

ON THE BENCH BY THE SWINGS

The only thing between her and the police was the pocket tape recorder standing at attention, whispering politely to itself.

She stared, daring him to look up at her. She felt wonderful, within and without. Keeping track of both was an ongoing labor. Her arms and back, often ambushed into vicious contortions were now relaxed happy allies. Her skull wasn't jammed onto her neck, stuck, like the badly threaded cap of a jar.

She wanted to stroke his lovely knuckles, to savor their warmth and the roughness she knew was just there. She looked down at her own hands on her lap. What would he do if she settled one of them on top of his? Or, if she grabbed that lovely large paw in both of her hands and held it to her heart? She wanted him to feel her gratitude.

He was kind to her. He allowed her to bring her bags into the building. He walked behind her, opening and holding doors for her.

It made her nervous to be so suddenly visible.

It was over for her. Done and finished. No more people hollering at her, swearing at her, telling her to get away, move on, get up. No more listening to laughter as dogs, loosed by their owners, chased her, sniffed between her legs or pissed on her bags. No more darts shooting from her brain through her eardrums with the beat of her heart. Everything had changed.

Today was the day she gave that boy her best present.

She would never go back inside Argyle. Inside, where wrappers, mimicking the streets littered the floor. Inside, where she had to keep the window covered with any handy shred or bit to block the Watchers hissing their cool dirty breath at her.

There were days she had to have a newspaper or she couldn't stay inside Argyle. She needed it to mop at the red-grey matter she watched silently dribbling down the walls, taking her breath away.

When she moved in, the Nice Lady put sheets on her bed. One was still there, roiled and knotted after nights of endless negotiating, bargaining for bits of light and sanity. Shredded cotton twists left from that day were tucked and scattered throughout the room as a necessary cachet; her protection, her weapons system.

Once, two young police came to Argyle.

“The manager thought you were dead.” The taller one said. They stood at the door, looking past her.

“He made a mistake.” She didn’t know what else to say.

Soon the hallway stairs creaked as the manager pulled his way up the bannister. His round bald head appeared first, a red globe, rising like a sluggish August sun.

“It’s only water.” One of the police turned, speaking over his shoulder.

“Whatever it is, it’s dripping from the ceiling. What the hell is she up to in there?” The manager was looking at the policemen.

“It looks like she’s got the sink plugged with a piece of cloth or some kind of junk.”

The police left once the Nice Lady came. She helped mop up. The manager stopped swearing and said, “yeah, yeah, ok, ok, she can stay.”

The Nice Lady gave her a shot of medicine and said, “Look at me, DO NOT, DO NOT put your safety plugs in the sink unless you are in here. You don’t need them when you’re not here, right?”

She nodded.

“Look at me, promise me. Okay? Tell me ‘okay’ so I know...”

“Um hmm, yes, okay.”

That day made her sad and tired.

Today was different, she was not here because of her room. She was here because of what happened on the bench by the swings. He came and got her. Everybody, the kids, the woman, she herself, was screaming and crying when he got there. The kids started to cry when the woman with them started screaming; shooting shards of sound at her out of the bottomless black “O” she had made of her mouth. Much later she realized some of the screams were her own.

He was dressed up in a suit. When he showed that lady his badge, the “O” snapped shut as if an electric wire was yanked out of the wall. He came over to where she sat, rocking, looked at her face and spoke into the thick silence, “It’s alright, take your hands off your ears.” He touched one of her hands and held her shoulder till she stopped rocking.

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“Come with me.”

“She’s not coming is she?”

“No. Here, take your bags, lets go.”

Happy. She folded her hands on the tabletop, sliding the knot of her fingers a little closer to his hand.

“Yes, what is it?” He looked up.

“Thanks.”

“I’m afraid we aren’t finished here, “ he said, “would you like a glass of water, cup of coffee?”

She was surprised, “A coffee? Lotsa sugar? I like it with lotsa sugar. Is that okay?”

“Be right back.” He stacked his pen, notebook and the recorder, grabbed them up, and left the room. *He is very fast, his legs are long.* She smiled. He didn’t have to tell her not to leave the room. Even if she hadn’t heard the lock click as he walked out she would have stayed willingly, nested in this bunker.

She sat, looking at herself in the mirror on the opposite wall. Usually, mirrors made her nervous, but she felt safe in this room and became bold. Staring at herself, she tested how far her tongue would reach out of her mouth; up, down, to the left, to the right, then as straight as she could make it. Turning her head, she checked each ear, no blood. Good, she nodded. Then she tried smiles; lips up, straight across, showing teeth, covering teeth, lips puckered, as if pulled by a drawstring.

“What the hell is she doing now?” The sergeant squinted through the one way glass. He leaned back, “What the hell...?” He laughed, “This broad is better than t.v. Lookit the faces...” He laughed again, “How’s it goin in there, Smitty?” He Glanced at the paper cups the detective was holding, “Finally got a girlfriend, eh?”

“Gimme a break, Sarge. She’s harmless.” The two men stood, looking into the room. “We’ll have to leave the interview room door open for a long while once she’s gone though, it’s pretty ripe in there.” He sighed, “Any idea when they are coming for her?”

Her interest had carried her beyond the mirror, around the small room. There was a grey steel bench bolted to the wall opposite where she sat. An iron ring was bolted to the wall above it. The stainless steel table where she sat was bolted to the floor, its dulled top etched with messages; *J was here, mom, Lks rul e, fuck u.* She got up, walked to the corner of the room, bent and checked her bags, then returned to sit at

one of the two chairs which weren't bolted to the floor. She pulled it closer to the table. Bending to her task, she began scratching into the tabletop with her fingernail. She wanted to leave her message, but it didn't work.

"Don't know, kid. You've got her for now. Old girl," the sergeant tilted his head toward the front of the building, says she doesn't want this to, he went on in falsetto, 'go any further, the park is no place for that woman, she needs help.' "

"Okey doke, Smitty, hold your nose, get in there with your girlfriend before the coffee gets cold, and find out where she got that star." The sergeant smiled thinly at Smith, "betcha she 'found' it."

With that the sergeant swept the heavy door open, gave Smith a bow and a wave, "Patient bastard", he said as the lock clicked behind the detective.

When she heard the door open, she looked up and gave him her best smile as the detective placed the paper cup in front of her.

She drank daintily, the tip of her pinky floating up, a tiny balloon. Her physical frame, and her size were a mystery. She was buried under brown layers of cloth. She looked like a mole moving dirt when she shifted in her chair.

"Tastes good. Just the right amount of sugar." She smacked her lips, as her head bobbed up and down. "Your hands still warm from the cup?" She tried another smile at him.

"Glad you like the coffee," he finally said.

"I have a gift," she told him, carefully placing the cup on the table. She leaned back, relaxed, on the chair.

"Oh yeah?" He was casual.

"A gift?" He gave up, allowing himself a sigh, "what is it?"

"In here, it's in here," the old woman tapped her temple with a grimy hand, "I never told nobody," she looked meaningfully at him, "but I will tell you."

"Is it about the star?" He asked.

"Maybe, maybe it's about lotsa stuff. What are you writing in that little book? Same as on here?" She tipped her head toward the recorder.

“Well, the recorder is for speech, talking. My written notes in the little book are for reminders to myself, or things I notice when I talk to someone.”

“I’m smiling.” She said, looking at him, “go ahead, put that down.”

“Ok, see, I did.” He held the notebook up off of his lap so she could see it. “Now, what’s your name? I would like to write that in my book, too.” He clicked his ballpoint up and down, a show of making ready.

“I told your friend out there,” she gestured toward the door, “Folly is what people call me.”

“Is that your street name, or, ah, nickname?” He corrected himself.

“When they say Folly and look at me, I answer.

“What about your real name?” He took a chance, “not what your friends call you, but, like a social worker, or maybe a doctor? You know, first name, last name.”

“That’s it, Folly, one name.”

“Is that what the lady at the agency calls you?”

“Yup.”

“Okay, Folly it is.”

“Folly, listen, this is important, it’s about that star. It belongs to someone, someone very brave. Whoever lost it needs to get it back. A soldier earned it. I want to help that soldier, I was one once, too. What do say? Where is it from?” He was leaning toward the old woman across the table, notebook forgotten.

“I used to have another name, ya know, but I lost it. The Nice Lady, she takes me to McDonalds sometimes, even when I don’t have to pee. She helps me, and she helped me look for it too. She has a bag, like mine, with important papers in it, my papers are in there too. She gives me medicine and helps me keep things straight. “What do I call you, Mr. Policeman?”

“I am Detective Smith,” he sounded stuffy. He paused, “My friends call me Smitty.”
“So, Folly, tell me about your gift.”

“I know things.”

“You mean you watch and you listen and know things going on around you?” The detective gave a small shrug and sweep with his hand.

“That too,” she nodded, “but the gift is different. It’s from inside, like a curtain. Sometimes I’m on the inside, sometimes I’m on the other side, outside.” As Folly’s hands fluttered around her chest, Smith looked toward the one way mirror.

“I see words dribbling out of their mouth, or their ears, like oatmeal, even before they say ‘em. Other times they are bright lights like in the movies, marching across their faces. People don’t know I can read ‘em like that, but I can tell what is true, and what is lies. It’s when the words coming out of their mouth don’t match what I see, then I know.”

She dragged her finger across her forehead. “They look at me, they don’t see me. They stare at me like I don’t see them, like I’m blind, or something with no brain or no heart; a, ah, a worm or something.” She looked down, silently.

“Folly, look at me. What am I thinking now?”

“That you want to believe me.”

“Why don’t you tell me how all that trouble in the park started? Was that lady staring at you?”

“I like to go to the park. I feel so good now Detective Smitty, I feel so good.”

“Good. Let’s talk about how the star, it’s called a Bronze Star, got into the park.”

“Where is it?” Folly asked him. “Does the beautiful boy still have it? I gave it to him, a good person, I want him to have it.” She was getting agitated.

“Right now, we have it, Folly, it is here, safe.” He reassured her. “We have to find the owner. Somebody earned it. It might even belong to the family of a soldier who died.” He pressed, “you can help us, please?”

“It came from here, I keep it in this little bag, see? I carry it across my shoulder, nobody can grab it. All my special stuff is in here.” As she spoke, she stood, and lifted a small grey bag from on top of the larger bags in the corner. She looped the canvas strap across one shoulder, the sack hung, a hunter’s lifeless kill. “See?” She patted the sack, “safe and sound. I like keeping this stuff near.”

“Ok, come on Folly, where did you get the Bronze Star? You won’t get in trouble, even the lady in the park doesn’t want to get you in trouble.”

Folly stood, head tilted, looking at him.

“That’s right, look at my face, I’m telling you the truth. It has to go back to where it belongs. Don’t you understand?” He sounded testy, impatient.

She sat back down. Taking a swallow of coffee, she folded her hands on the grey table top. She kept the canvas bag draped across her middle. “I seen her coming today, like always. Them kids, streamin behind her like toilet paper stuck to her shoe. Phone plugged in her ear, shiny and black. She was talkin, laughin, noddin. Even though them kids was around, they wasn’t around for her, oh no. She was too busy, you know, like I said, talkin, laughin, noddin.

“Three of ‘em, two girls and a boy. The girls, pretty little things, sparkly yellow hair, curls tumblin all over. It was hard not to grab ‘em and and hug ‘em. The bigger one uses her ears to hold the curls back. The boy don’t see right. He always looks worried to me behind them glasses. I know real life things Detective Smitty. I am not stupid, I know they aren’t supposed talk to folks like me, folks they don’t know. I gave em a wave. Like this, just jiggled my fingers,” she flapped a hand next to her ear, “the Little Stick Man started waving back, like this”, Folly held up her hand, fingers separated, moving gently up and down, , “like playin piano.”

“Them kids took turns, pullin on the woman’s arm, or jacket, lookin up at her. Did she ever look down at them? Did she ever pull that phone out of her ear? No, No. I got really mad finally. I got pissed off for them kids, Detective. She don’t know what she’s got, them three play so nice together, she don’t see what’s right there. She don’t see her own gift,” Folly mumbled, “uh, uh, she don’t see none of it.” Folly stared at Smith as if awaiting justification.

He nodded.

“I watch for em from the bench near the swings. I watch em to keep em safe--she don’t, that’s for sure! They come around about the same time every day ‘ceptin the weekend. I gotta admit, I like the worried lookin little boy the best. He never gives up tryin to get her to look at him, or to show her things.”

“Little Stick Man. Skinny as can be. And them glasses, hangin like a trapeeze off a his ears. He twists my heart. He’ll be a great and gentle man one day, you wait and see--no thanks to HER !” Folly spat.

“I wanted to touch his hair, but didn’t. Do you know those bell things people hang on their back porches, Detective Smitty? That’s how the breeze goes through his hair. He reminds me of somebody,” Folly whispered. “But SHE pulls on any arm of any of em when they cross the street. Yeah, people walk their dogs better. I’ve watched the boy pull on her clothes to slow her down sometimes. Sometimes she’ll just push his arm

away, sometimes she looks down and back at em. I see it all because I get there before they do, ya know.

“So I see her today, like always, crossin the street, phone up in her ear, like her head was empty, kids trailin her. She didn’t notice me, never did. The kids were behind her, lookin at me, comin towards me, across the street. We did our wave.

“Old girl steps back, almost knocks over them kids, car just misses em. This close,” Folly pinched thumb and forefinger together, and pushed them at Detective Smith’s face. She shook her hand back and forth in the air angrily.

“Wouldn’t you know, Detective, like puttin gas in the tank, phone goes right back up to her ear, pouring words into that head. I saw, my gift was working. She was planning things without them kids, talkin, laughin, noddin--I hated her. Them sharp edged words, clickity clacking out of her mouth. But, Detective, I stayed on the bench. Didn’t say a word. Nope. Just now, to you. You know why?” She paused, waiting for him to answer.

“No, why, Folly?”

“We had a plan.” She smiled, her mental antenna had gently turned.

“What plan, Folly?” He tried to remain calm. His shoulders were stiff and he had a headache.

“Your’re a nice man, Detective Smitty, I know you’d like them three if you saw em.”

“I did see them, Folly, in the park, earlier, remember, they were crying?” He reminded her.

Folly looked past the Detective’s shoulder, into the mirror behind him. “I had one once. A boy. He died in the Holy Land. The lady who visits me, you know, the nice one, brought me the letter. It was from the President and it came late. That’s cause of my name. He thanked me for lettin em kill my boy. The letters’ in here,” she gestured vaguely toward the bag hanging from her midsection. “Yeah, it’s in there, by itself. I got it in a separate pouch ’cause I don’t like to touch it. My boy never touched that letter with his hand, or his chest or his lips. It hurts me too much to touch it. It’s in that little bag, that’s where my boy is buried.” Tears roiled down her cheeks. “I see my boy, glasses hangin off his face, hair, straight silky, smilin at me, smilin like the sparklin sun. He’s gone, gone back to that hot sand and burning wind, where the Bible stories come from.”

The silence pressed into the space separating the old woman from the Detective.

“Still fightin. It’s not the right kind of funny, but it’s funny, isn’t it? I mean, they’re still fightin, since Bible times. I hope somebody looked into my boys’ eyes before he closed em for good.’

The Detective looked into her eyes, “I am sorry, Folly. What is your sons name?”

“Henry”

“So you know how important it is that we get that Bronze Star to its right owner.”

“I find things, you know.” Her smile was shy. “When they’re good, I put em in one a them sacks over there, when they’re special, she pointed to the pile of bags in the corner. “When they’re special, I put em in here,” She tapped the bag on her chest. “The others wanted to take my stuff when they drove me here. You wouldn’t let em. They don’t care about anything but their way a doin things. You think about good ways a doin em. Like me. I do that too...”

“So what was a good way of doing things, what was your plan this afternoon?”

“My boy was watching me, standing near my spot, the bench near the swings. She was there with them kids. She hollered at the boy, “stay away from that bench, come over here!” “

“The boy didn’t listen to her. He saw what I had in my hand, and came to me.

“Did you pin that on the boy then?” The Detective asked her.

“My birthday is Christmas, my day of birth. I like to give people things even if I don’t know their day of birth. I talked to Henry and we made a plan. Give the Little Stick Man a gift so his mother will know just how special he is. Then he will be special to her, too. We didn’t have anything for them sparkly girls. So while she was talkin, noddin, I waved to him. He waved back, and I held up the star for him to see. He came over. I was pinning it on his shirt when she came at me, screamin. Screamin, like this,” Folly’s screech tore, ricocheting around the corners of the concrete space, before it flattened into the hard white walls.

Detective Smith steadied her.”Stop, Folly, I get it, I get it, okay, okay!”

Folly continued, “Nothin stopped her, even the phone. I picked it up off the ground where she dropped it and tried talkin to her in it. She still didn’t stop screamin. Noises and words poured out of her all over me. Sharp edged as broken bottles, them red Xs were flying toward me, I was scared.” Folly looked shaken. “My ears hurt so bad, my head too, them three kids was cryin, just standin and cryin. My boy’s medal was hanging off Little Stick Man’s chest by the pin, open and one armed, like a jumper hangin from the window. The noise was somethin horrible.”

“Tell me your sons name again, Folly.”

“It’s Henry, Henry Holly.” She nodded emphatically, “You’ll see his name on the back.”

“Just wait a while, Folly. I’m bringing you something,” Smith touched her shoulder, “something better than coffee,” he said, smiling.

As the door lock clicked open, Detective Smith held out his open palm, “To the rightful owner.”

She took the medal out of the Detectives hand, and lovingly placed into the pouch sagging at her middle.

“Someone is here for you, I think it’s the nice lady.”

“Oh yeah, good. Say, what about Little Stick Man and them sparkly girls ?”

“I can tell you the Mom will not be using the phone when they go to the park. Your gift to them was a lesson, that’s for sure!” The Detective laughed.

“So, how did you get the name, ‘Folly’?” Smith asked as she began gathering her bags stacked in the corner.

“Typo at the Social Security,” she said over her shoulder.