

Late Night Learning

by Foster Trecost

A wrinkled man lie atop an ivory-clad mattress, matched sheets covered his body, matched hair covered his head. Just after midnight, a nervous boy sat by the bedside.

Stainless steel instruments lurked in the corner, and looked cold, both in temperature and temperament. The boy had never seen such contraptions, and could draw neither clue nor conclusion to their purpose, so he assured himself those who needed to know did, and that was good enough.

His chair had lost softness long ago. Years of use rendered the cushion hard like the wood beneath, and his back began to stiffen. "I told you I'd be here," he said to the wrinkled man. "I promised. I know I'm supposed to learn something, but I don't get it. What are you trying to teach me?" He asked as if he expected an answer, but knew he would not get one.

He looked at his watch, staring longer than needed to tell time. It had been gifted by his grandfather, the man lying beside him: "I can no more see the hands on this watch than I can see my own hands," his grandfather had said. "I don't believe in ornamentation, so I want you to have it. Use it to tell time. And to remind you of me."

The boy wrapped a blanket around his shoulders, and thoughts slipped to a conversation from not long ago: "There are lessons we learn in life," said his grandfather. "Just as important, there are lessons we learn in death. Sometimes we must take them together to understand. But we shouldn't wait until our own death. By then, the lessons will be of no use. If you learn to live without regret, what good is that knowledge if it's gained on your deathbed? If you learn integrity at the end of life, who will benefit?"

"What does that mean?"

His grandfather paused, a pensive nature to his unseeing eyes. "It won't be long. When I go in, spend a night with me. You do this and you'll have your answer. By morning, you'll know full well what I mean. Promise me?"

The boy knew the importance his grandfather placed on the request. "I promise," he said.

The night passed on its own terms, ignoring those presented by his watch. He looked at his grandfather's face, unchanged, yet somehow different. He wondered how his own face might look, and remembered his grandfather's words: "We shouldn't wait until our own death, by that time the lessons will be of no use."

With morning, an older man arrived. He wore a lab coat, and thick glasses. The boy looked at his grandfather, and then at his watch. "You should go home, clean up," said the man. "We need to get him ready, and you'll have to leave anyway."

The boy stood and stretched, and spoke to his grandfather: "I've got to go now, but I'll be back in time. I won't be late, I promise."

Outside, the sunshine picked up where stretching left off. He broadened a smile as he realized he had indeed been taught a lesson, both in life...and in death. He looked to the sky, and mouthed a silent thank you. He looked at the building where he had spent the night, and then at his watch; his grandfather's funeral would soon start, and he did not want to be late. After all, he promised not to be.

