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*Everything's gonna be alright*

Noon was approaching slowly, the sun shining lovely above me. The weather had gotten better over the past few days; the temperature had finally risen. After a long and unpleasant winter, this spring aura was a true relief to my nostrils. Every street corner smelled of hope.

I went out dressed in light clothes—probably too light for the weather. Spring hadn't fully awakened yet but it didn't stop me from getting prematurely excited. Patience has never been my strong suit. "I hope I don't catch a cold," I thought automatically when I felt a temporary breeze. But I convinced myself quickly that it was a spring breeze, and a breeze like this couldn't possibly do any harm. Surely, it brought only hope, fresh air and relief. Hope hasn't hurt anyone yet, has it?

Even speculating about it sounds ridiculous.

I glimpsed at the bus schedule at the stop. Not even having to wait fifteen minutes could dim my good mood. It was Sunday after all. "It will give me a moment to enjoy this beautiful day," I thought.

When I was standing over the timetable, I noticed a man sitting on the stop bench. He was clearly looking at me. I didn't want our eyes to meet, so I only used my peripheral vision to study him carefully. The man appeared different depending on moment and perspective. He looked experienced, old even—but I could have sworn he was younger than me. It were the eyes that made him look old—or something else. Honestly, I couldn't tell, as I wasn't able to see much out of the corner of my eye. Although, ironically, I saw just enough to make my own opinion. That's typical, I guess.

Eventually, I turned my head boldly in his direction, but then I saw him look straight forward, as if he hadn't noticed me at all, unaware of my presence. So maybe I imagined it all? I evaluated the situation and made a gutsy decision to sit next to him on the bench.

Suddenly, I felt a chill going through my body.

I had an irresistible desire to speak but I didn't know what to say to a strange man with old-looking eyes. Luckily, he helped me out by speaking himself.

"How is it going, my friend?" he asked nicely. He was slightly smiling. However, through the smile broke a pinch of irony, or cynicism, or maybe yet something else—cold, most probably, because in spite of spring, it was somewhat chilly.

Or maybe it was just the bench that was cold.

The man's inconspicuous question seemed so natural, the only appropriate at the time. I felt ashamed I couldn't think of it myself. Seemingly, it was an obvious one, ho-

wever it wouldn't have crossed my mind just a second ago. Something wasn't quite right about me in this warm spring morning, full of hope and all that. . .

I was wondering what I could say that would be of a deeper meaning but, again, I couldn't find the words. Damn it! Luckily, it was spring. I inhaled deep and imagined I was closing my eyes.

"Nothing much," I said. "How about you, brother?"

My attention was drawn to the fact that the man was sitting perfectly still. Although it looked very unnatural, I assumed he had done something the day before that sucked out all his energy, which he otherwise could have utilized for motion. Admittedly, I couldn't smell alcohol, but who knows what kind of drugs he could have done last night.

"Unwell, friend," he said with a heavy voice. If the voice expressed anything, I thought, it was suffering. Nothing else came to mind. "Truly unwell."

I didn't doubt for a second this was a sincere statement, even though his face didn't express any pain, or dilemma, or even uncertainty. In fact, it didn't express anything, or it expressed nothing—depending on how you want to look at it.

"Unwell?" I repeated it in form of a question, not being able to find any better words. I heard a chirping bird. For some reason, I wished to help this poor guy. It was such a shame that anyone could feel sad on a lovely spring day like this. So I firmly decided I was going to help. Only I was unsure how. What could I say?

"I've been thinking about death a lot lately—" he said.

"For how long?" I asked, almost mechanically.

"Not for long," he replied and he looked up, as though he was searching his memory for that distant moment when he had started pondering death. "It'll be about thirty minutes now, I think. . . I sat on the bench and I've been thinking about death since."

"It's not so long" I reckoned but what could I know. I had never thought about death. I couldn't tell if half an hour was long or not. Maybe when you think about death, time flows so slowly that thirty minutes feel more like thirty days, or maybe even decades. Everything's relative as far as human mind is concerned.

"Not long at all," he agreed.

"Maybe there is something that could draw you away from thinking about it?" I suggested, full of concern for the strange man.

"Like what?" he asked with perpetual void in his voice.

"Like. . . sun. Warm air. Have you ever tried meditating

on your surroundings, nature?"

"Never," he answered, curious—or so it seemed.

"I, for one, am stimulated by this day to live." I almost bit my tongue. Doesn't life stand in too much contrast to death? Wasn't the disparity somehow unsafe?

"I'd love to share your view—"

While dwelling on what to say, I took a deep breath. I exhaled audibly and said, "Don't you think the air smells of hope?"

The man attempted to take the deepest possible breath but his was unsteady, shallow, irregular, trembling, as if oxygen was a lethal poison to his nervous system.

"You're right," he admitted, although with no trace of enthusiasm. "It smells of hope indeed."

"What made you think about death?" I asked without thinking. Curiosity got the better of me.

"Pain," he answered succinctly.

"What kind of pain?"

"You know—" He paused as if he had to think it over but it was just an illusion. He knew very well what to say. "It's a kind of pain in the stomach. On the one hand, it squishes your insides together; on the other, you feel like they're about to spill out all over the floor. This is why the pain just tears you apart. This sensation of tearing apart is the worst."

I kept quiet.

"And the cold, too," the man continued. "I'm getting colder and colder... I feel I'm gonna be sick."

I could have sworn his face had turned greenish.

"The most important is positive thinking," I forced a truism, which was unexpectedly appreciated.

"Of course. I think that positive thinking, if it doesn't help, at least can't do any harm, can it?"

I nodded. "You know, when I'm in a bad mood, I feel gloomy or just sad, I keep repeating to myself that everything will be fine. I tell myself: 'don't give up,' I say, 'everything's gonna be alright.' I swear it helps."

"It's a great advice, my friend. I'll use it."

"I don't know what happened to you," I continued, "but sitting and staring into space has yet to help anyone."

"You're absolutely right," the man agreed. "Only I'm not sure I can stand up and do something about it."

"I'm sure you'll find someone to help," I assured him. It was, of course, an empty promise but I had to somehow get him back on his feet. Then again, I couldn't know it wasn't true. There was a chance I was right.

"You think?"

"Of course."

"Thanks, my friend. Nobody's been that nice to me since I got here."

"Don't mention it."

The man took a deep breath once again. This time he did a much better job. He closed his eyes, and he steadily exhaled the air out of his lungs.

"You know what, you were totally right about the air,"

he said, not changing his position or the look on his face for a second. "It does smell of hope. It brings a relief."

I was glad at first but then I noticed a single teardrop rolling down one of his cheeks and landing in the corner of his mouth.

"Still, you don't look so hopeful," I didn't fail to notice.

"But I am," he objected. "I am, it's just... I think I need to get over it gradually, you know?"

"Of course," I agreed. "I understand."

My bus arrived. I got up and put my hands in my pockets. I was about to say goodbye but something stopped me from leaving. The bus took off, and I turned to the man.

"I can't leave you like this," I explained. "You have to fight this. Forget about the pain. Take another deep breath. Sure, you say that you are hopeful, that you understand, but even when you agree with me, a teardrop rolls down your cheek. Hope without belief will lead you nowhere."

The man raised his head with difficulty, and looked me right in the eyes.

"I'm terribly sorry I don't meet your expectations," he replied, no reproach in his voice; it was still void and indifferent. He moved slightly, and only then did I notice that he'd had one of his hands hidden under his jacket the entire time. "I mean, it's just... It's hard to smile while trying to stop the bleeding. You know?"

He exposed his stomach, all red with blood, which kept oozing from his abdominal cavity and slipping through his right hand's fingers. Suddenly, to my paralyzing astonishment, he gathered all his willpower and stood up from the bench, nearly smashing into the pavement. But somehow he managed to keep his balance.

"Don't give up," he said to himself with true determination, "everything's gonna be alright."

I was standing there as if struck by a lightning and staring at him in disbelief.

"Don't just stand like that, my friend," he said with a smile and a caring voice as though it was he who wanted to console me! I felt I, too, had gotten stabbed with a sharp tool and I'm bleeding. I grabbed my stomach instinctively but I couldn't feel the wound. "Please, call an ambulance. Everything can be salvaged yet."