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Today, I make it out to the Walk. It’s a long strip of oak and poplar where a railway line used to be. If the weather’s fine and I’m feeling good, I’ll wander up as far as the old platforms, about a mile from the park. It takes an hour sometimes, including a few short stops. The slow train, I suppose.

I came here once with Joan and her children. I’d just moved and not found much I liked. At the top of the hill was The End – bistros and bookshops and kitchen showrooms. At the bottom – ice cream parlours and men urinating in phone boxes.

Pensioners bobble down the Walk like leaves stripped of green.

The holly, and only the holly, is wet from the morning drizzle. The holly, and only the holly, catches the light drizzling through the hornbeams.

## **‘THE WALK’ – KK FIORRUCCI**

There are bat boxes on every fifth tree. In April, the boxes catch the ache deep in the gladdening wood. This ache, being nocturnal, flits around once everything else is asleep, finds its hiding place in good time.

E. and I made love here twice; the second time requiring significantly more effort. Emboldened by our success, we tried a third time. E. put a confident end to proceedings, a relief to us both.

The blackberries are still hard green acorns, but, if you look closely, there is a tiny purple occlusion under the skin of every hundredth. Around every fifty berry-clusters is a small white flower. One in a thousand flowers is pink. I shall bring E. here when everything ripens.

Two girls are hurling sapling-spears at a wild Labrador.

It's summer and E. is making elderflower champagne. Last year, she forgot to let the air out of the bottles and they exploded in a single evil-smelling Catherine Wheel. This year the yeast has lost its potency and there is again nothing to drink.

The trees tremble and the leaves rage. This is the season of poetry. Or supposed to be. For now, words take cover in the bat boxes, while I hide out in the old station house.

E. has been cursing herself. A little bread-yeast, half a teaspoon, could have got the whole mixture fizzing to the

## **‘THE WALK’ – KK FIORRUCCI**

brink of detonation. She didn’t consider it over the weekend and by Monday it is too late.

Will I finish? Can I finish?

I wonder if it was with you in mind, or half in mind, that I moved here. I had always imagined what your house might look like. Tracked down pictures of it in the *Chronicle*, followed the progress of your numerous planning applications, advertisements, objections, letters to the editor, the unostentatious manoeuvrings, petty retaliations. At some point, it all stopped, either because you had won or lost, I suppose.

When I moved here, I moved with gravity. If I went walking, it was down the hill, to the park, to the reservoirs. Later, I discovered The Walk, which went upwards, in a straight line; two stops on the old line, like a secret corridor to you. Like something from a spy novel. Of course, you had not been living there for some time.

Other people live in you, don’t they? Some leave and some never take the hint. I stop for a minute to prepare anecdotes, rehearse the details of my day for E. ‘There’s a new furniture shop on Hornsey Road,’ I yell. ‘Turkish.’ Two cyclists turn their heads but nobody responds and anyway, it’s after dark. Who’s going to respond.

The end does not happen at the end, if you pay attention, but is blown backwards until it hits the beginning. In the

## **‘THE WALK’ – KK FIORRUCCI**

middle, you’ll be lucky to avoid cutting your foot on a shard.

Rain sends the people, who are perfectly dry, to the wartiest, knottiest hazels they can find. Every tree has a silver coin embedded in its trunk – some fantastical year of issue? 6060, 7777, 8008. Or else they are tags, in case the trees wander off and cannot find their way back. Somewhere, there is a meaning. Other trees along the path have a certain purpose, to light the way, feed the birds, keep the peace. Others still are purposeless – scarred, split, scorched, stranded. The forest savours them at this time of evening like dark, sweet liquor.

A poem, like a hedgerow brew, cannot be sampled immediately after plucking. It must be stored away in a suitable vessel, peeked at, occasionally, stirred, conservatively, sniffed and put away again, until either it or you have sufficiently matured.

Mice frolic alongside estate agents on long lunches.

Flies manoeuvre around my page like military helicopters waiting for the order.

A woman neighs to her children, who are clip-clopping out of sight. George stops. Ever the contrarian, he has been clop-clipping and breaking off to be a car. A moment of quiet contemplation, followed by a decision. He no longer

## **'THE WALK' – KK FIORRUCCI**

wishes to be a horse. But. He would like to take the horse-stick with him, whether or not it messes up the car. And why, in any case, does any of them need a car? He protests for another twenty seconds then runs off – like a boy this time, not a horse. The real fake-horse laps silently at the mist on the forest floor.

The man jabs the point of his umbrella so forcefully into the ground that it pierces the thin film of patience I have left.

A bird in this wood has a strange call; like a bottle cap being twisted off and a low, rapid, evil shriek.

A succession of dogs leaps onto my knees, each completely maddened by the scent of the last. They don't stay long; my body is not a desirable scratching-post. By the end there's blood in the scratches, rain in the air.

Every new forage you dare to be hopeful. How humiliating is to come back with nothing. Even worse, to come back with a measly handful of wilting poetic matter. Better not to come back, in that case. But where else to go?

I leave my watch in the bag, along with a superfluous sock and a decomposing banana. Sure enough, the day fails to move, or rather nudges back and forth between two moments that are so similar as to be the same. It's quite the thing to be almost timeless. True timelessness, though, is still faraway. Somewhere, there is both a meaning and a time.

## **'THE WALK' – KK FIORRUCCI**

Squirrels are doing a final sweep of the wood like eccentric rangers. People blow through in huge drifts now. It's the end of something, and the start.

It's a glorious day. Hard laps of my mind for as long as I can stay upright.

It's a hard thing to be young and unformed; much better to be old and unforming.

Even now, after the long immunity of solitude, I long to tell you of the gymnastics of oak-leaf on spider-wire, of the fallen arm, of shedding skin, and hope, teetering.

Joan used to make me promise that I would never go out like this without a fully charged mobile phone and some official document with my name and address on it. 'Just imagine, if you got stuck out there, or worse, and no-one called me. No-one knew where, or who you were.'

A tree is flat on its back; hundred of arms reaching into its enormous middle. It feels wrong to be here spectating with something so huge laid so low, roots all exposed.

'I'm thinking,' I say. 'Yes?' she says, rather briskly? 'There's this thing, on the internet. I've been reading about it, in the library. It's about this place.' 'Yes.' 'They want people to write stories about it - the Walk.' 'That's what

## **'THE WALK' – KK FIORRUCCI**

they call this place?' 'Yes. About talking birds, trees that come to life, that kind of thing. Then you come and read them to children.' Joan smiles. 'That sounds very nice. You should definitely do that.' 'Yes, and I was thinking.' 'Yes?' 'You could do it too. With me. Bring the boys back as well.' She smiles again, pats her own knee this time. 'Maybe,' she says, after a while. 'Maybe.'

To get anything done, or at least to move forward, you have to reach a place like this. Where it's cool and shaded, solitary and sometimes lonely. To move forward, you must first be stirred. It's not poetry, you know, but physics.

'Sorry,' says the girl, clasping my hands. A drumming from somewhere up the hill and unseemly hoots from all directions. At the tube station, she tiptoes and, to my astonishment, pecks me on the lips. I pull away. I hate being apologised to.

E. has noticed that she often says 'I think I feel' instead of 'I feel.' In bed a couple of nights ago, she asks me what I think the difference is between thoughts and feelings. I try to explain that, as far as I understand it, thoughts are like fish, and feelings are like shoals of fish. Shoals of fish are easier to spot and harder to catch. She asks me to go over that one again.

'Wow,' says the girl. 'Nice place. How long have you lived here?' 'Thirty-four years,' I say. 'Hey, do you have anything to drink?' She pours herself something and sits

## **'THE WALK' – KK FIORRUCCI**

there staring at me. 'Sorry,' I say. 'It's fine,' she says. 'Anyway. This is all. You know. Well. Why do you work where we work when you live where you live?' 'Well,' I say. 'I have things, but, you know, I also have nothing to live on. It's just something that can happen from time to time. You'll understand –' 'When I'm older?' she laughs, and I nod. 'Well, whatever. At least you don't have to share your house with cats.' 'I thought it's the cats that share their house with you?' We are touching now, on the sofa. I am kissed, gingerly, on the neck. 'Don't get any ideas,' she says. 'I don't really, you know, believe in any of that.' But I'm already asleep and don't hear any of it.

'Cool place,' she says. 'Very cool.' I'm already dressed. I say nothing. A minute passes. She leaves.

It's mating season in the wood. All the female creatures are being watched, chased, shrieked at, held in place. Several elderly couples meander by, hands professorially behind backs. They don't seem to know each other.

'Your son doesn't like me,' I say. 'The elder one.' 'He's shy,' says Joan. 'Doesn't say much to me either.' 'No, that isn't what I mean. I mean. He doesn't like me. Whenever I try to talk to him, he squirms. Runs.' 'Well,' she says, putting the finishing touches to the doodle of a leaf that might be a shrivelled butterfly (or a butterfly that tuns out to be a leaf). 'He doesn't know you.' 'Doesn't know me? He's known me all his life. Didn't I make up stories for him when he was small.' 'That was a long time ago, Cal,' says Joan. 'Was it?' I reply. 'Yes. Actually it was. It was before



## **'THE WALK' – KK FIORRUCCI**

he was him, you know? Before he could remember things.' She draws a net around the dying leaf; tighter and tighter until all that's left is a blue rectangle. 'Well, I'm just saying I don't think he should find me so unfamiliar is all.' 'He's just a child, Cal. And, anyway.' 'Yes?' 'You may feel you know him, but he certainly doesn't know you.' 'I see'. 'I'm not sure anyone really knows you, Cal.' And, just then, that forest peace of mine crinkles, crackles, scatters.

When it wakes at dusk, the soprano pipistrelle forgets it has three thousand insects to catch that night. The hedgehog hits snooze and rolls onto its side for another eight minutes; it has six thousand spines to protect it, if need be. It's as light, or dark, as it always is this deep inside the wood. No cooler than usual, no less dry. At this hour, the dead mumble in their sleep. Is it morning yet? What is morning, anyway, for the dead? Or 'yet'? Emboldened, they attempt some movement, some little flicker, the merest, most minuscule twitch of the finest fibre of the tiniest motor unit. One eye would do it, let the light spill through the deserted cells, split the whole body open. Everyone else is asleep, so there's no risk of being disturbed. Try again. Go on. Try again. They try again, but with half the effort, knowing it won't happen, can't happen now. When is 'now' for the dead? The trees, without realising it, breathe a 'collective sigh'.

It's as light or dark as it's always been. No cooler than usual, no less dry. The dead console themselves, mumble on. They've noticed no new rot today, though their minds have, admittedly, been on other things. The ferns spirit-finger to the wind-drum. 'Joan,' I say. 'Joan.' Her hair

## **‘THE WALK’ – KK FIORRUCCI**

smells like grass, wood-smoke, cheap shampoo. ‘You don’t seem to like me any more.’ ‘I do.’ I do. I do.

I ask E. to name her favourite ecosystem. No idea where the word or the thought comes from, but it splays and furls, sluggishly, in front of us for a long while, languishing in its whole form. She has a very specific answer. Her favourite ecosystem is former quarryland that was once flooded and now teems with plants and insects. As a close second, she would pick towpaths, also for reasons of biodiversity. Mountains she considers bare and lakes she finds stultifying. I’m taken aback by all this. Later, she apologises for giving what must have been a vague and confusing answer. Not at all, I mumble, not at all. It’s one of those days, apparently, where words are only weakly connected to each other, where the merest breeze can break them, like fronds floating free from a still-writhing stem. And you, she says. And me? I try to think of an answer that is not ‘woodland’. A magpie looks up from its detectorism of the forest floor as if to say ‘well, don’t look at me.’ At me. At me.

When quarry companies leave an area, they are obliged to tidy up after themselves, at least superficially. The first thing they normally do is flood a portion of the land, turning it into wetland. The rest is turned into a blank canvas; slowly ‘pioneer species’ arrive to colonise it. First is bindweed, which can live in sand, gorse, marram grass. Then, a second group blows in; brighter, taller, more vocal, and the first group – well, what of the first group really? The name for this process is ‘succession’, that is, the natural order of things.

## **'THE WALK' – KK FIORRUCCI**

Last orders. Twigs crackle in the rain. Finally, it stops. Pooled rain descends the canopy; lands in spurts. The wind shifts me in my seat. Time, it says, time. Everything else leaves me alone.