

The Walk

A Story

By Simon A. Perry

I keep wishing that I had never suggested we go for a walk that day, but wishing won't bring Bruin back. Perhaps if it had been raining, or if we had walked our usual route then things might have turned out differently. We might have stayed in, or been somewhere else instead of being very much in the wrong place at the wrong time. But we went out as normal and decided to try a different route and that was end of all our joy. Bruin, my darling, wherever you are, please forgive me.

I feel that I owe it to his memory – listen to me, I'm assuming the worst – to tell everyone exactly what happened that day. I've not spoken about it in any detail before; I couldn't, the memories were just too painful. But 6 months have passed now, and it is time to face up to the events of that terrible afternoon. If I'm lucky writing it all down like this may give me some kind of resolution, of closure. Only time will tell.

It was a Monday lunchtime early in February, on a day that felt as though it belonged in Spring rather than the tail end of Winter. A day for getting outside, away from the stuffy atmosphere indoors. A day for walking beneath the winter sunshine, breathing in the chill, refreshing air. So I asked Bruin if he fancied going for a walk, as I do every lunchtime, and as usual he said yes.

We left the workplace, walked up the hill and stopped on the edge of the subway that leads under the main road. "Fancy a walk down Broad Street for a change?" I asked. "Why not", he replied. So we walked down the subway, past the beggars and drunks and Big Issue sellers, until we reached the other side of the main road, and the end of Broad Street.

We decided to go and have a look at the canal, so crossed to the other side of Broad Street, and headed towards the city. The exceptionally fine weather had brought lots of people out onto the streets, and we had to push and shove through the crowds on the pavement to make any kind of progress.

Five minutes of such battling with the crowds, a sharp left and a stroll over the footbridge saw us enter Brindley Place, and the new canal-side developments. As usual it was packed with smart city types eating lunch at the kind of trendy cafés that most people would only frequent if they had come into some money. I'm sure that you know the kind of place; all supercilious waiters and over-priced sandwiches masquerading under fancy Italian names. We decided to go and have a look at the fountain – it's usually much more peaceful there, and the small coffee-bar on the edge of the splash pool sells an excellent latté.

Surprisingly, though, the avenue down to the fountain was packed with people, all staring and pointing at the side of one of the nearby office buildings. We couldn't get close enough to see what they were looking at, but from the front of the crowd could hear snatches of conversation: "Oh, isn't it beautiful" and "I wonder what it's doing here".

"Come on", I said. "Let's try and get to the front to see what is going on". So we pushed our way through the crowd, moving slowly to the front. As we struggled through the press of bodies I noticed a man standing off to one side, with a thick leather glove on one hand. How I wish that I had been paying more attention to what I saw, or at least that I had been thinking about what I had seen. But I wasn't. If I had, perhaps what happened next might have been avoided. Perhaps Bruin would be with us now.

Just as we pushed through to the front of the crowd two things happened. I heard someone say "Perhaps they're using it to keep the vermin down" at the same time as I saw a large bird-of-prey lift-off from the side of the office building and swoop down towards Bruin and myself at the front of the crowd. I ducked, shouting "Look out Bruin" and felt the wind as the bird passed right over my head. Behind me I heard a loud squeal, and the beat of the bird's wings.

I whipped round, my heart skipping a beat as I saw the bird lifting into the air above the heads of the crowd. But what turned the day to utter blackness, what saw the end of all my happiness was the sight of Bruin clutched firmly in the bird's talons, his bald, pink tail hanging down from beneath the bird, a look of pure terror in his eyes.