Forest of A Thousand Demons: An Essay by the Author of *Forest Gate*

I grew up in the East End of London, in an area called Forest Gate, where you could get your arse kicked if you didn't learn fast to keep your mouth shut and your eyes constantly averted. My best friend Alex and I spent our free time hanging around, robbing bus conductors, breaking windows, stealing cars and challenging people to fight on the flimsiest whim. When I was 15, I bought a gun from a dread in Notting Hill Gate and Alex and I committed an armed robbery. Alex got caught and went to prison. I got away - I hid under the loose slats of my old school building for a few hours until I spotted one of my older sister's friends and begged her to walk hand-in-hand with me to the train station where I caught the train to Oxford circus.

My parents, Nigerians, found out about the robbery from Alex's mum and vowed never to let me out of the house again; I could study and go to church, but that would be it. Nigerian culture doesn't allow for parent/child negotiations, so I complied – perhaps because I always wanted to be a good catholic Nigerian boy, and because I was terrified they would make good on their threat to hand me over to the authorities themselves.

Like many black men, I had reached a place from which there seems no way out, only the fear that all our efforts will come to nothing, that our whole lives may fall apart in our hands. It is the point at which we easily forget any allegiances, feeling instead as useless as unstrung beads. I have felt like this twice in my life. Ambition dulled, aspirations exhausted, my frustration became so all-consuming that I felt compelled to lash out against the system that I was convinced had been set up to make me, and others like me, fail. I had friends with older brothers who had tried to live by the book. I watched many of them fail miserably. Breaking the law made sense; it felt like an easier option.

In Britain we're not generally honest or open with each other about racism, even within black families. When I was five, I spent the first of many summer holidays going to work with my father at Chelsea Barracks on the Kings Road. I would eat lunch with the soldiers in the mess hall and towards the end of his shift we would walk around the beautiful grounds switching on the dim lamps before it got dark. My father, tall and shiny, would lift me up and tell me bogeyman stories about the IRA (who nail-bombed his beloved barracks in 1981) and whenever he passed a soldier he would get all stiff and address them as "sir". I loved the camaraderie of the soldiers, the way they saluted each other. I was going to be a soldier just like my old man.

I was 12 before I realised my father was a security guard. He didn't lie about his job, but for some reason I had always assumed he was the same as the soldiers I so admired. I felt so embarrassed. In the general

confusion of adolescence, this discovery (and the feeling that I had been betrayed) made me lose all respect for him; I couldn't forgive him. Our relationship became quarrelsome and violent, and we grew apart. How could my father, who spoke to me of nothing but education and gainful employment, end up as a security guard?

It was only after I left home that I learned that in Nigeria he had been a governor of 12 schools. He came to London with the spirit of African independence blowing behind him but was refused teaching positions because he had a hard edge to his Nigerian accent. At some point he gave up his idealism. But at 12 I doubt this knowledge would have meant much to me – or made a difference.

I would find out how hard it was by 16, when it came to finding a job for myself. Almost 30 years had passed since my father arrived, but not so much had changed. I wasn't sure what to do after I left school. I wanted to write a novel but in the meantime I was working Saturdays in Topman on Oxford Street, selling suits to my mates at inflated discounts on the side. One day my mother, ever a believer in progress through the usual channels, sent me trussed up in a suit to a career advice centre on Hoe Street in Leyton. The room was heavy with the smell of piss; discarded ticket stubs littered the floor. In a corner was a huge binder, full of jobs for school-leavers.

I noted the three or four that looked interesting. One was at HM Treasury Chambers. Then this chubby white woman with Leo Sayer curly hair called out my number. She spoke at me for 20 minutes before concluding with the offer of a job at the local McDonald's in Walthamstow, north London. "It's very popular," she said. "Ideal for boys your age."

What's wrong?" My mum asked when I got home and burst into tears.

"Fat bitch said I should work in McDonald's," I sobbed.

"Don't say 'bitch'," she said.

Then, having listened to what happened, she wiped the snot from my nose, half embraced me, and said, "Where's that piece of paper, the one with the jobs you were interested in? There is nothing to stop you applying for those jobs yourself. And don't let me catch you crying over something like this again."

By this time I was 16. It was 1988, seven years after the riot in Brixton, only three years after the Broadwater Farm and Handsworth riots. I had spent more than 10 years in education, but not one teacher had asked me what I wanted to do. Not one had offered me a book that I could relate to, nor spoken openly about race and social justice. My school was mixed but all the more confusing for it. The rugby team was mostly white; the football team mostly black; rap music was not allowed at the summer disco and we all spoke urban slang. I wasn't bullied but I grew up with a sense that I was

less than “black”. I was an African, laughed at by everyone because starving “Ethiopians” were always on the telly, because of my surname, my father’s tribal marks, his accent, my mother’s funny clothes. When I left all I knew was that I wanted to leave the area I had grown up in.

After taking A-levels I read law at university to please my mother and then worked at HM Treasury Chambers in Westminster for five years. To some this might seem like a turning point, but I don’t believe that education saved me. Lots of well-educated black men I know are unemployed or in jail. For me staying out of trouble was more about listening to the voice inside that says you don’t want to end up where you know you could, where lots of people expect you to end up. My motivation has always been to resist the image that many people have of black men.
For a while I felt I had arrived. I was earning decent money, bought my first suit (Kenzo) and a tacky Ford XR2 (white with all the trims), I got married, I thought I was the business. On Gordon Brown’s first day at work as chancellor of the exchequer I was one of the few hundred or so HM Treasury staff who, still riding high on the promise of New Labour, lined the marble steps to welcome him. I even shook his hand. The political landscape had tilted and everything felt right and proper. But of course it wasn’t. When I looked around at all the anodyne black men in that fancy building it scared me to death.

I soon became bored of office life. I was terrified of turning into one of my black colleagues who had been working there for decades making the same complaints about the illusions of equality within the civil service being worse than the obvious inequality. (Yes, there are lots of black people in the civil service but they’ll spend a lifetime waiting to be promoted unlike their white counterparts.) So I wrote a letter to Tony Elliott (founder and publisher of the Time Out Group) about a fantasy I had to start a magazine for black men. After a year of an internship (after work, I would take the tube from Westminster to Tottenham Court Road), he agreed to invest. He gave me £100,000 in instalments , and I launched Untold, an i-D magazine for black men, the first of its kind. It sold 30,000 copies a month and ran for five years. Advertisers paid top dollar for pages. I interviewed Tony Blair, Nelson Mandela, Quincy Jones, Youssou Ndor. But the £100,000 didn’t go far. Soon I was on my own, trying to extract money from reluctant advertisers.

It is not only because of their small circulation that so many magazines aimed predominantly at black people collapse. It is about racism. I ran around London trying to sell advertising space for five years and mostly got nothing but absurd excuses. It was like banging my head against a jagged

wall. Then one day I turned up for work bright and early as usual and a bailiff, tall white dude in a bomber jacket and scuffed boots, greeted me at the front door. “All right, Pete,” he said, smug as you like. He knew my name because he had come knocking so many times before. Bollocks to all this, I thought, and I never went back.

And then for the second time I found myself in that dark place. Only this time it was much worse than when I was 15. Like all company directors who lose their businesses I felt a huge sense of failure. My magazine had banged on about successful black men. Now I couldn’t afford a travel card. I was 32 and immersed in anger. I had lost my business and my home. I was made bankrupt, I was divorced and finding it difficult to come to terms with my absent/weekend father status. My world was falling apart. I started making bad decisions under stress. I was tired of constantly being reminded that I was not good enough, of having to be better than average just to be considered normal. I went into freefall, tempted to do things I had never dreamt I could contemplate doing. Instead of simply reacting to what was happening I wanted to act - think I’m a thief? I’ll show you a thief. Think I’m violent? I’ll show you violence. I wanted to fight everyone, to repudiate all allegiances, morals, values, loyalties and sentiment. I just wanted to lash out.

But what I really wanted was to curl up like a dead leaf and allow myself to go wherever the wind blew. To me it seemed that the systems - those historical conditions that shape advantage (government, economy, judiciary, education, mass media, pop culture), so drenched in racism - were geared to make me fail.

I had to get out of East London fast. I spent a year living in West London, four months in Paris, a year in Nigeria. Whenever I spoke to my mum she reminded me (nicely) just how much of a bum I was. Then, two years ago, I moved to Brooklyn. It was like taking a deep, warm bath. America has always had its problems dealing with race. Accepting black men into positions of power isn’t necessarily one of them. I’m no expert; I just prefer my chances here, where I’ve met more than enough assertive black men still full of ambition to lift the lid on my kettled anger.

I had my first proper punch-up in Chingford; I scored my first goal over on Hackney marshes on a Sunday morning; I lost my virginity one spring among the hyacinths by the pond in Victoria Park: I could buy you a beef patty from a Jamaican spot in Dalston that might be the best in the UK, if not the world. I haven’t known anything but a multicultural Britain. Yet the

echo of all we have inherited from the postwar immigration era rings loud and clear in my ears and in the ears of young black Britons of the fifth and sixth generation. But I can't walk around London without wondering what has happened to all the black men of my generation.

The lack of any significant social reform in Britain is disappointing. The country should look back and reform the Race Relations Acts of the 1960s. Some of the companies that are all white at management level should be forced to hire and promote black people. The arbitrary powers to exclude that are too often deployed against black boys in our school(s) need to be overhauled. Bank managers should be encouraged (subsidised) to help black businesses. Britain needs black universities like those in America. It feels to me as if black men are being denied access to the credentials that enable us to compete. In some respects it is as if we are in the process of being wiped out.

I still go home from time to time, and whenever I'm back in Forest Gate, amid the drone of souped-up engines and the rank odour of KFC, I see groups of young men milling at street corners. I always get a sentimental sense of connection. They stare at me like they could kill me and I stare at them back, with their wild hair, sagging jeans and arses hanging out, and I understand them perfectly. Rebellion feels like the only way to escape the deadly boomerang visited on us. Not all but lots of my friends do bad things as a matter of survival. I don't necessarily agree with anyone breaking the law, but in our country, the way things are, I don't judge.

Just before I left for New York I met my old friend Alex again. We had a Guinness in the Princess Alice in Forest Gate. He is now a businessman of sorts. He sells heroin, morphine, methamphetamine and cocaine around a large slice of east London. "We would've made great partners me and you," he said. Alex spent years in prison because of something we had both done. He got caught and in that great East London tradition, he never spoke a word to the police about me.

When we were kids, Alex's little brother Isaac used to try to hang out with us. Specifically, I remember Isaac begging to come out with us one Friday night, when he found out we were going to rob the man who collected the money from our parents for the football pools. We followed that man for most of the night around the estates. He was white, in his mid-40s with a Barbour-style jacket and a flat cap. We took him for £80 and put the money toward a gun.

I asked how Isaac was now. Isaac was dead, Alex said. He had jumped off

a tower block when he was 16, and he hadn't left a note.

For months after learning of Isaac's death I used to hear his thoughts in my head. Still I picture him often, looking scared and beaten, leaning over the edge of the deserted tower, with the harsh world rolling around in his mind. He must have known he didn't stand a chance — at anything. I picture Isaac looking in concentration over the tops of the sycamores, watching streams of taillights disappear down familiar perilous streets. In my mind I am always the first to arrive at the scene and when I look at the body, I see that he is me. Alex the dealer, the ex-con, the desperado, could have been me, too.

It has became fashionable for black and white people in Britain to act as if they don't have the slightest idea about racism, about why black men reach the point of massive gravity, when inertia sets in, where we can't seem to connect properly with the world, why we are absent, why we end up unfocused, directionless trying to rob and kill. In 2007 30 teenagers, mostly black, were reported murdered. A recent police report on London's gang culture identified 170 separate gangs, with more than a quarter said to have been involved in murders. According to a 2008 study by Queen Mary University, London, suicide is proportionally more common among young black men than white; but more alarmingly, most of the suicides that occur among black men happen within 24 hours of being in contact with a professional therapist.

Black men in Britain remain almost invisible, at the lowest of the "racial hierarchy". Yes we get jobs, but not often enough in boardrooms; 37% of black men in the UK are on the police's national database whether they have been found guilty of a crime or not (compared to 13% of Asian and 9% of white men). This racial disparity hardly ever works in our favour. Even if we play by the rules we are twice as likely to be unemployed. White men are the gatekeepers to the roles we could use to redefine ourselves: in politics, in television, radio, newspapers, even club promoting. Let us not pretend we can't see.

Prime minister, Tony Blair came into power in 1997. His '*New Labour'* and '*we deserve better'* slogans sent us all into a bit of a frenzy. He gave birth to an idea of 'cool Britannia' a play on the old imperialist song 'rule Britannia'. I voted for Blair and for an idyllic vision of Britain, of people living together harmoniously despite their differences. A number of phenomenally successful novels came out on the back of this ideal, playing upon the fantasy of a progressive multiracial Britain.

On the 6 July 2005 the face of ‘progressive multicultural’ Britain – a face at ease with different religions and races - won the bid for the 2012 Olympics and on the following day, 7 July, came the London terror attacks. Suddenly everyone was talking about race, culture, religion, immigration and identity again. How do third generation UK-born boys become radicalized? It’s a question for which the characters in this book might have some quick answers.

I have lived in London all my life and I could never fully relate to this dreamy idea of groups of multiracial teenagers walking hand-in-hand around London with no reason to notice their differences, oblivious to their race, their culture or history. The British idea of multiculturalism is in fact a dangerous myth. In London, different races may live on top of one another but we remain separate and often alienated communities.

I began to jot down my memories and impressions of Forest Gate when I was 30. At the time I did not know why or for whom I was jotting these memories down. Once the manuscript was complete I wasn’t sure what I had done. I had guns, gangs and terrible violence in my story, everything that flies in the face of the most conventional, asphyxiating British literary establishment. In Britain, these are subjects that are rewarded with a certain contempt; that relegate writers to less than writer’s status. I sent it out eventually because I knew *Forest Gate* represented a certain truth. Ironically, the backlash came not from the establishment but from some of my old friends in Forest Gate, people whom I grew up with and love said it made them feel uneasy. Others said they recognized themselves in the novel and have taken umbrage at the things I have said about drugs and growing up on the estates.

I knew I couldn’t answer all the questions but by writing *Forest Gate* I felt I could show a truer picture of what it feels to be young black and male in contemporary Britain. I thought I could tell a story that showed how the people who arrived in London were as changed by it as the natives whose community they altered drastically in turn. It is a story that is relevant for every major city, not just London.

Forest Gate was heavily influenced by Sam Selvon’s *Lonely Londoners*, CLR James’ *Minty Alley*, and Farrukh Dhondy’s *East end at your feet,* all of which centre on social transformation in Britain, new modes of human relationships in the lives of the city’s British immigrants as they struggled to prosper and assimilate. I am also heavily influenced by African writing and Daniel Fagunwa’s *Forest of a thousand Daemons,* which I bought for 20p at a garage sale in 1985. The book haunted my imagination and taught me

that literature could have rhythm and sound. James and Ashvin's experience in the home of a griot is one instance in which I was able to draw from the depository of my African heritage.

Even though I was born in London and I bear many of my parents' Nigerian idiosyncrasies, in my heart I have always thought of myself as a writer in that I do not want to belong anywhere. In 2006 when I learned of the fiftieth anniversary of the first international congress of black writers and artists I knew I had to be there. I spent most of the three days with a dreamy expression on my face staring up at the massive stone walls trying to connect with the spirits of all the dead writers I so admired. I did meet a Somali woman who was making a film about female mutilation. I ended up staying with her and her friends for three months, roaming Paris trying to relate my experience of London with theirs. I enjoyed the bistros, visited the Banlieux areas including Clichy-Sous-Bois, where the deaths of the two teenagers, Zyed Benna and Bouna Traore, sparked the riots the previous year after. The voice of my Somali friend became Armeina's, and those two teenagers who died - electrocuted as they hid from the police- only stoked the anger in the voices of James and Ashvin.

I came to Brooklyn in 2007 initially to edit a novel I had completed but I kept being interrupted by the stronger voices of my childhood. As one memory after another presented itself the idea for *Forest Gate* grew and took shape.

'You'll see a lot of white people walking up and down this street,' said the African-American real estate agent when he took me to my first apartment. I wasn't sure what he meant but moving here felt a lot like being in Forest Gate. Here's what Henry Miller said of one of my cross streets:

"But I saw a street called Myrtle Avenue, which runs from Borough Hall to Fresh Pond Road, and down this street no saint ever walked (else it would have crumbled), down this street no miracle ever passed, nor any poet, nor any species of human genius, nor did any flower ever grow there, nor did the sun strike it squarely, nor did the rain ever wash it. For the genuine Inferno which I had to postpone for twenty years I give you Myrtle Avenue, one of the innumerable bridlepaths ridden by iron monsters which lead to the heart of American emptiness. If you have only seen Essen or Manchester or Chicago or Lavallois-Perret or Glasgow or Hoboken or Canarsie or Bayonne you have seen nothing of the magnificent emptiness of progress and enlightenment. Dear reader, you must see Myrtle Avenue before you die, if only to realize how far into the future Dante saw."

To me, Bedford-Stuyvesant, the neighborhood I live in in Brooklyn, New York, is the same as the urban areas of Paris I visited, or Forest Gate: a crowded residential area an inferno of defeating streets; faded signs for long closed stores and restaurants, African braiding shops and the twenty-four hour fried chicken joint that always seems full, dingy laundrettes and loud cars with spinning wheels. Some nights Bedford Stuyvesant even reminds me of the chaos of Lagos, a city where 18 million Nigerians are crammed.

My book was always intended to be more than a ghetto parable. It is a chronicle of the new energy of Britain and a means of political dialogue to counter the real paranoia, fierce prejudice and delirious fantasy presently running through Britain and cultivated by the mainstream media. My characters are tired of being told who they are and what they stand for; of feeling separate and alienated, muted, tired of being misrepresented. I didn't see or meet anyone who shared my views even though I had encountered people just like me like me wherever I had travelled. I decided I didn't want my story to be friendly, I didn't want clever human universals. I just wanted to get this story off my chest.

I love Britain because it opened its doors to my immigrant parents. And yet I can relate to boys who join gangs and inflict terror in their communities. I can relate to boys who sell drugs in order to earn money to feed their families. Young black men go through years of personal questioning as they turn inwards and come to terms with the systematic order of white racism. As a result many don't want to face up to their bleak futures, lose their balance and, predictably, many black men end up dying angry violent deaths. This is not fiction; this is happening in the UK at the moment at an alarming rate. People need to start looking at this seriously because radicalism is not confined to, nor did it ever solely belong to Muslims.

I wanted to visit this complex state of mind particularly in my character, Ashvin. I wanted carefully to give him a dignified voice, one that resonates with pain. With Ashvin I wanted to focus on the family dynamic to give him heart. Anyway, I remembered telling myself to keep calm, to continue to write something truthful, to sneak my personal convictions into the frame. A book that would be grouped with a number of daring works of icy prose that helped to form a picture of the black man in extremis, that is to say submerged in anguish, heavily weighed upon. I wanted my book to reflect the rage surfacing in young black men based in London in response not only to racism in British society but also the trauma of surviving our dead-

end personal lives. I wanted to do it in a way of a story that peeled away at the layers wrapped tightly around young black men from different backgrounds lumped together in estates in London, who, together, had reached the point where they no longer cared whether they lived or died.

I have been in Brooklyn for almost two years now, and I am glad I came. I still have a lot of things to put right, but today I have found a way to value myself and to look in the mirror without flinching. I have a two-month-old son. Despite the promise of Obama I'm gutted that I will have to fly him 3000 miles if I ever want him to see the Arsenal football team play at the Emirates stadium, and I'm sick he will say "Mommy can I have a cookie" instead of "Got any biccies mum?" as I did

When he's old enough I will talk to him about my failures and the failures of British society. I'll give him the books that triggered all the questions in me and when he gets angry I'll chill him out, take the time to answer all the difficult things he asks, and hopefully he won't ever have to contemplate buying a gun.