

**Over
Henry**

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A few months after graduation, there was an issue with my visa. I didn't understand the problem, and judging from their letters neither did the Home Office. All the same, the letters came with startling regularity, urging a level of diligence with paperwork that was beyond me. When the word "deportation" finally appeared beneath the envelope's little plastic window, I felt an incredible sense of relief. It gave me an excuse to put into action a plan that I had been considering since I first arrived in London. After saying farewell to a few acquaintances in the City, I abandoned my rented room, sold all of my possessions, and moved into the Barbican.

I want this account to avoid romanticism, although I will admit that I have loved the Barbican from the moment I saw it. In the email she sent to dump me, an ex-girlfriend listed "imprecision" first among my many flaws (though to call those two cold months in Vancouver a relationship is itself an imprecision bordering on the magical). So, in an effort to now be as precise as possible, I should pause to explain two aspects of my decision and their implications for the rest of this story.

First, I want to specify those items I retained, the exact contents of my backpack (a 20-liter Klättermusen UII) faithfully captured in the packing list I made the night before my departure:

- Petzl headlamp and charger**
- Katabatic Gear "Alsek" down quilt**
- Zpacks 8.5' tarp**
- Two sets of full-body Merino wool long underwear (dark green)**
- 100 feet of 550 paracord (bright red)**
- Lloyd's debit card (international student edition)**

On me, I had another pair of long underwear, Teva sandals, and a Casio F-91W watch. I also kept my expired Biometric Residence Permit, although this was quickly placed in a plastic sandwich bag, weighed down with stones, and stored securely on the concrete floor of the Barbican Lake.

Second, I want to emphasize that I only "moved" to the Barbican in a strictly physical sense. There was no communication with a prospective landlord, no hand-wringing over south-facing windows, and certainly no credit check—something which I would have had no hope of passing. In fact, it took me more than a quarter of a century to realize that "moving" somewhere was much more about intention and proclamation than these sorts of administrative details.

Having sold my bike, I simply walked in—and since the moment I crossed over the southern threshold, I have not set foot outside these grounds.

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First, the more mundane questions.

What is the Barbican? It is something precious carved from London's profane financial district: a housing estate with two schools, multiple museums, a medieval church beside an artificial lake, and "Europe's largest performing arts centre." No summary is sufficient. It was briefly hailed as the future and now marinates in its own legacy, perpetually on the outer horizon of cultural relevance.

What do I eat? During those

long first nights on the Estate, the Lake's dainty surface feeders became a symbol of my hunger, mocking the fragile moralism that prevented me from purchasing anything pre-prepared. With time I found that if I crouched very still in the cattails and waited for that dull gleam to flash between my outstretched hands, I could grab the occasional Golden Orfe—though their pale eyes moved me and I could never bring myself to eat them cold.

At £5.50, the ham and emmental baguette represents the cheapest nutritional density offered by the Barbican Kitchen, so I now enjoy this elegant (and often overlooked) distillation of meat, dairy, and gluten twice daily, perched on the terraced fountains that descend into the eastern edge of the Lake. Luckily this indulgence also provides the decrepit paper napkins on which I record my account.

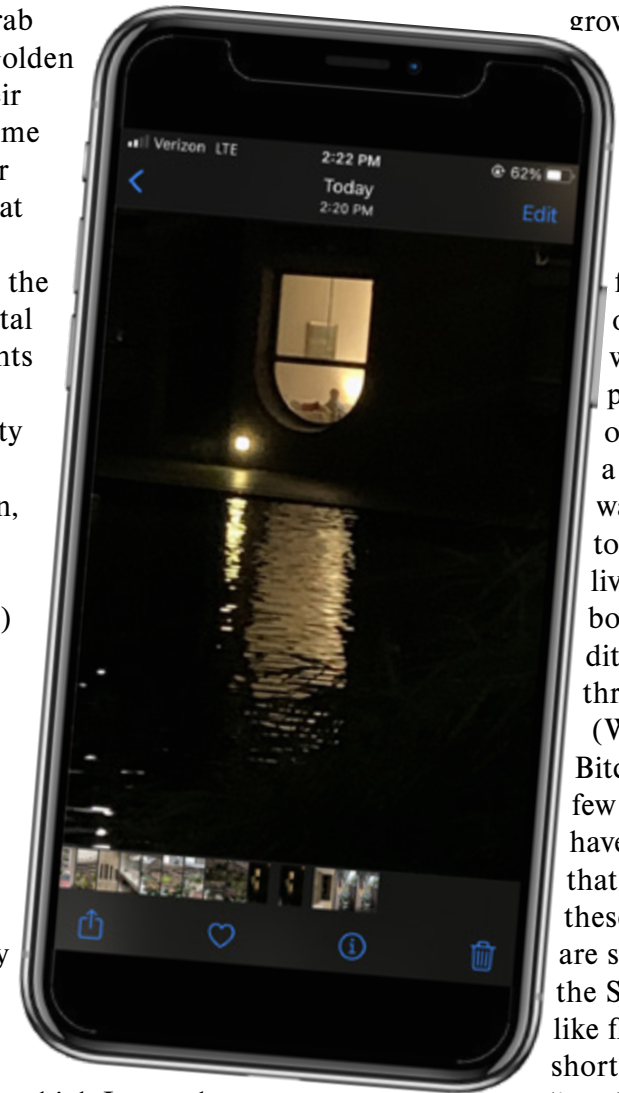
You may wonder how I am able to afford even this ascetic diet. While I never formally quit my job,

I trusted implicitly that Natasha, the sole member of the HR department, would work out the gist of things after a month or two of silence. "Just circling back to this," the messages would start: unopened reminders and dismayed chastisements piling up in Slack like virgin snow, the number in that little red notification bubble growing as

unchecked as inflation. I liked to imagine these things appearing frantically on my waterlogged phone screen—offering a brief, warm light to whatever lived in the bottom of the ditch where I'd thrown it.

(Whenever Bitcoin drops a few grand, you have to imagine that dozens of these start-ups are shaken off the Square Mile like fleas—their short, insectoid lives having played

out entirely under the museum glass of the bank headquarters around them. My deportation offered an opportunity to compete on more



Over Henry primal terms with the dying creature: to time my own shivering survival against its countdown to bankruptcy.)

In the meantime, I can only suppose that the paychecks continue to be deposited. Besides, the lackadaisical staff and erratic floorplan of the Barbican Kitchen are comically well suited to the needs of a thief.



Where do I sleep? I prefer deciduous shrubs but will lounge wherever the landscaping is most exotic.

The truth is that I'm spoiled for choice here in the Barbican's many planter beds and nests of HVAC equipment. Although the British seem to fear rain, my carefully arranged campsites are composed of materials that excel in the local conditions. If water manages to find some path around the Dyneema composite that makes up my tarp; if it wets through the 351g of 900 fill-power down that surrounds me—even then, Merino wool dries incredibly quickly: one of the properties that make it so popular with the ultralight backpacking community.

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Those first nights in the Barbican were easily the most intense of my life, which had otherwise been a coming-of-age montage of conventional desires and bland academic success.

In the Barbican, I lived: first on Gilbert Bridge, where moments after arrival I was stalking the 12-acre brick-lined path that soars over the Estate. Below, a network of paths had been sunken into the concrete lake, connecting eight little trellised seats, each with a sparse coating of flowering Jasmine and drooping ferns.

It was an impossibly alien landscape: a place lost between Italian piazzas and Soviet prisons, mistakenly constructed in a wetland. The apartments rose away in all directions, each lined with its window box of geraniums. I raised myself onto the pouting lip

of a cement balustrade and surveyed the water 40 feet below, somehow reassured that it would break my fall. (I now know that neither its 18 inches of depth nor its ferocious resident heron would have borne my intrusion.)

A tapering mass of ivy shifted in the night breeze, dangling just out of reach over the Lake. It grew down from the first level of balconies, a prospect that brought bright, shivering visions of illicit exploration. I thought of how it might feel to be so close to the residents sleeping in their warm Barbican interiors, surrounded by novelty design objects and bookshelves sorted by color.

High on my new freedom, I reacted to this premonition as if by instinct: sinking into a deep crouch and leaping out toward the foliage. Before there was any sensation of falling, I was amidst the immense heft of greenery; it was in my teeth and slicing at my forearms, too wide to hug. I felt the taut freshness of the thing as I failed to grip it, snapping through the spring growth in search of some stronger gnarled core. And all the while, I was swinging with it, swaying erratically over the water until the movement found a rhythm, and I realized that somehow, miraculously, it had held.

I spat out some leaves and watched them float down to the lake, where they sent little circles swelling out in all directions. Then, slowly, I began to pull myself up. With each move, the scent of geraniums fell over



me like mist. If not for the insistent pull of my backpack, I doubt I would have known which way was up, so similar were the stars to the lights of the Estate reflected in the water below. At some point, my outstretched hand encountered something firmer and colder. I turned and clambered, raising myself over the edge.

My first balcony was narrow and very clean. The geraniums were there, as deep a red as they looked from below, but the curtains had

Over Henry been drawn, blocking what I wanted so badly. I moved quietly, sitting in patio chairs and caressing flowerpots: trying to will myself into the mindset of a resident surveying their domain. Feeling indulgent, I even stopped to preen the leaves from my wool garment.

I touched everything I could, delighting in discovering that the path between balconies was unimpeded. At the occasional treasure of an un-curtained door, I savored those details I had read about so many times: the barrel ceilings and small midcentury kitchens. Even the people were incredible, those few that I saw: sprawled elegantly on crisp linen bedding or enthralled by their laptops, all evidently creatures of immaculate taste and obsessive neatness.

Each night held some new joy. I lounged supine in the inverted arch of a Type 76, pondering the music school's reflection in green water. I found hidden paths and learned how the Estate wrapped in on itself. There



are facts about the place that only earn their full power when discovered by chance. While fleeing near disaster on a stage I had thought abandoned, I learned that the Concert Hall sits directly under the Sculpture Court: that those strange, soaring planters are its fire escapes.

These early explorations felt pure, like the unpracticed first caresses that consummate delirious teenage love. Although the Barbican and I now enjoy a more mature union, I still like to imagine, perhaps arrogantly, that the cement looks a bit less drab

for our affections.

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Shelter, food, unending aesthetic rapture. What else could a man my age need? Although there are moments when a wave of carnality passes over me as suddenly as a food-

borne illness, I consider myself lucky to have never been overly affected by the erotic. Regular immersion in the Centre's contemporary art shows has helped greatly in this regard.

Far north in my home country, I have seen things moving through the tundra's broad, pearly light that border on science fiction. There's nothing like that here. It's been sanitized by the daily exodus of South London social media marketing managers, people occupying a world circumscribed by concepts like "Experience Design" and "the oat flat white": one disinfected by constant, self-conscious humor about "selling out" or "settling." "Swipe your Sparks card for a chance to get your shopping for free." I could despair at how casually they wear their Barbican tote bags, having never suffered for the beauty of that name—but to be honest, I find them charming. They descend in the evening like migratory birds, failing to see that the exhibits are only a misdirection: a ploy to keep them from building a life here as I have done.

But what do I know? These digressions always remind me that I'm a vagrant.

When you've taken the Barbican's architecture tour as many times as I have, it's impossible not to answer each of the good-natured warm-up questions the guides use to soothe their skittish pupils. When was the Estate built? Oh, too easy! What architectural style is it commonly associated with? Don't mind if I do. And that real ice-

breaker: "So, has anyone been to the Barbican before?" "I HAVE," I roar, earning patient smiles from the guides—who, after all this time, seem unable to detect the true irony of my response.

It's always the same quirky facts arranged into some preferred narrative, some frame of understanding. There's a young graduate who balances each aesthetic highlight against three drab scenes from the City's "monumental history of exclusion"; a pensioner with a "Right to Buy" tattoo who adores each building more than any of his grandchildren. A common theme is the tension between "the vision and the reality" of the place: the Barbican as Chamberlin, Powell, and Bon's utopic microcosm versus the Barbican as Disneyland for Design, a theme park where a few of us devoted actors perform in costume for each day's fresh herd of visitors.

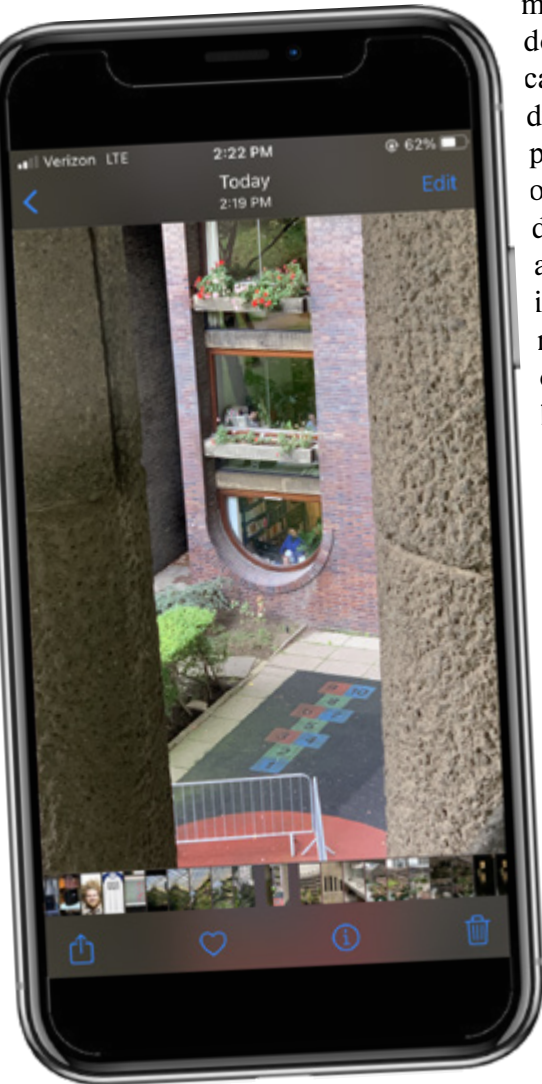
More than anything, the tour guides love to rebuild the Barbican in numbers: 40 acres, 1,500 species in the observatory, 4000 current residents at two-third's capacity. There are more than 60 entrances, but only three are commonly used. Of the 2,014 units (in 140 unique configurations), 93% were sold under Thatcher, leaving just over a hundred in the council system. The smallest unit is 35 square meters: the tallest tower, 44 stories—but with only three units per floor.

The numbers I'm interested in are smaller, and more intimate. The original entrance to the Art Centre is guarded by a massive iron



Over Henry gate; I can climb it in 18 seconds. After midnight, only one footlight is left on every 23 meters, creating long pools of darkness invisible to security. On the causeway beside Thomas More House, there are ladders with five thick metal rungs that feel exquisitely cold when I climb down into the planter beds. I can lie there and huff geraniums until 5:30, when the sprinklers come on, and I sprint across the balustrade back toward my warren, wet feet slapping concrete as I prepare for each six-foot leap between the flower beds: savoring those seconds, too few to count, where I'm floating over the back alleys of the Square Mile.

But the guides never mention these things, and I doubt any of them would even care. Luckily I have been banned from the tours and am thus spared this annoyance. Instead, I've taken to following from



ever-greater distances, stalking behind any stragglers and yelling out answers to the trivia that echo across the Lakeside and make the tour-takers jump like veldt-shy antelope, each paying £15 for the privilege.

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Only once in my time at the Barbican have I been caught.

On one of those endless summer walks, an unlocked door drew me over a bridge and down a new hallway, carpeted and silent during the evening's performances. Along one wall, there were deep leather chairs and doors that opened into dark conference rooms, where sleeping overhead projectors hummed over forgotten styrofoam cups.

The other wall was made of glass: a long row of small panes, each framed in thin, black iron and glowing an insidious green. The shadow of a monstrous palm fell over the hallway, split by the panes and rearranged into something Cubist.

I looked out over the Barbican's tropical

conservatory. By night the abundance was almost lurid: those thousand species reared in such luxury that they had grown grotesque, swollen like hormonal deformities. Plants flowed unrestrained out of their containers and onto the brick paths, bulbs bouncing lewdly in an ancient indoor breeze. And across it all lay the most fabulous shadows, thrown by spotlights hidden in the planters and footlights bracketed to the walls.

A tower rose in the center like a Mayan ruin, terraced to hold even more varieties—things that clung and climbed or trailed down along its face. Braided girders of white steel angled sharply to meet this central structure, supporting a delicate roof overhead.

I pried between the panes until a hinge creaked into life, and slowly the window swung out into the immense, humid silence of the glassed-in space. I leaned in and felt the thickness of the air. The hallway was no more than twenty feet above



the ground, and within seconds I was wriggling down a palm.

From there, the memories are less linear: scenes are spliced and rearranged with the incoherence of a film. I ran along the brick pathways as everything glittered, slick with dew. I don't remember drinking the dew, but I can recall with absolute clarity its taste—a metallic sweetness that I still associate with the color green. I buried my face in the first fern and then every fern I could find. I imagined their little cretaceous feelers sponging off imperfections and shrinking pores, gently searing away the accumulated crust of my lifestyle.

Towards the end, I became fixated with the steel girders. From the back of a bent palm, I pulled up into them and climbed hand over hand—at first enjoying the strain of it, then slowing to watch my feet dangle out over the chasm of the room. I felt my grip

Over Henry failing and thought how elegantly I would decorate the bricks: body somehow unbroken, wool onesie the color of the ferns. Someone on a Guardian grad scheme would translate the events into British English for the headline: “Barbican Burglar Bungles Cunning Conservatory Climb.”

The girders twisted around themselves to form a hollow core, and it was through this, self-preservation prevailing, that I finally crawled. The foliage blurred, became seaweed swaying in the shallows. Where the steel reached the tower, I took those first hesitant steps onto its concrete terraces: heir to Edmund Hillary, delighted at the privilege of firm footing in so austere a setting. I surveyed the alpine plantings and circled the ledge to see the extent of the Conservatory from above.

When I reflect on this scene now, it seems likely that he had been watching for some time—in awe, I indulge myself in such a strange display of acrobatics. Just as I completed my descent, he stepped out from behind a frond, dressed like a waiter in a black shirt and clumsy leather shoes.

I convulsed. I pictured myself being carried away from the Estate with a nylon bag over my head: disgraced, as Home Office lackeys in neon windbreakers triumphantly fished my residence permit from the Lake.

I began reciting every fact I knew about the Barbican.

He laughed, and I stopped.

“I never thought to open those.” He gestured up at the hallway

windows. “Have you done this before?”

We spoke for a few minutes about the Conservatory. He was a member of the orchestra, effeminate and charming: embarrassed, almost, as if he were the one discovered trespassing. Something about his thick glasses and small features put me at ease, and I began divulging every



detail of my life on the Estate—more, even, than I have written here.

“I come up here after

performances sometimes,” he confided as if this were equally devious.

By the time we finished talking, I was confident he wouldn’t report me. We shook hands (my forefinger, unfamiliar with the forgotten gesture, tracing small circles on his wrist, causing him to laugh nervously) and parted.

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There are many others lost here.

When I am taken by an archival spirit, I type up my notes on the public computers in the Library, which hangs like an eyrie over the crimson carpet and stale air of the Art Centre. Around me circle London’s most unmoored: furtive men who cut half-finished crosswords puzzles from back editions of *The Times* and place them, one after the next, into envelopes addressed to Nancy Reagan.

Even the residents are adrift. They discuss their home with an urgent particularity: it’s always this place or these walls, as if, despite never leaving, they might otherwise forget where they are. When I told Leslie I rented a room in neighboring Clerkenwell (a small lie, necessary to preserve these few, fragile friendships) she looked at me with surprise. “You’re in from that far?”

Leslie often sat with me outside Barbican Kitchen. No matter the temperature, she hid under endless sweaters, shawls, and cardigans—more layers than you

could count, and always somewhere beneath it all, a turtleneck, framing that small, wrinkled face: those cheeks as red as her geraniums. The mass of fabrics made her broader than she was tall. It gave her the scent of dead flowers.

Whenever Leslie saw me, she would clap her hands and laugh insipidly, crying across the Lakeside: “Oh, tell me about my home!” And I would make a show of withdrawing an imaginary notebook from one of my long underwear’s feigned pockets, ready to amuse her with the findings of my fieldwork.

“Three towers loom over the Estate like inhabited slabs of stone. On summer nights, Leslie, the residents climb down with ropes and spiked shoes, gathering for candlelight picnics in the private gardens, which they unlock with their magic keys.” (I always whispered this last part to coax her into brandishing her own key proudly. Then it was gone: slipped back into the maddening layers of cashmere, safe from my grasp.) “Now Leslie, pay attention to this: Barbican children have the long hair and baseless self-confidence of alternative education. They pick at their food and run between picnic blanket encampments, sorting precocious thoughts on identity and ownership into their games.”

Leslie was senile and would laugh at anything I said, though she liked it best when I recalled details from my childhood abroad.

“We rode great wheels of stone across the ice shelves. For

Over Henry playthings, I was given the shards of seal skin too frostbitten to cook.”

In her mind, I might have been Slavic or even from south of the river. Leslie had spent her life in a coveted Type 35: a 3-bedroom penthouse-maisonette that surveyed the lake from the fourth floor of Gilbert House.

I was always on edge during my performances, waiting for the inevitable offer to visit her place. But when that offer came, the joy quickly faded, and with each step toward the door, my stomach inverted.

I knew the stairwells and halls that led up to it: knew where to find a window that was always left unlocked by these careless, top-floor types.

It was obvious that I’d already been inside many times.

We left our shoes by the door. “Now, what did you say you were in, a Type 3A?”

“Clerkenwell, Leslie. No types there at all.”

As we toured the flat, I had to pretend to discover anew the double-height living room with its collection of Calder prints, and the awkward concertina doors that I never dared touch in the dark.

It was all too intense. As she discussed the underfloor heating (dazzling on bare feet, I recalled), I began to shake.

“Are you alright?” She put a frail hand on my shoulder, veins aquamarine under skin like wet paper.

I stumbled backward, knocking over a Monstera the size of a Bentley. She gaped and said “Oh! Oh!”, working the sound out of her small mouth as if from deep under the

second shawl, the third cardigan.

I fumbled with my Texas like I’d never seen Velcro. Leslie said “Oh!”

“I’m so sorry,” I sputtered. “It’s just that I don’t live here.”

I never spoke to Leslie again.

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Back when I held down a job (an idiom that’s always made me imagine the manhole of my responsibilities, shot upward by a jet of fetid water), I thought I could pioneer some truly new way of living if only I had more time.

And in a way, it’s been comforting to finally find that time: to look deeply inside myself and discover that there is nothing fundamentally more interesting there than the string of logistical failures I came to the Barbican to avoid. Mostly I spend my time singing the lyrics of a few popular songs played by the gardeners’ radios, mouthing the words from my daytime perch on the Lakeside as I watch the architecture tours come and go, the trains full of Clapham types up for an exhibit arrive and depart—the unending, spellbinding rhythm of pilgrimage enacted each day by those who come to worship here at my concrete relic.

This account, which I began in such high spirits, has clearly run its course. In fact, I fear that it’s come to emphasize more than anything the loneliness of my circumstances and perhaps more disturbingly, how content I find myself with them.

So, I write now far more solemnly than I first intended: please come and find me. You’ve made it so easy for me to get away with this. And I don’t know where I’d go if the special intensity of this place faded into comfort, into the sort of astounding flatness that urban life has taken on outside these walls.

Please stop me. I am in your planters and outside your windows. I feel so close to you all.

