

Spot

by Paul Phillips

‘Stop!’

On reflection – on balance, so to speak – it would have been better to call out his name, or ‘No!’ or ‘Here!’ or even ‘Biscuit!’ but in the heat of the moment the distinctly unanimalistic nature of the situation had confounded me.

Too late anyway. Heedless as ever and intent upon his great adventure, he slipped beneath the crest of the rise without so much as a backward glance.

We ran after him, of course: Thomas in a frenzied, head-back burst that might even have caught up with him had it lasted; me following mostly with my eyes.

The first to spot him, and react, were four or five ten- or eleven-year-old boys whose low-slung BMXs had been lurking beneath the limes near the top of the slope. Faster, more intuitive than anyone younger or older might have been, they turned to watch almost in unison – before one of them twisted his handlebars too far and let his front wheel slice disgracefully into the others.

On he sped, oblivious, scattering pigeons and starlings and causing an elderly gentleman who had been rising from a bench beside the path to topple backwards

again and bruise not only his coccyx but also the backs of his thighs and one forearm. (The other arm, clasping as it did a copy of the *Daily Express* and an incongruous, almost inconceivable, Curly Wurly, was safely tucked in and sustained no injury.)

It was about this time, as the slope slackened off and Thomas, hampered by his knee and elbow guards, gave up the chase, that the baton passed to a small, noisy Jack Russell named Milo. Soon this was the word that rang out around the park as its owner, a distracted ex-management consultant who had tried, and failed, to retrain as a teacher, joined the race. Ultimately (for Milo) this unthinking pursuit of the thundering, weaving thing and its maddening rider would end somewhere near the start of the next row of poplars, in a collision with a thirty-something divorcée who was scraping a living hand-painting wooden buttons and fridge magnets and selling them on eBay, an intersection of vectors that (for Milo's master and, it is to be hoped, the divorcée herself) would prove particularly serendipitous.

By the time their eyes had met, however, the erstwhile Cupid, if such he'd prove to be, was merely a receding blur of vibrating conveyance and conspicuous arsehole. He speared – to continue the ill-thought-out classical pretension – between the Scylla and Charybdis of two fluffy pastel mothers who each in her way represented that which the previous couple had lost without prior tenure and whose fluffy pastel children in fluffy pastel pushchairs parted with a cry, from one at least, of 'Look, Mummy – Superdog!'

It was a reasonable assumption. There was certainly something not only miraculous but also downright heroic about his continued attachment to the skateboard, particularly when he dropped a front or back paw to punt at the ground or

otherwise shifted his weight and leant into the bends as if he had been studying for some time how to steer the thing, which perhaps he had. From where we were, falling ever further behind, we couldn't see his fierce focus, nor his grin, only the proud spinnaker of the tail and the aforementioned arsehole.

Which brings us – and him – to his next encounter. As the path passed the stand of poplars and looped around toward the boating lake it opened out into a kind of lay-by occupied by another bench, this one vandalised, and a combined litter and dog waste bin. Here, feet planted like a prizefighter's, waited a twinsetted woman with finely plucked eyebrows and puffy, pugnacious features: a Conservative city councillor of fearsome reputation who was standing with her architect husband, upwind of the dog bin and the persistent whiff of scandal, contemplating the potential for redevelopment of public spaces. Alerted by the raised voices and the rattle of polyurethane, perhaps fearing some kind of attack or protest, they spun around, almost losing their balance, and the councillor's husband, whether through concern, mischief or malice, flung out a leg.

So did Spot. Even from way behind we saw him back up, ollie and kick-turn – and suddenly he was off the path, plunging cross-country down the hard-baked bank above the lake.

'Spot!'

- and he looked; just for a second, eyes rolling, tongue lolling, he looked back over his shoulder, up the slope, in our direction.

But what were we going to say? Jump? Save yourself?

From my vantage point - Thomas tumbling ahead of me, Tories flapping, open-mouthed, by the dog-bin – what I witnessed down below was a Biblical explosion of wings, bread, Balsa wood and water as dog and skateboard met duck-feeding children and a predatory paedophile with a scratch-built speedboat in a kind of criticality incident.

Twenty feet away on the steps of the war memorial, two drunks looked on in consternation, although neither squinted at his can of Special Brew and shook his head in that double-take beloved of 1970s movies.

What they saw – what we all saw as the feathers settled and ripples faded – was a loose assemblage of laughing children and flustered parents, surrounded by discarded plastic bags and sliced bread shrapnel (over which a dozen of the braver ducks and geese were already fighting), with at its epicentre an unmanned skateboard that had come, if such a thing could be said, violently to rest against the low iron hoops protecting the water's edge.

But what they were watching – what we were all watching, now – sat in six inches of water some distance beyond the iron hoops, in the shape of the predatory paedophile (still at this stage an innocent victim, as he would remain until the police arrived and found his wallet), soaked to the skin and clutching his broken radio controlled speedboat while an overexcited Spot barked and leapt all over him.

'Stop! Stop!' he was shouting.

But that was just the start of it.