

The Watchers

By

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It had been a mistake to come into London so early. Gramps had argued for them to travel after the rush but Winston wanted to make the most of their day in the city. He'd insisted they leave as early as possible but now he realised his grandfather had been right. The Loop was uncomfortably hot, overcrowded with commuters who distracted themselves with their Tabs and iPlants, each in their own bubble of isolation. Even the early morning views didn't seem to affect them, a well-worn panorama that had lost its influence over these regular travellers. But Winston couldn't keep his eyes off the windows.

"You'll see them soon enough," his grandfather chuckled, rolling his bloodshot eyes.

Winston's face tightened into a smile that evaporated almost as soon as it had appeared, and he turned back to the window. "It's OK for you," he said under his breath. "You've seen them before."

Gramps sucked on his lips, sighing. "Long time ago. Long time ago."

There was nothing wrong with his ears, Winston noted.

"Not been for years," Gramps said distantly.

Outside the sun crawled along beside them, poking between the growing rectangles of glass and steel. The autumn light splintered into his eyes then disappeared again, flickering like a broken lamp. Beyond, in the distance, the purple brooding clouds of a storm followed.

Winston looked at his grandfather's face, worn dry by the years. The skin sagged around his jaw, pulling the sides of his mouth into a perpetually anxious frown. His eyes darted constantly, but his gaze was distant, as if he was holding onto an image from long ago, willing it not to fade away. He

appeared lost. Then, as if he was resurfacing from a trance, those old grey eyes locked onto Winston's, and he saw the fierce spirit was still there.

"What d'you think?" he asked with half a smile.

The question puzzled Winston.

"When you get there," Gramps prodded, "what d'you think? What d'you expect?"

Winston shrugged, holding back his excitement, but his eyes betrayed his anticipation. "I just wanna see them, that's all."

"You've seen them on your Tab."

"It's not the same."

"Why?" Gramps teased.

"Just isn't."

Gramps leaned back in his seat. "No, it's not the same, you're right."

Winston's eyes widened. "Tell me."

"Just isn't. There's a..." The old man glanced out of the window, his lips apart, waiting for the words to form.

"A what?" Winston asked.

Gramps thought.

"A presence?" Winston suggested.

"Yes! That's it, a presence. Like they're alive."

Winston had heard this before, many times. Everyone who had seen them commented on it, but it didn't matter, he wanted to hear Gramps tell it.

"You think they are?"

Gramps looked back at him. "Alive?"

Winston nodded.

“Who can say?” Gramps sighed, his heavy eyes narrowing. “They’re just machines.”

Winston laughed, shaking his head. “Is that what you think?” He watched his grandfather, searching for hints to his true thoughts.

“You make up your own mind soon, yeah?” Gramps replied with a wink.

“But you must-”

“Nearly there now, you’ll see soon.”

As if on cue the Loop slowed as it ducked closer to the ground and disappeared into the station. About them the commuters rose up, collecting their things and standing at the doors in a silent single mass. Winston followed his grandfather, staying close to him as they left the carriage.

They stepped onto the platform and waded through the early morning sea of people, striding towards the exit.

Gramps checked his Tab. “Lots of time ‘till our slot. You OK to walk?”

“I am, are you?”

Gramps pushed his shoulder. “I’m not that old. I can walk as much as you.”

Winston nodded, waiting as Gramps plotted a route. They synced their Tabs and the iPlant in his eye projected the route in front of him.

Outside was cool, the light brittle and grey as the clouds advanced over the sun. As they walked across the river a feeble spray of rain tried to fill the air, pushed along on the intermittent breeze, not enough to spoil Winston’s mood.

At Embankment Gramps turned down a narrow street, off their route to Trafalgar.

“It’s this way,” Winston said.

Gramps faced him, grinning. “Lots of time. Coffee first.”

He led them to a tiny café, all bar with just a few stools, and they squeezed inside, finding a space to sit at the far end.

Gramps ordered espressos for both of them, not bothering to ask Winston what he might like. He nursed his drink, warming his fingers on the cup, trying to temper his excitement. He checked his Tab, already knowing it was another half an hour before their appointed arrival time.

“There,” Gramps tilted his head towards the buildings visible out of the narrow window.

“What?”

“You can see the top of one of them.”

Winston raised himself up in his stool, peering over his grandfather.

“I can’t see anything.”

Gramps pointed his finger, jabbing at a gap between two towers of glass.

“Ah,” Winston said as he captured the limited view. He tensed his eye, letting the iPlant zoom in until the curved silver dome filled his vision.

“Which one is it?”

“B,” Gramps replied. “A has the red head.”

Winston relaxed, letting his vision return to normal, and studied the odd sight. The dome glinted in the light, catching the diffuse sun in its pearlescent surface. He felt his stomach flutter and his excitement turned

to fear. Suddenly the reality of the morning hit him: he was going to see the Watchers.

Winston put his drink down and waited for his grandfather to finish his.

“Not thirsty?” Gramps asked.

“No.” Winston said.

“Thought you liked it. Your dad loved coffee.” Gramps noted with a regretful smile.

Winston stood. “Let’s just go.”

“OK, OK. They’re not going anywhere, you know?”

“We’ve booked. They said not to be late.”

Gramps frowned, making a show of putting his coat back on, teasing him in slow-motion.

Winston turned his back on him and waited by the door.

“Sure you’re all right?” Gramps asked as the wind cut into them.

Winston forced a smile. “Yeah, I’m fine, just a bit...”

“A bit what?”

“Nervous, I suppose.” Winston blushed, laughing.

Gramps wrapped a thin arm around his shoulder. “So was I. It’s OK. C’mon.”

They crossed the road and made their way towards Trafalgar Square. As they got closer and closer Winston saw more of the two Watchers, their shapes growing as they neared.

Winston looked up at Gramps, his old face crumpled under his thoughts.

“What was it like?” he asked. “When you saw them.”

Gramps' brow raised and he exhaled, as if he was digging up an ancient memory. "It was open back then, before the bombing. You could just walk into the square and look up at them."

"Really? No booking? No walls?"

Gramps shook his head. "Folk would just walk by all the time, eat lunch under their feet, touching them, taking pictures. Course the army didn't like it. They wanted it all to themselves. They got their way after the bomb."

Gramps shuddered.

Winston had seen the footage, he knew what had happened, but it had been before he was born, and it felt like another world. Someone had walked right up to the Watchers and let off a nuclear bomb. The blast should have destroyed the Watchers, and most of central London with them, but the white-hot flash just filled the square then disappeared. The National Gallery and the surrounding buildings had been badly damaged, and everyone in the square had been killed, but that was all, the Watchers survived without a scratch. A minor miracle. That's when the walls went up. That's when access was controlled. Now the only way to get close to the Watchers was to buy a ticket and go through numerous security checks.

The walls of Trafalgar Square came into view, giant curved surfaces of steel and polished black glass that reflected the surrounding buildings back at them, turning them into dark companions, twisted and deformed. There was a queue trailing along the south side, towards the entrance at the west. It was impossible to see the Watchers now, they were in their oversized shadows. Even the air seemed cooler here, hidden from the

sunshine, and Winston's fear grew. Instinctively he inched closer to Gramps, retreating into his side.

They turned the corner and he saw the entrance. Several armed guards in dark armour dotted the gates, pacing up and down the line of visitors, intimidating with their visored stares.

Gramps began to whistle tunelessly, and Winston knew he was nervous as well. Somehow that made him feel better.

They shuffled closer and closer until they were at the entrance gate. They each presented their hand to be scanned by the smiling attendant and were waved through a series of body scanners. Then they were through the entrance and herded towards a large hall, like the lounge at the Loop terminal back home.

"Can't we go straight in to see them?" Winston asked his grandfather, anticipation getting the better of him.

Gramps chuckled as he found a seat. "Soon, boy, soon."

After a few moments they were called forward by another eager attendant, a bubbly woman, barely in her twenties, and they joined a group of about thirty visitors.

"This way," the attendant beckoned, pointing towards a set of doors that led into a tiered theatre.

"Welcome to the Watchers Visitor Experience," the attendant enthused, grinning wide eyed. "My name is Becky and I'll be your guide today. In a few moments we'll all be going into Trafalgar Square to see the Watchers. There's no need to run, you'll have up to half an hour in there, so you'll have plenty of time to get up close and personal with both of them.

But before we do that I'd like to take a few moments to tell you about the Watchers, so your time inside the square will be more enjoyable."

Behind her the walls fizzed with light and colour, transforming the room into a vista of three dimensional images. The screens showed an aerial view of Trafalgar Square, before the walls, before the Watchers.

"Back in 2021 the world was a very different place," Becky explained as a flock of pigeons arced in front of Winston's face. "Then... the Watchers came."

The view changed to a security camera overlooking Nelson's Column. The sun shone down on a crowded square, full of tourists taking pictures of the lion statues, sitting by the fountains, feeding the pigeons. Then the air cracked and an abnormal silhouette filled the North West corner, close to the National Gallery. A shockwave pushed everyone to the ground, shaking the security camera and pixelating the image. The view changed to footage from someone's Tab, seconds before the disturbance, of friends laughing and smiling. Then the Watcher came and the tourists fell to the floor. The scene was replayed from a dozen different angles, each time getting closer and closer to the giant intruder.

"At 11.43am on June the 15th 2021 the world changed forever," Becky said as the images played out. "The first visitor, soon to be known as Watcher A, arrived."

Winston stared as the air around the Watcher darkened with clouds that circled about its body. Sparks grew, forming arcs of lightning that snapped at the brooding sky, forcing torrents of rain to fall.

Then there was another blast.

“Eight minutes later Watcher B arrived.” Becky said, her tone less jovial now. A swell of ominous music sent a shiver down Winston’s spine.

The images continued: the recovering crowd was thrown to the ground again, sliding away from the new structure in the South East corner. Then, as the clouds dissipated, and the rain eased, the sun broke through, forming a discordant rainbow between the two Watchers.

Becky stepped into the centre of the screen. “Mankind’s first contact with an intelligence from beyond our planet sent shockwaves around the globe. The next year saw huge instability in anticipation of further contact, or even an invasion. But since that day the Watchers have remained silent, and no other visitors have arrived to join these two. All attempts at contact and communication have failed. Efforts to scan the interior of the Watchers have also failed. They remain a complete enigma. The Watchers haven’t moved since their arrival almost thirty years ago... not even a terrorist atrocity has woken them from their slumber.”

Winston watched the terrifying footage of the nuclear attack, of the eerie aftermath - somehow more visceral on the large screen - only half listening to Becky’s narration.

“Some believe they are here to judge us, collecting information on our weaknesses,” Becky continued. “Others think they’re waiting and, when the time is right, they’ll awake and make contact. But no one knows for sure. Perhaps today, when you meet them, you can decipher the mystery of the Watchers.”

There was a flash of light as the screen broke apart to reveal a smoke-filled tunnel of leading out of the theatre. Becky grinned, waving for them to join her at the glowing exit.

“Come on,” Gramps said, pulling at Winston’s arm, “it’s time.”

The lights brightened as the last images faded away and they stood and followed the line of visitors towards the tunnel. Grey daylight bled round the far end of the passage and the chill wind touched his skin as they stepped from the womb-like visitor centre into Trafalgar Square.

In front of him was the scorched and fractured base of Nelson’s Column, an unchanged reminder of that fateful day when London should have died. At its base was a golden plaque inscribed with the names of those killed by the bomb. For a second the broken column held his attention. Then he turned his head and Winston gasped. He could see the Watchers stood on either side of the square, mute sentinels from elsewhere.

“Crazy, isn’t it?” Gramps said from behind him.

Winston nodded, hardly daring to speak. He took a moment to stare up at them, letting his eyes take in the details. Both Watchers were humanoid in shape – two legs, two arms, a torso and a head – but neither could be described as human-like. Their vast bodies were made of some sort of metallic structure that appeared to have been grown rather than shaped by machine. He walked towards Watcher A, feeling like he was approaching a sacred space. The Watcher’s legs were like giant tree trunks, their surface a metallic bark veined by finer rivers of silver. Plated segments overlapped each other, an ancient suit of armour connected with clockwork precision. From this close angle it was easy to believe he was looking at some intricate piece of public art rather than a thing from another world.

The torso was darker than the legs, a mix of reflective material and panels of matte reds and blues that caused the surface to shimmer under

the light. The head was lobster red, shaped like an elongated skull, and covered with an array of sensor-like protrusions that some suggested were eyes. These dark orbs pointed down to the square, never wavering their focus. Above the Watcher birds circled, keeping their distance.

Winston turned to face the second Watcher, crossing the square to join a group of visitors at its feet. Its body was squatter than its counterpart, with a broader back dotted with horn-like protrusions. B's head was elongated, with a snout-like chin. The same sensors dotted its dark head, asymmetrical nodes perpetually directed at the space below.

Both giants, while completely static, gave off the sense of being alive, of waiting for some unknowable stimulus. Even looking at them terrified Winston, every instinct he had was telling him to run away and hide from these bizarre visitors.

Gramps put his arm on his shoulder. "You sure you're OK? We can go back inside if you like. There's a shop there and..."

"No, I'm fine." Winston lied.

But Gramps wasn't listening. His head was tilted upwards, his jaw slack.

"Did you hear that?" Gramps asked.

At first Winston heard nothing over the reverent hustle of the square, and the throng of London from beyond the walls, but then the noise grew. It was like metal grinding over metal, ancient and unused. The long, low sound continued, and the crowd fell silent, their eyes drifting upwards.

"Did it just move?" someone asked behind them.

The noise evaporated, and an uncomfortable silence took hold of the square. The pigeons dotting the space broke for the air, flapping up as one, circling over the giants and retreating beyond the walls. Someone laughed and the tension fell away.

Winston realised he was holding Gramps' hand.

Then the grinding noise began again, louder this time.

"Look!" Gramps pointed towards the nearer Watcher. Its vast head was turning, almost too slowly to notice.

"That's not supposed to happen, is it?" Winston said, his mouth moist with fear.

"They've never moved," Gramps said breathlessly. "Never."

The Watcher's head continued to turn until its sensors pointed down at the crowd. The grinding noise ended as the head came to rest.

Winston looked behind him. The other Watcher was facing him as well. Around him the crowd separated, pushed away by fear.

A high pitched whine stung his ears as the sensors on the Watcher's head lit up. Tiny points of red light shone down, landing on Winston's body, scanning over his chest and head. He whipped round: the second Watcher's sensors were also illuminated, and pointed at him.

The crowd had formed a circle now, with Winston at the centre. Even Gramps had stepped away from him, leaving him isolated in the glare of the Watchers.

Winston ran to one side and the Watcher's lights followed him. The grinding of metal fell on him again as their enormous heads turned to follow him.

The Watchers let out a low rumble, like an ancient siren that curdled Winston's stomach. He stopped, breathing hard, sweat beading on his brow, and the Watchers ceased their roar. Somewhere an alarm sounded as armed soldiers entered the square, shouting orders. But all the noise and movement fell away. There was just Winston and the Watchers now.

He looked up at their fixed faces and he knew the Watchers were looking back at him.