



Parkbench Perspectives

By Wayne Visser

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Relief, at last. Thank god for this old bench - my nightly refuge, this bed of weather-bleached, splintering wooden slats, decorated with graffiti, both obscene and obscure; the one broken beam exposing its jagged edge, like a wounded limb; its upright arms enfolding in a cold, concrete embrace; partly sheltered from the wind by the school behind the park; partly protected from the rain by the creaky ol tree. Not much, but at least it's a place I can call mine, in a world that seems to have so little space for people like me.

Here, at least for the night, I can rest in peace. No insults. No harassment. No self-righteous advice. Just R.I.P., like a dead person. Here, on this bench I like to call my own, I am not disturbing anyone. No one can accuse me of being a nuisance. I am temporarily obliterated from the face of the earth, hidden in this suburban park. Safely tucked out of harm's way.

It's not much of a home, I'll be the first to admit. Nothing like the warm, cozy house I remember from when I was still a child. I guess that was part of deal though: I kept quiet about those things daddy used to do to me, and in return I got a roof over my head. Well, that was part of growing up for me, wasn't it - realising that having a roof over your head isn't everything in life. And also that you don't have to just sit back and take it. You can fight back. Today, I may not be a pretty sight, but at least I'm free.

I smile when I think of it, what a feisty bitch I grew up to become. Angry at the world for the raw deal I'd been dealt. Rebelling against everything and giving the finger to everyone. I used to think of it rather melodramatically as cursing the gods and courting the demons. Some would say I've got what I deserve, but I don't buy that guilt-trip crap. Shit happens, and it's happened to me in truck-loads. But I'm not feeling sorry for myself. I'm just getting on with trying to survive. Like everyone else, I'm doing the best I can. And anyone who's got something to say about it can just piss off and tell some one who cares!

That's my attitude, anyway. It's not like I asked to end up on the street. And it's not like I haven't tried, over and over again, to get a job. I'm not afraid of working hard. Try staying alive without two cents to rub together, and tell me that's not hard work! But you know, a person can only hear 'no' so many times before you start to crack. When rejection becomes a way of life, there's not much self-esteem left to go around.

I remember the first time I got desperate enough to beg. I felt totally humiliated, ashamed that I'd sunk so low; embarrassed that I had to rely on other people's generosity to survive. God forbid that I'd see anyone I knew! But hunger drives you to do crazy things, as I have found out more than once since then. Swallowing my pride was just another step towards my next meal.

But after a while I learned to look at it just like any other job. And to figure out what works and what doesn't. The tricks of the trade, so to speak. Not too clean and cheerful, or else no one feels sorry enough to give you anything. But also not too dirty and desperate, or people are too disgusted to come anywhere near you. I soon got used to feeling like a ghost - people looking straight past me, or through me, in an attempt to hide their own discomfort.





Only the extremes stand out from the tedious, numbing blur of street life: rare acts of extreme kindness and generosity, as well as those of extreme cruelty and pain. It's almost as if I walk around in some kind of desensitised stupour all day, my battered senses no longer willing or able to decode anything other than the highest highs and lowest lows.

I wish I could remember when I stepped into the quicksand. Maybe then, I could find a way out. All I know is that, at some point in my life, it seemed that the more I struggled to get out of the muck, the quicker and deeper I sank. That was until I discovered the secret to quicksand - don't struggle. You still sink, but more slowly, and there's a calm inevitability that replaces the initial panic.

It's not so much that I've given up. I'm just feeling more tired these days. I don't have the energy to fight any more. I'm weary to my bones, too exhausted to care about anyone or anything, including myself. And I guess that's why I find myself returning to this bench more and more often. I want to be alone. Just me and a little drink to warm me up and help to numb the constant aching. I've long-since accepted my sorry fate. I don't want rescuing. I just want rest. For no-one to be beating up on me. Just to be left alone to sleep on my bench tonight.

Tomorrow, I will open my blood-shot eyes and face the harsh world again. Somehow, from somewhere deep inside me, as I have done every day for so many years, I will find the strength to get up and go on. To keep walking the streets like the living dead. Why? Because I am a survivor. Because I refuse to give up on life. My mother, wherever she may be, would be proud of me for that. But tonight, please dear God, let me be forgotten. Allow me to die a little death of oblivion here on my special bench. Have the divine grace to let me rest in peace.



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