

## **Barefoot in the City**

*By Alice Griffin*

Willen Lake is still; my heart isn't. Juddering, irregular, my breath caught in my throat, the silence of the city all at once crippling yet comforting. Only the feel of damp grass between my toes keeps me grounded and so I stand, motionless, as life begins to unfold in unison with sunrise. Car engines, birdsong; lamps glowing, bright water: a composition of wild and manufactured life, juxtaposed seamlessly.

I had left the hospice before dawn – sleepwalking or nightwalking, I wasn't sure, I simply knew I must come outside. Running down the hill in anger and disbelief, salty tears streaming down my face, I had fallen down beneath the tree, a labyrinth spilled out around my head. I had thought to sleep here in its confusion so that I might somehow find clarity in the newly disordered paths of my own mind. To be in a city of straight lines, so self-assured in its simplicity, was to be adrift, and yet here in this green-space was to feel a tug back to the wild.

We had walked this labyrinth together many times, *"you start that end, I'll start this"* Gareth had shouted and we had switched and turned, stopped and started, until together we reached the tree and kissed. A love sealed. Entwined. Until a spaniel had come bounding up trying to lick our hands and break us apart, *"Bonnie get back here now!"* the embarrassed owner had shouted. But we laughed and slipped off our shoes to wander barefoot around the lake. Summer has that cruel way of reeling you in only to hit you with the bareness of autumn. I could feel it now, suddenly, that slight chill in the air, leaves clinging on in defiance; hope? But there was no more hope for us.

As the city begins to come alive I feel only the need to retrace my steps. Our steps. I walk towards the Peace Pagoda it's golden light glinting in the orange dawn, my bare soles soothed by the spread of smooth marble beneath them. My heart bare, too, crying out with a hunger to feel his arms wrapped around me again; warm breath on my neck, enveloped in tanned skin as I whispered

that small singular word, “yes”. I kick through the woodland where bluebells grow in springtime and hover at the edge of the gravel footpath before tentatively beginning the stepped descent. The roughness underfoot reminds me of tough times, times we ate baked beans in our YMCA flat and argued over dirty laundry being left on the floor. Then it’s grass again; dew-topped soft grass tickling my toes and I remember that summer, ice-cream dripping down our chins, rave music pouring out from the boom box as we lounged on the roof of the narrowboat his parents had hired. I feel my feet cut loose and begin to run across the bridge, hot-footing from one to the other, the redway so sharp beneath. Cars beep as they pass below on their way to work, drivers no doubt laughing at the sight of this windswept girl darting from left to right; delirious, lost, sleepwalking... and then somewhere in the gloom of a shaded canopy of trees I am awake again. Splintering wood, slats broken, trickles of water beneath. Hopping again, always hopping. I should have known our love was a chance, an intense happiness just waiting for the fall, but I did not take heed. I felt the splinter and kept on running anyway.

When I reach the canal a heron is stood motionless in front of me on the towpath and I long – ache – to be it, to feel no other thing in life than that natural instinct to survive. *“Why do we need money, Cate? Birds don’t. Let’s go and be birds somewhere far away,”* he had said as we mused our choices in life. But of course we didn’t run away, we kept on keeping on and when he cried, that night, that night the storm came, I cried with him but there was nothing I could do and I wished – wished – that we could run away, but it was too late.

The Beacon looks far away but I feel myself growing stronger as the day’s hours press on and so I trail lazily through Campbell Park before running to the top of the hill only to roll down like we did that day drunk on champagne, laughing and giggling, again and again, only now it leaves me with the deep sense of life – our life – running away and me, unable to grasp it. Office workers on lunch-break wander in and out of the MK Rose, head’s down, earphones in and inside I scream, *“Look around! Soak it up! Live while you can!”* but they don’t hear me and the city centre is crawling with faces lost,

eyes blank but the marble is cool – so cool – on my aching feet and I long for Queens Court, for how it was in the days when we lounged by the fountain, spray cooling our faces, days when life seemed endless, but now the chain restaurants leave me empty and I'm back in the grid and feeling hemmed in so I cross away from the city. Down the roads of my childhood named after wild flowers I watch concrete slab and cigarette butts drift under foot before passing the house where we first kissed, leant against his bicycle, my Mum shouting at me to come in because I had homework to do. Concrete merges into redway then bridle path and finally the untamed again. Birdsong drowns out the traffic and thorns pierce my skin as I wander around Stanton Wood so I stop to rest, lying in the basin that is already starting to fill with crisp orange leaves and I think of him, too, disintegrating. Of my holding his hand, stroking his face and of those arms, pale now. Weakened. And I feel glad for the greenspaces, the quiet places, the empty faces, that allow me to be anonymously lost in my pain.

I think, *'all life begins and ends in the wild; in the crumbling soil and rotting leaves'* and so here, barefoot in the woods – barefoot in the city – perhaps I will rest a while and wait patiently for spring.