

THE BENCH ON THE PATH

By Kip Cassino 393 Words

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The pain increased. He shut his eyes. A golden light appeared, so he moved toward it ...

... and found himself walking along a path, through trees at the edge of a bright meadow. He rounded a corner and saw an old man, sitting on a bench. As he passed by, the man beckoned.

“John,” the old man said. “Please, come sit.” So he did.

“Is this ..?” he began to ask, as he settled himself on the bench.

The old man nodded. “Yes, John,” he said. “You’ve passed on. Your life has finished.”

John nodded, understanding. The terrible pain was finally over. “My wife?” he inquired, looking around. “I thought I would meet her here.”

“She met her lover, instead.” The old man explained. “Her choice, you see.”

John nodded again, suddenly very sad. “I suspected, was never sure,” he said, shaking his head. “I guess our son ...”

“With them as well,” the old man confirmed. “Let’s talk about what happens now. After you walk past this bench the path will fork many times, John. Whichever way you choose will lead you to your next life, your new life.”

“In the future?”

“Sometimes. Does it matter?”

John shrugged. “I guess not,” he said. “So, this is all there is to it? No heaven, no hell?”

The old man laughed. “Oh, there’s a heaven all right, John. It’s quite a distance up the path, at the far end of the meadow. You’re nowhere near there yet, I’m afraid.”

“Angels, the whole works?”

“If that’s what you want, John. All those details depend on you.”

“How many times have we met at this bench, old man?”

“More times than you can imagine, John,” the old man said, scratching at his beard. “You are a frequent bench-mate, by my clock.”

“Does that mean I’m not making much progress along the meadow?”

“We each choose our own way around the meadow, John,” the old man told him. “Pick your next path carefully. Take your time. There’s no rush.”

John nodded, rose, and looked up the path. “I’ll be on my way, then,” he said. “One last question.”

The old man looked up at him.

“You told me about heaven. Where is hell?”

The old man smiled ruefully. “Hell is down the path behind you, John,” he said. “In fact, you’ve just come from there.”

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AN UNFINISHED DRINK

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Tomas heard a noise, and looked toward the bar. An old man sat there, though he'd heard no door open or close.

"Too early for customers," Tomas thought to himself. The clock's hands had barely passed ten. He'd finished opening the place, hoping he'd have time for the paper before the early lunch crowd arrived. It was a blustery day in San Antonio's November. A "norther" had blown in, chilling south Texas.

The man was dressed for the weather, in a corduroy overcoat. Deep wrinkles on his forehead confirmed his advanced age, as did dark circles under his watery blue eyes. He had removed a leather "newsboy" cap, revealing a shock of bright white hair. His nose showed a pugilistic past, broken at least twice. His hands, laying on the bar palms down, were gnarled and blunt. A curious odor prevailed around him, as though someone nearby had just struck a kitchen match.

"I'll have brandy on the rocks, please," the man said. "Don't be stingy with the ice. Where I'm going it's very hot. I'll savor the memory."

"What brings you to town?" Tomas asked as he poured the drink. He could tell the man was no local.

"I'm from the future, believe it or not," the man said. "My new master granted me a single favor and sent me. I came to see myself as a boy, to improve the path he'll take in life."

Tomas nodded, serving his customer. People carried many strange stories through the doors of this place. "So, did you find this younger you?"

"I did," the old man said, nodding as he lifted his glass. "The high school's not far from here. I watched him get off the bus. I had so much I was aching to tell him. But ..."

"But?"

“I realized I wasn’t sent here to make his life better, only worse. I decided he might have a better life without my butting in. He might make better choices than I had. So I walked away and came here.”

“Was it all for nothing, then?” Tomas asked, as he put the bottle away and turned back to the bar. The man was gone—only his unfinished drink and the odor of sulfur remained.

The whisper of a thought danced through his mind: “It’s not every day you get to beat the devil.”

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