

## **A Walk on the Strood Side – Maria Bradley**

This is the walk I have taken in anger, fists clenched, tightness in my chest. This is the walk I have taken in despair, head down, hood pulled over my face. This is the longest walk I could manage when illness slowed me to a snail's pace, laboured steps, and not enough energy to lift myself over the concrete banks if I had wanted to. This is the walk I took and the bench I sat on when deciding whether to leave my marriage, listing pros and cons in a notebook as if life decisions could be balanced into two columns. This is where I walked late at night with a lover at the age of thirty-seven, giggling, intoxicated with each other. This is where I walk on New Year's Day, alone, and where, in 2002, the words "Fuck Off" greeted the New Year, carved in the frost, encircled by a perfect oval like a corporation flowerbed.

Today I walk this way to get out of the house, stretch my legs. It's a Saturday in July 2005, a week into the latest heatwave, and my walk on the Strood side of the Medway starts by the retail park, near the back of the Civic Centre. The canal that runs here, an afterthought to the main river, begins and ends at the site of the new Morrison's superstore. Rusting metal sentinels, upended railway sleepers driven into the bank to stop the Travellers' caravans from settling there, stand in imitation of an Anthony Gormley sculpture – the guardians of the grass verge. The council mowers can't get on there now, and there are meadow flowers amongst the scorched long grass rather than the clipped lawn, punctuated with clumps of daffodils, that were there in the Spring.

I walk there at low tide and take inventory of the objects half-submerged in the mudbanks. Tyres, shopping trolleys, traffic cones – the usual choice of those who like to launch things into the river – are supplemented by the cardboard middles from rolls of carpet, a cage of the kind used in warehouses, a metal drum angled like a storybook treasure chest and three bundles of the Friday Ad newspaper. On a rivulet of brown water, tracing a softened zigzag through the mud, two mute swans glide past an industrial wheelie bin. The information board showing birds of the Medway estuary says that the river is a mixture of salt and fresh water. This smell is not fresh; the canal smells dirty, and the salt air doesn't hit you until the main river.

I pass beneath the railway bridge that carries trains along the Medway Valley line to Cuxton, Halling, Snodland, New Hythe, Aylesford, Maidstone Barracks and Maidstone West. I'm not one to meander – I usually take the quick route across the tarmac path by the Civic Centre car park – but today I follow the banks of the river, aided by a treasure trail of red and yellow McDonald's fries cartons, a quarter-pounder box, a cardboard cup, a crumpled paper bag and two Big and Tasty containers amongst the fallen fir cones from the landscaped trees. The trail ends at the brick building topped with a weathervane in the shape of a yacht. Here there is a small oblong of silver, torn at one corner, with *Condomi* traced in black letters and a crushed can of White Lightning. There is a strong smell of urine.

The shopping trolley graveyard ends with the river proper, just one lone specimen, close to the banks, encrusted with lichen. I notice that the lifebelt is missing from its stand, imprinted with a red/white, red/white circle, like a child's puzzle - this is where the missing piece goes.

Historic Rochester is in full view now: the town that used to be a city until someone forgot to do the paperwork. To the right of the Castle and the Cathedral, old buildings nestle in the hillside leading to Borstal, whilst new homes, housing Gillingham Football Club players and young execs, overlook the river on the Esplanade. Boats are moored either side of the river, though the ones on the Rochester side seem bigger and

better maintained. The Strood boats have more character, tipped at the edge of the waterline, half-stuck in the mud.

The tourists don't venture this side of the river. Even in the days when the Dickens Festival ended with scenes from a Tale of Two Cities, or such like, illuminated on the castle walls. It was the locals who congregated here for the fireworks finale. We knew it was the best spot. No scrabbling for cars and coaches at the end of the evening, just clutching tight to a child's hand, or raising them up on shoulders for the short walk home.

A warm river breeze touches the tops of my bare arms, flits away, and then returns to tickle another stretch of skin and ruffle its fingers through my hair. The wind catches at the hem of my full cotton skirt and lifts it above my knees. I smooth it down. I am aware that I am the only woman here amongst three men, but all are cocooned in their own concerns.

The Birdman is here today. I used to walk this way to work once a week – leave the car behind, get some exercise – and I saw him every time, pacing slowly, sometimes lifting a pair of binoculars to his face, other times muttering and shouting to himself. He doesn't have the binoculars today. Instead he has a blue plastic carrier, which he is batting from side to side, shouting at something or someone I can't see. I have imagined him as a works foreman in his younger life, in a brown coat with a clipboard, shouting above the whirr of machinery. He would have had regular haircuts then, short back and sides. He has had a bald patch for as long as I have known him, but now he allows his hair to touch his collar before an occasional visit to P&R Classic Barber's on Strood High St. He used to dress smartly when I first noticed him, some fifteen years ago, in brown trousers and ironed shirts. He has become more casual in recent years, and today he wears jeans, a white polo shirt and a dark blue zip up jacket. I spoke to him once, curious about the birds that perched on the bobbing orange buoys in the river, I asked him what they were. Face to face he looked uncomfortable, frightened. "Lesser black-backed gulls", that's all he said before moving on, twitching, fidgeting, jerking his head from one side to another in constant argument.

There is also a man in a mockery of evening dress, stained black trousers and a tail shirt that was once white. His long grey hair, greasy and tangled, is tied back in a ponytail. He staggers by the river wall before laying his skinny body on one of the benches, shading his eyes from the sun. On the next bench a well-fed young man with dark, close-cropped hair is talking into a mobile phone. He is wearing shorts and a T-shirt. Sunglasses protect his eyes from the glare of the sun on the water. "You brought someone else into our marriage for better or worse, Sarah," he says. His voice becomes louder. He rises from the bench and marches towards the Civic Centre, phone clamped to his ear and the other arm held out stiff from the side of his body. I walk towards the bridge, a favourite spot for those who flirt with suicide. I wouldn't use the bridge. I would plan it properly – dead of night, no one to save me – slipping down the steps from the river wall. At the top they are narrow with metal grab rails, then there are no rails as they descend, each step wider, more inviting. How easy it would be to take that last step, to keep walking down below the waterline.

The Medway is my friend and my enemy; calm and turmoil, the surface hiding what lies beneath. Sometimes it reflects my mood; sometimes I impose my mood on it. Today my mood is mellow, like the river. I don't turn, as I sometimes do, to walk down Strood High St, past The Prince of Wales (Travellers by appointment only) where you can hear *The Wild Rover* played most Friday nights, accompanied by the landlady banging an ashtray on the bar. Today, I take the long flight of steps up to the

bridge, rather than the seven opposite the entrance to the Civic Centre, wishing to improve on my exercise. I pause, but don't stop as I glance down at the choppy swirls where the supporting columns meet the water.

As I reach the Rochester side a woman of about thirty is walking in the opposite direction, her width taking up much of the footpath. Another regular to the local area, I often see her holding long conversations with herself. Although the weather is warm, she is wearing a quilted anorak, a grey woollen jumper and black leggings with a large, teardrop-shaped hole on the right knee. Her crinkled hair falls from a centre parting, cut in a severe, straight line just below the ears. As I get close she opens her eyes wide, sticks out her tongue, shouts twice, then folds her face into a wide grin. She's heading for a walk on the Strood side.