

Afterwards

A Battersea Riverside Tale.

In winter the Thames riverside can be a disturbing place, especially as darkness begins to fall. On Old Swan Wharf next to St Mary's Church the past never seems very far away. On a late winter Sunday afternoon there are few people around, and with a chill east wind stopping the Heathrow bound planes heading over the river, the silence can sometimes be unsettling. On my way back from the shop in Battersea Square, I stopped, as I often do, to look out across the river. There were lights here and there, but many buildings were as dark and shapeless as the industrial buildings they must have replaced.

The silence was suddenly broken, "You thinking philosophical thoughts again?"

I turned sharply and saw an old man grinning at me from under a woolly hat. "Maurice? What are you doing out in this weather?" He gave a rasping cough, "And that chest of yours doesn't sound too good."

He was small and wiry, wrapped in an overlong, shabby overcoat. "Nothing that a few tots of whisky wouldn't cure..."

He was a familiar face along this part of the river, always in search of an audience, and the possibility of a free drink. He had moved from this part of Battersea about forty years ago, but now lived somewhere off Northcote Road with his daughter. He was fond of announcing that he was eighty-nine years old.

"Does Moira know you're up here?" His daughter was probably already on her way looking for him. She'd stormed into *The Castle* one lunchtime just as Maurice was beginning to down the pint I'd bought him.

"Dad, you've got a doctor's appointment." But I took the full force of the blame, as if I'd been leading a teenager into bad habits. "You should know better than encourage him to drink at lunchtime!" She would not be pleased that he was here in this weather

"She knows I've always liked to take a stroll round here, this time of year. Just before Christmas. Quiet, like it was back then – when they closed the works for a couple of days."

Maurice knew every inch of this riverbank. He could still identify what had been where – from Morgan Crucible up to Gargoyle Wharf (or Battersea Reach as the developers like to call it). Sometimes I wasn't sure he could even see the shiny new blocks of flats, but was looking instead at the shadows of what been there before. He was clearly thinking about that now, as he glanced back at the white-painted building behind us. "Used to be a pub you know."

"Yes, I know – the Swan."

"Buildings have ghosts too. Burned down, that did. Twice. If ever a building'd haunt itself that one would." His throaty chuckle turned into another hacking cough.

"Don't start on about your supernatural experiences, Maurice..."

I had heard all this before. Among other assorted manifestations Maurice claimed to have seen JMW Turner embarking from a rowing boat to go and sit in his chair in the church. "Course, I didn't realise it at the time," he'd told me, "But I saw a picture of him later on, and then I knew it. See that's what they say about ghosts. They reckon you never know at the time. Only afterwards."

"It's too cold for Turner, today, Maurice," I said. "And for you. It's time you were going home."

Maurice was a great one for not listening to what he didn't want to hear. "They say that Mr Turner never painted a picture of St Mary's – for all the time he spent over this side of the river."

"Next time you see him getting off his boat, you can ask him. Look, you don't want Moira coming up here looking for you."

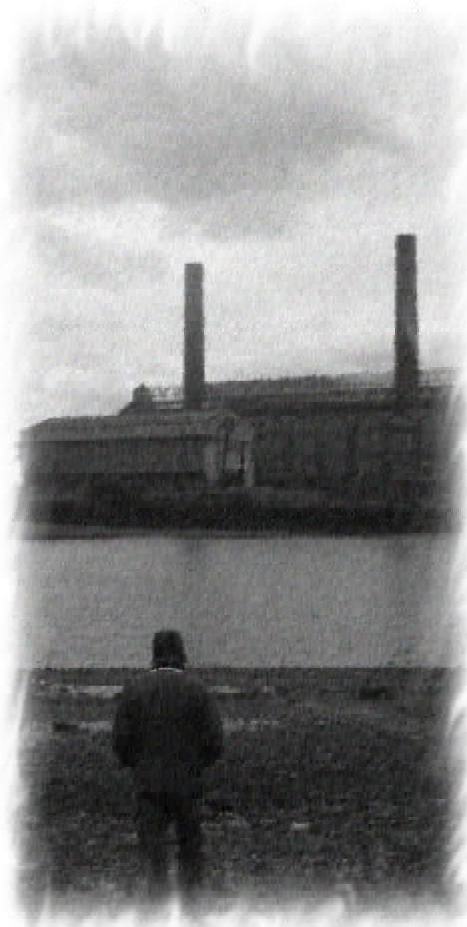
"Not today she won't", he said emphatically. "No, she won't be up here today."

"I'm glad you're so sure", I said, "But you need to get out of this wind. I'll walk you to the bus stop."

Maurice laughed, "Worse than she is, you are. I'll get myself back where I belong, don't you worry."

"I'll get back and phone Moira, tell her you're on your way."

"No need to do that. She won't be worried about me." He gave me a friendly nod, "You have a good



Christmas, eh?" Then he was gone, a spry enough figure, hands plunged deep in his pockets. I hoped he wouldn't have to wait too long at the bus stop.

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She answered the phone straight away. "Hello?"

"Is that Moira – Maurice's daughter? You probably won't remember me, but I live near the river and Maurice..."

She interrupted me, "Oh, it's very kind of you to phone. Dad seemed to know everyone in Battersea. The funeral's next Wednesday – if you'd like to come you'd be very welcome."

I let it sink in. "Funeral?"
"Oh I'm so sorry. Didn't you know? It was two days ago. He'd not been well, a chest infection. It was very quick..."

I stared at the phone for a moment, recalling words I'd heard only a few minutes before: "See that's what they say about ghosts. They reckon you never know at the time. Only afterwards."

Mike Roden