

Tamara Jones

Waiting for Spring

William and Albert sat on the freezing park bench and watched the children playing on the far side of the park.

“God they make a racket,” said William. “Come here for a bit of peace and quiet and you get blasted with their screeching and screaming. Oughtn’t they be in bloody school anyways?”

5 “Probably half term¹ or something like that,” replied Albert unconcerned. “You want to hear noise, you try listening to this roaring in me² ears.”

William rolled his eyes and handed Albert the bottle.

10 “Cheers,” replied Albert upending the bottle into his mouth and swallowing copious measures³ of the cider⁴, coughing furiously as he inhaled instead of swallowing and cider ran out of his mouth and over his chin down his coat.

“That’s what you get for being greedy,” said William, seizing the bottle back before Albert could put it to his mouth again.

15 Albert wiped his mouth and chin with the too short sleeve of his overcoat. “So what you doing here again William? That’s just about every day you be sitting on this bench, not like you to stay away from under the bridge.”

“I’m waiting for spring,” replied William, not looking at Albert.

20 Just at that moment a young couple with a small girl trailing behind them picked their way carefully along the ice coated concrete path towards them. As they approached the bench, it became obvious that they were deliberately avoiding looking at the two men, their eyes fixed straight ahead and their pace quickening, tugging the little girl along to speed her up. They ignored the upturned cap on the ground at the men’s feet.

“Reckon they think we’re undesirables,” announced Albert. The two men started cackling.

“Socially unacceptable,” said William.

“Dregs⁵ of society,” added Albert.

25 “The uninvitables,” snorted William between deep laughs. They sat while their laughter subsided, swapping the bottle between them, swigging from it in turns.

Finally Albert stood up, winding the scratchy woollen scarf tightly around his throat and chin and tugging on his Steptoe gloves⁶ to cover more of the exposed parts of his fingers. “I’m away,” he announced, “you coming?”

30 “Nah,” replied William, “I’m going to sit on for a bit.”

Albert raised his eyebrows at William, who simply shrugged. If he felt like sitting in the park on his own, bugger⁷ everyone else.

¹ *half term*: (her) skoleferie

² my

³ *copious measures*: rigelige mængder

⁴ æblevin

⁵ udskud

⁶ *Steptoe gloves*: halvfingerhandsker

⁷ pokker stå i

Albert headed away, rolling from side to side as he walked so that he looked as if he were balancing on a boat at sea.

35 William sat for a long time after Albert had gone. He ignored the cold seeping up from the concrete beneath his too-large boots, and the icy breaths of winter air that huffed down the back of his neck every time he moved.

40 He looked around at the wintry appearance of the park. He'd been coming to sit on this bench nearly every day for the last four weeks, since the end of January, and every day the park looked exactly as it had the day before. Bare and barren. Icy and brown and wet. No leaves on the trees and the municipal⁸ flower beds empty save for the twiggy shrubs, leafless too and looking as dead as the rotting leaves heaped in mounds all around the park grounds. What passed for a lawn lapping the naked trees was more brown from frost turned to mud than green grass and it all looked so dreary and dead that William felt himself become dispirited, despite the recent top up of cider. No sign of
45 spring still. He stood up and followed the direction Albert had taken. He walked slowly and it took him a long time to reach the end of the path where it turned into the grove of bare leaved trees leading down to the railway bridge.

The next day William sat on the bench alone, lost in his own thoughts. There were no children today and barely a single runner or dog walker passed during the time he sat there. For the end of
50 February, he thought, it was pretty bloody freezing still. He stared at the empty flower beds. Definitely a late spring this year, and a cold one. They'd already lost Gary and Norman, Gary found frozen in his sleep where the newspapers had fallen away during the night. And it was at this time of year, just when you'd think the winter weather wouldn't be such a problem anymore, that they dropped like flies, weakened by the short days and the rough sleeping and the consequence of too
55 much stress and cold, they got sick and that was it, poof, gone just like that.

He missed Gary. Young little shite⁹ that he was, he still used to make William laugh.

Suddenly a loud voice sounded in his ears and the bench shuddered as a heavy weight planted itself on it.

"Oh it's you, Captain," said William, not turning to look.

60 "Hola¹⁰ Bill¹¹," said Captain in his thick accent. "What you doing here? Not much good pickings from¹² kiddies and dog people."

"I'm not here for the beggings," replied William huffily¹³, although at his feet sat the upturned cap again. "I'm waiting for spring."

65 Captain said nothing and sat beside William for a few minutes. Then he shuffled and shifted and stood up to go. "They have fire under the bridge," he said. "You should come back there, warmer than here."

William shook his head and watched Captain wander erratically¹⁴ back down the path leading to the railway bridge.

⁸ kommunale

⁹ shite = shit

¹⁰ (spansk) Hello

¹¹ William

¹² *Not much good pickings from:* (her) Der er ikke mange penge i

¹³ vrissent

¹⁴ slingrende

70 He sat on for some time and was just thinking about heading off himself when a voice sounded from behind the bench.

“Bill!” said Jerry, slapping William on the shoulder and dropping himself with a thump onto the bench beside him.

75 “Here, what is it with you lot all coming up here suddenly?” complained William. “Can’t a man have a bit of alone time, what d’you think I’m doing here, supping on¹⁵ a secret supply or something?” He glared at Jerry who merely grinned back.

“Well, what are you doin’ down here?” asked Jerry.

“Minding me own bloody business,” retorted William. Then relented, “I’m waiting for spring.”

80 Before Jerry could reply they heard a shout from Albert, who appeared on the path where it turned from the grove of trees and made his rolling way towards them. As he approached it was clear he came bearing a bottle inside his overcoat and William’s mood instantly lifted, he’d not had a drink for hours.

Albert was a social drunk – he hated drinking alone and liked to get pissed in company, which suited the others as he could always be relied on to share whatever booze came his way.

85 “Wow Bert,” exclaimed Jerry. “Where’d you get this? Whiskey! Man alive¹⁶, this is the stuff!” He punched Albert playfully on the arm as he took the bottle from him and poured a slug down his throat, instantly coughing and spluttering as the whiskey burned its way down his gullet. William took a long pull as well and sat waiting for the inevitable kickback. He leaned over the side of the bench and vomited. And poured another slug into his mouth.

“That’s better,” he announced, wiping away the taste of vomit from his lips.

90 All three sat jovially on the bench making witty remarks to each other, commenting on life, the universe and everything (“always loved that book¹⁷,” said William), their laughter getting louder and their movements more expansive.

But the bottle was still a third full when their animation stilled and they became quiet. Albert stood up and announced that he was heading back to the bridge.

95 “Yeah,” said William, “I’ll come too.” He went to stand up but suddenly fell back onto the bench clutching at his throat. For several long seconds he arched back against the bench clawing at his neck. A terrible rattling sound came from deep within his throat and his eyes started bulging alarmingly.

“Mate! William! What’s the matter?” exclaimed Albert, grasping William’s arm. Jerry stood and hovered uncertainly and anxiously, “What’s up Bill, what’s going on?”

100 Finally William released his hands from around his throat and slumped back onto the bench, gasping loudly and taking in great gulps of air.

“Couldn’t breathe,” he croaked and flapped his hands at the other two to say that he couldn’t speak either. “I’ll be ok,” he added eventually, his voice smoother. “You get off¹⁸.”

105 After asking, “Are you sure?” and receiving a curt nod from William, Jerry headed off down the path. Albert, however, sat down again.

¹⁵ *supping on*: nipper til

¹⁶ *Man alive*: Er du rigtig klog

¹⁷ *Life, the Universe and Everything* (1982); roman af Douglas Adams (1952-2001)

¹⁸ *You get off*: (her) Smut I bare

“You too mate,” said William, wishing he could be left alone. But Albert stolidly¹⁹ remained seated.

“What the hell is it William?” he asked. “Haven’t ever seen you like that before, that’s not the drink. You should go see the doc. That young one at the hostel, he’s alright.”

110 William looked at Albert and sighed. “Been to see him last year already,” he said, and paused for so long that Albert prodded²⁰ him to go on. “Emphysema²¹,” continued William. “End stage.”

After a long silence Albert finally spoke, “Shouldn’t you be in hospital or something. Not living rough²². You don’t even sleep over at the hostel neither these days, can’t be good for you.”

115 “If I tried staying at the hostel, they’d shove me in a hospice fast as you could get a mouthful of cider down. Wouldn’t look too good, me dying on them would it? Nah, I’m alright. I got ideas.”

Albert looked quizzically at William, but William had said all he was going to and spoke no more. Albert handed him the whiskey bottle and they took turns at throwing more of the fiery liquid into their mouths, both content to sit on in the park together without needing to speak.

120 William continued to come every day and sit on the park bench, and every day he noted that the grip winter had on the park was not lessening. He stared at the grass beneath the trees, and looked closely at the empty flower beds, but winter remained in control.

125 A few days later he was joined again on his bench by Albert, without a bottle this time. He saw that Albert was paying attention to how William’s breathing was now permanently laboured²³, but it had always been that way and he’d just not noticed before he’d been told about William having the emphysema. You didn’t take account of things like that when you lived like they did, if you bothered about every sickness, illness, ache or pain you’d be in the doctor’s room every other day. And the powers that be²⁴ didn’t like that. Reckoned it was mostly their own fault and they didn’t get much sympathy. There’d even been talk of refusing treatment unless they gave up the drink. Like they’d done with smokers and fat people. William suddenly laughed aloud, he ticked the box on every
130 count: a smoker, fat and a lush²⁵.

They sat silently and looked at the grass and flower beds before them. Albert was gazing absently, unseeing, his thoughts apparently elsewhere, but William was staring intently.

Suddenly William seized Albert by the arm, startling him. “Look!”

Albert followed where William was pointing. “What?” he asked.

135 “There,” said William, pointing to a flower bed.

Again Albert looked. “What the bloody hell are you looking at?”

William got up then, ignoring how hard it was to breathe and strode across the path to the flower bed, beckoning to Albert to come too.

“Look there,” he said, pointing and grinning.

¹⁹ upåvirket

²⁰ opfordrede

²¹ kronisk lungesygdom

²² *living rough*: bo på gaden

²³ anstrengt

²⁴ *the powers that be*: myndighederne

²⁵ dranker

140 Where before there had been an empty barren flower bed, now there were dozens of green
noses pushing up through the brown soil, green shoots of snowdrops²⁶ with the white embryos of
their flowers held in the tips.

 “Snowdrops,” said Albert, obviously puzzled by William’s excitement.

145 “Yeah snowdrops,” said William grinning even more broadly. “Flowers. Doc told me I wouldn’t see
the spring, and what are these? Spring flowers!”

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²⁶ vintergækker