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Birdcage Walk

Written by Helen Dunmore

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HELEN DUNMORE

Birdcage Walk



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Birdcage Walk

Towards the end of the eighteenth century there was a frenetic building boom in Bristol. Builders and developers competed against one another, borrowing heavily to buy up land. Between 1789 and 1792 work began on several terraces which were to be sited spectacularly on the steep slopes of Clifton, two hundred feet above the River Avon. Among these were Royal York Crescent, said to be the longest terrace in Europe, Cornwallis Crescent and Windsor Terrace. But in 1793 war was declared between Britain and France. Bristol's housing boom collapsed, and more than fifty builders and developers went bankrupt within a few months. Hundreds of houses were left unfinished for years, in a roofless spectacle of ruin.

Prelude

If my friends hadn't decided that I should have a dog I would never have opened the gate and gone into the graveyard. I always took the paved path between the railings: Birdcage Walk, it's called, because of the pleached lime trees arching overhead on their cast-iron frame.

In late summer the rosebay willowherb grew taller than the battered headstones and monuments. Every so often the graveyard would be strimmed and the stones would show naked. The tide of green would be stemmed for a few weeks, but it could never be held back. I once saw a man doing t'ai chi in a clearing, but usually only dog-walkers ventured among the graves. The church itself had been bombed to rubble during the war. In its place there was a lawn where children were not supposed to play ball games, and some rose trees planted in honour of a forgotten royal occasion.

I liked Birdcage Walk, especially late at night, when darkness and the rustle of nocturnal creatures gave an edge to the safety of the paved path.

I was still learning to be a dog-owner. I'd never considered becoming one, but when I was left alone I soon saw how uncomfortable my solitude was for everybody. Walking on my own was no great pleasure, and we had always walked. I thought of joining a ramblers' group, but I'd never liked being organised and so the idea melted away.

Jack had belonged to a girl I'd known from babyhood, the daughter of two dear friends. Nora was moving to Australia. I took Jack on a whim, perhaps because I couldn't think what else to do. And besides, everyone was so eager to match me with the dog, and they had been very kind since I was left alone. There was no question of taking on a puppy. Jack was five years old, perfectly trained.

It didn't seem like much more than an idea until the day Nora brought Jack round, with all the paraphernalia about which I knew less than nothing. We'd had a couple of introductory sessions, of course. I'd taken Jack for a walk, feeling an entire fraud. I knew what food he liked and that he must not have it more than once a day. But this time, when Nora left, she didn't take her dog with her.

So there we were, alone together. Jack was a mongrel, or mixed breed as they say now. He was rough-haired and had a strong little body and a pointed, foxy face which at the same time expressed a willingness towards the human which you would never find in a fox.

He took to me. I let him sniff my hand and I fed him and made him walk behind me through doorways –

Nora had told me this was important – and we began to go for long walks together. Everybody talked to me. It's a cliché, I know, but it's not until you've been left alone that you realise how very few people want to pass the time of day with a solitary and no doubt rather grim middle-aged man. I entered a little world which had obviously always been there, running parallel to the one in which I lived. I talked about Jack and enquired about Rosie, Dexter, Ebony, Skye. It was pleasant, but I still liked a solitary walk from time to time.

It was one of those long, slow summer dusks and Jack and I were the only creatures on Birdcage Walk. I heaved the gate open and Jack flashed away into the dense tangle of ivy, long grass, bramble, periwinkle and wild clematis. I could just see his hindquarters quivering in ecstasy as he explored a hole where a stone had keeled over. I whistled and he came to heel in a way which still astonished me – and, if I'm honest, delighted me.

We plunged on together through the graves. Some of the inscriptions were legible, some worn away. There was a particular type of stone which flaked off in layers, taking the inscriptions with it. Whatever care had gone into choosing the words, they did not matter now. It was hard to credit that real bones lay thick in the soil, but perhaps they too had dissolved. I wasn't sure how long it took. The graves were all more than a hundred years old.

Jack vanished beneath a wild rose bush, snuffling and then barking. I called him off and he came reluctantly. His look was so urgent, so abjectly enthusiastic that I

didn't have the heart to keep him back. Let him dig if he wanted. It could do no harm, after all this time. I was careful. I was not one of those who festooned the iron railings with little plastic bags of dog crap. Jack barked again. He was looking back at me, as if he wanted me to come too.

I waded through the undergrowth, lifted a thorny branch and peered at the grave where Jack was digging. It sounds fanciful, but I half believed that Jack had brought me here for a purpose. The stone leaned only slightly backwards and the inscription was deep cut. I could not read it all but a name jumped out at me: Fawkes. For some reason I was curious. I suppose I thought of Guy Fawkes, and his awful fate, and the bonfires that still burned in his name. I bent down to look more closely. Jack was flurrying up earth with his paws but otherwise doing no harm as far as I could see. He had probably found a rabbit hole. I flattened the undergrowth with my boot and knelt down. Now I saw what I had not noticed at first: there was an object carved beneath the inscription. I puzzled over it, and then I saw what it was: a quill pen, beautifully drawn in stone. A craftsman must have done this. I ran my fingers over the inscription, for most of the words were hard to read. The script was flowing and copious.

To the Beloved Memory of Julia Elizabeth Fawkes,
Wife of Augustus Gleeson,
This Stone Was Raised on 14th July 1793
In the Presence of her Many Admirers.

And underneath, immediately above the quill, was written:

Her Words Remain Our Inheritance.

The inscription struck me as unusual. No dates of birth or death were given, and although Julia Elizabeth Fawkes was clearly married to Augustus Gleeson, she had not taken his name. Of course it was the many admirers who interested me most. She was a writer, clearly, but what had she written? I had never heard of her.

I called Jack to me. He came, whining and reluctant, but this time I was firm. We were going home.

I found nothing online about either Julia Fawkes or Julia Gleeson. They had quite vanished. I tried Augustus Gleeson too, but again I drew a blank. I decided to forget about them. Whatever Julia Elizabeth Fawkes's many admirers had cherished, it had disappeared as surely as the flesh from her bones.

There it would have ended, if there had not been an Open Doors day that September. One of the houses on the list was 18 Little George Street, which had never been open to the public before. The house dated from the mid-eighteenth century, and had later become a gathering place for poets and radicals. Coleridge had stayed there. Wordsworth had visited. Shelley had declaimed a poem on the top-floor landing and then attempted to slide down the banisters. Speeches had been made and it was believed there had been a printing

press in the basement. The house still belonged to the same family, the Frobishers, but it had passed to a cousin who lived in Canada and wished to sell in due course. He had recently employed an archivist to go through the many papers which were lodged there. The archivist would be on hand on Open Doors day. There was some idea, according to the Open Doors leaflet, that the house might be bought by the City Council as a museum. I doubted that. This was probably my only chance to see it.

I planned my day carefully. I would go to Redcliffe Caves in the morning, have a bite of lunch down by the water and then go to 18 Little George Street as soon as it opened at one o'clock. Jack couldn't come. He would have loved the caves, but the multiplied sound of his barking might annoy other visitors, and I doubted that he'd be allowed into Little George Street. I noted with some amusement that I was already thinking like a dog-owner, with a faint resentment that anywhere should be off limits to Jack.

It was a mistake to come early. The house was busy and the archivist was engaged with a group of local historians. I looked around. The bones of the house hadn't changed much, as far as I could see. The Frobishers had clearly been happy enough with one magnificent, outdated bathroom and a separate lavatory with a cistern which must sound like Niagara Falls when the chain was pulled. The windows all had their original glass. I liked that: it pleased me to think that Coleridge had looked out of these windows. I lingered, but the historians were tireless, and I went away.

I was halfway home when I realised what a fool I'd been. The house might never be open again. It was entirely possible that Julia Elizabeth Fawkes had visited Little George Street. She was a writer. She was well enough known then to have had 'many admirers'. Was it possible that she had left some physical mark there? I felt that I owed it to Jack to search a little farther. After all, he had made me come to the grave.

It was almost three o'clock. The local historians had gone and the archivist was drinking a cup of tea, well away from the papers which he had spread out for display over a broad polished table. He looked up somewhat guardedly as I entered the room.

'I'm sorry,' I said, 'I don't want to interrupt your break.'

'Come in, come in,' he said with an alacrity which might have been a bit forced but which I pretended to take at face value. I turned over some of the papers. They meant nothing to me, but it would be polite to dwell on them for a few minutes.

'I'm interested in a writer who may have come to the house in the late eighteenth century,' I said at last, still looking at the papers.

'What was his name?'

'Julia Elizabeth Fawkes. She was a woman,' I added stupidly.

'Julia Elizabeth Fawkes,' he repeated. 'No. I don't believe I have seen any reference to her.'

'She had another name. A married name: Gleeson.'

'Gleeson . . . Gleeson . . .'

'She was married to a man called Augustus Gleeson.'

'Oh,' said the archivist, suddenly all keen attention. 'The pamphleteer, I assume?'

'I have no idea.'

'Let me just check . . .' To my surprise, he ignored the laptop in front of him. 'I'll just have a look at the card index.' He got up, fetched a long dingy cardboard box and began to fossick about inside it. 'Gellborough . . . Gifford . . . Glanville . . . Ah yes, I thought so. Gleeson.'

He pulled out a card and laid it in front of me. There was nothing but a name: Gleeson, Augustus Shovell, and a sequence of letters and numbers: 2nd F L/g R/H Bc Sh 2/R/14.

'I knew I'd seen something.'

'What does it mean?'

'Second floor landing, right-hand bookcase, second shelf from the bottom, 14 items in from the right,' responded the archivist. 'It isn't my system, of course. This card index must be forty years old at least. But so far, I've found it reliable. Any matter relating to your man will be there.'

'Could we look now?'

He glanced at the door. No one was coming. The interest of the day had peaked. I heard voices downstairs, then a door shut and they were cut off.

'Why not?'

He went ahead of me up the stairs.

The bookcases were glass-fronted, and locked. The archivist brought out his keys and selected one. It turned

with difficulty and he had to prise the door open with a fingernail.

'It's all waiting to be properly catalogued,' he said apologetically. 'The card index is primitive. They want a digital archive, but of course people don't realise what an undertaking that is. And if the house is sold, then the collection must go to a museum.'

'You don't think the house will become one?'

He gave me a sharp look over his shoulder. 'It's not very likely, is it?'

He was kneeling now, searching along the rows and still talking. I looked over his shoulder and saw that while there were plenty of books there were also leather-bound boxes lined up on the shelves.

'I'm afraid this chap in Canada has absolutely no idea of what's involved. He thinks I can wave a wand and everything will be online – but the place is more or less untouched and that's what makes the job rewarding . . . Ah, here we are.' The box was unlabelled. He drew it out and undid the clasp. 'Here we are indeed.' A faint whiff of oldness reached me. 'I haven't got as far as this bookcase, you understand.' He held the box and peered into it. I could see nothing.

'May I look?' I asked, and at the same time I reached out smoothly. Without waiting for his permission, I took the box. In the bottom there lay a fragment of paper with writing criss-crossed over it. Most of the sheet had been torn away. The writing was smooth and flowing. It looked as if it ought to be easy to read, but I could not decipher it. I had the feeling, suddenly, that the

archivist had not known the paper was there and did not want to share the discovery with me.

'I can't make head or tail of this,' I said and, as I had hoped, he responded.

'It's part of a letter. There, that's where the seal has broken. People often crossed their letters at the time. The post was very expensive and they wanted to fill the paper as much as possible. There's a trick to reading it, and of course you have to ignore the orthographic changes. Let me see. The light's not very good here, and the ink's faded. We might take it downstairs and have a look at it under the lamp, if you're interested?' His eyes peeped at me.

'I'd like that very much,' I said.

We settled at the broad table and he drew down the lamp so that it shone clear on the paper. Every so often he scribbled down a phrase; then he pored over the document again. He turned it, read again, jotted down his notes. I sat perfectly still, waiting.

At last he said, 'There's not much in it, I'm afraid. Rather frustrating. It breaks off and then the writing across – here – seems to refer to quite a different matter. It must be written by someone who knew Augustus Gleeson well, but unfortunately there is no clue to the writer's identity. Possibly my predecessor – the person who created the card index – knew more. He must have done, to give Gleeson's full name as a reference, since it isn't given in the document itself.'

'Would you read it to me?'

'For what it's worth – but it doesn't shed any light on the lady you mentioned. This is the first part:

> ' . . . the Eagerness with which we read your letter giving Assurance that you are safely come to London. By Providence or the Act of Man you have been preserved in health and safety. Augustus, as you know, is staying with me at Little George Street for the present, and the Frobishers have been most Constant and Tender in their Attentions to us Both. When Augustus had read your letter he could not sit still but must rise and walk about the room to express his Emotion. How my Heart bounded, I cannot . . .'

The phrases galloped across my mind. All that long-dead emotion! Hearts bounding, eagerness, walking around the room – and it was all dead and gone, and no one left to know what any of it had meant. I would not have felt it so strongly, no doubt, if I had not been left myself, like the last speaker of a lost language that no one else understood.

The archivist was looking at me. I hoped that I had not spoken aloud.

'There is a little more,' he said.

> 'Preserve this Letter, my dear Susannah, as we have done with every Word you wrote to us from France. We lodge all Correspondence with

> the Frobishers and I most Ardently Advise you to do the Same so that there will be a Memorial of these Perilous Times. For months Augustus has not picked up his pen. We can only console ourselves that our dear Julia did not live to see the Fate of her Unfortunate . . .

'The paper is torn just here.'

'Who was Susannah? Are her letters here too?'

'As far as I know there are none. Possibly the Frobishers destroyed them all. Unfortunately, without a surname—'

'Why were the times perilous?'

The archivist blinked, as if I had revealed an ignorance which forced him to reassess me. 'These were radicals, remember. It was the time of the French Revolution.'

I peered at the edge of the letter. 'Is that a "C"?'

'It may be. Or possibly a "D". The following letter may be an "H", but I'm guessing now.'

'Child, perhaps?' I said. There were many such deaths recorded in the graveyard: baby after baby, given the same name, born and dead within the year.

'It's unlikely. We know that Augustus Gleeson had a son, Thomas, and that he survived to adulthood. Gleeson alludes to him in a treatise on education, and calls him his only child. As far as we know, Gleeson never remarried.'

For months Augustus Gleeson had not picked up his pen. I wished that Jack were here. I would have reached

down and stroked his head, over and over, until my mind was quiet.

'There are several of his pamphlets in the City Library,' the archivist said.

'Are there?'

'He was quite well known in his day, I believe.'

'But there's none of her writing?'

'Not as far as I know.'

I touched the piece of paper. The words were faded yet they still tumbled across the paper, eager, impetuous, alive. But they weren't alive. The archivist and I were snuffling after something which no longer existed, like Jack in his hunt for imagined bones. Augustus had been left, as I had been left. But it was over for him: he was dead. They were all dead and they could no longer tell us what their words had been, before the paper had been torn across.

Even so, I touched the paper as if the heat of their lives might come off on my fingers.

1

June 1789

The night was thinning as he went down the donkey track to the quay with his tools over his shoulder. He had taken the long way round, in the dark, and was dressed as a labourer. His heavy boots were clogged with dirt. There had been rain in the night after the fine summer's day. He wore his cap pulled down over his eyes, and a neckerchief muffled the lower part of his face.

There was the boat, tied up as he had left it. It wasn't yet full tide but the water had reached the quay. It was black and oily-looking as the dawn began to spread over it.

He glanced around him. The quay steps were slippery but he went down them as fast as if they were dry, and put the spade and mattock in the bottom of the boat before covering them with canvas. It was getting light too quickly. There were ships hanging like shadows on

the water, waiting for the tide. He pulled out the oars, settled them in the rowlocks, untied the mooring-rope and slid out on to the water. Before the tide could spin him round he dug in hard and pulled against it, pointing the bow across the river. There was mist on the dark meadows and on the woods beyond.

No one would notice him. He was a man on his way to work. A farm labourer or a quarryman from the stone quarries on the other side of the Gorge. He had taken a risk in leaving the oars in the boat overnight, but no one had touched them. The blades found the perfect angle and cut into the water, pulled strongly through it, released themselves, dipped again. He knew how to row, by God. He could do anything with his hands.

More and more the city sharpened itself in the light: the bulk of the Hot Well, the clutter of small boats and then the ships. But he was heading across, to the meadows. There was colour coming into everything: the brown, shining water, the run-off from his oars. She had said that the water was dirty and he had told her that it wasn't dirt but the particles of sand and mud that hung in the water and made it rich with fish. That was a long time ago now.

The city behind him was coming to life. He felt it like a prickle on the skin of his back. Men walking down the same steps he'd trod, their bundles over their shoulders. Looking out at the water. Now, quickly, he dug with his right oar and the boat shot in where he knew the mooring-post was. There were duckboards

laid over the soggy land closest to the water. He stepped ashore and tied up the boat. The boards squelched as he took off the canvas, lifted out the mattock and spade and hefted them over his shoulder again. He was on his way to work.

Through the wet meadow where cows stood on the higher ground. The smell of them drifting on the last rags of mist. It was going to be hot. He walked steadily but fast, across one meadow and the next, and then he climbed over a stile that led into the woods. The quarry path was well behind him now. He thought of stone for a moment, and the houses it would build; then he turned his mind away.

The undergrowth was still wet from last night's rain. There was a rich smell with an edge to it. He was going into the old forest which had never been cut since men lived in their hill forts and watched for their enemies coming up the river. The trees had been coppiced but no more. He knew about such things. He had an interest in antiquarianism and the men knew to bring to him any object of interest that they turned up in the digging of foundations. But those hill forts had been set on the heights and he was deep in the woods, where the trees were thickest.

She hadn't wanted to come so far, but he had told her about the nightingales, and she had put on her stout boots. There were glades, he said to her, where sunlight dropped down through the tall trees and made orchids grow.

He paused, looked at the oaks on the left of the path,

the whitebeam on the right, and listened for the chink of metal on stone from the quarry. Perhaps it was still too early. He glanced behind him again. There was too much birdsong, and it muddled him, but this was the place. There was a gap in the undergrowth. He had not lied to her: there was a glade. He pushed through to it, dragging the mattock and spade. Twigs snapped at his face and he flinched.

He must have shut his eyes. When he opened them, there she was. She lay as he had left her, under a tree in the brambles and ivy. He had laid her out straight, and crossed her hands, and then he had wrapped his coat about her head. He had known that she would stiffen in a few hours, and that he would not want to see her face again. There she was. No one had come; he'd known that no one would come. It was his luck. There were no marks where he had dragged her, because he had lifted her in his arms and carried her.

This was the place. He was dry, and his heart beat hard. There would be water somewhere nearby but he could not stop to look for it now. The coat over her face was sodden with rain, and her skirts too, and her boots. There were spiders on her, and woodlice. She'd been lying there all night on her own. She could not see him now. He had pressed down her eyelids and then he had wound the coat over her face. It was a light summer coat and it moulded to her. He could not help being astonished that she was still there, even though he had placed her so carefully and marked the site in his mind so that he would be able to find it easily. He

had half expected an empty glade with the first sun beginning to warm it and a cloud of gnats dancing.

He cut into the ground with his spade and carefully he sliced and lifted the sods and laid them aside. The solid sheet of limestone did not run so close to the surface here. He would be able to dig just deep enough and then when she was buried he would heap the undergrowth over her. Already he was sweating as he stripped down to his shirt and began to dig. There were lumps of stone in the soil; he took the mattock to ease them out, and then laid them aside. Earwigs ran and white grubs squirmed as the light fell on them. Flies buzzed about his head. He shut out the thought that it was she who had brought them here. It was his own sweat that drew them. The earth smelled acrid but clean too. Twice or thrice he thought he heard something and he stopped, head up, alert, sniffing the sunlit air, but it was always a woodpecker or the rustle of birds and small animals in the undergrowth. There were butterflies now, speckled ones, emerging as the air warmed. They were dancing over her. They could smell a dead thing: he knew that.

He dug and dug. He would not let his mind loose, for fear of where it might skedaddle without him. His clothes stuck to him with sweat and his head throbbed from the heat or because he had not slept. Now he was going deep and standing inside the hole he had dug, loosening more stone with the mattock. It was a fusty, crawling place he had made and fear ran over the skin of his back as he bent and lifted, bent and lifted, faster

and faster now, frantic to get the job done. He did not dare to look at her. It seemed to him that she might be sitting up, unwinding the coat from about her face, and watching him out of those eyes. She would pick the twigs and dirt off her dress, and the insects. She would put the spiders aside gently. That was what she did when spiders came into the house in the autumn months: she cupped them in her hands and tipped them outside. She never minded the tickle of their legs inside her fingers.

It was deep enough now. Not as good as a sexton would have done for her, but if he laid the stones over her no fox or badger would be able to dig her up.

It was hellish work getting her into the grave. She was cold and stiff. The broken sunlight glanced over her but it could not touch her. His back burned as he knelt to pick her up, and she was heavier than she had ever been. He staggered with her to the edge of the grave. She rolled stiffly in his arms and he thought that she meant to bring him down with her. He would lose his balance and fall into the grave and she would topple in after him, pinning him there. He would never emerge.

He hated her now. She had made him hate her. He pushed and shoved until he got her in, head at one end and boots at the other. She was on her side. He had wanted to lay her on her back, looking up at the sky, but he could not turn her now. He must remove his coat from around her head, he thought, but he could not bring himself to do it. The time for that had been when she was still lying under the trees, and he had not dared.

He began to fill in the grave. Until she was covered, he put in only soil, layers of soil which still teemed with disturbed life. Once he could not see her, he began to replace the stones he had dug up. He could not stop himself from brushing away the woodlice before he laid the stones in the grave. He fitted the stones together, the smaller and the larger, as if he were building a wall. She was covered again. Nothing could touch her. She would never push the stones back like her sheets and blankets in the morning, when she sat up and reached over her shoulder to untie her hair from its night plait. Once her hair was loose she shook it out until the cloud of it hid her face.

She was hidden from him now. He shovelled in more earth and more, right up to the lip of the grave. But he knew that it would settle and leave a dip in the ground, so he carried on shovelling and then he trampled the earth flat with his boots, shovelled again, trampled again. He could not prevent himself from feeling a stab of satisfaction that the job was well done. At last he took the sods he had set aside and fitted them back over the lid of the grave. Again he trampled and smoothed. The cuts he had made would soon heal themselves in the warm dampness after rain. He pulled the ivy forward, and then he stepped back to the edge of the little glade. He squinted, to see what a stranger might see if he also wandered far from the paths and pushed his way through the undergrowth.

The grave was apparent. In the surge of early summer growth it would soon disappear, but he could not take

that risk. He gathered brushwood, intertwining it with brambles and ivy and laying it artfully so it looked as if the forest was moving of itself, out into the light. Now, he thought, now you can see nothing. He stank of sweat and earth. The butterflies were still there. They were high in the column of sun-warmed air, and they were dancing.