

Heretics Park

They'd landed on their feet, thought Seb, turning down the alleyway into Heretics Park. It wasn't just the excellent schools: the little town they'd moved to had real history. He had enthused about it to Clapham friends who joked about yokels with extra thumbs.

Parkrun here had been great for getting to know people, but Seb was also determined to improve his time, hence his arrival for interval training with sunrise a hopeful glimmer at the end of their road.

The dimly lit alleyway disgorged him into the park itself. Dawn didn't seem to have penetrated here. You didn't realise in the city what real darkness was like. Seb slowed down to let his eyes adjust. It was great, really - no light pollution! He clicked on his head-torch.

He set off along the path towards the football pitch where he planned to run. Over there on his left was the duckpond with that stand of trees beside it: 'the burnt oaks,' according to the run brief on Saturday. He'd asked why and someone had told him about the five women burnt as heretics there in Bloody Mary's reign. They had been accused of turning milk sour, harbouring Protestants and talking to the Devil in the form of a crow.

Seb read up on it later. The so-called witches had been scapegoated for a variety of reasons: following the wrong religion, upsetting local bigwigs - even just making herbal remedies. One poor woman was pregnant when she was executed and gave birth in the flames.

How was it so dark, Seb thought now - was the torch battery going? Its weak glow accentuated the impenetrable blackness. It was November the 1st, but the park felt like winter. Clouds must have rolled in, obscuring the sunrise. Or maybe this park just swallowed light!

He peered ahead at a tentative jog. Tree-trunks loomed around him like wary sentinels. A chill breeze moaned and crackled overhead. He jogged on, stumbling on humps. The trees thinned out soon didn't they? Funny, you'd swear they were closing in.

There was scabbling at his feet and the torch beam caught a reflective stare. Something scampered off, crashing through undergrowth. Seb ran on faster. As he burst into open space, brambles snagged his ankle. He fought free, swearing. Wind groaned and sighed through the woods at his back.

He glanced at his Fitwatch - his heart-rate was ridiculous! Had he really got that unfit? He jogged towards the barely visible white lines of the football pitches.

He began his first jog along the touchline, with an avenue of trees to his left, looking for a double trunk he'd noted for his turning point. He kept glancing over, watching for it. The black trunks flitted by, creating a strange illusion of dark creatures stalking through the shadows.

There was his tree at last. Seb turned and set off back at running pace, stretching his legs.

The dawn must take hold soon. The park would be transformed into the perfect space for children the estate agent had promised. The Fitwatch said his heart-rate had settled. He turned at the corner and sprinted full-pelt into darkness.

Were those shapes moving in it? Shit, there could be anything there! He strained to listen and sensed a teeming presence, then a scuttling whisper, rising to a growl.

Something lithe and hairy banged into his legs. Seb lunged forwards, almost crashing to the earth in a flashback of teeth and mad-eyed ferocity.

'Fluffles!' A woman in a fleece and wellies loomed out of the dark. The dog - some sort of Collie - crouched ready to pounce again. It let out an ugly yelp and gave Seb a mismatched glare, one eye blue, one whitish-silver.

'Fluffles, stop that! Sorry! I don't know what's got into him this morning! This really isn't like him!'

Thank God for another human - even a hopeless dog owner. Seb walked back from his sprint, panting, as she scolded the hound for its 'funny mood'. Fluffles, for Christ's sake! It could have torn out his throat.

The woman had a lead in her hand, and a receptacle for dog-poo bags swung round her neck. 'Are you not a dog lover?' she asked.

'I was bitten in the face as a baby.' He glanced into the murky abyss behind her, suspecting forms moving through it, both upright and four-legged. 'I'm new here. Didn't realise I was on dog-walking territory.'

The dog raced off, yelping as though in fright. She peered after it, falling in step with Seb. 'Welcome to Heretics Park.'

'Thanks. I've been hearing about your famous martyrs.'

She snorted. 'If you believe the hype. You wouldn't be the only one; they all take it as gospel.'

Had Seb met the local lunatic? Or an enquiring mind like his own? He was jogging now, and she'd stopped by the touchline, calling to Fluffles to stop that silly noise.

'You don't believe the story, then?'

'I read the trial papers for a writing project. Half of what went on has been hushed up by history. And I don't mean the nonsense about sour milk and crows. There was real, corroborated evidence of events that have never been explained.'

Seb felt a damp chill. The head-torch's weak beam showed that fog had descended on the playing fields.

'Such as?' he panted. They heard the dog whimpering.

She lowered her voice. 'Horses stolen, children gone missing. Smouldering piles of ashes found in the park in the morning. When the townspeople searched them, they were full of teeth, both huge and tiny.'

Seb searched in vain for the double trunk, his heart thudding. This was far enough, surely? The dark looked denser as though the avenue had turned to forest.

'What's your theory, then?'

She glanced around and leaned closer. 'That the burning of the women wasn't the park's first horror. That our celebrated heretics weren't innocent after all. Well, enjoy your run. Come on Fluffles!'

She strode away. The dog barked at nothing, then ran stupidly in circles and lurched off after her.

The fog closed over them. Seriously, where was the dawn? The sweat was chilling on Seb's skin.

He should finish up and go. His jogs got faster, his sprints frantic. The fog was so thick now he could barely see the end of his outstretched arm. Dread grew as he hurtled into the unseen.

'Ten!' he said with the last sprint over. It was tennish anyway - he might have lost count. He slowed to a walk, gasping. Was that his own breathing he could hear? Or something behind him, muffled by fog?

His strength was failing, but he had to get out now. He entered the woods at a chest-heaving jog. Something shrieked in the distance and he started and swore. But now geese were honking on the duckpond - it must have been them.

There was a faraway sound like a horse whinnying, or maybe a bird's cry. Seb kept on through the trees, the feeble torch beam sweeping the ground. He'd be back on the path soon - he'd see the street light in the alleyway. When he got back to the house, Cal would be giving the girls their breakfast. He had a sudden longing to see them all as if he'd been gone for days.

He lifted his head and the beam swept the murky dark. A pair of eyes shone back at him at head height. The torch went out. Seb stopped and fumbled. Oh work, you bastard, work! But it was dead. He breathed in whimpers.

Black shapes that must be tree trunks appeared to be edging closer. His gaze swept wildly round and he spun in a circle like a dog.

A sigh breathed through the trees. Slow footsteps thudded towards him, rustled and stopped. A low growl rose to a whine: his mind flashed slobber dripping from teeth.

He heard crying - there were children! Were they really in the park at this hour? Shit, he had to help them! Then shrieking pierced the darkness, going straight to his heart.

But where were they? The wood was seething, alive. He lunged forwards, but his hands smashed into bark. He stumbled in reverse and pressed his back against a tree trunk. Brambles entangled him, spiking his arms.

A woman's howl ripped the air, ending in a tortured scream. Somewhere down by Seb's feet, a baby cried in terror.

The undergrowth crackled. Something muscled and hairy crashed against Seb and claws raked his chest. He smelt burning as teeth sank into his face.