

The Bench

I could tell myself it was for the best. It's right. God is in control. But heaviness sits beneath me, and I know it's a disaster. I got the position as a stepping stone to what I'd desired to do. From that step I would move up, till I could qualify for the position I really wanted. Resumes went out, but never came back, and like the grimy man on the bench below my shared office, I shared space on a bench until I could find my step.

"Remember, you can do it all," he told me as I walked to my office. I sat with him a moment. "I can," I thought, ingesting his words. But then he seemed to forget I was on the bench, and turned to me again and said the same thing. Perhaps he was right.

The tattered men of the streets, I'd supposed, were picking through waste for half-eaten goods, or to extract recyclable material. They're going to buy alcohol, or feed drug addictions. But Joe, who sat across from me on the bench would use the spigot behind the library to clean his face and wash his clothes. He'd make copies of his resume with the change from recyclables. In the late afternoon he'd return to the bench across the intersection from my office, sullen faced, setting his cardboard sign to the side. His eyes never reached my eyes, or really anyone else's. For hours his cheekbones would flex as his hands stroked one another.

Paul, my office-mate came out of the building. Glancing across the street his eyes caught mine. He smiled sincerely and gestured a wave. The days stretched long, clumping into weeks, and his eyes would go through the bench. I'd come to terms with my fate. As the scolding summer heat abated, I emulated Joe's routine, and clung to hope remaining. But sometime in mid November he didn't return to the bench, neither did the others. Clearly they'd escaped autumn's chill, but where to?

This is all a test, I'd determined. Pride can be stripped from me, and the items in my possession. I could become the most haggard, downtrodden, and abused soul, but I'd not renounce my convictions. Bishop Gray approached me after a service. He was glad I'd come. But whichever bench I'd choose, the sides, front and back would become vacant. Brothers and sisters averted their eyes, and children clenched their parent's sides. My greatest service to them was to leave. I did.

Joe was across the block. He saw me leave the church building. Anxiously, he pattered away. I followed him. Where was he going? The objects in his hands fell as he picked up the pace. I matched his speed down to the town center.

"Where is it Joe?"

"Leave it alone."

Then he stopped, and sat on the concrete. His eyes were long, as if forgetting my pursuit. He arose and strolled away at a slow pace. I continued to follow him. Instinctively, like a homing pigeon that's got no need for maps, he wound his way through street corners to a building. I followed him into the building. His body wrapped around a staircase, moving lower and lower beneath the city street level. I followed him down a subterranean hall, through a forced open grate, and into the city's sewer. My eyes adjusted to the dark, and I observed a ledge, barely wide enough to lie upon, which ran the length of the tunnel. Bodies were spaced out upon the ledge, taking in the thermal heat of rotting waste.

Filthy sludge consumed by the inhabitants above oozed slowly through the tunnel. I saw them distantly smirking, complacently satisfied. Even here their cackles penetrated hard. Overwhelming hatred came over me. I despise them, I do. Flames in their fireplaces, hot chocolate, and a window to safely watch the snowfall. But eyes, connections, individuals that

cared. Because I care, and because I've tried, that must be the reason why it's impossibly in front of me. While my dream is complexly simple, theirs are simply complex, like reading the roots from the stem to the ends.

The snow melted, and the rancid waste was pushed from sewage pipes. My comrades of the dark emerged, and returned to their benches. I landed an interview. It wasn't much, and there was no office by the window. But the cold had thawed from my face, leaving soft, sensitive skin. I scrubbed my face behind the library, and took the money allotted for the evening's meal to run a cycle at the Super Hut.

Cautiously, I crept through the side door of the church building. My eyes were met by those of brothers and sisters. My bench was empty on both sides, front and back. Subtle double-takes confirmed their suspicions. I would leave them to save them discomfort. As I arose, the button hole on my pants grabbed a nail on the pew, tearing the back. They were my only presentable pair for tomorrow's interview. Oh Father, I do believe, I do.