

Bench Bill by Sue Cheung

An old man has started sitting on the bench across the road from the corner of our street every morning. I go past him on the way to school and no matter what the weather is, he's always there, staring into space. One day I got worried cos it was chucking down freezing cold rain and he was wearing the same thin jacket. The bench is under a big tree so it's kind of sheltered, but still! I glanced at him from under my brolly to check he wasn't dying of hypothermia or anything, and he smiled at me. He didn't have his teeth in so I laughed out loud back. I didn't mean to, but he looked dead funny.

After school that day, I asked Mam, 'Do you have any spare woolly hats or scarves?'

'No. Why?' she said.

I told her about the old man and she tutted.

'I don't want you talking to strangers. He could be a tramp or a drunk. Just get yourself to school and back alright. D'you hear me?'

Mam's had a hard life, so she thinks everyone and their dog is dodgy as hell.

At the weekend me and Mam walked into town to do some shopping. We got to the end of our street and there he was, in his usual place.

'Oh look, it's the old man,' I said to her.

I waved at him without thinking.

Mam grabbed my sleeve and yanked it. 'What you doing?' she hissed.

'Hey, come here!' the man shouted, waving us over.

Mam groaned. Some other people were walking past and she didn't like to appear rude so we crossed over the road towards him, with her sort of shielding me in front.

'This is me mam,' I said to the man.

Close up, he looked younger than the one hundred and twenty years old I originally thought he was.

'Hiya, Mam,' he grinned, nodding at her. (He had his teeth in this time.) 'I got summat for yas.'

He got off the bench, leant over the low brick wall behind it and presented us with two tiny plants in brown plastic pots.

'They're broad-bean seedlings,' he said.

Mam's face lit up. She was going to buy some seeds in town.

'I look after these communal gardens. I live there,' he said, pointing to the block of council flats behind him.

Then Mam decided he was alright and not an axe murderer after all and ended up chatting to him for ages. We found out that he'd suffered depression and started gardening to improve his mental health - exactly like Mam did.

As we went to leave, Mam said to him, 'Thanks for these beans. I'll bring you some courgette plants when I get them going.'

'Aye, see ya then,' replied the man. 'By the way, me name's Bill.'

I think Mam has a new friend.

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