

APRIL 2016

When Dave was already committed to that journey to Wimbledon he got a call to inform him that the interview with the witness was delayed. This was the one journey he had, for so many years ago, promised himself he would never take again. He had an irrational hatred of Waterloo Station and the grimy trains that ran along the once glorious attempts at post fifties office building, past the grimy flats that the wartime bombers had failed to hit and the the inner suburbs that formed a deterrent for any invader or optimistic property buyer on a limited income.

He had two hours to kill and without thought turned left out of the station towards the less salubrious part of Wimbledon, before he almost caught himself in shock. Why here? But then he saw the cafe, still there after all the years. How many nights had he waited outside, hoping for a cast off sandwich a few chips left in a paper? As if eternity was locked on this street, the same the cold unforgiving rain lashed down with cruel intent, and, quelling his doubts and fears, the chill wind blew him nearer and nearer to the door of the cafe.

All that had changed in more than twenty years was the variety of hot drinks. The shabby tables unchanged, the bench and stools that were by the window still had scratches and graffiti he was sure he had done. His fingers traced a scroll, as he looked through the window at the unchanged street, the old shops a little altered but not the sky line, not the chipped roof tiles, not the bedraggled pigeons, cold and lonely waiting with lack of expectation for the spring to arrive.

And then he passed. 'God almighty it was Max!' Dave felt sick to the pit of his stomach, felt a shard of ice pierce his soul, an anger that had no name caught his throat.

Dave was certain it was Max. It was the walk, though head down, there was a swagger; it was the choice of clothes, not gym shoes, but trainers; not a cap pulled down to cover most of his head and face, but a hoodie. He was unmistakeable.

Thirty years ago Dave had been in awe of Max, this unkempt figure. Dave had been the little boy running errands for the gang, pleased to be included, terrified of failure. Each collection earning him some money enough to pay for supper for him and his sister, not enough for his mum to spot and take for her drugs. It was not until he had found her dead on the couch that any one noticed them. Looking back he could not understand how the police never saw him running around alone from the age of six, not like that now, everyone aware of the kids on their bikes, the exploitation, the ruined lives.

He could not help himself. He stood up and walked to the door, just as Max stopped to pick up a discarded cigarette packet, and in doing so looked back, an old street trick from those used to spotting surveillance. Max's eyes might have been be rheumy that morning but they had all the sharp cunning of the predatory wolf.

Did he feel Dave's look of hatred before he stared at Dave's face. But Max's eyes swept down the street, there was no recognition of his child victim, his former little slave.

Dave followed Max, who ambled up the Broadway, peering in cardboard boxes left out for collection, stopping to speak to a figure huddled in a doorway, exchanging something, probably drugs, drifting on towards the station.

Later Dave thought to himself, 'I can't explain why I did these things. I don't know why I turned left out of the station and did not turn right to walk to Wimbledon village, such a nice part of south London. I don't know why I stopped in that cafe that remains the scene of so many of my nightmares. These are not actions I am responsible for. I told them I did not want to go to Wimbledon but they insisted; I did not ask Max to pass by that morning, but he did. Not my fault. And why shouldn't I have followed him, not against the law. And really when he stumbled again, and I could smell the stench booze, saw his broken filthy teeth, did I put out a hand to help, which turned into a push. And was it my fault a speeding car came by just at that moment? And did I ask for the roads to be wet and icy? No I cannot explain these things.'

