

Malcolm at the Martyr's Cafe

Vanessa Kisuule

When you walk in, the three lattes on my tray crash to the floor. My colleague Tina looks over, then away. She is used to this sort of thing. Your lips twitch a smile of commiseration. A blade of light hits the left lens of your famous glasses, slices the room in half.

Feigning calm, I drum my fingers on the counter as you scan the menu, make your order. I watch you pour one sugar, then another and a third into your espresso. You throw it down your throat like a pill and grimace.

Here you are in the Martyrs' Cafe, where slain heroes come to cloud watch and drink coffee, mourn the revolutions they didn't live to see. I don't work here for the money. The pay is terrible, the people watching priceless. Martin came by a month ago, your presumed nemesis, and gleefully pulled an iced caramel mocha through a red straw. Joan of Arc sat beside him, sipping at a sombre filter coffee. St Bartholomew barged in,

ordered three brownies and ate them in five minutes flat. But you are the first martyr to fluster me, dash my coffees and my cool to the floor.

Behind the counter, Tina mutters at me. *Say something to him*. I wipe furiously at the spotless patisserie shelves, chewing the inside of my cheek. What do I possibly say? Hey Malcolm: did you know there's a community centre in my city named after you? As you walk through the doors, a crude rendering of your face takes up an entire wall. In every montage about black liberation you appear, always at some podium, the camera craning up at you. Or you're sat with your chin propped by your hand, that furrow in your brow persistent.

You told us not to wait for freedom but to seize it. How thrilling and fearful it was, how impossible an ember of rage to live up to. It was a distinctly American and male anger. I admired it but couldn't claim it entirely as my own. It happened often that your history across the pond was fed to us as if it were ours. I was nine when I first heard your name, twenty-nine when I heard of Olive Morris. Her face anoints no posters, her name not mentioned in any rap song I know of.

Can I confess I resent it, resent *you*, sometimes? The height and heft of you in that chair! You and Martin were not the only ones, certainly not the only ones that mattered, magnetic men though you were. If it were Betty and Loretta's mouths that spoke the same rhetoric, would the media have fawned and seethed the same way?

This is why you're not supposed to meet your heroes. They're best kept as hooks on which we hang our hopes for salvation. Of course, you know this. Maybe that's the question: have you forgiven him, your erstwhile hero Elijah Muhammed? The name that punctured your sentences like commas. Yours was the steady devotion of a cult member and we like our cult leaders strident, don't we, like a straight arrow we can follow to redemption. There is something cultish in how we remember you, too, how we remember all the telegenic leaders of the movement. A slogan here, a raised fist there, quotes pulled free of context and gristle.

With a jolt, I realise you are speaking to me. *Tell me where you grew up?* you ask. I describe the tiny bedroom in a nondescript commuter town, its curtainless windows and modest shelf of chick lit books and fantasy novels. I was eleven when I read your autobiography, a big serious book with tiny font. It made me feel grown up. Like you, I fancied myself an autodidact. Inspired by how you read the dictionary cover to cover whilst in prison, I tried to squint my way through the tiny Collins dictionary my mother kept in the living room. I got a few pages into E before I got bored and gave up ('effort' *n*: physical or mental exertion; attempt). You laugh kindly, say it's easy to be diligent when you've little else to occupy your time.

Malcolm. How sacrilegious, to think of you by your first name! The table you're sat on is the one that wobbles, I should have warned you. You fold a napkin and wedge it under its

short leg. As you bend, I see that your frame is slight, your shoulders failing to fill your jacket. You are still, I imagine, haunted by those three gun barrels, the last thing you saw before you hit the floor. Sometimes, I entertain notions of myself as a freedom fighter wanted by the authorities. I can see it: a black and white shot of me posed by a window with a rifle in hand, my hair blown out big enough to rival Angela Davis'. I like the aesthetic of revolution, shrink from its gruelling sacrifices. Looking at the gaunt hollow of your cheeks, the ceaseless tremor of your knees, I am ashamed of my hubris. There is no glamour or glory to any of it. Malcolm, I dare not ask: *were you scared?*

You go to leave, but something stops you at the door. It's something like bashfulness, the expression on your face as you approach. *Sister Betty* you say. *You know anything of what happened to her?* I tell an almost truth of a stoic woman who went on to receive a doctorate in nursing, took care of her children and grandchildren, retained always the dignity and nurturing ways you had known her for. You smile at all of this, lean in as if to tell me a secret. On the rare occasions you weren't working, speaking, travelling, you say, you and Betty would play games of chess. *She always won and not because I let her.* Your shoulders drop with relief. *Praise Allah, she lived a long life of love and purpose.* I do not tell you of the burns that covered eighty per cent of her body on the day she was burnt to death in her own home, that it was your grandson's hand that held the match. I convince myself this lie of mine is a gift. The bell above the door makes its high trill as you depart. The sound hangs for several seconds, as if waiting for your return.

Vanessa Kisuule is a writer and performer based in Bristol. She has won more than ten slam titles including the Roundhouse Slam 2014, Hammer and Tongue National Slam 2014, and the Nuyorican Poetry Slam. Her poem on the historic toppling of Edward Colston's statue, 'Hollow', went viral in the summer of 2020. She has two poetry collections published by Burning Eye Books and her work was highly commended in the Forward Poetry Prize Anthology 2019. She was the Bristol City Poet for 2018-2020. Her debut novel *Neverland: The Pleasures and Perils of Fandom* was published in 2024 by Canongate Books.

A recording of this text can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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