

Speck of Stardust

Jeff Lee Byrem

One and a half times around the Garden's massive meadow is an accomplishment that requires an old man's rest. I sit on a convenient bench planted in the encompassing shade of a white ash that is doomed to follow the plight of the American Chestnut, and I close my eyes. My mind wanders, and I feel at peace.

"Hello."

I open my eyes, and standing close enough for me to touch her, there is a girl of no more than seven, I should think, although determining the age of children is something I stopped doing decades ago.

"Hello," I reply and realize with some surprise that I am smiling.

"What's your name?"

"Jeff."

"Short for Jeffrey," she observes.

"That's true."

"I know a Jeffrey."

"Oh?"

"Don't like him much."

“Sorry to hear that,” I reply. “What’s wrong with this other Jeffrey?”

“The usual.”

“Which is?”

“He’s a boy.”

“Ah,” I respond. “I understand.”

“You do?” She asks as she sits next to me on the bench.

“I was a boy once.”

“Got it,” she says with a thumbs up I assume has been modeled by one of the adults in her life. “Must’ve been a long time ago,” she observes matter-of-factly.

I laugh out loud, something I seldom do anymore, and reply, “That’s very true.”

She is staring at me with eyes that have the power to remove a lifetime of protective cladding, and in defense, I cannot resist blurting out, “What?”

“How old *are* you?”

“Just turned eighty-nine.”

“That’s older than my *grandmother*, and she’s in a wheelchair, you know, the ones that go on their own.”

“Is she here?” I ask, prompted by the inevitable wonder as to what this child is doing here unattended.

“She’s coming. Mom’s walking with her. The wheelchair’s slow.”

“Quite a hill, you know.”

“Not for me. I’m a kid. Just turned seven.”

She extends her right hand and says, “My name’s Ellie.”

I shake the hand and remark, “Short for Eleanor, I presume. Nice name, that.”

“It’s okay, I guess. I like Miranda better.”

“Both good, but Ellie seems to fit,” I observe.

We sit quietly for a few moments. I stare at the broad vista of the meadow; Ellie looks at her sandalled feet, which swing back and forth beneath the bench. I can almost hear the wheels of her mind whirring although I know I am clueless about what it is that a seven-year-old might be pondering.

“You alone?” She asks finally.

“I am.”

“Where’s your family?”

“Haven’t got one.”

“Everyone has a family,” she observes in her frank way.

“Not me,” I reply, “I’m fresh out.”

“What happened to them?”

“Died.”

“All of them?”

“Every last one of them. Weren’t many to begin with. Just outlived them all.”

“Even your kids?”

“Only had one, a daughter.”

“And *she died*?”

“She did,” I reply with a sigh.

Ellie remains silent as I stare at the meadow and remember my daughter at seven, a beautiful child who grew up to be a beautiful young woman who made a fatal mistake a half century ago in the midst of the heroin epidemic. I sense that Ellie is studying me again, and I look down at her.

“No brothers or sisters?” She asks.

“One brother,” I reply, “but sad to say, he died quite young.”

“How young?”

“In his forties. Too young.”

“Did you like him?”

“We weren’t close once we grew up and lived on opposite sides of the country, but yes, I liked him.”

“I had a brother once.”

“Oh?”

“Danny was two years older than me, and I liked him a lot. He was funny, you know, and he let me play with his stuff; taught me things like how to throw. He loved me; I think.”

“I’m sure he did,” I offer. Even though I want to ask, I sense Ellie will tell me why she has referred to Danny in the past tense, and she does.

“Somebody shot him, and he died.”

I am stunned by the even tone of her voice that suggests such things are commonplace.

“I’m so sorry,” I say and mean it.

“Me too,” she responds wistfully, her feet still swinging freely beneath the bench. “There were a lot of other kids that were shot too. It was in school and everybody cried for a long time, even me. I don’t cry anymore about Danny, but my mom still does.”

It seems there is nothing left to say, and we return to our musings, the sights and scents of the meadow, and the swinging of feet under a bench. I hear the scuffling of other feet accompanied by the faint whine of an electric motor on the path to my left and see a woman who must be Ellie’s mother walking beside a white-haired woman in one of the fat-tired, motorized

wheelchairs the Garden provides to visitors. Ellie skips up to the wheelchair and kisses her smiling grandmother's cheek.

An apologetic expression appears on the mother's face when she says, "I hope she hasn't been bothering you."

"Quite the contrary."

"He's a nice man, Mommy. Not a stranger at all, and he's all alone."

"Ellie!" The mother exclaims, and I laugh.

"Well," the mother begins, "It's getting near lunchtime ..."

Ellie approaches me, again extends her hand like a grownup, and proclaims, "It was nice to meet you, Jeffrey."

"Same here," I reply as I shake the proffered hand. "You be a good girl now, okay?"

"Always," she laughs as she runs to catch up with her mother and grandmother.

My eyes follow Ellie until she disappears behind a knoll; her being yet another speck of stardust zooming by in the meaningless flash that is my life, never to return.

"What the hell's been the point of *any* of it?" I grumble aloud, but I cannot resist smiling at the thought of her.