

## The Bench by Julianah Vernon

I am lost. That is the only thing I know. Nothing is clear, my sight is blurry and my ears ringing. I am not alone; I see people all around me, walking and talking in groups. Everyone around me has someone, I am alone.

“Move over, lady!” a young man yells at me, jolting me out of my fog. I look down and see my pocketbook, and I clutch it closer to my chest. Everyone has their faces covered by a mask, most I think are a blue color. They look like doctors, am I in a hospital? It’s impossible for me to see anyone’s entire face with the mask. I can only see their eyes. Am I wearing one like them? Reaching my right hand up, I feel the scratchy mask over my face and trace the strings to behind my ears. A cold bar is on my ears, and I trace those back to my eyes, my eyeglasses! I’ve been looking for those!

I slowly spin around and look at the people everywhere, some standing in front of entrances with huge glowing letters above them. Others are walking, talking, eating, holding bags— oh, I sure hope they don’t throw all of those bags out!

“Attention! Santa is ready for pictures! Stop by the north entrance to meet the elves and get your list sent!”

The sudden harsh voice booms around me, kids start screaming and running around, I need somewhere to go and hide. I used to hide in trees when I was a girl, I think I am too old now.

I see it. A bench surrounded by tropical looking trees and far, far away from all the traffic. I make my way over, trying to walk fast, but these shoes are too big. Pushing my

eyeglasses back up, I see the blurs of people moving all around in front of me. The bright lights, moving stairs, and moving boxes made of glass are so strange. I feel like this might be a dream.

The computers in the hallways are too bright for my eyes to handle, I see people pointing at the map and following its directions. Everything is becoming too loud. The ringing in my ears. I lean forward, holding my pocketbook, and focus on it. It is the only familiar thing.

I close my eyes, the feeling of the wind as people rush by me feels like a soft breeze. Sitting on the front porch; the sun feels so wonderful, the dogs are out, and I can see the flowers from here. The kids are running around, there are so many now. All the leaves are beginning to change, so I know the cold is coming. The cold means Christmas, oh Christmas! I have to get my Christmas cards ready. I open my eyes to see I am not on the porch, I thought someone just went inside to get my coffee.

I want to get up, everything is heavy— something is hung. Wait! My tennis shoes, have they been untied this whole time? I lean down and tie the left shoe and then my right, realizing the blue jeans look familiar too. My arms are also covered in a jacket that looks like something I know, black and soft with pink and blue flower stitching. This was probably Mama's. The material skims my fingertips as I fiddle with my gold wristwatch, the one that Bobby got me. I miss Bobby, I don't know where he went. Maybe he is on one of the levels above me.

Suddenly a warmth surrounds me, and I close my eyes, trying to breathe it in. I don't want to leave the bench, but that smell is too wonderful to avoid. It smells like birthday parties. I slowly stand, using the bench to push myself up. I stare at it and decide I will have to remember where it is and come back. If I can't find the smell, Bobby, or my porch; I'll come back to this nice bench.

I try to join the crowd of the hallway closest to me and finally walk in behind a family. The young girl with blonde curls turns back to look at me. She gives me a little wave and I smile back at her. She reminds me of – well, what was her name?

The smells were suddenly in front of me, but there were too many now. I look around at a restaurant, no. A buffet. No, that can't be it, what is this place called?

A cafeteria, that's it! But this is giant, I have no clue where to go.

That one smell comes back, and it is too much this time, I turn around to find a line of people behind me. My nose is runny. I am stuck. I turn in a circle and see the little blonde girl and her family have scooted up. I scoot up, too. We must look like a row of tomatoes in mama's garden, I think to myself, or even daddy's cattle. That was so long ago, the wrinkles on my hands probably stick out from far away, the hands connected to me don't look like mine.

“What can I get you, Ma'am?” a boy wearing an oddly shaped hat asks me from behind a counter with a window.

I was confused. What did he mean, what can he get me?

He points down at the counter, it looks like what I smell. Oh damn, what is it called! I know it.

“Cheese only?” he says. I blink, not really sure what cheese only means.

The boy with the red and yellow hat, the one that looks like the food he puts in a box, hands the box to another boy behind a register. This boy doesn't have a pizza hat, he has a pizza shirt.

“Can I get you a soda?” the new boy says, waving at me to move closer to the family with the little girl.

“A what?” I choke out, I didn’t know my voice sounded like that. Sounds older than it used to, my thoughts echoed in my mind, for minutes.

“A coke or something, sweet tea maybe?” His eyes seem to roll, but the cover hides any emotion on his face.

“Well,” “I- uhh, ok.” I say, I just want to get out of this line.

“Which one, ma’am. There is a line behind you. Do you know what you are ordering?” the boy with the pizza hat says. Pizza!

I glance behind me and realize he is right; they all are staring at me with covers on their faces. The only face I can see is the little girl to my right, she is looking at me again. Who is she again? I know her, I recognize those blonde curls. She is in a picture I have; I know it.

“Ok, here is a coke. That’ll be ten dollars and seventy-five cents.” The boy says.

I don’t have a clue what to do, I grip my pocketbook. I look at the boy, and he is staring at me with eyes that don’t look like the little girls. I look behind me again, the people are still there, they have his eyes too. I wish they had sweet eyes like her.

She pointed to my pocketbook. Why would she do that? I open my pocketbook, my billfold is in here, the pink knit stands out. I open it and find a bill to hand to the boy. I grab whatever he hands me, shaped in a triangle box. And a giant cup. I turn around, the hard-concrete floor hurt my feet: I tell the girl thank you, I hope she teaches more people how to have those eyes.

I sit at the tan metal table right in front of the line, I almost run into it. The pizza was very good, but way too much. I had three bites left. The drink was ok, but it’s not coffee. I want to go find the bench again. I throw out trash where everyone else seemed to, they looked like mailboxes at the post office. Things are too much, I hear yelling, someone is frying food and the

smoke hurts. I squeeze my eyes shut, the ringing in my ears is worse. Where is Bobby? He will know where to go.

Bobby didn't show. I counted to ten, and once again just for luck.

I was beginning to lose my breath; the pocketbook didn't feel like it belonged to me. I have never used one of these before, I have pockets.

The gold watchband on my wrist is not mine, I can't afford this.

The tennis shoes on my feet are untied, is this even my jacket?

I have never seen one of these before. Why does my face feel scratchy? Where did everyone's smiles go?

Where are my eyeglasses?

I tried to breathe, take deep breaths and hold. But I coughed after too long. Eventually, I see the same palm trees as before; I think I know those. I did know one thing; I need to escape. I need comfort on the porch. I wish Bobby was back, I thought he would be here by now. Where did he go? Why am I here, where did I go?

For now, I'll be on the bench.