

## MNEMOSYNE'S CHILD

Entering Prospect Park from the Grand Army Plaza Professor Nick Madison ambled down East Drive. He passed the Midwood area. Despite the sun's dazzling glare, he still managed to reflect on the beauty of the changing colors of the foliage and all the smells from piles of bark, mulch, fallen branches, and leaves strewn all along the walkway and covering the grass.

Nick gazed at the shadows resting between the trees, the grass, the rocks, the dirt, and the groundcovers. Aware of the split second flashing images dodging in and out, he dismissed them. He needed his bench.

Looking up, he noticed the sun had moved towards the west as he walked the path around the Audubon Center. He smiled at the painted yellow webbed duck feet showing the way to the zoo. Gripping his journal and peering downhill towards the lake, Nick thought that it would not be too many more weeks before the Wollman Rink would open for skaters and hockey. As he turned up the path towards Wellhouse Drive, he saw his favorite spot right before the Terrace Bridge. Suddenly he stopped.

There on the far end of his bench sat a young girl with long dark hair. She had parked her yellow backpack on the bench seat on her left side and on the ground stood a dark green canvas duffle bag. Nick resumed his walk toward the bench. He decided that nothing would stop him from his precious seat— his solitary worktable.

Rather than be out of sorts that his privacy would be lost, he resolved that company may even become a new inspirational experience for him.

Until now Nick always sat alone. He never ever tried to write with another human being present. Walking right up to the other side of the bench, he noticed the girl had a Calico cat on a

leash. The animal had curled up and seemed asleep next to her backpack. Nick looked at her and the cat. They did not look at him.

He sat down. Opened his journal. Reaching inside his leather jacket, he took out a pencil. They still did not acknowledge his presence.

Sitting very still Nick stared down towards the area near the water between Breeze Hill and the peninsula. Several Mallards floated on the water. He heard them but he didn't come here to write about the sound of ducks on the lake, or the way the trees looked and smelled in autumn, or the changing of the light before winter arrived, or the black squirrels that frequented the park all year. He had already written about these things. He knew the world did not need another romantic verse about the creatures in the natural world and their relationship to man.

Nick looked at the cat, still asleep, and the girl. They did not look at him.

At least ten minutes passed. The girl had her notebook open on her lap. She worked in one of those black and white marbled composition books, and it looked as if she had it for a long time judging by the condition of the wear and tear. He hadn't heard her open it.

Nick noticed she wore a jean jacket that looked as if it had a fur lining. Her jeans appeared rather tattered, a much washed out faded blue color. He looked down at her worn black Doc Martens. He noticed she had a pencil in her left hand and she stared straight ahead.

Suddenly the cat got awake, put its paws out in front, stretched, opened its mouth and yawned, shook its head from left to right several times, and stared up at Nick with its greenish-yellowish eyes. Then it eased back into its place on the bench and focused on Nick.

“Her name is Anne Bradstreet.”

Nick looked over as the girl spoke but she still did not look at him. He saw her face surrounded by thick long jet black hair that fell to almost cover her shoulders.

“Nice name,” he said.

“I share my cat’s name with you and that is all you can say?” She still did not look at him.

“I like that you named your cat after the first woman poet in America,” Nick responded.

“I didn’t name my cat that. She asked to be named that. She picked her name. She told me her name was Anne Bradstreet so that was that,” said the girl.

She still looked straight away, directly in front. Nick turned his head and looked forward to see what she looked at.

“You haven’t written anything. Your pages are still blank,” she said.

Nick quickly turned and looked at her as she now gazed at him. He saw that she had pure white skin. She had large coal black eyes, black eyebrows, a perfect Romanesque nose, and pronounced cheekbones. She wore no makeup. He stared down at the cat which focused on him. He saw the tortoiseshell patches of black, white, orange, and cinnamon. He cleared his throat.

“Hey? Cat got your tongue,” she said.

The girl opened and closed her eyes twice.

“Ha Ha. No, I was just admiring the brindled colors of Anne Bradstreet.”

“Brindled? Well, at least you didn’t say cute. What exactly do you do?” She asked.

“Why?” he asked.

“My cat is brindled? Can hardly wait to hear what is going to come out of your mouth next.”

“I’m a professor,” responded Nick.

“Really?”

“Yes, really!” he said

“You don’t look like the type.”

“And what is that supposed to mean?” asked Nick.

“Never mind,” she said.

“I come here to this bench in this spot frequently,” he said.

“College level. Wow! And you come here to wait for something to inspire you.”

“Something like that,” he said.

“Your page is still blank. For God’s sake, professor, what are you waiting for?” she asked.

“I see yours is not. I mean I see that there’s something written. I don’t mean to pry. But looking in your direction I see that there’s something written on the page you have open,” stated Nick.

“Stop!” she ordered.

“Stop what?”

“You’re babbling. I really don’t care if you see that there’s writing on my page. After all, I saw that there’s nothing on your page. And I asked what you’re waiting for?”

Just then a young boy came running by with his wooden hoop and stick.

“Hi there. Cute cat you got there,” said the lad as he took a step toward the animal.

“What’s its name?”

“It’s a female. Her name is touch-me-and-I’ll-scratch-you,” responded the girl in a most curt manner.

“So does that mean I can’t pet her?” asked the lad.

“You’re smart, kid. Don’t you think he’s a smart kid, professor?”

“Yup, I do. Hey kid! Can you do any tricks with the hoop?” asked Nick.

“No. Just keeps it rolling with the stick. Do you know I can almost make it the entire way around the park without it falling?” said the boy very proudly.

“Good for you,” said Nick. He looked over at the girl as she just flipped her eyes upward.

“Your cat really doesn’t look mean. Bet I can pet her and she will love it. Please?” asked the boy. “I’m friends with lots of cats where I live,” he added.

“I said no!” The girl leaned forward.

The young lad looked scared. He grabbed his hoop and stick. “Hey. I’m on my way.”

“Goodbye! Goodbye! Goodbye! Get your eyes off my cat. Go! She puts a curse upon little boys. You don’t want a curse do you? Then leave,” she said.

The boy looked at Nick and the girl, stuck his tongue out, and then took off holding the hoop and the stick.

Nick sat there looking at the girl, dumbfounded.

“What?”

“Nothing. Absolutely nothing,” he said.

“That’s right. Something just happened and you still have a blank page. What are you waiting for, professor?”

“You know, we have been sitting here and I do not know your name. My name is Nick. Nick Madison.”

He put out his hand to her. As his arm went across the cat, he heard it “meow”.

She looked down at Anne Bradstreet. Then at Nick. She looked at his hand. Putting out hers she shook his saying, “Simone. Simone Symen. The last name is spelled S-y-m-e-n. Everybody gets it wrong. Simone is the conventional way.” She paused and stared into his eyes.

“So Professor Nick, you obviously still have a blank page, and I have an entire notebook full of stuff.”

“What stuff?” he asked.

“Mostly poetry and sketches.”

“It looks as if you are carrying everything you own.” Nick nodded towards the duffle bag standing straight up and propped against the bench and her backpack.

“Very astute observation,” she answered.

Nick laughed, “You’re kidding, right?”

“Nope. I never kid about things like that,” she said.

“You’re homeless?”

“My home is wherever I am. Right now it’s here. Tonight it might be some shelter or church. Who knows? Just have to wait and see.”

“So, just you and Anne Bradstreet?” asked Nick.

She looked at Nick.

“Bet *you* have a nice place. Cozy. Plenty of food. Heat. A bathroom with a toilet and shower. Books. Maybe even radio or television. Don’t you?” she inquired.

“I rent a two-bedroom over in Park Slope.”

She stared at him.

“Simone? Simone?”

“Sorry. I was just thinking of something. It’s gone now,” she smiled.

“Well maybe it will return.”

“I don’t think it will,” said Simone.

“Never know?”

“I know,” she firmly said.

“Simone? I have something to ask of you.”

“I don’t take handouts from strangers,” she informed him.

“Hey, I’ll admit we really don’t know each other, but I would like to not be in the category of stranger, okay? And giving you charity or a handout has not even crossed my mind, I’ll have you know.”

“It hasn’t?” she asked.

“Absolutely not.”

She looked at Nick.

“Alright, I’ll admit that I was not fair with that last comment. We *are* acquaintances. We have been sharing this bench, this space, this place. Here. So what do you want me to do?” asked Simone and started acting slightly nervous.

“Read me one of your poems,” he replied.

“That’s it? Any poem?”

“Then you can show me one of your sketches.”

“I’m not really a poet. Certainly not an artist. After you hear one of my poems and see a sketch, you may not want to meet anymore poets or artists,” she said.

“Please, I would be so honored,” replied Nick most eloquently.

“Okay. This one is called Elohim. It is about the nine concepts of the divine in nature.”

Nick knew the word in the title and its religious meaning. He listened very carefully as Simone read her poem in a very soft voice:

See the canvas of Nature:

What portrait lures a man?  
Is it a boat on a river?  
Or maybe it is a bench by a lake?  
Perhaps it is a bridge over water?  
Ah, is it the dust seen in the shade  
Of tall oaks shielding the sun?  
Why could it be sweet wildflowers  
That scent the air?  
Could it be the wild horehounds  
That fill the pastures?  
What do the turbulent wisps of gusting dust propose?  
Are these granules of thought to this depiction  
Of life?

“Thank you,” said Nick.

“Nick? I never read any of my poetry for anyone outside of a classroom. This is the first. You are my first,” she answered. Nick noticed her moist eyes.

“Classroom? You read your poems in an English class? See? Now you have stepped out of those confines and brought your voice to the world,” said Nick as he tried to give her assurance and confidence.

He wanted to ask her many things. Age? How long has she been living on the go? Family? Where does she come from? Where’s she going? Where does she or did she go to school? And many, many more.



“Thanks, Professor. I like the way you put that.”

“Simone? How old are you?” asked Nick.

“I’m twenty-two.”

“Where do you come from?”

“Professor, maybe I’m not ready to get personal. It takes a lot to share one’s life with someone you barely know. You know?”

“Okay, but I’m just curious. You know . . . now that we are becoming acquainted with each other. How about just a couple of basics?”

Simone looked at him with her big dark eyes and said, “I’m from a town up north called Lindisfarne. It is a land of rivers and lakes. It is a place where nature abounds in one shape, form or another. So how old are you?”

“Will be thirty-six at the end of the month,” he said.

“And where do *you* come from, professor?”

“Here. Brooklyn. Even so, I am familiar with New England. I had an uncle who used to take me with him when he traveled,” answered Nick who purposefully refrained from disclosing that his Uncle Moe took him on hunting expeditions. He didn’t know her feelings on hunting and fishing, and besides he hadn’t done any of those outdoor sports since his uncle passed away years ago. He told her about the beautiful mountains and breathtaking views of the scenery especially in winter.

Simone listened intently. Then out of the blue she said, “I completed two years of college.”

“Where?”

“Vassar,” she answered.

“Excellent school.”

“Yes, it is, indeed. Sits right there in the Valley of the Hudson. Very beautiful campus. I was English major,” she said.

“Was?”

“Well, I suppose I still am in a way. I just dropped out. Took a break from the intense world of academia,” she smirked.

“Why?” asked Nick.

Tears began to form around Simone’s eyes. Then Anne Bradstreet stood up.

“It’s okay. It’s okay. He’s our new friend,” she said to the cat.

Nick watched Simone pet the cat which went around in circles a number of times then curled up almost in the same spot on the bench.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to pry,” said Nick apologetically.

“That’s alright. I just ran out of money. I took all my possessions,” she pointed at the duffle bag, “and left. Just started roaming around and here I am.”

“Couldn’t anybody help you? Like family?” asked Nick.

“Let’s not go there, professor. I am the eleventh and last child.”

Her last statement astounded Nick. He wondered what family would have eleven children in today’s world.

She put both hands over her face, covering her eyes, took a big sniff, and spoke in a muffled tone.

“My family views me as a disappointment. They don’t believe in me. I told them I wanted to be a poet, an artist, a writer. They all laughed. Said that I needed to find a real life skill or a rich husband.”

Tears rolled down her cheeks. Anne Bradstreet opened her eyes, looked at Simone, then Nick, but didn't move.

"Hey, hey Simone," said Nick as he reached out and put his arm over her shoulders.

Simone reached down and picked up Anne Bradstreet. Nick slid over and with both arms around her, he just held her close.

"Hey what's going on here?" asked an unfamiliar voice.

Nick looked up and saw a park maintenance man. He stood there looking at them.

"We're just fine. Thank you very much," said Nick looking at him.

"You sure?" asked the man.

Nick shook his head. He saw the faded name on his uniform. The capital letters seemed to read EXTRAGONNE or EXTRAGOONNE but because of the many washings and general wear and tear, Nick couldn't really make out the last few but they appeared to be O's and N's and an E.

"Are you really fine young lady?" asked the man. He gazed at her.

Simone looked up and opened and closed her eyes several times.

"Young lady?" asked the man.

But just then the walkie-talkie's signal inside the maintenance man's pocket went off. Nick and Simone looked up at him as he pressed a button and said, "Vlad here." Then he listened to the person on the other end.

Nick could tell by the expression on his face that something happened. Someone wanted him immediately.

"What? I'm on my way right now." He quickly clicked the talk button off.

“Okay you two, if everything is cool, I have to get down to the zoo immediately. One of the cats is restless.”

Nick nodded. He had one arm still around Simone and unconsciously he rubbed the back of her jacket. She turned around and faced him. He noticed a silver chain around her neck and dangling from it he saw a pendant with a black cat. He looked deeply into her eyes.

Simone returned Nick’s look by opening and closing her eyes several times. Then she put her hand on top of his which rested on his lap.

After that, Nick spoke rapidly, not giving Simone the opportunity to answer until he finished. “Simone, would you like to come to stay at my place? I have lots of food. We can stop and get Anne Bradstreet some litter and a box. And I can buy anything that you might have a preference for. I have a bathroom with a tub and shower. It’s safe and sound and if it gets cold, there’s heat. I am a very very very safe person. I swear I am not trying to take advantage of you. I am the true knight in shining armor.”

Simone looked down at Anne Bradstreet and spoke directly to the cat.

“What do you think? We never had an offer like this one. Should we trust the good Professor Nick? What do you think?”

Anne Bradstreet stood up and climbed up the front of Simone’s jacket. It almost looked as if she whispered something to her. But Nick only saw the cat licking her ear. Then it sat down. The next sound Nick heard—purring.

“Professor? Anne and I are going to take you up on your generous and kind offer. But before we go, may I see your journal?”

Nick had never ever let anyone read his stuff but this time, for some unknown reason, perhaps because she shared hers, he just handed it over. She turned back to the last entry before the blank pages.

“Wow, you date your entries? Your last one is nine months ago. January,” she said.

Simone quietly read it.

“I like this. I really really like this. May I read it out loud to you?” she softly asked.

Nick felt uneasy about this, but he agreed.

Simone read the poem beginning with the title “Transition” in a very soft radiant voice:

Sometimes

I feel

Like an icicle,

Hanging coldly.

Sometimes

I feel

To remain

In the Spring

To smell flowers,

See trees

Is my only dream of life.

Sometimes

I feel  
No more, no less  
That this dripping  
Bothers me,  
So I asked another one  
But it didn't know either.

Sometimes  
I feel  
That I shall ask the shining Sun  
Why it is burning away my soul?  
And then sometimes  
I just don't  
Feel.

Simone closed Nick's journal. Nick watched as she put his journal in her backpack, zipped the compartment shut, and then put it over her shoulders, picked up the cat, and stood up. Still watching her, he stood up.

"Professor Nick, if you could manage my duffle bag, we're with you," said Simone as she opened and closed her eyes twice.

"Simone?"

"Yes."

“To the best of my knowledge, the Prospect Park Zoo doesn’t have any animals belonging to the cat family,” said Nick.

“Got me, professor. I wouldn’t know,” she said.

“I read the other day in the daily newspaper about the zoo’s new acquisitions, and cats were not mentioned in the article.”

“Not everything is always announced in a paper, professor. You should know that,” she responded. “I really don’t like zoos. It makes me terribly sad to see animals in cages and behind man-made barriers. It’s so depressing.”

“I see,” he said.

“You do?”

“Yup! I really do,” said Nick, smiling.

“That’s okay, professor. I don’t really care if you do or not. The fact that you’re trying to accommodate my point of view is really sweet.”

Anne Bradstreet suddenly looked up at the sky.

Nick and Simone both gazed up. There, circling, glided a hawk.

They all started walking down the path. Simone put her arm through Nick’s and looking up at him said, “Did you know, Professor Nick, that cats have magical psychic powers?”

“No, I didn’t, Simone.”

“Believe me. They really do. They really do.”