

By Nicole Kuiken

Word Count 2,012

## The Park Bench

“Oh, that is much better,” a dry, raspy male voice sighed. Wondering who braved to sit on it, the park bench studied him before making its attack. This man must have been 70 human years. He had a cane that leaned against its arm. The bench realized the day must have been mid-morning, around ten o’clock. It was that peaceful time when all the mothers were busy shuffling their kids off to places like school or daycare.

“What a lovely day,” the old man commented to himself.

What a crazy human, the bench thought. The bench hated it when it was sat on. The warmth of butts, and sweaty joggers as they rested, they even let out gas on it which would be annoying, making the bench want to cough. The bench began to get revenge by sticking them with splinters from its open wounds where the paint was chipped off. It found that attack was the most effective. But for some reason this old man was different.

He would come every day around the same time and stay through lunch, eat his lunch there, then head out before the school kids would crowd up the park. The bench tried to get rid of him by putting splinters in his hands where he set them or pooling all the water in the wood into the old man’s rump. It never worked like it did on the other humans. The old man would still come back each day at the same time.

The park bench remembered the first day the elderly man came. A boney bottom poked the lap of the bench. It awoke surprised. Where was the sun? Was it mid-day? No one had tried to sit on the bench for several months since the beginning of spring and now it was summer. The paint was chipping off badly, so the bench took the opportunity to slip slivers into everyone who touched its arms, seat or back. But as the soft wrinkled hand of the old man was prodded and

poked, the gentleman would say, “Oh my, you need to be repainted, look at those chips.” The bench was surprised to be addressed. This continued to happen, with the old man commenting on the bench’s cuts and bruises then promising to come repair them one day.

After a month of this the park bench began to accept his visits. The old man was the only one of the patrons that came and didn’t abuse or hurt it, like runners scraping their muddy shoes, or kids carving stupid words or names into its sides, which were painful. The bench couldn’t weep its sap into the scars they made because it wasn’t oiled before it was painted—dried out with gaping wounds it could not fill.

But the old man, he was a good kind of strange. He sat on the bench like it was meant to be sat on. So the bench would just listen to him, feeling the breath rising and fluttering heartbeats from the old human. The old man often talked out loud to himself, though at times the bench thought he was talking to it. “The air is crisp today. It’s probably due to no cloud coverage.” He would just ramble, not really making conversation. But as his visits became regular the bench enjoyed his endless chatter. Listening to him, the bench found out the old man had lost his wife four months back, a few days before the old man started showing up on the first day of summer.

“She left me.” The wrinkled face of the man looked down. “We’d just celebrated her 65<sup>th</sup> birthday.”

The bench felt a longing to comfort the man. It didn’t know how it could. But the park bench tried to make its back supportive for the crooked back of the man.

One day the old man came with a bag. He pulled out metal tools and rough sheets of sandpaper. “Hello,” the man greeted him. “I’m going to make you young again, since I can’t myself.” He laughed to himself, as the bench observed him in wonder and the objects before it. Then the old man began to strip its seat.

“Ahh,” the bench wanted to say. “What are you doing, you’re taking off all my paint.”

The wrinkled bent hands of the man steadily worked on the bench for the week. After the paint was taken off, next came the sanding. The rough scratching of sandpaper on the benches seat and back was rejuvenating. The bench began to sense the years being rubbed off.

“What a nice shade of wood you are,” the gentleman said. “Must be oak,” he mused. “Strong and solid.” He pat the bench reassuringly.

The bench stood and listened to him. The man spoke about his youth, telling him stories of growing up during the Depression, where his parents taught him to use what he had, to not abuse the land and what little things they owned. “My mother would wash the tin foil she had and would reuse it, every time, till it was practically falling apart,” the old man said. “Kids nowadays just throw that stuff away after one use.”

The man was staining the bench now; it was the fifth day since he started the project. The bench at times thought the old man would give up, not make it one day, or get hurt. He was the only person the park bench would let him touch it. If walkers, parents or kids tried to sit, it’d poke them with silvers. Since the old man was working so hard at fixing it back up, the bench wanted the old man to sit on it first.

The bench noticed the old man was almost done with fixing him up. He had just dry oiled it and the bench was thinking what colors the man might paint it. The bench had always wanted to be a nice cherry red. It saw a kid pulling a wagon that color one afternoon. The wagon was rich and exciting and made it think red was an important color. But the park bench was painted a green to blend in with the grass. When it was first being painted the men said it was to be “environment friendly,” whatever that meant.

The older man didn't come till after lunch the next day. "Sorry, I'm late," he said to the bench. He was out of breath, sitting down for a bit on the seat, he rested his cane against its side and a plastic bag next to him on the seat. "I think some of this work is taking a bit more out of me than I thought." The gentleman rested his hand on his chest, steadying his breath. The park bench could feel the old man's heartbeat; it was jumping more erratically than usual.

"Well, let's get to work, we don't have a lot of time." The man stretched forward and got up. He smiled at the bench as he faced it. "You're going to love what I brought for you." The bench didn't think it would ever get this attached to a human. The old man pulled out a small can of gold marine varnish from the bag and popped open the lid.

"I knew you would like it," the man replied. "She loved the natural color of oak when it shined." He smiled, looking at the liquid amber in the can. He reached down, grabbing the brush and dipping it into the warm varnish. "You're going to look brand new." The man rested his hand on the bench for a moment. No one had ever treated the bench like an important object. The old man worked later than usual, with the hours reaching into the night. The stars were out when he finished.

"There ya go, all finished," he said, snapping the lid back onto the varnish. "It will take a day to completely dry, so I won't be able to sit on ya till the day after tomorrow." He gathered the stuff together and grabbed his cane to stand up. "But I'll still come visit tomorrow and bring a chair." The bench was ready to show off its natural color, the sun would really have to shine to out mask it. The man groaned as he stood up, for a second he stumbled and quickly grabbed onto the bench. The bench tried to support his weight so he wouldn't fall. "Oh, thank you," the stooped man gasped. "I shouldn't have crouched so long on the ground." He steadied himself

and bent for his bag. He said goodbye to the bench as his steps faded, his cane thumping as he walked.

The next day the bench was waiting for the old man's arrival to look the best he could for him. It enjoyed bringing the old man comfort and being a friend. But the early morning hours passed and he didn't come.

Maybe he'll be late again like yesterday, it thought. But he still didn't come.

The day passed slowly, the old man had left a sign saying that the bench was "Wet" so no one tried to sit on it. But they walked by admiring the park bench, commenting on the great color and how new it looked. This thrilled the bench and it actually wanted to be sat on for once after years of neglect and mistreatment. The park bench thought that maybe the old man had something else to do, so it just accepted that he would come the next day when he should be dry.

The next morning came and went, same for the lunchtime, with no old man. The bench began to get worried, thinking that he had forgotten it. The day passed and a little boy came to the park with his mom. He walked up to the bench looking at it and placed his hand on its smooth seat.

"Mom!" he yelled. "Can we sit here and eat our lunch?" The bench was surprised as the boy hopped onto the bench and began to swing his feet back and forth. The mother came walking over with their lunch sacks.

"What a perfect spot," she said looking at her son and the bench. She felt the seat to see if it was dry and sat down handing her son his sack. The park bench was happy; the old man helped it find new friends. It wasn't afraid to let other sit on it anymore. The morning of the next day came as the bench waited for the old man to come back. The bench heard the two step thump that was familiar. It was the old man.

“Don’t you look sharp,” the old man said. The bench was so excited to see him again it didn’t notice the slow, ragged breathing coming from the man. The man reached out to the bench feeling the varnish to see if it was dry, saw it was and sat down.

“I’m sorry I didn’t come yesterday,” he said, looking down at the park bench. “My heart was aching a bit and I couldn’t get out of bed.” The old man patted his chest as he said this. He rested his cane on the side against the arm of the bench, and laid his left arm on the arm of the bench and the other at his side, taking a deep breath and letting it out. The bench wanted to thank the old man for making it feel young again, and making it want to support the weary walkers and joggers as they came to the park.

The bench noticed the breathing of the man begin to slow along with his heartbeat. The body of the man slumped sideways, almost toppling into the grass in front but the bench was able to hold onto its friend when a jogger found the man dead two hours later, who called an ambulance, and two men dressed in blue came, put him on a stretcher and took him away.