

The Walk of Blood

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He lived alone in the village, which is how rumours get started. ‘He’s an odd-looking bugger,’ one mother said at the school gate. Everyone agreed, but when pressed, couldn’t quite say why, although another woman who was known to have studied early 20th-century art had a theory about a face taken apart and put back together. Others joked about ugly sticks and being last in line.

They did not feel it necessary to elaborate on the link between the man’s odd looks and internal demeanour. This connection had been cemented since people began telling stories. The odd-looking buggers were not the heroes and princes; they were the ‘ones to watch out for’.

Children were warned, just in case.

‘What’s his name, anyway?’

No one knew for sure but there was a suggestion that it was a foreign-sounding surname, one that drew consonants together in a way that saw them rattle when spoken.

As for where he was from before he settled in the bungalow with the contents of a surprisingly large removal van, including more boxes labelled ‘books’ than any normal person would read in a lifetime, the feeling was that it must be Europe.

‘One of them places we won’t have to take all t’odds and sods from after Brexit.’

Apparently, he had once sent a parcel to a solicitor in London.

He didn’t own any pets.

The fact that he did not respond when children limped behind him,

imitating his gait, was considered another oddity, even after the discovery that he was profoundly deaf.

One thing that could not be disputed was that he was very old. Liver spots bruised his face and arms; lines carved memories across his face. His lips caved in towards a toothless mouth. The floss of his white hair barely covered his skull. But beneath the wiry curl of his eyebrows, his round bright eyes remained vigilant.

Despite his age and infirmity, he liked to take a walk every morning. He kept to the same route, turning left out of his stone cottage and entering the woods bordered by cornfields.

No one could remember when the Walk of Blood was first mentioned. It began as a rumour, which, just as it began to die down, was revived as an uneasy joke.

It was thought to have come from something overheard, as despite being deaf, or perhaps because of it, the man liked to talk to himself.

On the day he was followed, the man left his cottage at the usual time. It was mid-July; the paving slabs were severe with heat and even the best-tended gardens sagged and slumped.

Supported by his stick, he made his way into the woods. He didn't hear the shuffling whispers of the three boys who followed him, just kids of maybe 12 or 13, but he sensed their presence. He didn't protest. Let them follow. There was nothing anybody could do to him now.

The ghosts of all the dogs he'd owned walked beside him. He would have liked a new companion, but had not expected to live this long after the last one left.

He sometimes forgot his age. He had lied about it when he joined the resistance and it was easier to continue to do so. He had been tall for his age and broad shouldered back then, before his body began to shrink and fold in on itself. In the boldness of youth, he had stood alongside others in protest on the streets of Warsaw, but many had fallen at his side and he had gone underground.

There were others who had fallen, too. He had left them behind in the cities of occupied France and later on the Normandy beaches.

The children who followed him today, they knew nothing of this life. Their parents, too. He could give them all a history lesson. How

his fellow Poles and the Czechs and the North Africans and the Indians and the rest fought alongside the Allies. But people didn't want lessons. They didn't want to be reminded.

He had never thought of himself as a hero, but he had been quietly proud of his contribution during the war. This meant nothing now. He knew what people thought of him; some of them at least. They had told him. He was a scrounger, taking money from the state, stealing from British pensioners. It didn't matter that he had made this country his home, worked hard all his life, paid taxes.

He had been on the bus heading into town when it happened, a couple of years earlier, not long after the Brexit vote. A group of men got on, smartly dressed in polo shirts and jeans, black zip-up jackets. They invited attention from the start, shouting slogans, staring down any passengers who glanced at them. It seemed they were heading to some kind of protest march; one of them had an England flag round his shoulders with the slogan: 'Refugees not welcome'.

He supposed he counted as a refugee. Driven from his homeland. But he had chosen not to go back, and to make a life here instead, alongside those he had fought for.

At the next stop, the young woman sitting next to him got off and one of the men took the seat. He was a handsome young lad; blue eyes framed by long dark lashes, high cheekbones, wide mouth. His hair was shaved close to his head and covered by a tweed cap.

'All right, grandad.'

He nodded politely and kept his head down but this wasn't enough.

'Where are you heading, then?'

'Into town, shopping.'

As soon as the words left his lips, their jagged trace of an accent condemned him.

They pulled him from his seat, ignoring his protests.

The other passengers watched it happen. They looked shocked, but did nothing.

He followed the path through the woods, trying to ignore the ache in his leg. The whole world had been at war and he had somehow survived, only to be thrown from the step of a bus.

The three young lads were now following him in plain sight.

They had fallen quiet, perhaps nervous, perhaps bored. Children seemed to have such a short attention span nowadays.

At the end of the line of trees, there was an opening to the corn-fields. Instead of looping round for his usual return walk, he stepped through the gap.

The field stretched out before him. The seeds he had spread from his pockets in the spring had buried into the rich earth. It was a long way from where the bodies were buried but it would have to do. Roots and shoots had burst forth. And at the heart of each plant, a bold red flower.

He stood for a moment, observing the field of corn, dotted with hundreds of poppies. He stepped out on to the field of tiny wounds and began his Walk of Blood. This was his remembrance. His silent protest.