

## DH1: A Tale of Two Cities

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\*NB: all names have been changed

**I'M ONE OF** those people who doesn't sit in their booked seat on a train. I'll look for an empty space where a passenger hasn't shown up instead. I've chosen Carriage B, Seat 15, and, so far, no one has turned up. I know I'm safe when the train hushes away from the platform through the shadowy ribcage of the train station. I can settle into the journey now.

I'm on the LNER. It goes all the way up to Inverness, but I'm getting off at Newcastle. We're not long out of Leeds station when the train driver welcomes us aboard. His voice folds into the background, muffled and grainy over the tannoy. I'm half-listening until I hear the destinations listed. York. Northallerton. Darlington. Durham. I'll be passing through Durham for the first time since graduation. It's only been three months, but this crisp October morning seems a world away from that hot day in July. It was one of the best days I ever had in that city. Almost aggressive in its perfection.

When I think of my experiences in Durham, I'm drawn to the extremes. In the highlight reel of the things that stand out the most, all of the quotidian details fall away. I forget what each day felt like. Instead, I rely on my two-dimensional version of the past. And I'm not the only one. In fact, this happens on a much wider scale. On the surface, Durham has a dual culture: at once a bastion of the elite and a working-class cultural touchstone. This is the touristic image of the city fed to the public, crude in its simplicity. A shallow understanding that does, unfortunately, stick to some version of the truth.

You can see it in the invisible boundaries drawn by Durham's pubs. The Swan on Elvet Bridge belongs to the students in the summer: it's the one-stop destination for any graduand to celebrate their final exam, post-trashing.<sup>1</sup> However on any given Saturday, the city night is for the locals. There'll be sparkling heels instead of sticky student trainers treading Sadler Street and North Road. And some pubs you know not to go to, no matter the day. I learned this the hard way over a quiet pint with my housemate one Friday night at The John Duck. All of my insecurities around being the only visibly non-white person in the room were realised as a man asked if I knew his girlfriend, only she was from Africa too, Kenyan incidentally. Sit in the wrong pub at the wrong time in Durham to feel a true sense of un-belonging.

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<sup>1</sup> Graduands are students who have completed their degrees but are yet to graduate. Students coming out of their final exams will be 'trashed' with prosecco/champagne, flour, glitter, foam etc, to mark the end of their degrees.

Durham in the last half of the 2010s is a place marked by its duality and the extremes of its opposites, caught in a series of contradictions held together by the enduring town/gown division. A tale of two cities that sit alongside one another on a parallel path, never converging, like train tracks. Yet there are exceptions to this: experiences that fall between the tracks, even if we don't hear about them all the time.

Watching the greenery shift beside me in the way we all do in moving vehicles makes time stretch out a little. It's its own motion picture, following me as I drift in and out of thoughts of everything and nothing. I flick between them as though I'm searching for a word in a dictionary, Os, Ps, Qs... There's something about the rhythm of a train that makes it so easy to think. I give into it; let my heart pour out something quiet as though I'm giving it to the landscape itself.

### DH1 3LJ

**ROSHAN IS EXACTLY** as imagined she would be from her emails. When she speaks, I can hear her exclamation marks and ellipses. Our virtual introduction through a mutual friend started an online trail of potential coffees that were always cancelled last minute. Her work would get in the way and she seemed to always be in the middle of dealing with something on the long list of responsibilities she shouldered as part of her role as a community development worker.

From the little I knew about this line of work, I imagined she spent her days building networks or facilitating groups, but I was never sure what her job actually consisted of. So, when she sent me an invitation to her International Women's Day event, I knew that this would be the best chance I had to see her in person and at work. She's jumpy and bright, running on the adrenaline that any host under the pressure of convincing their guests that what they're invited to is worth their effort would be. The pressure of keeping a promise they're desperate not to break.

We're in the Lindisfarne Centre at St Aidan's College, and it's the beige room I've ever seen. Colour is something I can't help but notice here. Against the beige, I see the reds and the greens of saris; marble eyes defined by flawless eyeliner; golden skin and the glitter of bright jewellery. It takes me by surprise. Being in a room like this emphasises the fact that I am often surrounded by people that don't look like me. I've become so accustomed to only seeing white that I don't notice it anymore.

I'm all too familiar with being the odd one out. In every classroom and at every party, I'm the only one with twisted hair or a button nose. I have to bury insecurities of whether people are reading my external features as shorthand for false caricatures of my ethnicity. This is the burden

of everyone who lives in a world not made in their image, to be defined by a set of classifications that barely scratch the surface of who they fully are.

I'm still the only visibly Black woman in this particular room but I don't feel like an 'other'. Instead, my standing out inhabits a different kind of difference. Most of the women here are Middle Eastern refugees or asylum seekers who, for some devastating reason, have found themselves torn away from their home countries. I feel obtusely Western in my unearned comfort and I resist the urge to ground conversations in points of similarity. I can't match their unique grief, their memories of war, or their admissions of isolation. But as the evening progresses, the lines of visible and invisible difference dissolve.

Timid introductions turn into gripping anecdotes. The women here have lived through extreme love, loss and pain, but also through banality. The prosaic experiences in life that are sublime in their tedious relatability; junk mail and boring daytime television, as well as unimaginable heartbreak. They're robust. Supported by networks of friendship that come alive over buffet food and cheap wine.

When it's time for me to leave, I realise that I've only managed a few hurried exchanges with Roshan. She spent most of the time buzzing from one group to the next. I catch her for a moment to say goodbye and we vow to arrange a proper meet up soon, although I know this may never happen. It's clear to me now exactly what her job is. She binds people together. It's the immersive, uncelebrated, but life-changing work of a person who keeps the heart of this city pulsing for the women who've travelled a long way to feel at home.

## DH1 4SG

**THE BUILDING SMELLS** of rain. It's bone dry outside and has been for days, but this is the sort of place that retains a scent, almost as though it's holding on to a memory. I inhale it in waves as the dust on the staircase kicks back at me with each step I take. The long ascent is made unbearable by the heat. It's mid-June and another day in a long sequence of sunshine and blue skies. I'd be on Tynemouth sand right now, if I could, but instead I'm taking part in a group art exhibition.

I make it to the landing of the second floor of what used to be a government building to see it flooded with light shooting through the smeared sash window on the left. The window looks as though it hasn't been cleaned since the late 90s. Back then, this building was the home of the now-defunct Department of Social Security. A desk worker in a suit would have looked onto North Road from this window before starting a day's work under office strip lights. Now, there's

paint on the walls and glue on the floor. It's found new life as the base for TESTT Studios, where artists from all over Durham work alongside each other, and where I have an office as Editor-in-Chief of *Blink*, Durham's only People of Colour-led magazine.

*Blink* started life in the university but soon grew out of its mould when it became apparent that the magazine was more than a transient, term-time, student project. Becoming a part of the TESTT Studios residence took our frame of reference to a part of the city entirely beyond the university. Up until then, we had had to tolerate our bedrooms, the Bill Bryson Library foyer and Student Union meeting rooms as makeshift workspaces. So, I was glad to have a dedicated space, and never tired of the satisfaction of twisting the key in the lock of a room that was our own. But it was more than just the peace and quiet that I appreciated.

TESTT Studios may physically only be a street away from one of the many university buildings sprawled across the city, but it is creatively miles apart from the institution. It is a contemporary cultural art scene at the heart of Durham City that exists in its own right and not just as an export of a home county with a view of London as a final destination. It became my hiding place away from reading lists and puffer jackets. It was real life. The Durham I'd longed to be a part of since I'd first arrived.

The main entrance is already open. Jenny and Robert are assembling the table for the food spread. All of the pieces are in position: a collection of paintings, visual installations, photography and sculpture, all linking in some way to the theme of 'Bloom'. I've seen this space be so many things before, but today it's alive with colour. An outsider looking at this building from the street would think it symbolised what Durham is. Crumbling. Declining. Trapped in the last century. But this exhibition will bring out a garland of bright ideas; artistic conversations that will dance together like the fruit in the Pimm's cocktails we'll soon be drinking.

TESTT Studios represents what Durham could be, but it's one in a long line of many impermanent occupants of a building that has seen so many lifetimes. Like the old student houses in Gilesgate or on Hallgarth Street that host the generations of twentysomethings coming of age amongst swollen ceilings and damp. In the end the inhabitants drift on, leaving the disintegrating buildings that make up the city's skin behind, sagging and wrinkling with time. The spirit of TESTT Studios has to live on, for Durham's sake. But it needs more than bricks and mortar. Sustained social infrastructure will be a part of this story's survival too.

### DH1 3RD

**WE AGREE TO** meet at Esquires Café. It's a dark January day and, despite it only being 3pm, the evening is already desperate to overcome the afternoon. It dawns on me that this whole arrangement is the most bizarre thing I have done in the service of my degree. Talking to missionaries from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the LDS Church) is not a typical exercise as far as studying goes. But here I am, treading far beyond the confines of my comfort zone, to speak to Sister Franklin and Sister Owen about their experiences of faith and feminism.

A distracting feeling of apprehension settles at the pit of my stomach as I wait for them to arrive. I'm here because I chose to study an ethnographic research module as part of my second year in the Department of Theology and Religion. I was enticed by the chance to engage with religious life through the experiences of those it directly affects. I wanted to learn about the diverse shades and intricacies of how humans relate to the divine; the history, the politics, the culture, the psychology, the poetry of it all. Durham is a prime stage for the big and the small dramas of religious experiences, from the heavyweight institutional bodies like the Church of England symbolised in Durham Cathedral to the lesser-known faith practices like the work of the LDS Church missionaries I was learning about through my degree.

It's obvious to me who the Sisters are when they walk in. With their long flowing skirts and sensible hairstyles, they stand out against everyone else. I wave them to my table, and they acknowledge me with kind smiles, so big and bountiful that I can feel them from across the room. Sister Owen is the first to reach out for a hug, warm but bounded, and Sister Franklin replicates, their name badges pressing against my chest. They tell me that missionaries work in pairs just like the animals that Noah led into the Ark. And I can see this in the way they interact with each other, apportioning themselves exactly 50% of everything as if each person is half of a whole. Neither dominates the other, especially not in conversation. They continue the volley of dialogue in equal serves. Sister Owen is from Australia; Sister Franklin from America. Sister Owen is engaged; Sister Franklin is single. Sister Owen has siblings; Sister Franklin also has siblings. We tunnel into a winding discussion set by the pace of this metronome.

I get to see Durham through their eyes as they describe their daily routine. Their work consists of lobbying the cobbled streets for disparate souls in need of the Word of God, of drawing people into the most existential conversations. They wear their faith on their sleeves and their willingness to talk about it all is unreserved. By the simple but extraordinary act of being who they are and being here, they show me that Durham is in communion with the whole world. This patch of land a part of a globally interconnected faith story.

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**THE LURE OF** sleep creeps closer, tempting me to relent the control of my neck muscles, my eyes already having yielded somewhat to the weight of languor as each blink lingers a moment longer than it should. The train slows down and I recognise exactly where we are: the elongated bend right before the postcard image of Durham – and it’s as if my body is aware of it too. The view yawns out in front of me and I have that feeling in the centre of myself, a pang of tenderness at the beauty of the sight of it. Cathedral and castle floating on trees.

It’s dominating and devastatingly magnificent: a visual used freely as an emblem for everything that Durham represents. But from this vantage point, it’s impossible to see the detail, the individual bricks, the houseplants in the windows, the faces of the people that breathe life into this place. As I look at that picturesque image, I know there are shades to it, and that’s the Durham I wish people knew about – instead of the dense symbols that control its cultural brand. We’d do better to listen to the quieter voices that show us the texture of what it means to be a part of this medieval city, perfect in every season, held in the frame of the wide train window.

Those reaching their final destination ready their things and shuffle to the exits. The queue to leave stretches into the aisles and a student with a small suitcase stands above me. The ‘19 LEAVERS’ on the back of her hoody gives away her age. A fresher, she’s barely on the edge of it. That was me four years ago.

When I look at 19 LEAVERS, it feels like I’m looking right at the cycle of regeneration that drives a wedge between the disparate experiences of the city. Departure is an inevitability for Durham students. It’s there from the very beginning, the unspoken destiny accepted at matriculation that hangs in the air until it’s fulfilled upon graduation. Like so many finalists, I didn’t think of Durham as my future. But that doesn’t mean that my time there didn’t matter.

When the train doors open, I think of how easy it would be for me to get off. I could weave through the blocks and fields that I know so well. I could take myself right back to the root of all of the memories I made there. But the doors close before I even have the chance to take the thought seriously. And I know that there’s more than a locked train door keeping me from entering into that space. It’s the nature of the past that has closed off that time forever.

I ready myself to arrive in Newcastle and think of how Durham vibrates for all the people that live there now. I hope that it can become a place for more than two types of people – those who have always been there and those who will never stay.