

Characters

- Luke (M)** - A young(ish!) man taking on the challenge of sleeping out for charity.
- Stuart (M)** - A rough sleeper, who is actually a ghost.
- Will (E)** - Park keeper. Small role; a dozen lines at end of play. Could be doubled by Stuart.

Scene 1 – Park Bench

(SFX. Hooting of owl. Repeat. Luke enters with sleeping bag and backpack. Heads to the bench. Lies sleeping bag on bench, places hot water bottle inside. Unpacks book, torch, flask and opened packet of biscuits from backpack; arranges them tidily around the bench. Sits on bench on sleeping bag; shivers a little. Gazes up as if admiring the stars.)

Stuart: **(Enters with an old thin blanket and well worn ‘bag for life’. Heads for bench, looking increasingly annoyed at the sight of Luke.)** Hey! What do you think you’re doing?

Luke: **(Innocently)** I was just about to have a cup of cocoa.

Stuart: Not there you’re not; that’s my bench!

Luke: This is a public bench in a public space. Anyone is entitled to sit here.

Stuart: **(Enquiringly)** You’re leaving, after your cup of cocoa?

Luke: Er no, I thought I’d settle down here for the night.

Stuart: Not there you’re not; that’s my bench!

Luke: **(Sticking up for himself)** We’ve been through this. **(Gestures)** – There are other benches. I’ve just got myself sorted out on this one.

Stuart: **(Stubbornly)** Yes, but this is my bench.

(Stuart picks up Luke’s book and torch, switching torch on and off)

Luke: **(Stands up)** What are you doing?

Stuart: I’m moving you on. This is my bench.

Luke: **(Challenging)** What makes this your bench?

Stuart: Because, I always sleep here. Every night I sleep here, and I’ve been doing it for the last – for ever! Now clear off, before I duff you one!

Luke: You mean you’re not doing it for charity?

Stuart: **(Amazed)** For charity? Why should I do it for charity?

Luke: That’s why I’m here. My friends and family have sponsored me.

Stuart: Have you ever thought they’re trying to get rid of you?

Luke: Of course they’re not; it’s only for one night.

Stuart: One night! That’s not much of a commitment! How much are they paying you? Perhaps they’ll pay me too – then I won’t have to sleep on this hard bench!

Luke: The money’s going to help people off the streets – including you.

Stuart: Bah! I don’t want any nosy parkers helpers helping me; they can mind their own business. **(Says wonderingly)** Money to sleep rough! That takes the biscuit that does! **(Puts down Luke’s book and torch. Picks up Luke’s packet of biscuits and reads writing)** ‘Bourbon’. **(Takes biscuit. Rhetorical)** You don’t mind do you – though I’d have preferred a Garibaldi. **(Bites biscuit.)**

Luke: Help yourself.

Stuart: **(Takes half a dozen biscuits and puts them loose in his bag.)** Thanks. You haven't got a drink, have you?

Luke: **(Gestures to flask)** Yes, I've got cocoa; it's made with milk. I thought it might help me to sleep.

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Stuart: Cocoa won't help you sleep; a drop of the hard stuff is what you need. Got any?

Luke: I was told alcohol was the last thing to drink when sleeping rough. It numbs the senses. It could cause hypothermia.

Stuart: **(Quiet for a couple of seconds.)** I like my senses numbing. **(Looking up as if at stars.)** It's going to be a frosty one. On a clear night like this, the stars look like shards shattered from a cut glass decanter. They say we come from the stars. **(Shivers.)**

Luke: Yes, I've heard that. **(Points as if to sky)** Is that The Plough?

Stuart: **(Gazing upwards)** No, that's Orion the Hunter. Four stars make Orion - Rigel, Betelgeuse, Bellatrix, and Saiph. Then there's Alnitak, Alnilam and Mintaka in Orion's belt. Have you got any then?

Luke: **(Puzzled)** Got any what?

Stuart: **(Nods at Stuart's backpack)** Hard stuff.

Luke: No, sorry. I don't drink hard stuff; I enjoy a glass of wine, or half a beer.

Stuart: **(Rhetorical)** I'm not going to have a very merry birthday then am I?

Luke: It's your birthday?

Stuart: January 5th, Christ's birthday.

Luke: December 25th is Christ's birthday.

Stuart: That's a modern convenience due to the changing of the calendar. January 5th it is in Old Style timekeeping. I had a very good birthday a few years ago. I went to this house for a glass of water; people never refuse water.

Luke: Water?

Stuart: Yes. **(Proudly)** I never ask for food; I'm not a beggar. This woman gave me a glass of water, then told me that her husband had gone off with this other woman, and he'd left behind three bottles of his aged whiskies. She gave them to me; said it served him right. Nectar, pure nectar! How's the war going? I haven't seen a newspaper lately.

Luke: Ukraine?

Stuart: **(Puzzled)** No – the Falklands.

Luke: The Falklands! But that was over years ago; Argentina's still quibbling over it.

Stuart: **(Frowns)** That's odd. Last newspaper I read was full of it. I must have picked up an old one.

Luke: About forty years old! It's all Ukraine now, and the trouble in the Middle East.

Stuart: **(Scratches head thoughtfully)** Middle East; that rumbles on. I hadn't picked up about Ukraine. Are you going to move then? There's other benches in the gardens **(points)** up by the old peach house. I want to get settled. I like to think about the stars before I go to sleep.

Luke: Do you mean where the old peach house used to be?

Stuart: What do you mean used to be? It's over there! You used to be able to get into it at night; keep warm near the pipes. Then they started locking it up.

Luke: It's not there now. I think it was vandalised so much, they demolished it.

Stuart: **(Frowns)** Demolished it? But I only saw it, only recently it was – **(looks a bit confused.)** Anyway, clear off, that's my bench. **(Points to all Luke's stuff)** Take all your chattels with you. Have you got some newspaper?

Luke: I've got a book thanks.

Stuart: **(Patiently)** I can tell you're a newbie at sleeping out! Newspapers for keeping you warm. You put a thick wad under you, and a thick wad over you.

Luke: **(Smiles)** I don't need newspaper thanks. **(Points to sleeping bag)** This sleeping bag is five seasons. It keeps me warm up to minus 45 degrees - or rather down to 45 degrees! **(Starts packing his belongings away into his bag.)**

Stuart: **(Gets old looking wads of newspapers from his carrier bag and lays them on the bench.)** What a lot of fuss you make for one night! **(Waves an untidy wad of other newspapers from his carrier at Luke. As if lecturing)** Newspaper - thermal – and sterile. You could deliver a baby on these newspapers!

Luke: **(Looks doubtful. Suddenly notices headlines in newspaper that Stuart has laid on bench. Stares at it. Picks up paper.)** How old is this newspaper! **(Reads incredulously)** 'Election Victory for Margaret Thatcher'! **(Laughs. Scans top of paper for date, reads)** 4th May, 1979!

Stuart: **(Annoyed. Grabs newspaper back roughly. Smooths it down on bench. Smooths it down again as if he is unsettled.)** It's not old at all. It's a good newspaper. If you've got money to burn buying a newspaper every day, then I haven't! I look after what I've got!

Luke: **(Apologetic)** I'm sorry. I've never seen a paper with that date before; it's way older than me. My parents probably saw it when they were children.

Stuart: **(Stares)** Older than you? Oh, I can't understand you, with your five seasons sleeping bag and your Ukraine. **(Holds his head as if in pain)** You're doing my head in. I need to sleep now.

Luke: Sorry, I'll get going to one of the benches where the old peach house was. Perhaps I'll see you in the morning? **(Holds his hand out offering to shake Stuart's hand.)** I'm Luke.

Stuart: **(Shakes head as if perplexed, but hold out hand to shake Luke's hand.)** Stuart.
(Luke and Stuart shake hands.)

Luke: **(Exclaims as he's shaking Stuart's hand)** Man, you're freezing! Will you have a cup of hot cocoa Stuart?

Stuart: (Somewhat agitated) No, no. (Indicates the bench) You can sleep there. I'm going to have a look at the peach house; it's there, I know it is. (Quickly removes his newspaper from bench and stuffs it into his carrier. Walks away.)

(Luke looks troubled. Starts to lay his sleeping bag down again on bench. Interrupted.)

Will: (Enters) You can't sleep there!

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Luke: (Doesn't realise Will is a park keeper. A bit annoyed) Don't you start, I bagged this bench first and I'm not moving!

Will: (Firmly) I'm locking the park gates. It says quite clearly on the gates that we close at dusk.

Luke: (Can't see the problem) Well lock us in then; you can let us out in the morning, can't you? We're not doing any harm.

Will: (Frowns and looks around) We?

Luke: Yes. This other chap, you've probably seen him, says he sleeps on this bench every night. He's let me have it tonight; he's got a bit upset about the peach house. (Gestures) He's over there somewhere. Stuart.

Will: (Suddenly alert) Stuart!

Luke: Yes.

Will: What's the date?

Luke: It's 5th January.

Will: (Meaningfully) Ah.

Luke: (Querying suspiciously) Ah?

Will: Old gabardine raincoat, canvas shoes, carrier bag?

Luke: Yes. What about him? He wasn't doing any harm. I offered him a cup of cocoa. He was absolutely freezing.

Will: You're right. He was freezing. (Points to plaque on back of bench. Reads.) 'Stuart. A gentleman of the road. Froze to death here 5th January, 1983. He loved looking at the stars.'

Luke: (Incredulously) So – he was – a – a –

Will: (Finishes sentence for Luke.) Turns up around dusk this date every year. Back in 1983 they didn't lock the park at night.

(Will and Luke look up as if at the stars.)

The End