

THE BENCH

BETH GODFREY

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The tree had grown, and the grass hadn't been cut in a while. They used to be quite regular with that. But the view was the same familiar one and the night's gentle breeze had no chill to tense Cara's lower back. Her mother's bench looked out over the city, tucked neatly behind a gorse bush so it was easy to miss. They'd come up here often as a family for cocoa and snowball fights or sandwich suppers on long spring evenings. Mum would smile, bathed in that low evening light, and the shadows would find her laughter lines. She'd play and cackle, pulling harmless pranks with the boys until they were the ones telling her to behave. Cara remembered being embarrassed at how carefree mum had been and had only began to realise in recent years what a conscious effort that must have been – a single mum of three managing to make it all a game through sheer force of will. She wished they could talk now, woman to woman, that she could shake her and tell her to stop trying so hard and just be real. But Cara struggled to form specific thoughts to direct at her mother after the last time when

“I don't forgive you”

was uttered into the ether. And in truth, that was still the case. She was stuck, still angry and bereft with no idea how to find her way back. She thought being here on mum's bench would help, but numb, she trawled through memories and found none able to wrap around her firm enough so she could lean in and let go. She missed her. And knew her own hard-heartedness would be a disappointment. She'd never felt like her mother's daughter and it was all too late. She finally had news she wanted to share, questions she wanted to ask, and they just made the absence of her mum all the more total. Even here, on the hill, in the back garden they never had, site of so many happy moments, nothing offered comfort. She was met with the city churning indifferently and a hillside that had forgotten her.

“It would be the perfect time to have a cry”

she smiled tensely, and let her thoughts steal her feelings away.

The sound of fabric wrestling with gorse led to a woman pushing through a gap in the bushes and abruptly stopping on seeing Cara. The woman was armed with her backpack and unkempt from her exercise. Young yet weathered, she looked like one of those wholesome outdoor types who had never grasped how to be feminine but could be pretty if she tried. But something forceful about her put Cara on edge.

“I’ve never seen anyone here before”

grunted the hoarse voice. Cara acknowledged her but didn’t reply. Warmth was such a costly effort. Rather than accepting that the area was taken, the woman lingered with a quiet aggression, crowding the clearing with a clear intent to make Cara uncomfortable enough to move on. Cara stiffened and, staring straight ahead, forced her arm to stretch out over the back of the bench. She knew the bench was in a public space; that they didn’t own the view; but her mother’s name was on it. They had paid for it and worn it in and this felt akin to trespassing.

But the intruder didn’t go, she stood off to the side looking into the distance. Then she dropped her backpack and sat, picking at the grass. Picking a silent fight she knew she’d win.

Feeling relieved that the uptight woman on the bench had finally left, the young woman flung her backpack on the seat to claim her prize. The lady had no doubt been rich judging by her air of entitlement and stiff separation from everything around her.

“I’m tired of people like that always getting what they want”

thought the young woman. She knew she had made the lady uncomfortable and half enjoyed doing so. She was accustomed to people responding uneasily to her, being met with guarded stares or worse, invasive acts of kindness. People barely veiled just how deeply they underestimated her in the way they spoke down to her, assumptions parading across their faces. And when others have so firmly decided who or what you are, the line of least resistance is just to play along. It was so rare to just talk these days, human to human. Not about

herself, but ideas. She remembered her teenage years and the passionate debates she'd get into, out manoeuvring her friends with her twisting logic. She'd always had a precision with her words and a burning self-assurance that had got her into trouble. These days the sound of her voice shocked her partly because she spoke so rarely, but also because it sounded old and tired.

The four walls of the flat she'd recently started living in had been creeping in around her and she wasn't sure about it, no matter how many seals of approval it had garnered. She'd been bought house warming gifts that seemed so superfluous to her; garish decorations that increased the claustrophobia. She didn't feel herself, didn't feel capable in that static air or encroaching quiet. Over the years she'd moved about, but this was her favourite spot. She liked the walk, the solitude, the hidden-in-plain-sightness of the bench. It was far enough to get away, secret enough to feel safe, but close enough if there was trouble. Not that she sought much help these days. She'd mastered simple self-sufficiency, knowing not needing people wasn't necessarily a strength.

She read the placard on the bench like a nightly prayer:

In remembrance of Marianne,

Who lived fully and loved fiercely

From her children who will miss her

Always.

and imagined her namesake, willing her to send some of her magic from beyond the grave. She wondered what Marianne's kids were like; how much it hurt when she died; stuffing down her own thoughts from the past and imagining what her life would have been like if she'd had Marianne as a mum. She polished the sign with the hem of her jumper, kissed her thumb and pressed it into her own name, studying her dirty fingernails with a mixture of disgust and acceptance. She whispered the words again, claiming them as her own, as her future, if she was lucky.

Then she unrolled her sleeping bag.

Beth is a poet with a background in theatre, whose work in community settings reduces social isolation and elevates the voices of women and young people. @beth_g_poetry