up or shot at. Or shoved in prison for sayin the wrong thing. For thinkin the wrong thing. You want an apple turnover?’

‘Naa.’

‘Everybody runnin away from home. Gettin out. Because it chaos over there. Chaos. Left their families behin’, half of them. You wouldn’t believe it.’

He starts eating the apple turnover.

‘Anyway, I take a break, switch on the TV and I sees you on the news. Next to the madman in the red hat. Couldn’t miss you you so damn tall. Scare as a cat.’

‘I wasn’t scared.’

‘You looked it. Hope you didn’t kill nobody with those big hands. Or start throwin bombs.’

‘There’s alcohol on your breath.’

‘And cigarettes. All the vices, kid.’

He takes another bite of apple turnover.

‘Hear that? The police after you.’

Sirens far off, turning their way through the streets, slaloming through the hours and the nighttime dreamtime mumbles. All the snorers and the snufflers in their monoliths – far gone. Just Tyler and his dad now, one half-asleep the other half-drunk.

‘Don’t forget what it was about,’ says the old man.

‘What?’

‘The riot. Dead man in the cells. ‘Cause of his colour.’

‘I know.’

‘I know you know. Just don’t forget. And keep your nose clean. And leave me some aspirin next time.’

He closes the door quietly and by the time he finishes turning the handle of the door, Tyler’s asleep, his shoulder numb, everything gone numb, even the streets of Brixton, which crackle and fizz with need and hunger and preachers preaching and dealers dealing and the immigrants doing their soft shoe shuffle to stay alive, yes even them, all gone numb till morning. And George, Tyler’s father, who won’t live longer than the decade, lies on the sofa, wide awake, listening for the whirr of extraterrestrial engines traversing the millennia in their icy machines.

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