

City of Rain

By Adair Broughton

Pale sun filtered through forlorn cloud now too tired to cry, casting the last of the light that enabled shadows to dance and mock the tired afternoon.

He had walked throughout the day, saying goodbye to places instead of people, listening to the hours slip by with the sounds of a dying city. Conversations merged into traffic and car horns became yells of help. Footsteps were the beat of a city and bodies became a blur. The range of sights, sounds and smells touched him and caressed him like a familiar lover, one he had grown tired of, and one he wanted rid of. Distance had betrayed him. He would not miss this, so why did he feel subsumed with melancholy? Why did a part of him belong to the city when a part of the city could not belong to him?

Something was keeping him here.

It had been a nice morning; the blue sky of autumn giving the false pretence that summer had not yet waned. It was both a new dawn and a final one, beckoning possibility as much as castrating the past. The yellow and brown leaves yet to fall decorated the select trees that had so far managed to hide from the sly saw of progress. Roots had held firm from the teeth of mechanical jaws. There was beauty in those colours, too often unseen. Concrete could not be nurtured, accounts could be. The shame of the city did not rest on one person's shoulders or feelings. Those same leaves would soon lie on the ground, celebrating winters entrance but for now they glistened with recent rainfall, dripping onto passing heads. Then one day there would be no leaves at all. A signature was all it took for nature to dissolve into another street or another billboard.

He watched the swaying tree as he stood in the doorway. It was only a slight breeze, tempting the branches into soft movements of distraction.

He had known so many places and had so many memories of this city, all with different meanings and connotations of feeling but the further he engaged into his past the more he realised how little he knew, how the slow changes had built into the unknown. He had become a stranger, ostracised by time rather than forced exclusion. It had been a strange walk into memory.

He had lived here for most of his life but this wasn't home. Maybe nobody belonged? All the faces rushing home lost to their own world and patterns of life but none really feeling that this is where they belong. It was the mist of the mundane. He seemed out of the loop, as if there was no purpose. He had tried to find one. Nothing.

The walk had been somewhat refreshing even if disconcerting. He was the urban explorer absorbing himself into brick and the silence of hidden doorways. Then the rain had come by mid afternoon. Clouds seemed to form from nowhere, converging in protest to dim the lights of day. He knew that was because of the tall buildings blocking his vision of a horizon. All he could do was look straight up. The sky changed so quickly with that limited perspective.

He had sought shelter in a doorway, the wooden boarding the grand entrance to a failed bookshop. All those people in a city, twice as many eyes and still bookshops had to close down. They were always failing, like a parody of his life. He had much to say, but words were hidden. Nobody would know of his story, all the things he had done.

Books were where he learned to live, entombed in this viscid city, glued to its entrails and underbelly of need. It was his escape, sojourn to eternity, and break in morality and trepid footstep to the possible. They gave him ideas that blurred the edges of fantasy, fiction and fact. He became engrossed in character and wanted to live the lives he read about. Things were so

real to him and lately he felt dangerous and antagonised by the city. He had done all he could to leave except actually depart. It would happen, he had faith in that but it was much harder than he had supposed.

The rain was now in puddle, asleep, reflecting faces and bodies as they walked past splashing ankles and feet. None turned to look at him. He was lost in the doorway as much as they were lost to anything outside their vision. The peripheral was another place entirely.

He stared at a small oil spill in a puddle beneath the tree. It created swirling rainbows showing pollution could also be beautiful. Diamonds sparkled into existence and disappeared as quickly, shimmering with the afternoon's incipient decline of light. He was getting cold and would have to make his way back to the apartment. He was also hungry but that did not always register with him. He either ate or didn't depending on the day. Food was a need and not a comfort. He wasn't deliberately frugal or seeking condolence in the ascetic but it was the end result, how he appeared to be.

His mind had other flesh to feast on.

He was the colour of concrete, his clothes having absorbed many years of traffic pollution and dust without ever being cleaned. Somehow he didn't look dirty. He looked after himself, kept his nails clean and his face shaven in sharp contrast to his attire. His gaunt appearance could have been labelled lithe. His quick walking pace showed purpose. His movements were like a bat, sharp and jagged, swerving from people at the last possible moment as if he hadn't seen them. Faces turned round to see who he was, to highlight annoyance but he had always gone, one more head lost to the bobbing people of the pavement. He did not meander through the city like his thoughts did. They struggled to find self and acceptance in the turmoil that was everyday living. He walked fast but thought slow. His head swam with delicate notions of how different things could be, often drowning him in possibility but always providing a lifeline of knowledge and life and chaos.

His skin was pale but not haggard. People found it difficult to guess his age. Those younger felt him older while those older presumed him younger. He was a loner but not lonely. Solitude had often found him in dark corners of bars with disparate and desperate people. Drink was the formality that was the precursor to the burden of tangled disappointment that followed the false meaning it could imbibe. Infrequent and illicit trysts had made him realise less was more. Touch was cold. He did what he could to gain some warmth from those people but he never sought permanence or connection. There was no universe above him at night that pressed down on him with the weight of want. He was a friend of the night and their conversations were generally silent.

He looked at the graffiti on the walls decorating the doorway, modern cave painting but of word not beast. Turning round he looked at the brown package on the floor. There was no letterbox for it to go through, no remaining door for someone to open and collect mail from. He was unsure whether to pick it up. Should it stay there? It made him nervous. He was unsure why. Traffic rushed by.

A long thin arm reached down and picked it up anyway. He quickly placed it under his arm. He turned again looked left and right and stepped out of the doorway heading towards his apartment. Although the rain has stopped falling people still had umbrella's open. He had grown adept at dodging people and keeping to his fast pace. He could hear the tyres hitting puddles where the drains had decided not to drink any more water. The soft rumbling of tyres gradually grew less as he entered the back streets of his life. There was less people but as many cars, finding shortcuts to save seconds but adding stress that took days off their lives.

Streetlights appeared and car headlights dazzled in unison. The city evening was quick to arrive but he was home. He pushed open the outer door listening to it clatter as it sprung back in position. That door attacked him daily, the spring's vitality strange for its age and its rust. He

climbed the stairs. He had virtually smoothed the wooden banister himself, his daily ritual of sliding his hand and tracing a finger along the wood better than any varnish, as he made the three flights of stairs to the subdued white door. Small black marks like clinging insects showed the need for more paint on his door. He heard the woman opposite shouting at her son for another made up reason for justification. If she had no son she would shout at the television. He wondered whether she could speak in a normal voice. He looked at her red door, shiny and bright but dreaded to think what the inside would look like. The noise dimmed as he closed the door behind him and now she had to voice her authority through two doors which gave him some peace.

Inside was different. Surprisingly clean, the exterior of the apartment block had given no clue to how well the man had kept his abode. He cared little about what others thought; hence the door that needed some renewed vigour and the clothes that needed to be burnt. It was about the importance of others opinion. How little they mattered. This was not a deliberate decision. The simplicity and limited amount of decoration and furniture made things that much easier to clean.

He had been too ingrained in some of its darker moments and secrets to see an escape years before. The city was a bad odour the he had become accustomed to but recently not immune from. He never felt he had money, had not needed to change his lifestyle. His comforts were cheap. The gradual increase of wealth over the previous twenty years almost amounted to freedom and fresh air but it was not something he could feel every day. It had not been something he deliberately worked towards.

He had wanted this day to be his last walk, to finally clear his mind of the city but also offer it something in return, to find some respect within its confines. He had wanted to say goodbye properly not just leave work without informing the people he knew. He wanted to feel he was sacrificing something but things hadn't worked out that week and he just left, resigned over the phone. Nobody had come round to say farewell but he had spent a few days sorting details after he had just not turned up. He had been away from work for two weeks but he didn't miss it. It seemed nobody missed him.

He was an electrician, providing maintenance to many of the apartments owned by the clandestine, keeping rents up to keep their happiness up. His keys gave him access to anywhere. He received calls for emergencies and followed old print outs and maintenance routines for the others. He generally worked alone but not always. Apprentices came and went and he would wonder what happened to them. He tried to give advice and watch them intently to try and offer advice after seeing their work. He could see perturbed and vulnerable faces glance back but he rarely told them anything then, never opened up and they never seemed to last long. If they didn't care or want to be around him why should he bother? They closed themselves off before giving him a chance. Gradually they had stopped sending them. He would remain the elusive electrician powered by his own currents.

He was in his chair, the radio playing delicate classical music that often irritated as much as soothed him. He closed his eyes to gather some peace from the city that could have been far away but was just outside his window. His tea became cold, as moments were lost to minutes. Next to his cup was the package he had yet unwrapped. He knew it was a book.

He woke from the small amount of shuteye to a much darker piece of music, crawling its way out of the radio, its tendrils in his ear. He had dimmed the lights in his apartment and it was hard to wake fully from a sleep that should have been harvested later. There had been no dreams but haunting thoughts made him feel on edge. He picked up the tea to ascertain how long he had slept. A law of thermodynamics showed it in balance with its environment but cold tea never seemed to be the match of room temperature as if it had lost more energy than physically allowed. He sipped it but it felt refrigerated. He could still drink cold tea. His snooze had lasted a while.

The package intrigued him more than food. What wasn't there couldn't waste away. He didn't have a bad diet, brown rice and pasta, yoghurts and fruit but he was always slightly hungry, the feeling kept him alert and undoubtedly kept the look of youth against the adversity of time. He often felt his stomach was eating him, purging him off problems and bad aspects of life. He felt real when he was starving, knew that he still had spirit of life.

Part of him wanted to open it, to read the book. Another part of him wanted to put it straight back where he had found it, go back to the doorway. It was for someone else to find, not him. It had been placed there for a reason.

He picked it up carefully taking off the clear tape and sliding out the book. A mandala adorned the cover and personal handwriting had scribed the title 'My Confession' into that same front. Would that figure mean anything to anybody else?

He put the book down again after slowly opening to the hand written text within. He felt weird, not in control, a feeling he didn't like. His hands were clammy and he didn't want to pick the book up in that state. It was too valuable to spoil. This was a personal message, a personal story. Everybody had confessions, not everybody wrote them down.

He knew he shouldn't be reading this. It was too personal but it was still addictive. He imagined other people finding it, doing exactly the same. What would they learn by reading it? Would they have the same nervous feeling of being sequestered and frightened, knowing that intimacy often contained truths that were dark and scary but equally fascinating.

Only music played from the radio, no presenters voice to offer comfort or companionship. He could change channels but the music seemed to be ingrained into the atmosphere contaminating the room. He closed his eyes again but this time he felt awake, too alert with what he would read, knowing that the book had not been left there by chance. It was a journal, nothing a person could sell in a bookshop. There was a story behind it. He was meant to read it.

Weather would change landscapes over time but it could never wash away memory. He could hear the faint drumming of rain against the window tapping delight at its consistency. He picked up the journal, opened it on a random page, not wanting to read it from the start. He remembered when he had started out in his trade, his hands would always shake not knowing if an electric shock would be his last. Safety was now more important. Protocols if followed could alleviate much of those nerves. He had that original feeling now, that this journal would somehow shock him. He could feel the hairs on his arm, a sensation he now rarely felt. It's just a book he thought, nothing in it that could surprise him.

Words seemed to write themselves, the handwriting an added poignancy. It had been written neatly, he knew time had been taken to write this neatly.

"She looked like the rain, almost ghostlike. She would drown me if I let her. Her words formed pictures of lies in my mind as if I could see what she couldn't; as if she had lied so much she cared nothing for truth anymore. I had seen her with other men, coming and going from her apartment. It was a long time before she had noticed me. I had been in her apartment while she slept and had sat by her bed stroking her hair, careful not to wake her. I think that time meant more to me than when she had invited me there. She picked men up too easily, that angered me. She couldn't admit that to me. If she had no respect for herself at least she shouldn't deny it. It never feels the same being invited into a house. She sat me on the bed and began to kiss my neck. I left. I did go back there weeks later and watched her sleep again. I cut her hair and was glad she never woke but I was too tired to hide and wait till morning to watch her reaction. I sprinkled her hair on the sidewalk as I went home. The city seemed very quiet that night. I remember my breath forming patterns in front of me as I walked home."

He let out a breath too. It formed clear images in his mind. He wondered what the women would be doing now, how she would have felt that morning. He still felt a chill, knowing that people could be asleep and watched over, he could think of nothing worse, being so vulnerable like that. He walked to the window, watching his faint reflection walk towards him. There were people who lived in shadows, who preferred that life. At least that woman had not been harmed physically. It was a form of protection, looking over someone. That could be forgiven. Was that the confession?

He looked at the mirror image of himself, watched the rain soak through his reflection. He looked jaded and faint; his mirrored self seemed more real though, as if the realm of reality and shadow had been reversed. He knew it was to do with the book he had picked up. He knew he should have left it where it was. He would be reading things he shouldn't be reading, things he didn't want to hear. He felt weak somehow. The fact that it said confession...

He sat back down, picking up the book as he did so, opening a page towards the end.

"I am nearing the end of my time here. I realise I have left clues for the discerning or a glimpse of the hidden for the intrigued. I regret some of what happened but nothing happens without a reason. I shouldn't have to explain myself fully, not to you or myself. I have wounds as much as they do. I can tell about a person by how they sleep. It was the only selection I did. Only some let me get close but they were all lonely."

He didn't want to read anymore. It felt too personal. He opened up another page near the beginning.

"It was only the second time I had been in her room. The moonlight decorated her face with white glow and reminded me of a pearl. She looked content, at peace. During the day she was arrogant, always looking in mirrors and sweeping her hands through her hair, subtly checking to see if she was noticed. But on that bed she was the same as all the others. Relaxed she was an angel without pretence. The covers had slipped down, her silk nightdress designed for touch. I had been quiet but was naïve back then. The floor creaked, as I was drawn closer and her eyes opened. She must have been a light sleeper. Panic is a strange thing. I became used to how different people would react, but I had less idea back then what to do. She stared at me for an eternity. It was only when I smiled that she screamed, that she recognised the reality of her situation. I had just wanted to watch, to feel the innocence of sleep. I would have left if that had not happened. I dived over the floor putting my hand over her mouth but her flaying feet and bite shocked me. She screamed again and it felt so loud against the silence of the night, piercing my own limits of reason. I put the pillow over her face, pressing down, letting her find the serenity of sleep she had been enveloped in only moments before."

He took a deep breath, already realising he had read too much. He wanted an escape from this journal as much as he needed to escape from the city.

He had purchased an old wooden house in the woods miles from the city. His walk was as much to say goodbye, as it was to act as a final comparison to the new life he would have. He had not realised how clean the air had felt, how much renewed vigour he had walking through the trees feeling the calm that had escaped him for so many years. This was a new start, a break from all his memories, a new beginning. He would have his books, his connection to people. He wouldn't have to walk through the night to find peace. He read the last page of the journal, now sure of what he had to do.

"There are many more ways of being dead than alive. Some we can control, some we can't. I've realised I need to break free from the chains of the need to find peace in power and to seek a forgiveness that the city won't allow. I watched them sleep but nobody watched me. I cried when I made them sleep forever but not from sorrow but because that they wouldn't realise the gift I was

giving them. Then it happened. I felt watched too and I couldn't live with that. It changed my perspective, broke the chain of what held me"

The man was agitated, restless. He put the book down on the table but picked it up again, his mind battling whether to finish reading or too throw it out into the rain, letting the rain drown the words, freeing the confession from anyone else. He focussed his eye, knew he had to get through this.

"I can't explain what happened to her. She wasn't meant to be down there. She just stared at me. I had gone there to get warm from walking the cold city night. I worked there so I couldn't risk going to one of the rooms. Not that night. But she found me anyway, haunting my presence in that basement. I still remember her walking over, like an apparition, gliding towards an unknown future. It was too tempting; to hold her, to feel that dress and to smell her hair. She never said anything but her eyes spoke understanding. She felt cold, colder than outside and I knew she needed warmth. I held her close and tight. I warmed her neck with my hands, squeezing the cold from her. She tried to speak then, gripping my arms tight, appreciatively. She fell limp, her arms dangling like the dead vines on a winter tree. There was no peace to her now. She didn't look content, not like the others. My gift had not helped her and I felt irked, almost vexed. I left her there even knowing at the time that it was a mistake but it felt out of my control. I needed to leave. I barely slept and the three hours I managed to get gave me a semblance of sense. The early dawn gave me a chance to make amends. I went back there, worried that someone else might find the beauty that is only mine to see. She had gone. I never slept for days after that and nothing has been the same since. There was no mention anywhere of the body. Other times I caught fleeting headlines but not then. Had I imagined it? Am I imagining the feelings that I am being watched? That's why the chain was broken, why I am leaving but I need someone to know this is true, that the city has these secrets. It isn't a secret anymore if you know it. Because I know you'll pick this book up if I leave it. I know someone else will know. You can be haunted too."

He stared at the page for a long time.

He had eventually fallen asleep, but it was fitful and restless. He had the same urge to leave but still he couldn't, not until he had an answer. He missed breakfast, his hunger now keeping him awake. He took the book, carefully wrapped it. He only knew of one thing to do. He rubbed his forehead trying to itch his brain, rub away the feeling that seemed to be with him constantly. Nothing worked. He had to make a decision.

The city was always busy but it was quieter now, before the rush of work. The rain had eventually stopped but it could happen anytime in the city of rain, the pavements seemingly dry for the occasional day only.

He reached the doorway. He took the package from his arm knowing that this would be the last time he did it. He had to leave. The city was killing him. The woman was killing him. He would be free. It didn't matter if she never read it. His confession could be heard by anyone but it was a way of keeping it in the city, his apology, and his permanent link. He put the book down, just like he had before his walk yesterday. He would not walk by here again.

His confessions could not be dampened by rain but they could wash away guilt if he knew someone else had them.

He stepped away from the doorway, the first splash of rain hitting his face. It would be a long walk out of the city. There was something comforting in that.