

# Afternoon In The Park

*by* Michael Barela

He liked to say that he was taking a moral and spiritual inventory check. Well, he would like to say that if anybody asked what his problem was. He was a ticking time-bomb, as his grandfather liked to say; among other things. Right now, however, he was just trying to find peace in his confused mind, sitting in the shade of the oak that grew in the public park. Anyone that walked by would have thought that Nick was completely at peace with the world. But if anyone that walked by would have asked, he would have cried explaining everything; and he would, he had been keeping everything in himself for years now. He *wanted* to cry and he *wanted* someone to care enough to have him unload every minute detail on them and help him sorted. Nick needed help so desperately.

Nick sat with his head hung between his crossed legs, staring at a particular blade of grass with an ant crawling up the side, carrying what looked like some stray sugar from picnickers. *What joy it must be, Nick thought enviously, to have this objective; to know its place in its own surroundings. This little guy never wonders if it really is as important as the rest imply, its existence is affirmed by its own existence. Sure, maybe this insect might be aware that it is replaceable; but it doesn't feel anything about that, that is just the way things are and while it exists, it will do what it knows. Nothing will stop this thing besides death itself, and this ant doesn't seem to mind either way.*

Nick's mind began whirling in circles, wondering about his own place in this world. Then to minimize the pain, he focused on just trying to find his place in his town. *No, what's my place with my friends and family. Wait, I don't even have any fucking friends and my family acts like I don't even exist.* Nick whittled it down to his typical deduction, he had no place.

To stop his mind from reeling from this feeling of worthlessness, Nick threw himself backwards and hit the grass with a hard thump.

---

Available online at «<http://fictionaut.com/stories/michael-barela/afternoon-in-the-park>»

Copyright © 2014 Michael Barela. All rights reserved.

His head collided with a decent sized rock, and might have even caused bleeding, but he didn't care anymore. Physical pain was a joke to him anymore. This wasn't an exaggeration of his emotional state; little more than a year ago, Nick was in a car accident that caused him constant pain. He didn't know what exactly was wrong with his own body, but his back had never fully recovered from that accident. Nick had gone to a number of physicians, asking only for help to find out what was happening with his back; it felt as if different columns would slide in and out of place for no particular reason and the muscles would bunch up into tight knots with the slightest provocation. Thinking about how physically helpless he felt then made his chin spasm and his eyes to gently overflow stinging tears. He felt weak again.

Nick recalled, with startling clarity, being in a doctor's office that seemed to be exactly the same as every other office he had visited, being on his knees with his back hunched over from the muscle spasms, crying out pleas to the doctor, "Please! Can you please do anything more than just prescribe me five *fucking* Vicodin and sending me away? Can you send me to get an x-ray? Can you recommend a chiropractor or acupuncturist? *FUCK!* I'll pay you everything I have right now to kill a virgin chicken and dance on my back if you thought it would help me!" Nick remembered that after that experience he actively tapped into the black market of the town.

Sure, he had made plenty of so-called friends from his exploits during and after scoring some dope or even just some prescription pain medication, but they never stuck around for very long if they even survived. But through his time of being sociable while mingling with the underground, he never felt any real connection to anybody. He always felt like an island on his own. Nick would almost always be the one to go get the drugs, he would almost always be the one to deliver drugs to anybody else involved, and he was always expected to know where to get the drugs as well. In a "party" situation, his presence would be tolerated, but he knew that everyone harbored resentment against him until someone else could find the drugs for

that night or whatever length of time. Nick put a lot of weight on himself during that time, even though he knew that it was a fairly unnecessary burden. He didn't have to like the people he was around, but since he felt so alone for so long, his mind associated the joy from pain relief with the joy of company. He supposed that this might have played a part in his current situation and found himself wishing that he had written this down. *I've been so alone for so long, that even bad company was good company to me*, he would have written, or something to that affect. Maybe just that would explain his time spent with those dead-end people, living a dead-end life to anyone that didn't understand.

Nick was able to pause his mind long enough to watch a caterpillar finish wrapping itself up into its cocoon. *This fat insect, also rejected by society, hides away while it changes into a beautiful insect that people love and actively try to preserve. If only I had a cocoon of my own*, he thought to himself longingly.

His mind drifted off to a time not so long ago. His girlfriend, or ex-girlfriend, Rachel, had dragged him out of the seclusion of his house and out to the parade that day. Admittedly, Rachel wasn't much for being out in public, especially crowds, but her concern for Nick had grown exponentially over the course of only a few days. She had noticed that Nick spent more time sleeping than he usually did and that the updates on his band's website had become few. It was unlike him to not update his band's fans on their progress; even if it meant one sentence about how excited he was with a new song. It wasn't solid enough for Rachel to make a call, but she figured that it might mean that Nick was a little depressed.

Nick recalled Rachel's bleach wave hair bounce as she hopped in place while holding onto his hands, begging him to cheer up and join her in catching a ride on a float, or rent a miniature car to ride in the parade with. She even tried to convince him to stay afterwards and ride the Ferris-wheel with her, but Nick declined repeatedly saying that his back was particularly twisted and he just wanted to lie down and sleep it off.

He did just want to sleep, and he did.

Nick had only recently gotten clean. He was two years sober and no day was any easier than any other for him. Rachel had been instrumental to Nick for staying clean, she would always do her best to change his mind set when he would start talking about taking drugs again. He never told her this, for fear that knowing it would cause her to feel too much pressure, too much weight on her shoulders. Maybe he should have said something to her, but he never did.

Now here he was, lying in a park with a needle in his arm, waiting impatiently for the kiss of his first love. Even Nick felt terrible for his relapse, but the only warmth he felt anymore was from a rush of opiates. There were some comforts that Nick couldn't go without, and when Rachel left him for being too boring to be her boyfriend, he couldn't help but give into turning to the needle for comfort.

The constant physical pain, the depression which follows relapse and the void that Rachel had dug in his soul and left alone was too much for him. He had his mind made up when he got to the park. Hell, he had his mind made up for days, maybe even weeks now. He wasn't having second thoughts; he was just having a hard time following through because his body felt so relaxed.

*I should have speed-balled this shit.*

He flopped over and forced his knees and palms to take the weight of his body. Eventually, he stumbled to his feet. The whole ordeal recalled a memory that Nick had kept hidden for so long. It was during one of his many dope binges that Nick met a special girl by the name of Christina. For some reason that defied his logic, Christina seemed content with taking care of Nick when he was feeling particularly bad; and that made Nick felt like maybe, for the first time ever, he had someone who genuinely felt concern for him. Even though they were both addicts, she would take on the duty of scoring the dope or even just giving his back a massage in the evenings. She would kiss his ear, then his cheek, then his lips after she was done; and they would, as Nick always liked to think of it because of her delicate touch, make love. Afterwards, Nick's mind would be full of dreams wherein he and Christina would actually

share their lives with each other and go clean together like they would sometimes talk about.

All those dreams turned to dust one morning when Nick woke up without Christina by his side. Since they didn't actually live together, this didn't surprise him too much. After three weeks of not hearing from her, however, he got the idea and slipped into a worse depression than he usually resided in. After two months, he figured the best idea would be to get her out of his mind for good. During that time, Nick drank and shot more dope than he could remember.

Nick stood staring at a couple lying side by side, holding hands, and staring into the sky; most likely watching the clouds and trying to point out the shapes they would see. He fantasized, wildly, of shambling in their direction and scaring off the girl; a petite blonde with an aura around her that gave him the impression that she was the close to being an angel. He would fall on top of the guy with all of his weight, even though he looked like he could easily lift Nick off of him. Nick would pin this ungrateful looking fool to the ground where he lay, and pull a knife out of his back pocket. While staring deep into the stranger's eyes, Nick would say, "It's nothing personal, I just need to make a statement. I need people to pay attention." While the man would be processing this statement, Nick would drag the blade slowly across the man's throat as he watched his eyes fill with terror. He would maintain eye contact so that this man will be able to see the face of the man that just killed him for no reason. All the while his girlfriend would be shrieking in horror and shock, desperately calling for help. She would be feeling as helpless as Nick does all day, every day. He would then stand over the body of the man unknown to him and drag the same blade across his own throat.

Nick could only hope that he would be able to maintain a smile the whole time and preferably into his death. It would be one last reminder to everybody that he still wore his fake smile even when he lost all hope and took his own life.

*I can't hurt someone else*, Nick reasoned to himself, disregarding this wild fantasy of his. He looked back up at the tree with the lone

cocoon he spotted earlier. The branch it was on looked sturdy and the tree looked tall enough for what Nick needed.

He thought about how long it had been since he climbed a tree. Nick quickly realized that he only climbed a tree once as a child. His mother came storming out of the house, screaming at him to get down right away; so he jumped off the branch he was on and ended up spraining his ankle. His mother didn't care that her son was in pain; all she noticed and cared about was that Nick was monkeying around on the tree when she had just, "spent so much money," buying him an astronomical themed building block set. All she did was demand that Nick play with his new toys and stop crying, or else she would, "call the police." Nick thought it funny that he only did that once, since that was the only time anybody in his family paid much attention to him. He felt he was always being scolded, but never felt it was directly focused at him. Nick felt it was time that he tried to get someone's, anyone's, attention again.

He climbed up the oak deftly, as if he had been doing it constantly since he was a kid; as if he had never felt the need to stop. Nick quickly reached the branch where the cocoon waited to finish the metamorphosis within and erupt a beautiful and new being. Nick thought it would be symbolic, if anyone would ever catch onto it, for him to pick this branch. Besides, the branch was sturdy enough to hold his weight; it was strong enough for what he needed.

Nick pulled the rope he had in his back pocket, not the knife that he only carried in his fantasies, and tied one end to the branch, close enough to the cocoon to be seen with it, but not close enough to disturb the wondrous transformation it harbored inside; he hoped, at least. By the time he had tied the other end into a sturdy slipknot, he heard the girl he was just staring at begin to shriek in horror. Nick looked in that direction and noticed she was pointing her finger at him and bouncing up and down frantically. She was pounding on the chest of her boyfriend, presumably urging him to call for help seeing a how he was fumbling with his cell phone. Nick chuckled at the thought that the first time in what felt like forever that someone had paid attention to him and his situation appeared to be in so much

shock that he would be too late to actually help him.

*Such is the way of the world.*

Nick took in this feeling of someone, much less two people, paying attention to him and felt a warm glow emanating from his heart. Before his next move, Nick thought to himself, *at least this is some really good dope*, and let a giant and genuine smile grow from his lips.

