The Old Man

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The stillness of the morning lay on the grass. The buildings, cold, gray and lifeless, stood silently with their heads towering into the morning sky. The clouds, looking like whiffs of smoke, meandered effortlessly in the chilly breeze. The stars were still visible as the first rays of dawn shot out from the horizon. But as time passed, they gradually lost their brilliance. Mars, the morning and evening star, faded away into the vast expanses of outer space. The bleakness of the sky grew to an array of purples, oranges, reds, and yellows. Sea gulls, pigeons, robins, and sparrows, signalled by the coming dawn, came out of their evening resting places and filled the sky. The awesome splendor of the beginning of another day took place.

The chilly breeze stiffened and for the first time the buildings began to show signs of life. Women began to converge on their terraces to retrieve their washing hung on makeshift clotheslines. The clouds hurried by, making no sound as they passed. The steady clip-clap of the milkman’s horse could be heard as his hooves struck the cobblestones on the street below. The smell of frying bacon was everywhere. The day had begun.

The morning lengthened as the sun grew higher, casting shadows on the earth. The birds, circling above the harbor
looking for food, began to fly east in search of a cooler place to pass the day. They massed and swung over the buildings into the dense interior of Central Park, a vast expanse of trees and open grass located in the middle of New York City. It is here that people and birds alike come and spend a quiet day resting. The park is surrounded by a wide row of trees of all sizes and shapes. Under these trees runs a sidewalk around the perimeter of the park bordered by benches of rotting and decaying wood. The wind caught up and flung a piece of newspaper against the base of a rusting lamppole and it is here that Mr. Fitzgerald slept.

Mr. Fitzgerald was seventy-five if he was a day. His face and neck were lined with deep furrows that showed many hours of hard work in the sun. His hands, hard and calloused, were tucked underneath his head forming a pillow. He had a small frame with skinny shoulders. His features were rough and rugged, but the thing that everyone said didn’t fit his rugged appearance were his eyes. They were a soft and youthful looking blue said to sparkle in the sunlight. His legs were drawn up in a crouch and he covered himself with a tattered overcoat. His shoes were torn and ragged, in keeping with the rest of his appearance. He breathed slowly and deeply. His face was covered with a calm, serene look. He was sleeping, dreaming of his home in Ireland. His mind wandered out over the green expanses of his land. The wind caught the tall grass and swayed it like waves on the ocean. He looked out over his fields and thought of his good crop that would help his family survive the coming winter. He dreamt of his family and his son that he loved beyond words. This son of his would carry on his name and look after his fields. He felt proud. His face changed from a calm look to a slightly scared expression. He drew himself up more and pulled the overcoat over his face and neck. He tried not to think about the famine that had taken everything from him, forcing him to come to America. Here he could not find work and everyone was indifferent to him and his problems. He also lived with the fear of being killed, here in this big city where everyone is alone and afraid. Slowly he rolled over, dropping one arm off the bench as he did so. His feet hung off the bench while he slept with his mouth open. The wind picked up, flinging more newspapers against the bench and the rusted lightpole.

The day grew lighter and the sky changed from the oranges of dawn to the yellows of midday. The sky was dotted with clouds that rippled by. Mr. Fitzgerald still lay on the bench sleeping soundly. The birds made their way into the park and around the bench that the old man was sleeping on. The big gulls circled overhead riding on currents of air. Slowly they landed around and on top of the bench where he slept. They cooed and strutted in the grass, pulling on an occasional worm. The birds were his friends. Mr. Fitzgerald rarely slept through the sunrise. He jerked a couple of times and then his sleep-filled eyes opened on the day. He raised himself up off the bench and rubbed his eyes with the back of his hands. He stood up from the bench and raised his hands high in the air, giving his body a good stretch. He looked around and saw the tall buildings that surrounded him. He saw the trees as they swayed in the wind. He saw the birds and he felt sorry for them. He reached into his ragged pockets and brought out two handfuls of seed. He strowed the seed along the ground and the birds came and took the seed. The pigeons pecked the seed with their long beaks. Mr. Fitzgerald looked at the sky and the rustling trees around him. He smiled an aged smile and leaned back on the bench.

The shadows began to shorten as the sun climbed higher into the sky. The sky was dotted with gray puffs of clouds. The buildings glistened as an occasional ray of sunlight hit the window panes. The terraces were once again deserted.

Slowly children began to come into the park. They came through the trees and went to the playground in the northwest corner of the park. At least a hundred children assembled in the playground. Some were on the swings and the slides. Some
were in the sand boxes and on the merry-go-round. But everyone was having a good time. The old man rose and walked slowly into the playground area. Abruptly the children stopped their activity. The swings were motionless in the silence. The old man eyed the group slowly. The children didn’t move a muscle. Mr. Fitzgerald raised his hand to his coat pocket. Slowly he began to smile and the children raised a deafening cheer that echoed throughout the park. They stamped across the park like a herd of buffalo. His arms were open and he fell to his knees. The children swarmed around him. They pulled on his clothing and his hair. They all laughed and shouted together. Tears came to the old man’s eyes because these children were all he had left in this world. One by one, children moved back to their activities. Mr. Fitzgerald rose slowly, wiping the knees of his pants with the palm of his hand. He straightened himself and merged into their play. He pushed Bobby Thomas higher in the swing. He pushed Evelyn faster on the merry-go-round. He played with the Collier twins on the see-saw. He helped the Negro children build a sand castle in the sand box. The activity continued into the afternoon. Mr. Fitzgerald had begun to tire around two o’clock. Since then he had kept a careful watch on the children. As he looked around him, he thought of how lucky he was to have this many devoted friends. He loved children and he felt a sense of responsibility because he was in charge of their safety.

Mysteriously, the birds, which had left the park at three o’clock, began to return to the park. The sky faded from a bright yellow to a bright orange. The children began to gather around the bench. The birds gathered around the children who sat on the ground. He looked down at them with a silent expression. He began to pass out some bird seed to the children and they fed them. Some of the birds ate the seed from the children’s hands, others pecked the seed from the ground and sidewalk. The children had already heard the forecoming story hundreds of times before. They had heard him tell of his home and family. They had heard of how he lost them all, but still they sat intently as he began.

The sky darkened and the sun had slipped down past the horizon. The waning light of day slipped away. The children sat on the grass with their heads in their hands as he finished his story. As he ended, the silence of the dusk was broken by the noise of the children’s mothers returning for their children. The children rose and departed. The kids returned his waves as the last of them disappeared into the dusk. The old man felt alone because the children and the birds were no longer there to comfort him.

He wiped his brow with his palm. He looked slowly around as he thrust his hands into his pockets. He lowered his head and started into the middle of the park on his way home. As he walked into the park, he thought about tomorrow.

The dusk fell and the full moon broke from behind the clouds. The wind, which seemed to know all things at all times, blew through the trees. An owl hooted in the tree beside the bench that Mr. Fitzgerald slept on. All at once a sudden shriek broke the silence of the night, and then all was still once again. The moonlight cast a blue glow on three figures as they ran from a crumpled heap that lay on the floor of Central Park. The dew began to fall as the wind calmed. The grass around the heap turned a dark red color, then a pinkish color. The owl lifted itself from the tree and glided away into the night sky. The city was fitfully trying to sleep.

Another morning broke on a small gathering of children. They stood silently staring at the empty bench. There was a void left by his passing and the children would no longer have their favorite playmate. They slowly withdrew back to the playground to start another day of activity. However, they knew it would never be the same.

The day grew on. The children had long since returned home. The wind blew from nowhere to end up in eternity. The leaves of the trees rustled in the morning breeze. The wind caught up and flung a newspaper page against the silent rusted lamppole beside his bench, where the birds rested.