

Human Frailty

As soon as I entered the park, I spotted Robert in his red bobble hat, sitting on my favourite bench at the top of the hill. His hunched posture exuded a sense of separation and loneliness. I wondered if he was waiting for someone, possibly even me, but we had no arrangement to meet that day.

Robert had only just turned 50 but he always wore polyester trousers, synthetic shirts and acrylic sweaters and I wondered if he were imitating his late father. He even had a comb-over. No tie though.

Today he was wearing that concrete-coloured anorak his mother had given him in 1999. He had other coats but I knew this one came out when he needed some familiarity and reassurance.

There were dark stains at the cuffs and pockets and a rip in one of the seams but nothing would persuade him to get rid of it.

This attire and the stiff, ponderous movement caused by the neuroleptic medication he'd been on for years identified him as an ex-psychiatric patient. More vulnerable than if he'd smartened himself up, had a go at pretending to be normal but he didn't really try. He just was. I was concerned about him getting picked on by unsympathetic people and as he hardly went out at night I think he worried too.

I wasn't sure if he'd seen me but then I saw him raise his hand in greeting. It wasn't a wave - that would be too flamboyant. I diverted from the path and made my way across the slippery grass towards him. I could smell the damp earth.

'Hi Robert.' It was always Robert, never Rob or Bob - that would have been too casual and modern.

'Hello, Emma,' he faced me with a slight smile, 'How are you?'

I noticed the bench was still wet and wiped it with my sleeve before replying.

'I'm well.' I sat next to him and we said nothing for a few moments - just looked at the glinting cityscape spread out before us in the post-shower sunlight.

Sometimes it was hard to know what to say to Robert. Years ago, I had been his support worker when he had moved from hospital to a flat of his own. I'd visit him once a week to help him negotiate his way to independence and keep an eye on his mental health. We'd do all the practical things together and I introduced him to activities to keep him occupied but nothing stuck. He remained detached, half in a world of his own and always alone. He didn't seem able or perhaps willing to make friends. But we got along. He tolerated me to start with and then seemed to grow to like me. I think it was an advantage that I was a woman. I worked with him for two years until I got a better paying job.

When I moved in with my boyfriend near Robert's flat I wasn't sure about living so close to him but I didn't see him at all for a long time and then I bumped into him in the corner shop. We became friends of a kind, occasionally meeting in nearby cafes and going for short walks. He was undemanding and had a surprisingly good sense of humour. I broke the silence:

'I've just been for a job interview.'

'Oh yes? What for?' Robert turned to look at me. His face showed little curiosity. He rarely took an interest in me, or my life.

'I've applied to be an Employment Coach,'

'Not for the Job Centre?' He didn't hide his incredulity and distaste.

I smiled. 'No, it's for a charity, Fresh Start, they work with all sorts of people in recovery.'

'Oh, that doesn't sound too bad.'

There was something in the flat tone of his voice that made me think something was wrong.

'So, how are you? I haven't seen you in a while.'

Robert turned away, his gaze seeking the horizon. He didn't say anything for a few seconds and then I heard,

'I'm dying.' His hands clenched together.

I wasn't sure if I'd heard correctly. 'What?' I searched his face for confirmation but he was impassive.

'I'm dying. I've got lung cancer.' Robert didn't look at me.

'Oh no,' I didn't know what to say.

'The consultant says I've got 6 months maybe.' He still wasn't looking at me.

'I'm so sorry Robert. That's terrible news.' He'd been a heavy smoker until his mid-forties when he had quit for good. It seemed more than unfair that he should now have this disease. I looked down at the ground, at the soggy grass. I wanted to put my arm around him but we'd never touched before and this seemed like the wrong time to find out how he'd react.

'Isn't there anything they can do?' I said in desperation, 'A transplant? Chemo? Radiotherapy?'

'I've decided not to have any treatment.' His voice was monotone and final.

'Are you insane?' I almost shouted and then realized that my choice of words was rather insensitive given his history. 'I'm sorry, but what on earth has made you decide that?'

'I'm too far-gone and I'm sick of hospitals, doctors, drugs, of treatment. In any case there would be no guarantee I'd survive and to go through all that for perhaps a few extra months...' He was looking at his hands as they opened and closed tightly in his lap.

'Hasn't the doctor insisted?'

'Nope, they've decided that I do have the capacity to make this decision,'

'Oh, I see.' I wondered if a Second Opinion Doctor would agree. 'Surely you want to give it a try?'

'It's not worth it. I want to go to Switzerland.'

I knew what he meant. He wanted to go to one of those clinics where you take a lethal dose of barbiturates under supervision.

'Oh God, Robert, how can you say that?' He shrugged. 'Why didn't you tell me before? I had no idea.' I'd seen him a few weeks earlier and he'd seemed fine.

'I didn't want to worry you.'

'But to have to deal with this on your own, Robert...' He didn't respond as my voice trailed off helplessly. Robert didn't have any close relatives or friends and I couldn't envisage him being able to go to the Swiss clinic on his own. After all who would bring the body home? Should I offer to go with him? This was far more intimacy than I wished for and I didn't want to help him die. I had a vision of being the only mourner at his funeral; I'd been to services like that before. As I turned to him I noticed that the corner of his mouth was twitching.

Before I had a chance to say anything he guffawed, laughing like I've never heard him before, his head thrown back and his torso heaving with mirth. At first I thought this might be an inappropriate reaction to his terrible fate. I just stared at his contorted face.

'Oooh dear,' he said after a while, putting his hand up to his chest, gasping. 'Got you there didn't I?'

As he wiped tears from his eyes I continued to stare. Eventually, I said, through almost gritted teeth,

'You mean you're teasing me about being ill?'

He started to laugh again and nodded, unable to speak.

A ball of anger was forming in my stomach. 'You mean this is all a practical joke?'

'Yes I'm afraid so.' He laughed again.

My guts were telling me to punch him in the face.

'Why?' My voice high and whiny.

'I don't know. I just wanted to see how you'd react.'

'Bloody hell, Robert, surely you know by now that I care about you.'

He looked a little chastened by the edge in my voice, but he turned towards me, his eyes still twinkling.

I hoped he could see how sad and angry I was. I didn't like being made a fool of and he'd denied me, my feelings, our friendship, whatever professional boundaries were still in place.

'I just wanted to know that I mattered to someone.'

'You could matter to a whole lot more people if you could be bothered to reach out to them Robert.'

'Maybe,' he said quietly and turned away.

'What's brought this on? This isn't like you,'

He was silent for a moment, studying the ground in front of him. Then he looked at me again, and shyly said 'I've met someone I like.'

This was even more of a shock than his previous announcement.

'You mean you've fallen in love?' He nodded.

My anger had dissolved into astonishment. I had never known him to have a girlfriend.

He started to giggle.

'So you were just testing me out? To see if someone could care about you?' I hazarded, still confused.

'I 'spose so,'

'Well...I hope she's worthy of you. But don't do anything like that again, please.'

'I'm sorry if I upset you.'

'That's ok,' I said, unsure if it was.

It started to rain again, big fat droplets obscuring the scene in front of us. We stood up to leave. Robert zipped up his anorak and stuffed his hands in the pockets. I resisted the impulse to tell him to get a new coat and said, 'So who is she?'

'She's called Caroline. I haven't asked her out yet.'

I didn't know her, so I simply smiled and wished him luck. We parted, going in opposite directions to our respective homes, him to the prospect of new love and me to someone else I thought needed me.

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