

The Grief Benches

by C.J.F

I pass the Grief Benches on my way to work. No one is on them today. Last night I saw a couple there, him wet eyed and her with her head down. She scrunched her eyes tight as I passed and I remember thinking she was a fraud. It's alright if you don't want to cry, I thought, there's no point pretending for my benefit.

Me and Jack christened the benches when we were walking home from work half drunk. Three benches on a slanted grassy verge with nothing nearby, facing out to sea, a kind of limbo: perfect for grieving. I look at them whenever I pass and wonder what it is about grief that makes people want to get out of their houses.

All day at work 'Too Much Too Young' by the Specials keeps going round my head. Me and Jack heard it as we came out of Boots, after we had spent our last five pounds on a pregnancy test. It made us laugh, hearing it then, it was like we had our own sound track.

Keep a generation — gap. Start. Wearing. A. Cap.

Now it goes round and round inside my head, followed by that drum beat, which starts to sound more and more like circus music. It still makes me laugh, but it's a different kind of laughter now, not very close to humour at all. Jack texts me to see how the test went and I can't bring myself to text back.

When the Wizeden Man shuffles into work the song disappears. I'm not going to hurt you, he says to my boss and she smiles at him in a way that makes it clear she doesn't think he could.

His skin looks hard all over, like cured meat, like the life has been sucked out of him. Like the head of a garlic prawn. As he asks Megan for a drink he looks so hopeful that I don't know how she can resist. He glances at me, and I look away quickly, but not before Megan notices.

At our last meeting, she said she thought I'd been encouraging the tramps of the town. She told me not to speak to them anymore while I was working.

We need to observe a zero tolerance rule towards them. They must realise they cannot get alcohol from this restaurant. I just nodded, not really knowing what to say to someone who thought that this was what needed to happen.

Jack loved it when he heard. It was his favourite story for weeks. He even made it into a toast.

He'd say: Here's to zero tolerance!

And I'd say: And here's to homelessness!

It didn't make any sense, but it made us feel original, and it made us laugh.

I'm not a bad person you know, the Wizened Man is saying to Megan. His eyebrows lift earnestly, dragging the wrinkled face below up and over the old, old bones underneath. Megan lifts a manicured hand to her nose, as if she's smelling herself to keep him out.

I just drink too much, he tells her. I drink too much vodka, but I'd never hurt you. I just want a little bit of vodka. He goes as if to move towards her, lifts one foot, but then thinks better of it and places his foot back down.

Megan takes this as her cue, and raises her voice slightly, tells the Wizened Man he has to leave *now*.

I can't stay out of it any longer. I put my hand on his coarse, fisherman's jumper and link my arm through his, imagining he's a well turned out old gent in an expensive hotel lobby.

Allow me to escort you to the door, sir, I say, hoping he's imagining the same thing and that my manoeuvre seems vaguely elegant.

Megan stays by the bar, aghast.

I just wanted to apologise to you two young ladies, he says to me on the way out and the sweet, fermented stink of alcohol fills my nostrils. I smile at him graciously like a well trained hotel porter,

discreetly letting go of his grubby elbow when we're on the pavement.

As he tells me about his broken arm and the lads that did it, I try to listen, but I can't concentrate. I'm trying to understand that there's a foetus growing inside me, that this foetus could actually become a person living in the world.

The Wizen Man's dry lizard lips are moving, saying things I've heard a thousand times before and I'm just thinking what chance has he got-

I think about him, just born, somebody's baby, and Megan, believing that saving money is more important than giving a thirsty man a little shot of vodka and I feel sad for her, like she's fallen for a terrible trick, and then I feel sad for myself because I know she's not the only one.

I look past the Wizen Man's head with his dry lips still moving and imagine all the people rushing by us are children. Their faces lift, become more expectant, like they're waiting to see what will happen next.

I look back at the Wizen Man, trying to see the bemusement in his eyes as wonder at the world, but it's impossible. As he peers at me, holding the left arm that no longer hangs properly with his filthy right hand, the magic is broken and the people in the street are the same aging, distracted adults they always were.

I have to go back inside then, to get out of the way of the people on the street, to leave the Wizen Man behind. And I can't bear the way he hovers by the doorway, saying goodbye louder and louder like he wants to carry on a conversation that we weren't even really having.

Megan shakes her head at me and tuts, opens her lipsticked mouth to say something but I walk straight past her to the toilets, lock the door. I grimace ferociously in the mirror, gnash my teeth at myself but I don't feel any better.

When he gets home, Jack asks me what I want to do about the baby and I tell him not to call it that.

He tells me he doesn't want me to have an abortion, and I tell him I don't want to give birth. It soon becomes clear that the decision is down to me, whether we like it or not.

I tell Jack he just wants me to have it so he knows what he's doing with his life and he doesn't deny it.

It would still be amazing, he says, putting his hand on my stomach.

It wouldn't always be a baby, I tell him, moving his hand away and standing up.

You don't have to do this by yourself, he says as I walk away, and I tell him to be quiet because it feels like everything we say is scripted.

And because what he's saying isn't true.

That night, when he curls his long, warm body around me, I imagine us as two foetuses under a quilt. I turn onto my back, spread my arms in the most unfoetal way I can.

When I fall to sleep I dream about a lost kitten.

I know it's officially autumn when I get to work because Tony who sleeps in the kebab shop doorway is sitting at the bar.

'Ello darling! he exclaims when he sees me, showing me his gums. I'm here for my autumnal coffee — it's the end of British Summer Time!

I walk behind the bar to put a shot of coffee in the machine and Megan looks at me like Tony's existence is my fault.

I'm going to do the banking, she says and we both ignore her.

If I'd known you were going to be here, I'd have put my teeth in, Tony says.

If I'd known you were coming I'd have worn a shorter skirt, I say back.

Tony puts his head back and laughs, his big phlegmy laugh cracking out around the empty restaurant. I put his coffee down and pour a slug of whiskey in it, happily reducing Megan's profits.

I've been living in this place for six and a half years, he starts and I raise my eyebrows as if it's the first time I've heard him say this.

Six and a half years! You didn't work here back then, did you-
No, I tell him, I was still at college.

And how old were you then- he asks me.

I tell him I was eighteen.

Really- he asks in a soft, surprised voice. He pauses for a minute then, fleshy eyelids threatening to fall down onto watery eyes as he stares down at brown, speckled hands. I imagine those hands as they must have been once, soft and pink as an infant's, or hard and calloused as a working man's.

Eighteen, eh- And where have those years gone- he asks me gently.

I shrug and he takes a sip of his coffee, silent for once.

He clears his throat elaborately, then starts telling me about his girlfriends when he was my age: Pauline with the long legs and Dorothy who used to give him blowies in the back of his Morris Minor.

I put some more whiskey in his mug and offer him a slice of carrot cake.

You're too good to me, he says.

As I smile back at him, I realise I'm being kinder to this stranger than I have been to Jack for weeks. And I don't even know why. I think about the warm body that I left in bed this morning, the way his hair works itself into a tangle where he has been sleeping on it, and the creased look his face gets from lying on his front, then I look at Tony, staring into his coffee, frail strands of hair just about clinging to his head, and I wonder at myself.

I take my bag into the kitchen and steal two sirloin steaks for tea.

On the way home, I see a lone woman on the central Grief Bench, her wispy blonde hair catching in the cold wind. The sky above her is low and dark, and so is the sea she stares blindly into. I speed up, fumbling in my bag for my keys.

I start preparing tea straight away, trying to remove the woman's blank face with routine and domesticity but instead, I just imagine her kitchen, empty. Her dead husband's shoes waiting by the door.

The steak seems different now, not food, just a stolen slab of flesh. I cook it anyway, trying not to think of morgues or sucked-out fetuses.

When Jack gets home I hug him hard and present him with his meal, then get him a beer, feeling slightly self conscious about my fussing. He's unnerved and keeps looking at me in a way that makes me feel twitchy and unhinged.

I try not to be disgusted by the blood on our plates. But as he stuffs chunks of steak into his mouth, I find myself becoming annoyed that he hasn't noticed I'm not eating mine.

Don't you want that- He says finally, when the steak's the only thing left on my plate. I tell him I've gone off meat and he just frowns, then sticks his knife into the middle of it, lifts it off my plate like some kind of Neanderthal.

That night, Jack's sister Holly comes round. She's just got back from a year working in Southern Africa. She tells us about the state of things over there, then goes on and on about how weird it is to be watching *Eastenders*.

Jack tells her that I've been banned from conversing with the homeless and I wonder if he's doing it to please me, or because he thinks it will make us look more philanthropic. I laugh along anyway, looking amused then modest as necessary.

You know what she's like, he says in that proud voice. She nearly cried the other day about this old man we saw — she wanted me to give him my shoes!

I smile, like I always do when he says this kind of thing, but I'm wondering now whose benefit he's saying it for. If he's actually just saying it for me, to remind me how kind I am.

As Holly laughs, Jack pulls me close and just before I disappear into his shoulder I see Holly's face change. Her laugh falls into a slightly sad, slightly awkward smile and she looks towards the telly.

I stop going over everything in my head for a minute and try to see what she's seeing. I realise we look happy, with our dirty plates on the table and our clean clothes on the radiators. I think of Jack

pulling me towards him like that and for a second I can see things as if I am him. I can imagine us muddling on together in this rented flat, with a little person that we've made by ourselves, and even though I know the picture isn't real, I realise what it means that he can see it. I kiss him hard on the mouth even though Holly's sitting right there, then I start asking her questions and listening intently to her answers. I give her my full attention, feeling ludicrously affectionate towards her.

The doctor confirms the test and I start to feel sick all the time.

Jack gets used to the idea that our lives aren't about to radically change and I get sacked for misconduct from the Quayside. It feels like the end of an era, like the end of school or the start of puberty or something. I start looking for a job where I won't get sacked for trying to help people, and go regularly to the doctors to be probed and examined. The day of the operation gets closer.

The night before I'm due to go into hospital Jack wakes me up, and I tell him to be careful of the kitten.

What- he asks and I shake my head, confused.

I can't sleep, he says. Come for a walk with me.

The way he says it is enough for me to drag myself out of bed.

Outside the moon is bright and there are streaks of silver blue cloud high in the sky. The yachts on the water look gothic. Water slaps eerily against them.

It's obvious where we're both heading and we make our way to the Grief Benches without saying any words, but when Jack puts a foot on the step, I pull him back.

Let's sit here, I say, lifting myself up onto the wall instead. The damp moss seeps through my jeans but I don't care. Jack puts his arm around me so I'm wrapped up in his coat and we both stare out to sea, dry eyed.

