

## George Winthrop Jr. Park

by

Scott William Foley

“Look, there he is,” Krystal groaned.

Ben said, “Every Tuesday! Just what is that creepy old guy doing at a children’s park?”

Andrea added, “It’d be different if he brought a grandchild along or something, but he just sits there watching the kids play in their bathing suits. It’s weird!”

“We’ve sat here and done nothing this whole summer,” Lisa noted. “We should confront him. We need to let him know that we’re on to him; that he’s acting inappropriately; and that we won’t tolerate it.”

“Totally,” Ben agreed. “Doesn’t he realize that we see him grinning and gawking at our kids? He’s lucky we haven’t turned him over to the cops!”

“So go tell him, Ben,” Krystal prompted. “We shouldn’t put this off any longer, and it’ll sound more impressive coming from you.”

“Why?” Ben asked. “Because I’m a man?”

“No,” Krystal clarified. “It’s because you’re extremely tall and probably three hundred pounds.”

“Two-fifty,” Ben huffed while getting to his feet. “Keep an eye on my Lacy, would you?”

Lisa smiled and said, “You bet, Ben. Good luck. We’ll be here if things get out of hand.”

Ben followed the water area's perimeter. Toddlers frantically ran from spout to bucket to spray gun, laughing maniacally all the while. Ben had joined Lisa, Krystal, and Andrea's Tuesday play group after meeting them at church. Throughout the summer, they'd convened weekly at George Winthrop Jr. Park, and without fail, they'd seen the old man haunting a bench, speaking to no one, and ogling the children.

As Ben approached, he saw that the old man wore a battered fireman's cap and black-rimmed glasses, as well as a white shirt and blue jeans. He also had a thermos. Ben could only imagine its contents.

The man in question seemingly didn't notice Ben's advancement.

"Hey," Ben called out.

The man's head snapped away from the children and he studied Ben a moment, careful to avoid eye-contact. With a face devoid of friendliness, he mumbled, "Howdy."

No stranger to confrontation, Ben got right to the point by saying, "My friends and I notice that you come here a lot."

"Yep," the old man replied.

"Every Tuesday, in fact," Ben stated.

"Just like you and yours," the man pointed out.

Ben chuckled a little before retorting, "Yeah, but we bring our kids with us."

The old man went back to watching the children as he spat, "That right?"

Folding his arms across his wide chest, Ben answered, "Yeah, man. That's right."

Without looking at Ben, the man informed, "I used to bring my kid to this park—every Tuesday. This was back before it had all the fancy water guns and such, back when it was still called Evergreen Park. It was a long time ago, probably before you were born."

“I don’t really care,” Ben revealed. “I do care about my kid’s safety, though, and I want to know what you’re doi—”

“People are funny nowadays,” the man interrupted. “They don’t think. They don’t think about the past or the future; they only think about the present. They get a notion, and they act on it, lickety-split.”

“Look,” Ben interjected, “I don’t have time to listen to you rant, okay? I just wanted to give you fair warning: we don’t like you watching our k—”

“You probably don’t even know who George Winthrop Jr. was, do you?” the old man questioned.

Furrowing his brow, Ben was caught off guard. He stammered, “W-What? No. Who cares about George Winthrop Jr.? He doesn’t matter. It’s just a park.”

The old man emitted a bitter laugh before grumbling, “He doesn’t matter, huh? He sure mattered to Travis and Becky Swan. They had a little girl, about three years old, and she got trapped in her bedroom during a house fire. George Winthrop Jr. was a fireman, and he saved that little girl’s life. He died doing it, but I’ll be damned if he didn’t get it done. The Swan girl got a little burned on her legs, but she went on to grow up and have a few kids of her own. Last I heard, she’s teaching elementary school up north.”

“Cool,” Ben muttered, “so they changed the name of the park in honor of the fireman, I get it. What’s your point?”

“Ha!” the old man cackled. “They changed it all right, but only after I hounded them for three solid years. A man gives his life saving a baby, and the city makes you jump through a thousand hoops just to give that man a little recognition. Then, a few more years go by, and before you know it, nobody even remembers who the park is named after.”

Ben's cheeks grew hot as he began to understand.

The man continued, "Well, I'll always remember who this park is named after, I can tell you that much. My boy loved this park, and I know he'd love seeing all these kids enjoying it, too. Like I said, I brought him here every Tuesday, my only day off, and I don't aim to quit coming any time soon. Sometimes I can feel him sitting right on this bench next to me, and we watch the kids together, and we understand that he did right that night—saving that Swan girl. I miss him terrible, but he did the right thing, and I'm proud as hell of him."

Swallowing hard, Ben extended his hand and said, "I'm Ben Silvestri. Would you care to join my friends and me? You could meet our kids and maybe tell us a little bit more about your son."

The old man looked Ben in the eyes for the first time, and then, with his face brightening, said, "Why, I'd like that, Ben. I'd like that very much."

He then shook Ben's hand, saying, "I'm George Winthrop."

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