

## The Martyrs' Bench

Paula pushed her hand through the roll of packing tape and wore it like a bracelet. That left that hand free for the rail. Her other held the plastic vase and the flowers she had clipped in the backyard early that morning. The stairs went down the back of the garage from the sundeck by her bedroom and ended at the head of the drive. Past just one house on Garden, then down Carmel, cross Ocean View. And she could walk just a short way down to the bench. She took pleasure in this, decorating the bench she and Robert had donated twelve years ago, the bench dedicated to their daughter and the others who had died in the Twin Towers on 9 - 11. Robert used to go with her, but the walk wasn't far, and she felt no hesitation these past three years to go by herself. His death had left her alone. She had friends, her church, the Historical Society. But with no children or grandchildren, her days passed quietly.

The day was beautiful. Summer on the Central Coast had continued into early autumn, and, while the morning had been cool, the sun had warmed the day, and Paula only had added a windbreaker, the maroon one she had bought for traveling. Robert had encouraged her to have something lightweight, packable, convenient in his rucksack for sudden showers.

She missed him. Everything seemed to go back to her forty-five year marriage to that dreamboat. Most of her home's furnishings they had bought together after they moved to the Pacific Grove house in the nineties.

Margaret had gone to high school there. She had run the path along the bluffs by Ocean View most every morning when she had been home. College at Berkeley brought her home normally one week-end a month. Grad school, Columbia, had taken her away longer. And then that morning. All of her other memories seemed wrapped in Robert's arms.

After walking a bit on Carmel - the O'Grady's nasturtiums contrasted beautifully with the white bark of the stand of birches in their yard - Paula could see Ocean View and the sea beyond. Little traffic, the height of tourist season had ended, and, by the early afternoon, people were at work. The clear air made Santa Cruz across the bay seem close enough to swim to.

Robert seemed to have faulted himself for Margaret's death. He had encouraged their daughter to do her MBA in the east. "The contacts you'll make," he'd told her repeatedly. And the internship she wrangled with Cantor-Fitzgerald. Margaret went down with the building, one of nearly seven hundred Cantor-Fitzgerald employees who had died that day.

Her boss had called. Robert had known Seth from conventions and promotional meetings. Seth nearly cried on the phone. "I told her she could come in late. Hell, I went in late. But you know your daughter. 'I want to work with a couple of portfolios. I have some ideas and want to run some projections, set up a presentation.' There was no holding Maggie back."

Paula smiled remembering their over-achieving daughter. She always had found time for the extra work. "I need an edge if I'm going to succeed," she'd say. Well, the Jihadists had found a way to stop her. Paula frowned at that.

And Robert's first heart attack had come after he hadn't retired early. They had been able to travel a bit, their lifelong dream, but her husband's health limited even that, and a second heart attack killed him. She knew his heart had broken with their daughter's death. The Jihadists had taken him from her also.

No light was at the corner, so Paula waited for the traffic to thin and clear. Staring past the street, she looked left towards Lover's Point Park. She could see Margaret's bench from the crosswalk. There seemed people, perhaps a family, around it. That was all right. The bench was there to use. Margaret's bench commanded quite a view. A cut-out in the bluff showed the sandy

beach and the rocks below. The water included "a complexity of blues," Adell, her oil-painting friend, had told her.

The inscription carved into the bench read "Margaret Renee Crosby 9/17/78 - 9/11/01. Dedicated to the Victims of the Events of 9/11/2001." Paula had included something of a memorial from the beginning. A laminated note - "Dearest One - you remain with me, your love of flowers, your determination, your compassion for others. Always, Mom" - flowers from the garden, often a teddy bear. She could not part with any of Margaret's precious stuffed animals, but Paula had found duplicates of some. People had always been respectful, left things alone.

She smiled at the kindness of others. How often, when she had been seen replacing the flowers, adding some seasonal touch - a teddy bear in an Uncle Sam suit for Fourth of July - had people stopped, talked with her, "Sorry for your loss," a common parting note.

The large family seemed to surround Margaret's bench. An elderly woman, seated on the bench, focused on the goings on around her, was heavily dressed, a long black skirt, a knit vest over a paisley blouse, a black head scarf. And the woman beside her - a daughter? - dressed similarly. Two men stood nearby, talking to a third middle-aged woman, no head scarf, but dressed conservatively. And teenagers, both genders, played frisbee on the wide green just beyond. Paula took in that they all shared olive complexions, they all had thick black hair, somewhat curly.

As Paula got closer, she heard the old woman, "... *tef esmoo eron teeren.*"

Paula heard the syllables, could not make out the language. It sounded Arabic, near eastern certainly. She had planned to walk about, take in the fine day, until the family moved on. But this seemed really too much. Al Qaeda had murdered her daughter. Now Arabs, Muslims, blocked her from tending Margaret's bench.

Something snapped, and Paula walked forward, the beginnings of anger in the tension of her hands, the feeling of the set of her face.

"Here now, you." Her raised voice got their attention, even as it cracked. "You need to move on, find somewhere else."

The old woman seemed confused. The woman with her on the bench bent towards her, seeming to explain something.

Paula advanced closer to the foreign family.

One of the men stepped towards her, spoke in heavily accented English, "May I help you? Might there be some problem?"

Paula pushed past him, stood opposite the old woman, glared first at her, then back at the man. "Problem? Of course, there's a problem. You people should learn to read English and show some respect."

By this point, a crowd began to gather.

One of the teenagers, a short girl, long, curly hair, came running from the frisbee game.

Paula was worked up now. "Oh, I know it wasn't you, but your people...you all hate Americans. Why do you come here? Can't you read the dedication? My daughter...and my husband...and here you sit..."

The girl stood nearby, listened, looked to Paula, looked to the bench, looked back to Paula.

"Mrs. Crosby?" the girl looked back towards the bench. "Is that who you are?"

The small crowd murmured, supportive of Paula against the Arab family.

"You have no respect." Paula felt tears forming, beginning to streak her cheeks. "I know it's a public bench, but my daughter, and your people killed..."

The girl looked to her, looked to the crowd. After a conciliatory gesture, she approached the old woman still seated, took her hand, helped her rise. The other woman rose with her.

The girl spoke, "Mrs. Crosby, we mean no offense. Please," she looked to the crowd, "let me try to explain."

Paula stood tense, glaring.

"We are the Boulos family..."

"I don't care who you are.."

"No, really. We are not Muslim. My family is from Egypt, well, I was born here, in Santa Ana, but they all fled the same feelings that killed your daughter." The girl looked back to the bench.

Paula, still angry, was confused at why any of this mattered.

"Please, let me explain. We are Christian, Coptic Christians. And in recent years it's become harder and harder to live where our family had lived for thousands of years. I'm going to the university next year, Stanford, and I would not have been allowed to go to college back in Egypt. The government there does not allow Christians an education."

"But, why are you here?" Paula stammered.

The girl nodded, swallowed, continued on. "My uncle, aunt, and cousins live north, in Richmond. We live south. My Tita lives with us. We came here to celebrate the new year together."

"The new year?"

"Our new year festival begins September 11, lasts two weeks. We date our years from the martyrdom under the Roman Emperor Diocletian..."

"September 11? Diocletian? Martyrdom?" Paula tried to understand.

"The great persecution took place throughout the empire, but in Egypt alone, the Romans killed almost a million Christians."

"A million Christians?"

"Yes. But the Coptic church survived, may God be praised. And so we gathered the whole family this year for Tita..."

"For your grandmother..."

"She's having it hard. You heard of the ISIS beheadings in Libya last year? One of my uncles stayed behind. To keep the family holdings, what's left of them. One of those young men beheaded was her grandson, my cousin. Two others, well, it's hard to explain, but they were distant cousins also."

"Your cousins? ISIS?"

"And just before you came up, Tita was telling us how blessed we were to find this bench, this bench for the Holy Martyrs of September 11."

"Holy Martyrs?" Paula stood frozen, her anger draining.

"I'm Pearl. Pearl Dimyanah Boulos." She stuck out her hand.

Without thinking, Paula transferred the flowers to her left hand, the one with the roll of tape still around it, stuck out her right, shook hands weakly with the girl.

The girl said something to her grandmother nodding towards the bench, nodding back towards Paula.

The old woman, not so much older than she, Paula realized, stepped closer, said something to Pearl.

"Tita would like to tell you something," Pearl said.

*"Gor evol en ni Gaji:ente ti ek ekleesia."*

"She quotes our holy liturgy. She prays to God, 'Disperse the enemies of the Church.'"

Tita approached, opened her arms, wrapped them about Paula. Drawing her close she said, "*Shere nak oa pi martiros.*"

Pearl wiped tears from her eyes. "Again, Tita quotes our liturgy. 'Hail to you, o martyr.'"

Paula wrapped her arms around the woman, let go her tears.