

## **She Wore A Raspberry Beret**

(Inspired by Prince's 1985 single, *Raspberry Beret*)

The first time I saw her sitting on the bench, my only thought was, 'Isn't it a little warm for a hat and coat?'

When I saw her again several weeks later, she was sitting on the same park bench near the water's edge, wearing the same raspberry beret and matching wool coat. The leaves had turned golden by then and an autumn chill hung in the air, but the sun shone in the cloudless cerulean sky. A gentle breeze tousled her wavy, brown hair, wafting an earthy fragrance my direction.

I slowed my pace—PB be damned—and, as is custom, smiled and said, 'Lovely morning,' as I jogged past.

She didn't respond.

AirPods, I told myself. She must not have heard me. It's nothing personal.

She was at the same weathered bench the following Saturday, wearing the same hat and coat. I'd spotted her from a fair distance away. I suppose, in a way, I was looking for her. Had hoped to catch another glimpse of this stranger, whose striking features frequented my most recent dreams.

As I neared her, I veered off the footpath and stooped to tighten my laces. She took no notice of me nor my fellow runners who forged determinedly ahead, their footsteps pounding the pavement like migrating wildebeest. Instead, she kept her eyes fixed on the water lapping against the shore of the lake; her delicate hands folded prim-and-proper on her lap.

I coughed into my fist. She turned her head slightly, but avoided my gaze.

'Hello again,' I said, offering my most gentlemanly smile. She nodded, then looked away; her attention returning to the steel-grey lake.

I didn't press further.

Rain fell continuously for five days leading up to Saturday last. I knew what that meant. Flooded footpaths. Park Run, cancelled.

*Would she be there?* I wondered, as I watched the rain fall from my kitchen window. I chided myself, annoyed by my own foolishness. *Don't be daft.*

'This girl you keep bringing up,' my friend Alex said. He pushed a pint across the table then sat down, his eyebrows raised. 'Who is she?'

I shrugged.

'Yet, you're totally smitten.'

'I suppose I am.'

Alex sniggered. 'Have you tried talking to her?'

I shook my head. 'Just the odd greeting.'

He swilled half his pint and wiped his mouth. 'You're hopeless, Nate, you know that? You need to talk to her. Follow her on Insta. TikTok. Whatever.'

I sipped from my glass and nodded. 'You're right. The next time I see her, I'll...,' I took another sip. 'Yeah. I'll talk to her.'

The next time I saw her was on the evening news.

'The skeletal remains of a woman who disappeared from her London flat nearly forty years ago was discovered earlier this week in a Hertfordshire lake. Police have identified the victim as twenty-four-year-old former model and West End darling, Heather Walton.'

A grainy photo of Heather appeared on TV. She wore a radiant smile and a raspberry beret.

(498 words)