

## **Old People in the Park**

***from the book "Bits and Pieces" 2011***

**by CJ Heck**

One afternoon last fall, I grabbed a sweater and a book and, after stopping at Dunkin' Donuts for my favorite coffee to-go, I headed to the city park. A people-watcher by nature, I love walking the pathways through the park and studying people from my bench who also love being there.

Not too far into the park, I picked out a shaded bench where I could sit and read for awhile. Just across from me, an elderly man was talking with his grandson who was seated on the bench next to him. The boy was six, maybe seven years old, with the most incredible blond curls framing what someday in his maturity would be a very handsome face. He had huge eyes that looked adoringly up at his grandfather, as though searching his face for answers to his many questions and they were holding hands.

When I look at any beautiful child, I can't help but think of something my mother used to say, "With all of the beautiful children in the world, I wonder where all the homely adults come from." I smiled, partly because she had been right, but also because I missed her terribly and the memory brought her closer to me.

I overheard the boy ask his grandfather, "Grampa, why are there so many old people in the park every day?"

The old man was quiet, thoughtful, for a minute. Then I heard him clear his throat. He let go of the boy's hand and slowly stretched an arm around the youngster's shoulders, pulling him closer. Then in unhurried words, he told the boy, "Well, son, they're just too alone at home to want to stay there. Sometimes, old people need to be with other old people. Here in the park, they can share their favorite jokes and maybe play a lazy game of bocce ball or even play checkers to pass a little bit of time together."

Then, looking down at the pigeons that had gathered on the ground around the bench, the old man reached into the pocket of his tan jacket and pulled out a small brown paper bag. He handed it to his grandson. The boy thanked him thoughtfully, reached into the rumpled brown bag, and with a great big smile, began tossing pieces of popcorn, one by one, to the pigeons, favoring a gray one with a pronounced limp.

As the boy did this, he asked the old man, "Grampa, why do they all call out names and wave at each new person that comes to the park?"

The grandfather cocked his head thoughtfully, thinking, and as though measuring each word, he slowly said, "It's just a way of keeping their minds alive and well-oiled. You know, by remembering a person and their name. After all, your mind is just like a muscle and all muscles need to be exercised. Remembering everyone's name and face is like a private game they all play, maybe it even helps them to ignore their pains and their problems."

The boy nodded his understanding and continued to feed the pigeons, taking his temporary job quite seriously. Then, spotting a gray squirrel that had darted out from under the bench

to steal a kernel of popcorn, he jumped up and stomped his small sneaker on the sidewalk with a loud "Shoo!" Of course, this also frightened the pigeons who instantly took to the air and it was so cute that it made me smile. Then the boy sat back down beside the old man, obviously disappointed by the sudden turn in events.

The boy sat quietly for awhile, as he watched the old people in the park. As I mentioned, I'm a people watcher and I followed where his eyes traveled. They stopped first on a couple of elderly men playing a game of checkers on a stone table. Then they moved on over to settle on a group of three even older men having what seemed to be a heated verbal exchange.

As he looked from one little group to the other, he asked his grandfather whether he thought the men playing checkers ever got tired of doing that. "Do they just sit there every day doing the same thing for hours and hours?" Then without waiting for an answer, he glanced at the men who seemed to be arguing, and asked, "What do you think they're all upset about, Grampa?"

The old man smiled lovingly at the boy. He cleared his throat again and in a slow, determined voice, he explained to his grandson that to some of the old folks, the daily checkers games were a way of making some sense out of a changing world that they didn't feel a part of any more. He said, in a way, it was like keeping them in touch with a world they did know -- and it got them out of their recliner chairs and away from their TV sets for a little while, too.

The old man went on to explain to the boy that the three men who seemed to be in a heated discussion weren't really arguing. They antagonized and criticized each other a little bit, but just to keep their juices flowing, not to be mean or hurtful. He said sometimes they even acted a little bit wise by bragging, or maybe griping, about the good old days. You know,

talking about their old girlfriends or teasing the others about their old girlfriends. The boy giggled at his grampa's explanation and then in typical little-boy fashion, he wiped his nose on his sleeve.

By now, the pigeons had again begun to congregate at the boy's feet. They came tentatively at first, then with a little more fervor. It always amazed me how the feed-ees recognized so easily which feet belonged to the specific feed-er because somehow they always knew and went straight to them.

The boy stuck his hand once again into the rumpled brown bag and brought out his next offering for the hungry rascals on the ground below. Both of them sat in silence, watching and grinning as the greedy winged goblins jockeyed into position for the next morsel dispensed from the small hand.

The boy then turned his face up to look into his grandfather's eyes and he asked him how long everyone stayed here in the park and how they knew when it was time to go. The old man sighed. His eyes were still focused on the pigeons. At first, I thought he hadn't heard the boy, but then I saw him lovingly pat the blond curls on the top of his head.

The grandfather told him they stayed till it started to get dark, or sometimes, until it just got too cold to be there any longer. Then, one by one, they waved goodbye, again calling each other by name just as they did every day when they first got there. Then they went home again and, for many of them, back into the past again, too.

The boy nodded, then he smiled up at the old man again, and both renewed their feeding ritual of the pigeons. After a little while, the boy asked his grandfather how he knew so much. The old man told him that when you got to be his age ... well, there were some

things you ... you just *knew*. With that, the youngster looked up at his grandfather with a concerned look on his face and said, "Grampa, I love you. You're NOT old. You're ... you're like a shiny red apple. You're ripe and ... j u s t right."

The old man laughed out loud and, God help me, I did, too. Maybe it was the dwindling light, or maybe a trick of my eyes, but I could swear I saw the lines in his face smooth out. He looked a full ten years younger and I was surprised to find a tear on my own cheek as I watched the old man swipe at his eyes when his laughter had finally subsided.

Slowly, the old man looked up into the sky. He told his grandson they should be getting along home now. As they rose to leave, the grandfather replaced the now empty rumpled brown paper bag in his pocket and stood up to leave. One by one, the others in the park raised an arm and called him by name, almost in unison,

"Bye, Gabe."

He, in turn, did the same. "Bye, Herb, Sam, Max, Shorty, Charlie, Gib."

"Hey, Gabe. We still on for checkers tomorrow at nine?" Called one man who was sitting next to the men who were playing checkers on the stone table.

"Sure, Sam. Lookin' forward to it," was Gabe, the grandfather's, response.

I was sure God would forgive his little white lie ... and the last I saw of the little boy, who was at the beginning of his life, and the wise and loving old man nearing the end of his, they were walking slowly back down the path through the park, hand in hand.