

Second Steps

by Foster Trecost

I'd rather be an only child, but I have a sister. Turns out, she'd rather be an only child too. Still, the tug of sibling obligation, though weaker than it was, pulls me in her direction and right now, it's pulling me by train. Fellow travelers look like lawyers, but I can't be certain and the truth, wherever it falls, fails to interest me. I tilt my wrist to check the time and my eyes are drawn to the second hand. My father once told me the ticks didn't matter. He said they were just a tool of measurement, no more useful than the seconds they measure. But he wasn't talking about ticks or the second hand or even the watch. In his own cryptic way, I'm sure he was talking about me.

Mother, who places a great deal of importance on form, gifted this watch to my father and then to me after he died. In honor of her I wear it faithfully, but because of him I wear it with a twinge.

The cavernous interior of the train station reduces everyone to ants, and I meander to the cabstand. My sister lives close, but too far to walk. I give the driver an address four blocks from her house and finish on foot. At the door she greets me with deceitful warmth, akin to the hollow glow of a fake fireplace. I can tell she'd rather find me elsewhere, perhaps on an opposing sidewalk where she could wave and keep walking, but here I stand at her door, a slab of red-painted wood that would easily separate us were she to shut it. She's curious, I can tell, but questions about mother or what I want go unasked.

"It's nice to see you," she says instead.

"And you," I say back.

I want to say more, but there's nothing more to say. My obligation has been fulfilled. I pocket both hands and nod, a notion she's free to regard as a genuflect, but the gesture is far from respectful. Mother will inquire about the meeting in her way of inquiring about things in which she has no interest. Her questions will border on rhetorical as if she, too, were fulfilling an obligation.

I turn toward the sidewalk but turn back when she shuts the door. I know she's looking through the peephole and I'm tempted to meet her one-eyed stare with one eye of my own, but I don't. Instead, I glance at my watch, again drawn the second hand. The twinge sets in, but I'm done with it; this twinge will be the last. I open the clasp and loop the watch around her doorknob. It should have been hers to begin with.

I leave and gain speed as I go. My arms swing with the precision of pendulums and I count steps, increasing the count each time my foot hits the ground. A step is worth no more than the distance it covers but like the second hand, it's the outer edge that gets all the attention. Still, I march on, time marching right along with me.

