

Night Prayer

Above me it stretches out, its endlessness and enormity is beautiful. Eventually it fades to a deep blue as the birds begin to quiet. I lie here, watching as the mist from my mouth rises and falls, rises and falls. A cool, metal bar juts into my back as an icy breeze flaps at my hoodie. Streetlights flicker off and then on again, placing me in momentary darkness. The night is calm and peaceful. The park around me is empty. By day the benches belong to pigeons, squabbling and squawking as they flee from skateboarders. Now they nest in the rafters of Chaffers New World, sheltering from the sharp wind. Loose coffee cups are picked up in the breeze, they never make it to the bin, instead they scratch and skid across the concrete. When I shut my eyes I can shut out the far off blaring horns, the wind rushing in my ear. I can almost pretend the sky above me is only the roof of my bedroom, the flickering streetlight is a night lamp so I won't be scared of the dark and the wind is only my mum hushing me as I try to sleep.

Nights like this are rare. Usually they are filled with screeching sirens and drunken idiots stumbling home from Courtenay Place. On these nights my stomach constricts when voices drift near. In the dark it's every man for himself. The sound of clinking bottles or the occasional flash of a knife can force my blood to surge faster through my veins. On these nights my trembling fingers reach for the needle. Dreams are like sleep, right? Apparitions only need a puncture, peace only needs a puff. But every so often there are nights when the winter chill keeps the youth tucked in their beds and the bars empty.

As the night continues the wind strengthens. Winter has not yet begun but still it carries a chilling hint. It creeps through the holes in my clothes, stroking my exposed face as I look up at the skies. You can't see the stars, not from where I am. The lights from the flashy office blocks and the cinereous motorway obscure them from view. But I fill in the blanks, drawing my own stars in the night sky. Southern Cross, Orion's Belt... I used to seek them out but these days they are lost in my lethargic mind.

I hear the slow murmur of conversation carried in the wind. "*You're looking gorgeous tonight, Babe*". "*You're not too bad yourself.*" Words and phrases softly spoken forwards and back. I wonder what would change if they knew I was listening. Would their eyes grow wide as they see a bundle folded on a park bench? They speak of new love and hopeful possibilities, but if they see me would their voices go quiet in fear of waking the sleeping giant. Normally the thought would twist my gut, but not tonight. Instead I smile in the shadow of the streetlights, tonight is a peaceful night.

The words of a book come back to me as I huddle in the cold. My mum's voice echoes around my head "*the night is for sleeping.*" "Not anymore Mum," I say softly to myself. The nights are for adventures, for runaways, for highs. The nights are for hiding when you find a slice of shelter, the nights are for thinking when the days are too distracting, the nights are for dreaming while your eyelids stay open.

I lie on the bench until morning comes. The expanse above me lightens again and the streetlights flicker off for another day. The birds' songs lace the air as the apartment lights turn on, one by one. Car engines start and the thud of sneakers hit the pavement and the city wakes up. I sigh as I haul myself up, tightening my hoodie around my body. The delusion of peace is broken.