



# The Floating Harbour

By William Altoft

## Chapter 2

*The Day, In Gentle Force, Begins*

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## Chapter 2

As if born of the moment the sunlight speared the river and placed upon the platform by the breeze, she is present where no presence was before. She is too young, surely, to be alone. Perhaps not far beyond the border of her parent's kingdom, but into the shadowland, nonetheless, and pushing it. Whether she is to be summoned, reprimanded, or directed by her own self home, she is no doubt safer than worry would have it – and yet the waterfront appears, still, void of any candidates for guardian.

Hands enmeshed and elbows on knees, I keep my seat atop the cascade and my gaze between the girl and the harbour strait ahead. She must have been within the ferry-boat, waiting but with limits on her restful patience. Oblivious or indifferent to my presence, she is either way entranced by the vitality waterfalling down the steps between us, and though the distance is too much for telling it seems clear from her face and poise, so eminently, that the water of the golden steps and the water of the locked-in river can do nothing less than flow more freely as reflections in her restless eyes.

Evidently freed from an unacceptable stillness that lasted forever if it lasted a moment, since her conjuring she has not stood still. Though never frantic, she has gently run a course, without pause, as between a stroll and a full-on dance, indescribably both and neither one nor the other. As she veers toward the boat, I sit up straighter to gaze away and around, and sure enough, having found no more evidence of a family or a school group, I do find that, whilst the sun is still out from behind the cloud and suffusing with light the water, the girl that embodied their meeting is no longer manifest upon the platform. Returned, no doubt, to a restless patience and a stillness state – already an eternity too long.

With her permission granted, her dancing signal across the platform and briefly through the morning, the slow unfolding of its set-up settles out and the day, in gentle force, begins.

My left hand innately moves to the pocket of my jeans to summon my external self, but it finds the pocket phone-less. I had deliberately left without it so I could capture and present not a bit of this day – only live it and then watch it fade. Unable, thus, to trap the solar scene before me, I stand and take in the twin suns: sitting in the clear, bright water and floating in the bright, blue sky.

*Clap! Clap! Clap! Clap! Clap! Clap! Clap! Clap! Clap! Clap!*

Jesus... fucking Christ...

I turn, exclaim – though only inward – and confront the affront to my painted picture. What looks like nothing more or less than a scaled-up puppet of a make-shift dog out of a child's TV show from the 1960s is sat staring blankly at my being and everything immediately around it, wooden boards-for-mouth falling obscenely together in what cannot be music, sounding out entirely void of any melody or mode or rhythm. A purple sheet dotted with a golden pattern is draped around whomsoever it is that considers this a good idea.

For all its stark and sudden intrusive nature, it has clap-clapped me to attention, and my brain takes in a wave of waves of sound.

A drone of cascading liquid life creates a base for all and envelops and spreads the sound of clapping boards into coherent rhythm.

*Clap!*

*Clap!*

*Clap!*

*Clap!*

*Clap!*

*Clap!*

*Clap!*

*Clap!*

Rapidly  
and underneath  
and up and through.

Score fundamentally set,  
a pitch at height,  
a shriek and undulation  
fades in from left  
and fades out to right,  
melody answered by a chorus of like instruments  
set back and central on the river strait.

Right upon the heels of the moment that the shrieking round settles among the rhythm and atop the drone, a hum rises at a threatening pace, simultaneously from either side.

To the rush of water and the clapping boards, whipped around and buttressed by the seagull song, the creak and cry and rush and halt of city traffic rises up to a moderate point and plays out steady on the borders of the music.

The wind stabs among the players every couple of bars,  
a forceful beat formed by the rustle of the trees.

The repeating round enters its final flow,  
as the gulls,  
individually,  
one-by-one,  
begin and lift and rise  
until their song fades out,  
final gull closing final line.

Toward the rhythm and the humming and the drone below,  
punctuated with percussion by the wind,  
a new melody approaches from beyond all borders,  
converging into harmony with apparent ease.

Strings of phrases not afraid to find and form with a frenetic fraction of another, one with which to mingle, pass, combine, and part, to join others and persist or leave.

Quavers of Spanish trill away above Germanic pulse,  
hints of Romance tied up tight between them.  
Slavic sounds sing out from time to time, finding room  
amongst patois phrases of the Caribbean.  
Afro-asiatic notes pass on by,  
and all above play out,  
amongst, around  
call and response:  
variations on a farmer's,  
near a pirate's, dialect,  
much posher voice there to fill the air with vowels.

Symphonic.

And that absurd little purple dog, conducting through the whole damn thing.

I walk away to the sounds of the opening bars of the second movement, and the symphony plays on around my fading presence, as if, almost, it was not being performed for me.

I walk on water and no-one stops to stare. Between myself and the river is the ground man-made, created to cover and on which I wander without waiting for an aim to put itself, above any others, for consideration.

Between the two roads the wide promenade stretches out, away from the orchestral hub, decorated down the middle with three shallow fountain pools, laid down in the material style of the Cascade Steps. Their straight edges are bordered by smooth ground of dark-grey brick and dark-grey wood, the left-hand side, as I approach, watched over by a line of trees and gently hemmed-in by flowerbed-backed benches, giving off shade and green and oxygen.

As I walk among this, the first two fountain pools pass me by. In the space of wood and brick that separates the second from the coming third, a solitary pigeon, with its grey, dark grey, and dirt, wanders with apparently much the same day plan as me. We cross paths as we switch promenade sides, both ignoring the little blue and silver metallic hut that serves out coffee and sets out chairs, whilst about us, nearby and further off, move many another pigeon and many another human: some smooth and quick and heads held high, some slow and battered by the city.

Looking to the other sides of each bordering road, I see the building mix of history: from signs of Georgian to the sleek and modern glass-heavy façades. I pass the end of the third and final pool – first and foremost to my cross-pathing pigeon – and here the danger manifests.

Beneath a statue, atop a podium, of the immortal Neptune, fiercely bearded and trident wielding, patrol the bothersome haunts of the city centre, neatly bearded and clipboard claspings, or smooth-faced and flailing insincerely around and in the way whenever triggered by a moment's eye-contact. Neptune scowls down at myself and at the fountain pools – how diminished a domain left to him once ousted from the sea – and I sorrowfully meet his eyes as I wade into the storm...

“HELLO! :) :)”

“Dude... I can see you wanna talk to me.”

“Heeeeeeey? xoxo”

“Mate, you look down, let's chat.”

Wristbands, style, and open-arms: I flinch, all but drowned in the guilt and the good news. The kooky girls and the charming guys comprise the shock troops in the drive for charity, and I notice to the side, passive and quiet and leaving all alone but for smiling, two witnesses of God standing by their little watchtower. Perversely, I feel drawn desperately to discourse with them, not for their message, but as escape from the evangelising of the righteous getting paid to pressurise/the sincere tryna make a difference. Alas, the Christians are now hidden from view, as a representative of Amnesty International decides to give an older man no peace.

“Hi there!”

Aaaaaah.

“Hi.”

Goddammit.

“How's the day going?”

I should not have stood still.

“Ah fine.”

It is so much easier if you do not stop walking.

“Only fine?”

She is invested in how your day is going.

“Fine in the positive sense.”

Why can't she stand still?

“Great!”

Nobody needs to move their hands and arms around this constantly.

“Have time for a chat?”

“Ah um.”

“It’s for a good cause?”

I have plenty of time.

“I’m afraid I can’t really.”

I am doing absolutely nothing but wandering through space.

“It won’t take too long? And you look like you have all the time in the world!”

I have all the time in the day, at least – perhaps that is all the time in the world – but I have also rediscovered my forward physical momentum.

“Ah, no. Sorry.”

As I escape across to the bordering road to Neptune’s left and to my right, I pass through, weaving, the traffic unharmed, a small green man showing to me too late when and how. I come now to the base of a V shape on the Bristol map and cross at another crossing – this time holding fast until green permission given to swim upstream through a crowd of people heading the other way.

Safely through, the branches of the V stretch on. Where one goes flat and to my right, the other goes left and up a gradual hill, and this latter route I take, heading up to Corn Street instead of down to Bristol Bridge.

Between a betting shop and a supermarket housed in the lowest floor of an old, grand building, between a bus-named bar and top-hat café, the length and breadth of this street are set out in grey and dark-grey slabs of stone, four-sided and etched in enduringly with gum, chewed-up and spat clean out: signs of life.

Walled-up either side by Georgian and Victorian buildings of the 18<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> century, only occasionally does the street break open, as roads piercing through from either side cross and converge with the road that now splits the tiled pavement and runs up toward the humble tower at my vision’s end. As another building – grand, old, and foundationed with the banality of an optician’s and a sandwich shop – falls behind me, I step onto the first of these cut-through roads. Before I take up the pavement on the left-hand side that begins with three storeys of red brick, a Gothic elegance roofed with peaks and spikes and edges, I catch a small church with my left peripheral, its gated yard just beyond a line of bikes rigged for the delivering of pizza.

I see ahead, outside a book shop that signals the beginning of historic Corn Street, a group being addressed by an individual. I walk slightly faster, so as to listen in from the outskirts before they dissipate or move away.

“... and the four Corinthian pillars reach two storeys high, and can you see just above them, central? The city coat of arms.”

Reversing into the road and to the other side, as if propelled backwards by the approving murmurs shooting out from them, a group of six are taught the histories by their guide of one. As I reach the book shop they begin pulling away, back across to my side of the road and on, up the gradual hill.

“Corn Street was one of the principal streets in historic Bristol. The medieval city was focused on a crossroads between this street and the High Street. Having grown up in Saxon times, Bristol...”

I gaze up at those Corinthian columns she had pointed out, too close to see the coat of arms, but I do see a more modern logo, at far less an elevation. The trio of archways that house two glass windows and a wooden door sit beneath the letters that stretch across the base of the columns, reading *31 Corn Street*, and under these symbols sticks out a sign for the bar and lounge that occupies the place within.

I pass on by.

The five women and the two men; the seven sounding strange; the information and the informees – I haunt the group that walks on slowly along the principal street.

“Yes, exactly. And you can see the sculpture work on and between the pillars of the Old Bank. Here near the lowest floor: heads of firemen, do you see? Bearded, helmeted, even showing two axes either side! And all the way at the top are female figures acting as pillars.”

We all raise and squint at the final row of carvings and window panes, as sunlight rolls over the triangular peak above them.

“One holds fruit, one holds a book, and another is holding a globe – this was the Bristol branch of the Liverpool and London and Globe Insurance Company.”

I knew of the facades and pillars, of the warm-coloured Bath stone and the stone of white, and I knew of the past dead behind the veil of present, but, as we are moved on again to the next exhibit, I realise more the abundance of sculpture and engraving: of trade goods and of men and women, of sphinxes and children. There is much to be missed when beset on all sides by history.

A white van rumbles past us in the direction of the harbour, as a pizza begins its green mile, boxed and hitchhiking on the bike that weaves past van and tourists, turning left with the road as Corn Street becomes pedestrian-only at the slight hill’s crest about the humble tower.

Before we cross that road that way, we look upon four more columns.

“... between 1810 and 1811. It barely reaches half the height of these two buildings either side, but the Grecian style makes it far more impressive. Inside now is a pub, a chain, but originally it housed a club for merchants, businessmen, and traders, and was frequented by local prostitutes. The first president of the Commercial Rooms was a road surveyor who went on to invent tarmac!”

Looks and murmurs, at various pitch and volume. Two doors and two potted plants out front, two free-standing signs to entice with a promoted menu. As our tour guide elucidates on the three female figures, life-size, spaced evenly atop the building – symbolic of Commerce and Navigation either side, with trident-clasping Bristol standing high and centre, oval shield decorated with the coat of arms – I consider that a Grecian exterior signals grand whilst it holds, within, a Wetherspoon’s. Where once, inside, men let plantation sugar fall and crash into their coffee, sharing news of the sea, the world, the country, waiting on the wind vine to signal safety for ships wanting to negotiate the Avon Gorge, now for lager and debate on sport, pausing only to bite into the bread around a burger, and find it taken just a little too early from out the microwave.

The group is distracted momentarily, as it starts to once again move, as one of its members topples to near-capsized after steering unknowingly into the first of eight horseshoe silver-metal bars rising out of and back into the pavement, half-full of locked-on bikes. Yet now things are righted in this little fleet about the city as we sail on forward, the road going left without us.

“Here we have it – the Corn Exchange!”

The building she refers to dominates the area, smaller than the tower in height but less humble, and three storeys of windows grow out either side of a clock face flanked by pillars and above an archway entrance. The windows on the third-storey row, directly in line with the clock face, are smaller squares to the taller rectangles of the windows of the floors below, and those windows closest to the ground have each a hanging basket, hidden by the green and pink and lilac that covers and grows out from within them.

“... covering the courtyard behind this front was built during major works in 1872, the Exchange itself was built from 1741 to 1743, created by an architect from nearby Bath – John Wood. Two of the four columns – Corinthian, of course! – are supporting, and the other two on either side of those columns are known as pilasters, which are ornamental pillars, only giving the appearance of support.”

As the group murmur and trap the building deep within their phones, I, being a few metres behind them, lean my right-hand side against a lamppost that looks as Victorian and Georgian as much of the rest of this street, its bulky head sitting, clouded, twice as high up as mine sits.

“Ah yes: that tower is part of a small, now closed, Anglican church, called the All Saint’s Church. Part of the church survives from the twelfth century, and part from the fifteenth, so it is very old. The tower, however, was added in 1716. In the 1400s, a brotherhood, named the Kalenders, built a library over the church, after a deed of 1464, and gave free access to all who wished to study – the first public library in the Kingdom! Unfortunately, many of the books were destroyed in a fire in 1466. And you see this small, three-storey building between the tower and the edge of the Exchange? This was a Georgian coffee room, at 56 Corn Street. The room known as ‘the great vestry’ was given by All Saint’s to John Cooke, and soon became Cooke’s Coffee House. It was officially given to him in 1718, but it must have existed at least five years before, as there is a will from 1713 that refers to a room occupied by Cooke as a coffee house. By 1723 it was known as the London Coffee House, and was probably the most popular in the city. Less Starbucks for competition in historic Bristol!”

Jolly murmurs. I smile not because of the oh-so-mild humour of the comment, but because of how the men and women of the group seemed so genuinely to enjoy it.

“But there *was* competition from an American coffee shop – the American Coffee House opened on Broad Street, and the place at 56 Corn Street closed down around 1769. But, in October of 1780, the council had a meeting that saved it. It flourished in the twentieth century as the flagship coffee house of the Cawardines, with the smell of freshly roasted on-site coffee in the air, and from 2002 it has been what it is now: Café Revival. Let’s go back to the Exchange, there is plenty more history here! Intended for merchants of all types...”

As she discusses the mercantile past, I survey, from my clouded lamppost, the modern traders of this paved and lively little area.

A small number of stalls have been set up, tables draped in cloth, each covered above with a canvas held up by poles, the deep red of which lacks only in the shapes of letters, white words across the canvas edge, reading: *ST NICHOLAS MARKET Est 1743*.

And so the market beneath the glass arcade thus spills from out the archway entrance. Behind one stall, a woman of silver hair stands almost buried in the folds and piles of cushions, rugs, and carpets, while the next along flanks itself with its own divine imagery: a marijuana leaf across the table from a reggae legend, boxes of records strewn about between them. On another sit plastic baskets holding in a mass mess of plastic toys, beside a collection of films held and stored in a most archaic method of viewing them, while a man of fading hair, standing at a stall apart, keeps alive the market’s original purpose at that establishment of 1743: fruits and vegetables are offered for purchase atop a bright green cloth atop a pair of tables.

The woman of the past is pointing at me.

“... the first of four in total, used for the exchange of money between traders and their customers.”

She had been pointing at the little object about a metre out from where I lean, though now she points to another between the group and the exchange. A little brass pedestal with a rounded top and base which narrow in toward each other, the top at elbow-resting height for some, at waist height for others.

“... referred to as ‘nails’, which is where the phrase ‘paying on the nail’ comes from. Okay, we’re going to walk further along, but first feel free to spend time at these stalls – we will be going into St. Nick’s market a little later, however.”

The group begins to move

“Oh, hold on!”

and then it stops again.

“One last thing on the Exchange! I almost forgot to include it. The clock face up there was installed in 1822, and you see it has two minute hands? This is because it had to show both Bristol

time and London time. In Britain, it was the advent and spreading of the railway that eventually caused the whole country to run on the same time. The scheduling and timetabling of trains necessitated a standardised railway time, which Bristol officially adopted on the fourteenth of September, 1852. The old local time was just over ten minutes behind London's."

We part ways, if they ever knew that we joined them in the first place.

I walk from my post and pedestal along to the second 'nail' that had been pointed out; the group sails on through history. I see the third 'nail' and fourth, placed just as the first and second on the other side of the archway entrance – on which I fix my sights.

The wooden door stands parted amongst the stone. Here ends, from either side, a black-metal railed fence, with two more lampposts standing sentry, heads unclouded, latent light within clear to see. They let me pass, and, with the further permission of the lions, their heads holding rings with which to knock, I step through, away, and in.