

Low Excellence - The Veteran in the Park

As usual the park was busy; mothers and their children, retired couples and office workers from the adjacent office blocks enjoying their mid-morning break. The old man sat on the park bench alone. The sun peeked out from behind a cloud and a light drizzle fell. Droplets of water trickled down his Royal Hussars hat. He didn't move. He just sat there.

His mournful eyes reflected the memories of a distant battlefield. Like black mirrors those eyes seemed to reflect memories of a haunted past. His mouth was neither sad nor happy but resigned; like a true soldier he hid his emotions. War medals were regimented across his chest, like soldiers on parade. These symbols of honour and courage were polished to perfection, each simple in shape but big in Meaning.

The red rose-coloured jacket was heavy and weighed his frail body down. It was too much to bear just like the memories are too much to endure. A faded tattoo with scratchy lines of ink appeared as the old man tugged up his jacket sleeve to check the time. The corners of his mouth dropped when he realised it was only mid-morning. There he sat, his soft wrinkled hands gently holding each other. Only hand left to hold and the only human contact he will enjoy.

The clock struck midday, a signal that he had successfully managed to fight another day. It was time for the old man's lunch so he packed up his belongings and slowly, with great effort, heaved himself out of the park bench, reached out for his wooden walking cane and staggered off on the journey home. The cane hit the concrete like a rhythm of sad echoing heartbeats.

High Merit - Grandad:

When we pulled into the driveway, he was kneeling on his hands and knees in the garden – a shovel in one hand and a small strawberry plant in the other. He was a tall man and still reasonably fit considering he was 75! He had white wispy hair and wore old brown glasses which had been around for as long as I could remember. He was wearing his standard gardening uniform which consisted of his brown slippers, cream track pants, his brown woollen jersey and his faded Mickey Mouse hat which seemed to be a permanent fixture on his head.

His garden was immaculate. The lawn was lovely and lush and there was not a single weed to be seen. Maybe it had something to do with the fact he would get out there with a kitchen fork and pick each weed out individually. The garden was his pride and joy.

He greeted me with a strong manly handshake – the kind that makes your knuckles want to crush under the unbearable pressure. He invited me inside and let me sit in his favourite chair. You see his house was his castle with that one suede Lazy-Boy being his throne so being allowed to sit in it was a huge privilege.

Grandma pretty much acted as his maid and did what he told her to do. He ordered her to go get me some food and something to drink in his old Southern man voice, he didn't even ask politely which made me feel rude and uncomfortable. He was going a bit deaf so everytime he asked you a question he would completely tune out and start clicking his false teeth as he always did.

When his wife came in with plate-loads of food his face lit up, it was like a baby seeing lollies for the first time in their life. His favourite was asparagus rolls which he pretty much sucked on. At one point in the visit he fell asleep lying there in the corner of his long suede sofa with an asparagus roll in one hand and a big dribble rolling out his mouth and down his wrinkled, leathery dark skin. This was my granddad.

Low Merit - The Tree House:

Hidden amongst a cluster of trees there lies a castle. It sits high in the treetops, just inches away from the sky. With our little heads tilted right back, the top of our castle can just be made out – but to reach the top a treacherous journey must be undertaken. Our tiny fingers tightly grasp the wooden railings of the tree house's sturdy steps. In our minds this is a matter of life or death. Little eyes steal quick glimpses of the shaky ground. As the summit is reached we are greeted by a strong plank of wood, which fills us with security. The seemingly endless view comes to a halt only at the horizon. A sea of billowing clouds feels close enough to reach out and grab, taunting us with dreams of flying. All fears completely vanish when we are greeted by the radiant face of Winnie The Pooh, smiling from above a huge oak dresser, home to all kinds of royal tea parties. From this protrudes an enormous mirror; bright little eyes and a wide cheeky grin stare back.

Years later, so much has changed. The decrepit old tree house sways in the morning breeze. It can barely hold itself up, instead arching down towards the ground. The ancient wooden steps rock in dismay at the unaccustomed weight as I carefully start my climb. Where tiny fingers once grasped, strenuous strings of ivy now intertwine themselves around the rickety rails. The once strong plank beneath my feet is now riddled with rot, victim to years of weathering. The lonely tree house has been left with only one companion – the little sparrow perched within the abundance of overgrown branches which encroach through the window; the tangled sea of green restricting all views. The faint smile of Winnie The Pooh brings back even fainter memories; below; a coat of green eats away the soggy old dresser. But there is one thing that hasn't changed – the same bright eyes and wide smile stare right back, unaffected by the hands of time.

High Achieved - The Avon:

On a warm summer's day, the water of the Avon River glistens as it flows past. Tiny, translucent silver fish can only just be seen darting past, as fast as flashes of lightning. Ancient willows and poplars are a haven for those who wish to escape from the glaring sun. Children can be heard laughing, running down the newly lain path and chasing ducks. The kayaks are speeding down the river, with oars splashing rapidly, trying frantically to get ahead of the others. Leaning on the banks of the river is a big orange dredging machine, dragging weeds up from the water and dropping them in a tangled pile on the ground. Small gray and white seagulls are searching through the weeds, looking for their afternoon meal. On closer inspection of one of the great, tall poplars, an agitated mother duck is aggressively defending her nest and eggs, afraid of the passing cars. Snowy, the silver and white cat, is waiting on the banks of the river, amongst the high green grasses and piles of tangled weeds, for an unsuspecting bird to come past and become her prey.

When night falls, though, you would not believe it to be the same place. The water is still, and there is an eerie silence about the whole place. Each of the trees has long, outstretched shadows, reaching out through the small amount of light provided by the distant street-lamps. The path is empty, still and lifeless, mourning the loss of the day. Weeds are drifting slowly along the never-ending chasm of water, lost in its currents. There is no wind, not even the slightest breeze, and yet the air is cold enough to run chills down your spine. The only noticeable life is Snowy. She is still waiting, more patient than the rocks, for her prey to come walking past.