

Bourne
toWrite...
creative writing
workshops

Walking down the Devil's Path

by Stuart Carruthers

Maria held the blue Cardboard Box close to her chest.

Running as fast as she could, she was desperate to stay away from the obvious places where people knew her. Struggling for breath she stopped by the chain link fence that separated the Cordwell Estate from the playing fields. Row upon row of 1950's housing separated by narrow rubbish strewn alleyways. This was her last chance.

Maria was nervous about knocking on Paul's door, as the last time it didn't end well. Carefully lifting the black lid, she smiled as the box's contents were still intact. Looking skywards, the rain clouds were gathering overhead. The doorbell was barely audible from outside, so she pressed it numerous times as she wasn't sure he'd hear it. Stepping away from the door, she looked up at the bedroom windows, the curtains remained drawn. It wasn't a good idea to hang around.

*

As the rain clouds gathered, the high street deserted in quick time. Paul waited patiently in the shadows of the shop doorway. Across the road two young skinheads in matching tracksuits laughed uncontrollably at their victim lying motionless on the ground. Their afternoon's handywork would pay for this evening's fun. They were too busy to notice their nemesis.

The rain was relentless, but the boys didn't care. The red door with the cracked glass at the end of Station Street was well known to Paul. As the boys waited to enter, Paul walked under the bus shelter canopy out of the rain. He didn't have to wait long. In less than five minutes they emerged, hoods up and walking briskly towards the bus stop. They paid no attention to the man sat slumped on the seat waiting on the No 29A.

As the bus took its time to cross town, Paul settled into his seat just behind the boys. He could hear everything they said above the crowded top deck. Across town two phones vibrated with numerous messages, instructions for the coming hours.

*

With just enough time Maria caught the tram. As it rolled across the uneven streets, she was desperate to hear from Paul. The force of the rain on the windows suddenly drew her attention to the bus stopped on the opposite side of the road. That's when she saw him. With no opportunity to get off, she ran towards the back of the tram to see what number bus it was. Maria tried calling but no one answered. At the next stop she was the first off running head first into the driving rain, the cardboard box tucked securely under her coat. Taking the side street between the old car park and the bakery, Maria emerged onto the high street and the next bus stop.

“Why didn't you answer my calls?”

“Keep your voice down.”

“Answer me.”

Turning to face her, Paul placed his index finger across his lips and gently whispered into her left ear.

“I need to show you something.”

Maria carefully opened her jacket zip.

“I know what it is, I want nothing to do with it, understand?”

Up ahead the giggling skinheads stood up and made their way downstairs as the bus slowed to stop.

Paul lowered his head as Maria started out the window, desperate to get rid of her surprise.

Waiting until they descended the stairs Paul said, “come on, this is important.”

Maria followed.

As they kept their distance in the emerging rush hour pedestrian traffic Paul answered a few of the endless questions that were coming his way. Turning into Crescent Industrial estate he suddenly stopped by the coal yard.

“Look Maria, wait here, I won't be long.”

“What am I supposed to do with this, you can't ignore it anymore”.

Paul looked over her shoulder to ensure no one was watching, then carefully opened her jacket, removed the box and its contents.

Maria's face turned white.

"Wait here, keep the box."

The rain was relentless.

Black streams of soot washed out onto the potholed road and down into the town, followed by a sound that changed their lives forever.