

The Blue Bench



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The Blue Bench



Margaret's leather handbag swayed from her wrist, the brass clasp clicking softly against her wedding ring with each step. Her gait was steady but careful — someone who'd learned to trust her balance without taking it for granted, to trust the order of things. Like her work as a Librarian, ensuring every volume found its rightful place, according to the sublime order.

Nothing misplaced.

The path curved through the Spotted Gum forest, their mottled trunks tall and straight, grey-blue leaves waving against the brilliant blue sky. Dappled light fell through the trees in that striking pattern of shadow and light, a thing she knew from the Japanese as *Komorebi*. One sometimes used as a metaphor for the contest between darkness and light.

She paused at the fork in the track as a kookaburra warbled somewhere above her, the sound carrying across the still air, as it melted into the silent, dark forest beyond. This was where she felt the shimmer — a surge of lightness and weight, as though something briefly aligned between present and past.

The blue bench came into view around the next bend, paint peeling like old skin but still solid beneath its weathered surface. It had existed here for an eternity, the forest never reclaiming it, keeping a respectful distance yet offering protection.

Margaret settled onto it with a small sigh, placing her handbag to one side and smoothing her skirt over her knees. Retrieving the knitting from her bag, she busied herself in the warm morning air, wondering who might grace her blue bench today. She took a small packet from her cardigan and began throwing a few seeds onto the ground, waiting for the lorikeets to visit as they did every day. She enjoyed their company as she waited, watching them with an amused look as they jostled amongst each other, twittering yet still.

Her eyes scanned the path, anticipating the appearance of those who might feel compelled to reach beyond. Margaret's habit was to classify each who came, her Librarian's instinct too strong to resist. Like finding where a book belonged and gently returning it. It was not a question of shelf, but of collection.

Of path.

And where they might lead.

Komorebi.

Yes.



Jess

Jess stumbled more than walked along the track, her feet finding the path without conscious direction. After wandering for what felt like hours, time had turned elastic, that same feeling of coming down, minutes stretching like a rubber band until you couldn't tell if it was still afternoon or already evening.

Just needed air. Just needed to get out of that fucking flat.

The walls had been closing in again, the way they did when she'd been clean too long, and her brain started remembering all the shit she'd usually kept buried. Sarah's empty bed across the room. The social worker's business card still taped at an odd angle to the bathroom mirror. The silence where Lily and Jack's voices used to echo in the hallways or float in from the garden in euphoric waves.

Her legs felt heavy, disconnected from her body and the track wavered in front of her like a mirage. She had to stop twice to lean against tree trunks until the world steadied and became one instead of two.

Jesus, I'm getting sick. Coming down too hard.

The bench appeared through the trees, empty and inviting. She was desperate for a rest and it looked solid, and she was so fucking tired of walking. Slumping onto one end, exhausted, fidgeting incessantly, she pressed her shaky hands against her knees hoping it wouldn't get worse.

She'd quit. *Again.* And this was the last of the meth messily working its way out of her system. And it didn't feel good. That restless, crawling feeling under her skin meant her body was remembering what it was like to be clean and was rebelling.

Shouldn't have gotten rid of the last bag. Just kept enough to taper off properly.

But she'd flushed it down the toilet three days ago in one of those moments of madness that felt like revelation and stupidity all at once. Sarah would have laughed at her. Another grand gesture that solved nothing, and changed even less. Didn't even move the dial.

As she scratched at her arms, too strung out to notice anything, the old woman perched on the other end of the bench came into her vision. She wasn't trying to make conversation, thank Christ. Jess was so sick of people asking if she was all right when the answer was always *fucking no*. Nobody really wanted to know anyway, except her case worker who wanted any excuse to reduce or, hopefully, eliminate her benefits. Make her crappy quota for the month. Keep her kids away from her.

But this woman was knitting. All the way out here in the forest. What the fuck?

Sarah would have known what to do. Sarah always knew what to do.

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But Sarah had been dead for six months. Wasn't coming back. No matter what. Not even if their last conversation had been replayed a thousand times.

Should have fucking seen it coming. Known she was using again.

But Jess had been too wasted, way too far away to recognise anyone else's pain. Too self-obsessed to notice her sister was drowning in the same dark sea of dependence. And now she was gone. If that wasn't bad enough, Social Services had taken her kids into protective care, and her deadshit of a husband had stolen all her savings.

Rock bottom would have been relief from all that shit.

Yet Jess was sitting on a bench in the middle of nowhere, shaking like a junkie because that's all she was, would always be, no matter how many times she tried to get clean. Next to an old bag knitting. How bloody ironic.

Should have gotten clean before they took them. Should have gotten clean when Sarah got clean, helped her. Should have been a better mother; a better sister; a better person.

But she understood the damage she'd done. Allowing Lily to roam the house, nappy soiled, a rash so bad it bled. So strung out that she fell and cut her head in a myopic haze. The morning Social Services arrived they found Jack, barely two years old, crying in a pool of shit while Jess slept off a three-day bender.

Christ. They're better off without me. They're safer.

But knowing that didn't make it hurt less. Didn't stop her from wondering if Lily still looked for her in crowds; if Jack remembered her voice. If they'd learned to stop asking when Mummy was coming home.

The old woman shifted beside her, the movement gentle and unobtrusive. Her presence was not demanding, just quietly existing in the same space and time.

We were going to get clean together. We were going to get the kids back and rent a place big enough for all of us. Piss off the useless old man and become a real family.

But Sarah had died in a hospital bed in excruciating pain. Alone while her deadshit sister got a hit in the filthy toilet block across the road. Slumped against a wall, drooling with her own vomit.

She'd failed everyone who'd ever truly mattered to her — Sarah, Lily, Jack, herself. Failed so completely that recovery felt like a joke, like a life that didn't fit.

Maybe it's too late. Maybe some fucking people just die because they're too weak. Because the devil has come to the door and claimed them.

But even as the thought formed, the old woman beside her turned to Jess, handing her a jumper that she'd just finished knitting.

‘I thought you might need this.’

Jess looked at her, eyes unfocussed. Uncomprehending. At first she recoiled. Yet a strange feeling overtook her, and she took the jumper, pulling it over her head, feeling its warmth and comfort. It enveloped her, making her feel like a child again, held close in the arms of her long-lost mother.

‘Thank you,’ she stuttered.

‘Forgiveness may not always be granted aloud. But even unspoken, it frees the one who seeks it.’

Jess looked at her, eyes wide in wonder. It seemed as if she knew her own private, intimate thoughts. Knew all of her fears.

And maybe that *was* the answer. Forgiveness for herself.

Was this where recovery started?

With Sarah. Someone had loved her despite everything.

But that sounded like crap. As she found that small bag in a hidden flap in her purse, she injected the last of what she knew was her destiny. The forest whispered around her, light filtering through the trees, and she felt Sarah’s love touch her like a soft hand in the night.



Claire

Claire shuffled forward, shoulders heavy, her feet searching for the path with small stumbles. She had discovered this bench by accident one afternoon when the weight of loneliness and burden of silence had driven her from the empty flat. Today the loneliness was different. Today it had a name.

Early-onset presentation. Aggressive.

She had read the neurologist’s face before he finished the sentence. Thirty years in nursing had taught her the language of small hesitations, the careful phrasing that tried to soften what it could not. So hauntingly familiar. She had used those same words herself, standing beside families whose lives had already shifted beneath them like tectonic plates.

Now, those words of faux reassurance rang hollow like a fractured bell. No kinder being on the receiving end.

Perhaps worse. The clinical precision left no gap where hope might lodge itself.

Unable to face the flat, she’d left. But now, standing here without remembering how she’d arrived, she slammed her eyes shut in fear.

I have become my mother.

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Her steps were measured but purposeless now, missing what they once possessed. Walking helped. Not with the shock, nothing helped with that, but with the restless energy underneath it, the sense that she should be moving while she still could.

The path curved through the Spotted Gums and Claire's mind did what it had been trained to do when confronted with a problem: it assessed, staged, projected forward.

She knew this disease the way a demolitions expert knows a building: where the foundations were suspect; which wall would crack first; which support beam would fail; which collapse would create devastation.

Her mother had lasted thirty-seven short months from diagnosis.

Claire had counted every single one, marking a wall calendar in a daily progression of inevitability.

It had ended in a room that smelled faintly of antiseptic and bedsores and over-sweet talcum powder, her mother's eyes wandering the ceiling tiles searching for a husband who had died ten years before. Each day the search had begun anew, hopeful and confused, as though the world had simply misplaced him.

Claire had sat beside that bed and spoken in a low voice, brushing the grey hair from her mother's forehead, reading passages from books she knew her mother once loved.

The nurses, her colleagues, had caught her eye sometimes over the bedrail. That particular expression. She knew what this was. Knew they were sorry for her. Sorry for them. Yet that sorry changed nothing.

She had kept coming because that was the compact between them. The quiet agreement every child makes with a parent long before they understand it. Love did not require a witness. Nor measure time against obligation.

Yet the insidious progression across those thirty-seven months had robbed them of a bond she had never exactly named or known she would miss until it was gone: a final recognition; a farewell spoken by one who understood who she was.

The path ahead dipped slightly and Claire slowed, feeling the recognizable heaviness in her limbs. She flexed her fingers unconsciously.

The tremor was small, almost imperceptible. But she knew what it meant.

They run faster when familial patterns are involved, her neurologist friend had told her gently after the appointment. Not as a doctor then, but as a friend who'd known her for years.

Three years, he had said. Maybe less.

Claire was fifty-three: she knew she'd never make fifty-five.

Des Brady

She had spent three decades explaining illnesses to families, threading the careful needle between honesty and kindness. Now those same words echoed back to her like lines from a script she had memorised too well, delivered by an actor she no longer trusted.

What she couldn't stop turning back to wasn't the ending: they didn't frighten her, she'd watched enough to make a private peace with the idea long ago.

No... it was the middle.

The long subtraction.

Not remembering why she had walked to her kitchen, just as she had with this place she found herself in now. Opening a cupboard and finding objects she no longer recognised. Watching neighbours become strangers knocking at the front door.

Smells would vanish first, that fundamental, precious sense. That could evoke such deep memory: the scent of her garden after rain; the sweet bitterness of thyme and rosemary warming under the sun. The small herb beds her mother had helped her plant years ago, kneeling in the soil together while the afternoon light filtered through the leaves.

And there would be no one there to notice when it did.

Her parents were gone. Her marriage had ended years ago with the slow politeness of two people who had become strangers. There were no children, no siblings nearby, only colleagues whose lives were already full.

She had spent a lifetime tending other people. Yet when the voids came, when they intensified and multiplied, there would be no one sitting beside her bed reading aloud to a woman who no longer followed the story. No one brushing her hair. No one holding the hand that had held so many others.

No tears.

The blue bench appeared through the trees and Claire slowed. An old woman sat at one end, knitting without urgency, as though she had been waiting a very long time.

Claire hesitated before sitting down. Her legs had already made the decision. She stared at her hands resting in her lap, not recalling sitting. But they were good hands, her mother used to say. Strong, capable hands. *Like your grandmother's.*

Yet as she looked at them now the slight tremor belied the strength they once held.

The knitting needles clicked in the still air.

'You were with her at the end,' the woman said.

Claire bowed her head.

'Yes.'

'She knew.'

The Blue Bench

Claire shook her head slightly.

‘She couldn’t have,’ she said, her voice slipping into her usual clinical cadence. ‘The disease doesn’t leave room for...’

‘Not with her mind,’ the woman said gently. ‘The mind went. The rest of her remained. Deep inside.’

Claire pressed her hands together, the tremor worsening.

‘Those months,’ the woman continued. ‘The body keeps its own accounts.’

The forest held them both. Somewhere above, a currawong called once and fell silent.

‘I don’t want to forget the smell of my garden,’ Claire said finally. ‘I don’t want to stand in my own place one day and feel like a visitor.’

‘I know.’

‘I’ve seen what comes,’ Claire whispered. ‘I’ve walked that path.’

The woman nodded.

‘Yes. You have.’

Claire sat very still for a long moment.

‘I believed it mattered,’ she said. ‘The coming back. The sitting with them. Even when they didn’t know who you were.’

‘It did matter.’

The answer came without hesitation. And it shifted.

She looked towards the forest and saw that light.

Komorebi.

She had once looked up the word after hearing it somewhere, fascinated that another language had found a name for such a simple miracle. Claire had always loved the way it fell in shifting patterns across the ground, brightness and shadow trading places without either claiming victory. Yet now it was about clouds shrouding the world, the sun being defeated by the shadows.

She had thought it was about her mother. She understood now. And wondered which would disappear first — the word or the memory of the light itself.

Claire turned her hands over, studying the lines across her palms, each small scar a memory of a past that was never far.

‘Whatever comes,’ she said. ‘Whatever is subtracted, whatever window goes dark... I will not be defined by that end. By that emptiness. That void.’

The woman beside her resumed her knitting, needles clicking in the still air.

‘No,’ she said. ‘You will not.’

Des Brady

Claire lifted her eyes to the forest. The light moved through the trees the way it always had, the way it always would. But there was another thing beneath the fear of forgetting. Something she had not said aloud until now.

‘I want to go softly,’ Claire said finally. ‘While I am still myself. On my own terms.’

The woman did not offer comfort at first. She simply listened.

‘Some doors are better closed from the inside, my dear.’

Claire stayed until she was ready. Then she walked through the forest. Away from the blue bench. Away from her car, parked at the trailhead where she had left it that morning. Where it would remain forever.

Her grandmother’s hands swung lightly at her sides. Toward her certainty.



Tom

The forest path wavered in front of him like heat shimmer. One moment he was walking through eucalyptus trees, the next he was back in that place, standing alone in the desert in Chora, shoulders hunched, bloodstained boots sinking into sand that shifted with every breath of scorching wind.

His chest tightened. The familiar spiral beginning.

Not real. You’re not there anymore.

But the sand felt real under his feet. The brutal heat of the sun weighing as if summer pressed against his brow, a patina of dust coating his face. He is twenty-six, hands zip-tied behind his back, a hessian sack over his head. The heat is unbearable. The smell worse. Blood, piss, engine oil, and fear. His own voice echoes in his skull, desperate and cracking.

He closed his eyes, forced his breathing to slow.

Four counts in. Hold. Four counts out. Don’t break. Don’t scream.

The desert shimmered, visions sharply flashing, sometimes the desert, sometimes the cave. More often it was just his mind, gradually fragmenting with each passing day.

When he opened his eyes, all he could see was a blue bench, paint peeling like sunburn. It was another impossible hallucination in this wasteland of memory. Yet it seemed tangible, solid. He gently sat, picking the flakes off with his fingernails. The lorikeets called above him. Forest sounds. Solid bench under his hands. But his mind kept slipping between then and now, between what was and the things that haunted him.

They’d called him lucky. A hero. Tom didn’t feel like either.

No. He felt like a piece of half chewed gristle, spat out onto the ground.

The Blue Bench

His limbs might have been in one piece, but that sure didn't apply upstairs. That was shattered by the nightmares: the darkness in his head, his mates screaming as they bled out, half their guts missing.

He'd had pills, lots of those. Treatment. But that was just a nice woman trying her best to piece together the jigsaw of a shattered mind. She didn't know the feeling when the sharp screech of tyres made him jump. The paranoia of going down a dark lane.

Trust, even love, was harder to find. And, when found, didn't last long.

I'm not broken. They just never understood.

Then came Birdtree. Tasmania. The furthest south he could run without falling off the continent. It was by accident, yet no accident. Just a dilapidated shack he'd rented from an old farmer who told him it had been owned by his nephew, killed in a farm accident a few years before.

There were no neighbours, no noise. And most importantly, no questions.

He'd expected silence. Hopefully, peace.

He found bees.

One day, sitting on the porch, he'd noticed them settling in a grass-covered box amongst the overgrowth. A Langstroth hive, two boxes stacked. Like his dad's who'd kept bees when Tom was young, gently teaching him their intricate, arcane lives. The moment stirred a distant, long dormant memory.

He approached the hive and stood for an hour, mesmerised by their industry. Returned from the house with his rigging gloves, then began clearing the grass from the box. Delicately. Methodically. Remembering his father's words.

Don't disturb them too much. They'll let you alone if they know you're helping.

He removed the cover, picked up a frame heavy with comb. Taking off one glove, he scraped off a little wax — sticky liquid oozed over his finger. He put it in his mouth and the sensation exploded. Smoky, deliciously sweet honey from the forest flowers nearby.

Not just taste.

He opened his eyes and looked down at the peeling blue surface of the bench. Transported from somewhere else to this place.

Smiling, just faintly, at those fond memories, it hit. A shift in the air beside him. A change in pressure. And before he even turned, he knew what it was.

Seated at the far end of the bench, barely making an imprint, the woman was calm. Grey hair pulled back loosely, her face lined and kind, legs crossed neatly, hands busy with her knitting.

Des Brady

He sat for a moment without speaking, as the wind moved around them like a river around rocks.

‘I’m not dead,’ he said finally.

‘No,’ Margaret replied. ‘But you were close enough to knock.’

He nodded. ‘Maybe.’

‘You lingered too long in the wrong space.’

He glanced at her. ‘What is this place?’

She smiled, not unkindly. ‘It’s different for everyone. But mostly, it’s memory. The ones you try not to carry, the ones you didn’t mean to forget.’

He looked down at his hands. Scarred knuckles, burn marks. That old tattoo on his right forearm, half faded now, the letters almost illegible. He flexed his fingers.

‘Wasn’t planning to leave...you know,’ he muttered. ‘Not really.’

‘No,’ she said. ‘Not after you found Birdtree.’

He looked at her sharply. How did she know that?

Tom exhaled.

‘I’m tired of fighting,’ he said. ‘Me, the system... everything.’

Margaret didn’t answer right away. She looked toward the trees, as if checking for movement, nodding as none came.

‘You don’t have to fight,’ she said eventually. ‘You just have to return.’

‘To what? I have nothing.’

‘Yes, you do. To the place that gives you peace, which offers life. That hums rather than screams.’

He closed his eyes. Remembering the hives. The way the dappled light fell on the boxes, warming them. The smell of honey warming in jars. The bees resting on his gloves, trust implicit in their steady resolve. The thrum in his chest when the work felt right.

When he felt useful.

‘I was starting to feel human there,’ he said gently. ‘I didn’t ask to come here.’

‘Yes, you did, Tom. You know that.’

‘I didn’t want to be fixed,’ he muttered. ‘I just wanted to stop being a burden.’

She didn’t flinch.

‘Then go back... you’re not done,’ she said gently.

He didn’t respond. He closed his eyes.

Margaret remained silent.

‘Yes.’

The Blue Bench

It was Birdtree. The slow work. The way the bees had come to understand his routine. Trusting him not to tremble.

‘But I don’t know how to keep going.’

She smiled, almost sadly. ‘Some leave to find peace. Others return to build it.’

He looked up.

The bench was empty again. The woman had vanished and he felt steadier. And the wind behind him smelled hauntingly, deliciously, of honey.



The Blue Bench

The sun had shifted. Long shadows pooled under the trees now, the dappled lightplay moving across the forest floor. The lorikeets had gone quiet, their shrieks carried somewhere further into the scrub.

Margaret stayed on the bench, knitting in the hush.

A small girl on a pushbike emerged in the distance, her advance wobbling slightly, still learning the tricks of balancing. She stopped at the blue bench and dismounted unsteadily, watching Margaret peacefully knitting.

‘This is my new bike,’ she announced proudly.

Margaret looked up and smiled, as the small lass played with the colourful tassels attached to the end of the handlebar grips, their sparkles glinting in the sun, speckling like grains of sand.

‘I got it for my birthday,’ she ventured again.

‘And it is a beautiful bike, I must say. What is your name, young lady?’

‘Averil,’ she announced. ‘My mum taught me to ride.’

‘Well, Averil, my name is Margaret, and I am pleased to meet you.’

Averil smiled, twiddling her pigtails. She set her bike down and climbed onto the bench, brushed the hair from her eyes and turned to Margaret, her head tilted to one side, a curious look framing her face.

‘Are you Death?’

Margaret placed her knitting in her lap and let the air settle around her, waiting for the silence to engulf them.

‘No, sweet child. I am the Librarian.’

This made the young girl screw her face up slightly, her body forming a question mark.

Des Brady

‘But there aren’t any books here.’

It was more of a statement than a response, the girl certain of her position.

‘Oh, Averil, you don’t need books to be a Librarian. It is more about putting things in their rightful place. Returning them as needed.’

Averil smiled the simple pleasure of youth.

‘My mum’s sick.’ It was a statement. A proclamation.

‘I know Averil. She will be here soon too.’

Averil tilted her head, and nodded almost imperceptibly.

‘You know what we’ve learnt today, Averil?’

The girl’s eyes lit up, all anticipation.

‘Even the smallest things stay with us,’ Margaret said tenderly.

Margaret nodded once to herself and then a call came from the distance. Averil readied herself and climbed onto her bike.

‘That’s mum calling. See you later.’

Margaret smiled.

‘Much later, darling.’

The bench was empty again. Margaret stayed. She watched the dappled light, shadows moving through it, shifting. That interplay between darkness and light.

Waiting. Listening.

Komorebi.

The Blue Bench

Authors Note

Here's an idea that genuinely excites me.

I hope you liked this. I love working in this “liminal” space in a story. Not quite supernatural but certainly not in the present world.

Once I wrote this, I wondered if the structure could become something even larger. Maybe even a novel. The characters worked out quite well in just a short space. What do you think?

Suppose every visitor believes they're coming because of one problem. But Margaret sees something else entirely.

Jess thinks she's there because she's an addict. Margaret knows she's there because she cannot forgive herself.

Claire thinks she's there because she's dying. Margaret knows she's there because she cannot relinquish control.

Tom thinks he's there because of trauma. Margaret knows he's there because he has forgotten how to receive peace.

In other words, their mission isn't the outward behaviour. It's the invisible orientation underneath it.

That is *very* Dante.

Cheers Des Brady, 12 August 2026