

ILFORD: AN END AND A BEGINNING



It's Michaelmas and Tesco Extra is crowded with asters. For weeks gladioli have bunched around the entrance, bending at angles in cellophane sheets, now it's starbursts of daisies, purple and pink like sugared almonds.

The A11, the last scatterings of London.
Edwardian houses, stone cladding, saplings splitting the walls.

We lived above this one. I look up at the window, the faded red curtains, pleats of pale rose where the sun bleached them. The marker pen drawing is still there on the pane, the outline of his hand, a staring eye.

He left marks to guide those coming next, I never imagined that I'd be one of those straggling behind, searching for clues in the walls, deciphering code in whorls of graffiti.

There was a yard at the back with cracked paving stones and roses smelling of sherbert and raspberry sorbet. Next door was Kwik Fit. We saw them gathering on the forecourt, dozens of them in black salwar and huaraches. He called them psychopomps, caught in the liminal zone between London and Essex. Sometimes they'd be away on jamaat but mostly they'd be here in the oil slicks and black dust.

The River Roding, the North Circular, low rise millennial housing.

There are gaps where there shouldn't be, revenant terraces, mirages over rubble heaps. The September heat brings smells I'd forgotten, red earth and pine needles, mauve shadows under conifers.

The way he directed me is haphazard, a confused cross hatching of scrawls and symbols on a sheet of paper. I scrutinise the lines, the pressure points, the skimming of his hand.

London is contained by the elevated motorway, the pylons and the river.

I follow paths through rusting tangles of buddleia and hawthorn. Concrete slabs are dumped to hold off travellers, brambles and sycamore break through metal railings. This is an interstitial zone, a nameless place.

I cross buckled tarmac where charcoal and crushed cans of Leck mark old revelries. It's clipped perennials then, red stemmed dogwood in geometric clumps, and a care home, a two storey slump of ochre brick. Idris is waiting with a cigarette in his hand talking to a nurse in a green uniform. Seeing him is like stepping through a portal, groves of low rise blocks become radioactive, reanimated as the decades compress.

He pulls me in, smothers me with the catnip of delicious, forgotten names. The nurse shakes my hand and smiles before returning to penumbral rooms of dettol and daytime tv. I told him about the parties Idris says, the power station and that, he's into it. I'd forgotten this, the pied piper gathering of troops.

Desiccated palms in plastic urns, earthenware pots smashed on the gravel.

Lavender place. Little Ilford Lane.

We're walking into town to see some old mates. It's strange even to think of them after all this time, I anticipate the visit like a seance or a resurrection.

Shaki and Khalil.

Appliance shops, office blocks, a knot of new towers.

He asks if I remember Pioneer Market.

The shell of art deco arcades, a smell of meat and sawdust, a pie and mash shop maybe. I think about Ilford Sounds where we got rare Jungle records, you had to sift through racks, nothing was in alphabetical order.

Now the imprint of the market is deep within the foundations of Pioneer Point, twin obelisks dominating the skyline. Idris tells me about property scams, corruption on a massive scale, Nawaz Sharif shuffling money.

The high street is busy, overheated. Someone presses a religious tract into my hand with planets radiating supernatural light.

Idris says Ilford is an important station on a sacred route. For him the town's redevelopment in the 1980s was an attempt to keep everything circulating in an enclosed drum.

Primark. Superdrug. Argos.

I remember that pound shop from before, QuidSaver, a luminous cavern exploding with baubles and tinsel. The woody scents of incense are blue in the air, a smoky drift from the stock cupboard.

We walk round the back to Havelock Street. The pub is still there on the corner. Last time we were on microdots, higher doses than today. I remember drinking bottles of cold lager watching the glowing outlines of the arched windows. There was a property show on tv with the sound off, I remember bright images of thatched cottages upturned by dark UK garage spilling from the jukebox.

The flat is pressed in between the railway tracks and Harrison Gibson furniture store, they're demolishing it soon Idris says, turning it into a 30 storey drome. The way he describes the new development is a cold warren, a glacial hive of corridors.

Havelock Road is loading bays and fire escapes, the obverse side of the high street. We stop at a yard with indigo shadows and sharp autumn light, everything razor edged like a collage. The flat is above the pound shop, you have to climb steel steps to get in, then a caged roof with galaxies of white petalled stars, jasmine broadcasting a druggy sexual fragrance.

Idris shouts through the letter box. The windows are dust caked and barred.

There's a temperature drop as we cross the threshold, a cold slap of damp.

Newspapers are spread out across the floor, dishes of food arranged there and I realise they've been waiting for us. The missing years are elastic, cloying stretches of unexplained time. Idris told me he went to see Khalil in detention once. Afghanistan is a scrubbed zone on the map, they're Hazara, an ethnicity the Taliban tried to cleanse. I think of those giant Bamiyan buddhas, cliffs of wreckage there. Now they're working with Idris on this renovation project, houses near the power station.

They have a musical instrument called a tar, I'd never seen one before I met them, it's like an 8, two mulberry bowls stretched with lambskin. They play Farsi folk songs, sounds unfolding in the thick scents of blueberry kush. Idris calls it bluesy, a buzzing kind of vibe. It's like crystals replicating, the giant's causeway or something.

Conversations unspool in the music. We're discussing new places, the zone round the power station, the tidal shifts of the Thames. There's a new town forming there, and parties in the shells of pubs. They want out of this place, the crazy rent and goggle eyed landlord. They show me the dustings of mould, the ashy dots from floor to ceiling.

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The concrete frame of the furniture store is wrapped in plastic sheeting. A door is propped open, its vast showrooms have become Ilford plaza, a skein of stalls and cabins, plywood tunnels of sepia light.

A heavy itr fragrance conjures nights in that last house, the roses, the kwik fit, the guardians at the gate.

Punjabi film posters, kurtas, embroidered prayer mats. The place is quiet. Idris says it's the first time he's seen it in this state. It feels crepuscular, on the verge of eviction. Then a corner booth with photocopied hands, all the lines labelled- head, heart and life. Idris wants to go in, says it's an entrance to the 'real building, where it's actually happening.'

We push through black baize. There are no lights, just evening sunlight leaching through gaps in boarded windows. The polystyrene ceiling has black gaps like a crossword. I look into the concrete vault above, it's dark and dusty like the backstage of a theatre.

There are empty display units, raised platforms where settees and tables would have nested.

A stairwell is petrol blue like the '70s. At every landing there are padlocked doors. There's a smell of tobacco, and something else, woodsmoke or burnt grasses.

On the 15th floor a nightclub, a carmine shell lined with leather banquettes. I trace patterns in the walls with my fingertips, there are sounds locked in them.

Idris beckons me to a wall of windows. London is there in the distance, serrated jags in a band of hazy violet. The forest is an island chain, a bluish archipelago. I feel its groves, its smoky fragile webs.

I can see the imprint of a roman signalling beacon and Howard's chemical factory, then the iron age hill fort, the care home he drew in blue biro. I think of the nurse in the green uniform and wonder if we'll ever see him again.

I don't know the time but the sky is indigo like the skin of Japanese plums, the bloom on dark chocolate.

Wanstead Flats, Green Man Roundabout. The protests at Claremont Road. Faces come scuttling back. I think about the end when we were evicted, how Idris was there when it seemed hopeless. Mirrors light up behind an empty bar, I see his face scrambled.

Ibis Budget. Wall End. The salt marshes and container ports. He points out dusky willow trees, a V formation of geese.

Ilford is a border town, an end and a beginning.