

Happy Hour

by Foster Trecost

We were in the car more than anywhere else. A few days driving, then a few days to get back home. Family vacations: the minutes crept by, and so did the miles.

My father chose the hotels, and the cheapest would usually do. It didn't matter how run down a place looked, if the price was right, we stayed. But when a marquis advertised free champagne at the five o'clock happy hour, the dump next door, fifteen bucks cheaper, suddenly seemed too cheap.

We checked in at four forty-five, fifteen minutes to spare. He disappeared into the bathroom, and emerged as someone we didn't really recognize. He had slicked back his hair, and it looked stiff, like it might crumble if he ran his hands through it. He'd shaved so fast, red nicks dotted his neck.

In the lobby a few others gathered, but not many. He grasped his glass as though his hand was accustomed to the shape, and took small sips, not because he thought he was supposed to, but because he wanted the wine to last. A goofy grin settled on his lips, and he walked to each of the others, toasting them like privileged members of an elite club. We watched him from a corner, unsure who we were watching.

I knew his glass was empty when he tipped it upside down, and tapped on the bottom. He shrugged his shoulders, and tilted his head in an "Oh, well" sort of way--one glass per guest, no refills. His music had stopped, but it didn't go gently; the needle scratched across the grooves telling him it was time to go. He set the glass on a table, and walked right past us. During dinner he smiled in an unfamiliar way, just a hint, but I could see it, and I'd never seen it before. The next day it was gone; we crammed into the car, and so were we.

Years later I told this story to a small group of men, each holding a glass of wine. Free wine. I told them my father would've wanted it

this way, and to enjoy because life doesn't give refills, and neither did I.

They seemed to understand and tipped their glasses toward the casket. I thought more about that happy hour, and wondered if maybe it was the only one he ever had.

