

THE BENCHMARK

By

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A short novel in parts

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February 14th 1902

George had two problems, both of which were leaving him more than a little vexed. Firstly, he'd just been told that his wife, Olive, the love of his life, his friend of the soul and the only being to ever truly make him happy, had died. Secondly, he'd run out of jam. Normally, George was of the intelligence to realise that the drama of the second problem was only exacerbated by the first. But on this particularly day, exacerbation had got the better of him, leading him to be sitting alone in his study, talking aloud to his dead wife about the rather inconvenient nature of her sudden passing.

"I wish you could hear me Olive", George cried, just on the off chance that someone might hear him and fear he'd gone mad, bargaining as he was on the fact, that acknowledging you were talking out loud to someone you knew couldn't hear you was considered perfectly sane.

"Once there was a time when I would think you'd look on from heaven", he continued.

"But now I seem to be cursed with this belief that there is no God, that what I once thought so unquestionable is now so unbelievable, I cannot believe that you are up there, listening. Unless, he is real, and has merely taken you from me as punishment for my insolence in doubt. But I know that not to be true. My mind is now just a myriad of questions, a maze of unanswered confusions I have little hope of navigating a way out of – what is the point of leading a good and kind existence if there is no point come the end?" George gasped in despair.

"What is the point of loving so purely and so truly if you can be snatched so easily away at the hands of a stranger. Murdered! And what the hell am I going to put on my toast?"

March 10th 2019

John was running and running fast. For him. John hated running. Largely, because when he did, he looked and felt a little bit silly. All his life he had dealt with the strange affliction of his arms and legs seeming to lose all muscle memory when his brain was distracted with gear shifting the increase in speed; each limb from the top seemed to spin out a 360 in a direction opposite to his legs that flailed in their own circular motion, giving him the odd appearance of two windmills side by side reflected in the water.

He was momentarily distracted by a woman and her son walking past, embarrassed that they would see this human interpretation of ancient energy generation in full flight, which is why he failed to see the broken branches in front of him, laying on the path as if the tree had casually discarded them. He only noticed they were there once they had helped him head for a painful union with the ground and assisted in tangling his ankle enough to give it a good old fashioned twist once the rest of him had made impact with the grass that lay bare under its coat of autumnal leaves. John was not best pleased with this. Only one thing looked more ridiculous than a human windmill advancing like a lethargic army and that was a human windmill advancing like a lethargic army with its sails broken.

“Buggery Buggerton’s Buggeration Bugger-up”, he exclaimed in pain, whilst simultaneously congratulating himself on a swear that PG Woodhouse could have commandeered. John liked to swear creatively, and was particularly proud when avoiding the more vulgar cousins in his native tongue’s family of profanity.

As it soon became apparent, John need not have worried about the woman noticing him, as even the crashing of his increasingly bulky frame to the floor was not enough to pique any sense of curiosity or interest as to his well being. He dragged himself up, and hobbled to the nearby bench, falling back in a heap to the backrest, sweat dripping from his head onto the plaque that once served as a dedication to a love one lost, but was now unconsciously performing the task the sweatband he wore on his head seemed to have failed at miserably.

The decade was now nineteen years of age, but John was definitely getting the feeling he and this century were not going to be pals. Nineteen years in and thus far, all the 21st century had brought him was a fat stomach, sagging jowls and the feeling that life was passing without making any real effort. Forced to take up running in order to combat his frequently commented upon increase in weight, this branch-based ankle injury was merely a minor addition to a long-list of calamities the century had thus far gifted him.

He was a mere 5 yards away from the bench he normally liked to use as his resting stop on his enforced fitness tour of the park and he was upset he wouldn’t be able to read the plaque that always splashed a little colour in his greyness of a day. The bench was dedicated to a ‘Mary Farnsworth’ and inscribed with the legend that it was intended to let her be in death as she loved to be in life. Which John could only imagine was to be the resting point for tired park dwellers sweaty derrieres’. And if she liked the feel of a stranger’s bottom on her, he was not one to judge, but it did always add a little cheer to his day.

He giggled to himself at the memory of the dedication that lay only just out of his reach, pushing away the feeling in him that it’s proximity and his failure to reach it was a tawdry metaphor of his life, and instead enjoyed the idea, as he often did, that the bereaved spouse

would've been mildly cheered once he'd realised his linguistic failure had led to his wife being remembered by strangers as some sort of park-based pervert for generations to come.

The laugh that escaped his lips quickly turned to an instrument of further embarrassment once the previously unnoticed lady that stood before him said hello.

"Are you alright?" she enquired as John was struck with the realisation that the most exceptionally beautiful woman he had ever seen in real-life was now staring with concern at the sweaty, scrunched up mess that was laughing to himself whilst seemingly collapsed across the bench.

"MGAFRNNNH", John replied, his tongue twisted by the beauty before him like his ankle to the branch. 'Bloody century', John thought as she sat next to him with mix of concern and caution.

March 10th 1902

If Olive was alive, George would probably have admitted to her that he wasn't one hundred per cent sure he was entirely in control of all his mental faculties. He submitted the papers when he was still in a state of some distress. And, quite frankly, inventing a new request upon the law of his majesty's good courts was bad enough, but it was a bit of stretch applying it to a physical impossibility. For a long-time Death as a scythe holding, Earth roaming character had served as a fictional representation of life's most definite curtain call, but trying to get him in the docks of the Old Bailey could slide a little towards the area of the Venn diagram known as impossible. And asking for a 'restraining order', as George had termed it, was fine in theory, but its difficult to know if Death would respect the 100 yards his majesty's courts would require him to stay away from George, even if they did see fit to pass such an odd injunction.

But, the fact was, George was one the country's most prominent appointees of the courts and the press had jumped on the story the second the papers were filed. Mainly the 'yellow press' and the tabloids, spreading lies and rumours without so much as a nod to truth, facts or journalistic integrity. But, whores to the rumour mill they maybe, their readership meant George was in no position to back down now. He had is reputation at stake. Well, what was left of it, after filing such a ridiculous petition.

The courts were full to the brim as George got his notes in order to begin his case. One thing Victorian England loved was prominent figures losing their marbles and the old girl may have recently succumbed to Death's charms herself, but the precedent still stood - and as far as the recently post-Victorian England was concerned, there was no finer example of losing your marbles than a top solicitor fighting a case against Death itself.

The judge entered and told them all to sit, before nodding at George to let him know it was time to begin. George took a deep breath, shuffled his notes, and stood. He was about to try and convince his majesty's courts they should pass a case that he himself now believed was conceived in a moment of temporary madness.

'Well, I wasn't expecting that', Death thought to himself as they all filed out of court. He'd spent centuries hiding in the dark to stop people talking about him and now, as if it wasn't bad enough some crazy had tried to take him to court, the stupid judge had found in favour of the prosecution.

This left Death in quite the conundrum. Not only was he quite insulted that they still referred to him as holding a scythe which, quite honestly, he'd stopped doing way before they went out of fashion in the 1400s, but now he wasn't even sure where he stood. He certainly wasn't bound to the physical laws of humans, but he had no idea if he was bound by the law of land. And that meant one thing. Research. And if there was one thing Death hated more than misinterpretations about his understanding of fashion trends, that was bloody research.

One thing was for certain. This George fellow was going to be getting a visit from Death very soon. He just hoped he wasn't going to have to shout at him from 100 yards away.

March 24th 2019

John's hands had started to tremble as he picked his sandwich out of his lunchbox that he'd carefully placed on the bench beside him, the intensity of the shake increasing as he lifted it to his mouth. He paused before he bit and exhaled loudly, his nerves overcoming him, as if he was concerned he might be biting the bullet in some odd sandwich filling version of Russian roulette.

John wasn't concerned about the sandwich. He'd made it himself, and, its contents may well of engineered a misunderstood reaction of disgust in most people, but John was no apologist for banana and chocolate spread between a couple of slices - the heathens really didnt know what they were missing. No, the sandwich was fine. It was sitting on what he now rather disgustingly thought to himself as 'their' bench that really induced such a indictment of terror within him. Well, the sitting he could take, he'd had a lot of practice over the years, but waiting for her to appear was becoming increasingly more nerve-wracking the more these picnics had become a regular fixture of their lunchtime calendars. He thought that asking her out for that first drink, words stumbling and bumbling out of him like Hugh Grant with a stutter, would be top of his list of terrors. But, now, a couple of dates and a few lunchtime rendezvous on the over-elaborate marble bench that seemed so alien to the rest of the surrounding park was what proved more and more nerve-wracking each time, the result of a constant sense of self-worthlessness that left John sure the terrible mistake of her saying yes would be rectified at any moment.

"Hello John".

John's moment of introspective self-doubt was interrupted by the sound of her voice singing across the air. He surprised himself by always thinking of her voice as a melody now, and found himself even more surprised he could think such a thought without vomiting over his shoes. It was exactly the sort of statement that if sprung from the mouth of another would have made him want to punch them in the face, but he couldn't help himself now; he bargained with himself that such Mills and Boon verse was fine, as long as he kept the offending thought internalised - if he found such tawdry teenage poetry ever escaping from his lips he was entirely prepared to assault himself on the spot.

"Hi Anna", he finally said back, patting the seat next to him. She sat down and they started the choreographed dance of laying out their lunch, a dance they'd routined in only a few short rehearsals that had formed their previous picnic dalliances. They placed out napkins and passed out pots, full to the brim of over-elaborate garnishes and condiments brought along to add to the sense of occasion. There was bread, spreads, olives, cheeses, all laid out for them to eat, as the occasional meeting of eyes and nervous smiles were exchanged between them. John had even contemplated bringing a bottle of champagne with him to really raise the romantic prominence of their lunchtime get-togethers, but had once drunk at lunch before and the ensuing impromptu strut and sing of 'Staying Alive' he felt compelled to deliver back at work in a state of post pub revelry was considered, rightly, to be not entirely appropriate behaviour in a funeral directors.

Instead, John had decided to add the personal touch, creating Anna a sandwich experience that she had never tasted before, another of his odd yet infinitely palatable fillings that rendered the rest of the lunch effort entirely pointless, different from his, classier, something he felt befitted her personally. He handed Anna the sandwich, neatly wrapped in baking paper, which she took with a wide grin.

“And what’s this?”, she asked.

“Well. It’s a sandwich”, John replied, seemingly unaware that Anna was perfectly capable of deducing that from the clues first-hand, but was rather referring to what lay within it.

“Yes, John. What’s in it?”

“Oh, I see”, John said, suddenly embarrassed at his lack of respect for her culinary detective skills. “Well, it’s Bacon and chopped grape, with avocado chutney”.

“Well. I don’t really know what to say to that”, Anna replied, with a face that suggested she knew exactly what to say, and it involved the words ‘no’, ‘thanks’ and ‘sandwich weirdo’ strung together in a sentence.

“I know, I know”, John protested. “But just trust me, you’ll love it”.

Anna didn’t want to bite into the sandwich, but she wasn’t ready to question John’s trustworthiness at such an early stage of the relationship either, so she summoned up her courage, swallowed her doubts and took a bite. A taste sensation of surprise and delight enveloped her tongue and she broke out into a smile, causing John to nod in delight. They talked of John’s talent for unusual but tasty bread fillings and John silently thanked himself for having the sense to ditch his original intentions of bacon and marshmallow for such a novice to his work.

George often liked to come to these dedication benches and stand amongst the memories of loved ones lost. The last thing he expected to see was him. After all these years. Since the law had voted in George's favour about the 100 yard distance, George had encountered him a few times, shouting from the required distance, clearly upset that George had taken control of the situation.

But it had been several decades since their last encounter and there he was, standing in the bushes, his ghastly eyes fixated on that young couple, clearly in the first throes of love, sitting together on the bench. Something had to be done.

By the time George reached them, his over exertion in pace had left him a little too short of breath to do more than pant heavily in their direction.

"Are you OK?" Anna asked, ever concerned about men looking on the verge of exercise enforced suffocation.

"Come with me if you want to live", George finally mustered with as much drama as he could manage.

"Er...No", John replied, which he could tell shocked the old man somewhat.

George looked over to where Death was standing, noticing his arch nemesis was now poised in the manner of a boxer ready for a street fight, and he sighed. That line always worked in the movies George had seen. Now, he was trying to use it to save a couple from the inevitable fate that awaited them and they were looking at him as if he had taken leave of his mental faculties. Clearly, what he needed was a calm head, a genial and non-threatening way to get them to trust him, to explain to them that he was there to help them, to spare them the fate he had suffered so many years before.

"One of you is about to die", he said between gasping for air.

That did not do the trick. If anything, it seemed to make them slightly more wary.