

THE BENCH
By Teresa Smyser

My stiff fingers pulled my sweater cape tight under my chin as the crisp breeze blew. A pleasing view kept me on the bench. The children's playground nestled between trees on the park grounds provided my daily enjoyment. Squeals. Laughter. Giggles. All delighted my ears.

I closed my eyes and lifted my face to the sunshine. Contentment flooded my soul.

"Are you sleeping?"

I jumped at the voice. Peering down, a three-foot little girl with her head cocked to one side stared back.

My lips twitched. "No. I'm just enjoying the music flowing from the playground."

She frowned. "Music? I don't hear any music?"

"Those sweet voices floating on the wind sound like music to me."

The girl shook her head and then shivered.

My brows raised. "Where is your coat, little one?"

She looked back and pointed to a woman sitting at a picnic table. "My mommy has it. I don't like to wear it while I'm running and climbing." She shrugged. "It gets in my way."

Her dark curls bounced in the wind as she climbed onto the bench. After looking me over, she squinted. "You look old. Are you a grandmother?"

I chuckled. "Yes, I'm a grandmother and a great-grandmother. They call me Mimi."

The curious child scooted closer and gazed at me. "My name is Amanda, and I'm five." She eyed my sweater. "Is that warm?"

"It does take the chill away. Would you like to share my cape?"

Her head tilted. "My mommy told me not to talk to strange people, but you're not strange. You're just old. So, I think it'll be okay if we share."

I opened my sweater, and she shoved her head under my arm. As I wrapped her small body, she snuggled closer. A light, flowery shampoo scent drifted to my nose. Long ago memories rose to my mind. I glanced at her mom and gave a reassuring wink. There was nothing to fear with me.

Amanda yawned. "Tell me a story."

My hand stroked the soft skin on her arm as her blue eyes met mine. “What kind of story?”

“One about when you were little like me and got into trouble.”

I laughed to myself. That was not a random request.

She sighed. “Go ahead. My mommy says no one is perfect.”

“Alright. Once, when I was about nine years old, my favorite cousin, Anna, babysat me while my parents were out for the afternoon. We played together and had so much fun. After my parents returned home, my daddy told her she could go home, but I didn’t want her to leave. While my father walked her to the door, I jumped on the couch and pushed all the cushions in the floor. Then I ran outside to walk with her.”

I looked down into Amanda’s upturned face. “But do you know what my daddy did?”

Her eyes grew wide. “No.”

“He called me back inside the house and scolded me for jumping on the couch. It hurt my feelings so much, that I didn’t talk to him again until after dinner.” I resisted the urge to disclose how he spanked me for fear of scaring her.

Her lips pooched in thought. “You were a naughty girl. I don’t jump on our couch.”

I tweaked her nose. “I’m glad you’re a good girl, but sometimes we learn lessons from our mistakes. I assure you; I never repeated it.”

She yawned and rubbed her eyes.

“Your mother is waving. It appears she’s ready for you to return to her.”

Amanda peeped around the edge of the sweater. “Yep. She sure is.”

I released my hold, and she slid to the ground. “I’ll be back to play another day. Will I see you?”

“Unless it’s raining, I’ll be right here on my bench.”

She smiled and waved. “Bye, Mimi.”

My heart filled with joy as I watched her skip away. “Oh, Heavenly Father. You sent this old woman a precious gift today, and I’m forever grateful.”

I accepted the hand of my caregiver as she assisted me into the wheelchair. She asked about my time on the park bench. My eyes watered. “Blessed.”