

STONE Man & STATUE Boy

By DL Shirey

WHY WE LIKE IT: *Cancel culture and political correctness are the themes in this curiously beguiling story that held our interest and then some. The linear narrative and straight forward prose generate a literary honesty and the seamless blend of two realities is handled with aplomb. Written in a simple style that's easy to read but hard to write. Quote: 'Families were tending their yards, but no one stood out; no one was so different that they caught my eye. Every car in the parking lot was American made, full of moms and dads and kids who all looked like me. They went to churches like me and worshipped the same, unalterable Jesus. All white, even when it didn't snow.'* (Spacing and font are author's own.)

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Alone at the top of 79 stairs, only my footprints follow. Each step below has a concrete space kicked from the steep, powdery incline. I pause to catch my breath, feel the rasp at the back of my throat from cold air and tired lungs. SUVs will soon brave the snowy streets, depositing children and sleds and romping dogs in the parking lot below this hillside park.

Even though I've stopped walking, there remains a sense of forward motion as clouds push fast overhead. Yet there doesn't seem to be any wind down here in the park; nothing to help the trees shrug off their burdens of white.

Breath back, I notice the sign with the park's name is gone. It's finally official, the man whose name graced this park has been toppled, his philanthropy supplanted by an inauspicious past. All textbooks will be rewritten, each placename displaced, this signless post rechristened. But it won't be easy to erase the name's significance to me: the memories, the wonderland. It means swingsets, nature trails, hide and seek and first kisses. My parents never had to ask 'where are you going?' There was no place for me but here, two blocks from home.

How can this park have any other name, as many times as I've counted to 79?

This place is dreamlike after snow. The quiet. Luminosity is inverted, with brightness on the ground instead of from the sky; an odd light where trees can't cast shadows. Today my sense of place is skewed. There's no gravel underfoot, so every step sounds wrong. Feels wrong. I've walked this way countless times, yet I still check behind me to make sure my footprints are there, in case I need to follow them back.

I fumble forward, using each tree as a crutch. I need the reality of solid anchors bolted to ground I cannot see. Then a backlight brightens behind the trees ahead and they finally give way to a clearing.

The center of the park reorients me but I feel his absence immediately.

My steps are the first to scar the smooth, white field that circles an empty plinth. The statue on the pedestal is gone. I can see clear through to trees beyond, where the man and boy once stood. Where the nameplate used to be, only a square of discolored cement.

I'm not sure if nostalgia or bitterness forces me to close my eyes. I want to see the stone man, his ever-raised arm pointed west, urging the statue boy beside him to look in that direction. I want to see the buttons on the man's vest, the watch chain and the long tails of his coat. He'd been there for me a million times, through every season. Without him, can I ever get my bearings again? And I wonder if I can find my favorite bench when he's not pointing the way.

When I open my eyes I see something I hadn't noticed before. Half the snow has been whisked from the plinth, on the ground below it an imprint of a snow angel, then footprints running away. I follow the fresh steps to

the bench where a child sits. He grips his knees, pulled up against the cold. He gazes over a clearing of trees and the distant blue reclaiming the sky. We look out on a sprawl of houses, stretching as far as the eye can see. The only movement billows from nearby chimneys and in the first dots of cars navigating streets.

"Is this your seat?" The boy has gray-blond hair. His voice sounds younger than he looks, maybe 12. He dusts snow off the bench. "You can sit here too, there's room."

"It's too cold to sit." What I said isn't true. I feel awkward. I want nothing more than to rest, but things are different these days. You're not supposed to be alone with a child that's not your own.

"If you squint your eyes just right, with all this snow, you can imagine how it was when the houses weren't here," the boy says.

"Hard to picture it with no houses at all. That would have been long before I was born. A lot of the buildings are taller, but this is pretty much what I saw when I came up here as a boy."

"You've seen a lot, I bet."

There was something familiar about this kid, the shape of his head, his faraway stare. But I've climbed the 79 stairs most days of my life and know that children are

drawn here. Their games aren't that different than the ones I played. I'm sure I've seen this boy before.

"Where's your house from here?" he asks.

"Right over there."

From behind the bench, my arm extends over the boy. His eyes never follow the direction of my finger. He looks at me instead, at the way I'm standing.

"What's this park called?"

I start to say the name, but it feels wrong somehow. Like a lie. It's as if saying the man's name whitewashes everything he stood for. For the first time, it's more than a name of a park. I can see the scarred backs of people on which he made his fortune. His legacy was to make sure his fields and workers stayed *over there*, while he helped the lives of his people *over here*.

Then my memories of childhood became more focused and I saw myself running to the park, past houses that all looked the same. Families were tending their yards, but no one stood out; no one was so different that they caught my eye. Every car in the parking lot was American made, full of moms and dads and kids who all looked like me. They went to churches like me and worshipped the same, unalterable Jesus. All white, even when it didn't snow.

The boy is still looking at me, waiting for my answer. "It had a name, but it's gone. Just like the man in the statue over there."

He jumps up. "What statue?"

"That block of stone is the only thing left. You can follow the footprints back."

"Show me," he says.

The boy waits for me to lead but becomes impatient at my slowness. He runs ahead, pretending to fly. His arms are superhero straight, I could almost see the billow of a cape behind him. When I catch up, the boy had scrambled up the pedestal. He is sitting on the edge, waiting for me, bouncing his heels against the low slab.

"That's right. The statue was here." It's hard for me to speak between breaths.

"Too bad he's gone. Must have been great to stand here and watch everyone play. Like being king or something." Then the boy hops to his feet and assumes a regal pose: hands on hips, chin high, chest puffed forward.

I laugh. "No, it wasn't like that at all. He was more—I don't know—he looked like a grandfather, I guess. Watching over you, helpful, pointing to that bench of ours." Then I thought again. Perhaps the man was indicating

something else to the statue boy: pointing to the side of town the man had built in his image.

"Show me what he looked like." Then the boy shakes his head as I try to recreate the pose. "No, up here. Climb on up and show me."

The boy kneels and holds out his hand. I notice the skin, ashen and pale, weathered with black freckles. In the cold, weird light from snow, his hand casts no shadow.

"What's *your* name?" he asks.

END

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *This is a story of two parks in Portland, Oregon. The physical description is that of Mt. Tabor, an extinct volcano within walking distance of my house. There is a statue in this park, erected in 1933.*

The name of the other park escapes me. At the time I was writing this story, local news was reporting about a change to the name of this park; its previous designation celebrated a person whose past was tainted by racism. Oregon has a history—to be polite—of not being particularly welcoming to minorities. The renaming of this park was an effort to atone.

As I said, there is a statue atop Mt. Tabor, of a newspaperman pointing west. He is alone. In the story the statue is of a man and a boy. I invented Statue Boy to add an element of surrealism and to have another character to interact with the protagonist.

AUTHOR'S BIO: DL Shirey lives in Portland, Oregon, where it's probably raining. Luckily, water is beer's primary ingredient. His stories and non-fiction appear in 50 publications, including Confingo, Page & Spine, Zetetic and Wild Musette. You can find more of his writing at www.dlshirey.com and @dlshirey on Twitter.

