

## **The Bench**

The man sat at his usual bench on the pier, watching the moon's reflection ripple in the dark water before him. He was alone - he'd been coming there alone since his wife, Juliet, died three years ago. He'd saved a space for her beside him, as though by leaving room for her he might turn around and find that she was really there.

He loved the quiet. When the night was still, he could imagine it was five years ago, when he and Juliet first sat on this bench together. If he closed his eyes, he could picture it: the sunlight gleaming on the water, seagulls streaking across the sky, and Juliet, gazing at the sea, full of hope for-

"Ten years from now, where do you think we'll be?"

He jumped, startled, and looked around. A young man and woman were sitting at the edge of the pier a few yards away. He hadn't heard them coming, and it seemed they hadn't noticed him either.

The woman laughed. "How do I answer that? I don't even know what'll happen tomorrow."

"You know what I mean," the young man said, grinning and nudging her with his elbow.

She stopped laughing and looked out at the sea. "I think everything will work out," she said after a pause. "You'll get your job, we'll get married, maybe have kids. I'll choose to believe that. But we can't know what'll happen between now and then."

"I know," the young man said. "But I'm glad we're choosing to believe the same thing, at least."

They looked back out at the moonlit sea and fell silent. On the bench, a tear ran down the man's cheek. Hearing their conversation, he remembered one he had had with Juliet on this bench just after they'd moved here.

"This place is beautiful," she'd said, gazing at the water as the breeze played with her hair.

"Yes," he'd said. "I hope we'll be able to settle here, but life never works out the way you want."

"Hey," Juliet had said, looking at him. "Don't be pessimistic. Bad things might happen in life, but good things can happen too. We just have to stay strong and face them head-on."

*Stay strong and face them head-on.* He hadn't stayed strong. He hadn't faced her death head-on. He'd clung to the past, coming back to this bench and pretending that the bad things he'd been afraid of hadn't happened.

He looked at the young couple, sitting at the edge of the pier. Their life together was beginning, and the possibilities of the future lay ahead of them. But his life with Juliet had ended, and his life alone had to begin.

He stood up and sighed, feeling lighter than he had in a long time. He looked at the bench, at the empty spot he had saved for Juliet for so long. Then he turned and walked away, away from the couple, away from the pier, and away from the empty bench.