

The Binmen

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The litterbin stood beside the park bench on which three elderly men were sitting. They sat bolt upright looking at their surroundings but seeing little while idle thoughts drifted aimlessly through their minds.

‘It’ll rain later,’ the man closest to the bin said to nobody in particular. He had interrupted the silence with a voice that rasped from a lifetime of nicotine and tar. Slowly, as though keeping time to a silent clock, the others nodded in unison. Despite the weather forecast and the cloudless sky idle thoughts left little time for logic or contradiction.

The silence continued for a little while longer before the man furthest from the bin declared. ‘I fancy rabbit stew for lunch.’ He licked his lips instinctively but as images of his granddaughter’s pet hopped through his head he added, ‘but maybe I’ll have cottage pie again.’

Once more they nodded mechanically, their minds changing to wander green hills with flocks of white, hearing whistles and commands to ‘come by’ and putting woolly thermals on the shopping list. Even Wilson the butcher fleetingly featured as Closest mused on images of bloody shanks and cleavers chopping.

These dissipated and were followed by meditations on an egg-stained lapel, a brown OHMS envelope on the doormat and the rather Rubenesque assistant in Wilson’s shop. She was pictured by Furthest as vibrating like set jelly as she vigorously turned the mincer handle and he couldn’t help recalling the old advertising slogan ‘porky and best’ without sniggering.

Across the river rooks wheeled above the oaks, vying noisily for the highest points on which to build their nests. Their raucous demands were clearly audible but went unheeded as the men aimlessly meandered from one thought to another. Furthest voiced one of his. 'I thought she was faithful but she was just a bitch.'

The man in the middle didn't hear, didn't respond, but the man beside the malodorous litterbin spoke again. 'Rabbits are vermin. How can anyone eat vermin.' His lips compressed adding to the silence cocooning the bench like a mourner's shawl. This was rather fitting as two of the men had actually experienced loss.

Closest who was scratching at the dribble of egg on his jacket lapel was still lamenting the departure of his wife. It was five years to the day that she had succumbed to the butcher's amorous advances and within days she had left her husband for the womanizer who claimed meat was much tastier with a lot of fat.

Furthest had experienced two heart-breaking losses. His partner woke one morning and declared that he was heterosexual; he packed his bags and went off to co-habit with the flirtatious village postmistress. The following day his faithful Labrador came on heat and left him; she's just another bitch, he had said at the time.

Closest and Furthest had remained strangers even though they sat in close proximity, alone in their thoughts, day after day. They had been compelled to use the same park bench as the other one was the daily property of two incorrigible gossips and their equally vocal offspring.

Middle was the most recent user of the bench for he had appeared in the park the previous Tuesday morning. He had walked back and forth four times before pausing and without a by your leave sat down. The newcomer carried a small bunch of wilting forget-me-nots that became as much a part of his appearance as his grubby raincoat.

Closest and Furthest had nodded a greeting in time to the invisible clock when the new arrival sat between them but they did not venture to say a word and Middle followed suit. His silence was taken to be a positive sign and he was accepted as a participant in their solitary vigil on the trivialities of life.

Two mute weeks passed before a weird sense of curiosity arose in Furthest and his ideas on breeding red kites for release in Suffolk were completely turned topsy-turvy. The

floral tribute clutched in Middle's hand had caught his eye and a question arose that he was compelled to voice: 'Are those for your wife?'

The bold enquiry hung in the still morning air and remained there, unheard, ignored, unanswered. Furthest watched the swathe of uncut grass ripple and flow in the breeze like Cornish surf and began drifting into a stream of idle thoughts about the new postman before his mind suddenly rebelled. Furthest refused to listen to Middle's silence any more and he repeated the question in a low murmur that Closest was hard-pressed to hear. There was still no response and he turned to see that the familiar bouquet was now lying between Middle's scuffed boots. Stems had been bent and broken and tiny blue blooms were randomly scattered over dull black toecaps like confetti.

Furthest hadn't witnessed the act of littering but he felt he should reprimand Middle with a gentle nudge in the side. There was no acknowledgement, no sign of life. Furthest turned to look more closely and saw there never would be. Eyes that could no longer observe rooks wheeling, daffodils unfolding and clouds forming seemed fixed on the white dove strutting towards the bouquet.

Closest also realized what had happened and immediately used his cellphone. After a tumultuous twenty minutes of ambulance arriving, paramedics discussing and police questioning the officials sped away in their official vehicles with sirens silenced.

Keeping a mutually acceptable distance between them Closest and Furthest walked from the park gates back to the bench to resume their normal places. As he was within reach Closest bent over and painstakingly retrieved every stem and dying bloom. He placed those remnants reverently between them on the wooden slats and Furthest nodded his approval before drifting into thoughts about whether Pooh Sticks was a fair contest in a fast-running stream.

Closest was wondering if ring-necked doves and grey wood pigeons ever mated.

They still had another hour of solitary contemplation before lunch.

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