

Layover Memories

by Foster Trecost

It was a pleasant time, my thoughts were mostly good, with little effort wasted in regret. For these reasons I found myself searching the walls for a pay phone. I had just arrived to Chicago, en route to Seattle by train, and as scheduling goes, I had a layover. I'd not seen my father in five years.

I could've called him the night before, but I didn't want to seem eager; I was curious to see him, but not desperate. "Andrew?" I asked upon his answer, even though I knew it was him. I had abandoned the more endearing term *dad* years before in favor of his first name, but when I heard his voice, like a sad, forgotten old record, I was drenched in a deluge of pity, and I offered it up as a gift: "Dad, it's Stephen."

"Stephen?" he asked. "Son, are you okay?"

I didn't answer his question. To answer would've been to forgive, and I preferred to keep him at a remorseless distance. "I'm at the station," I said instead. I was yet to tell him *which* station. I had just referred to a stranger as *dad*, and he replied in form. So peculiar, I was puzzled by the sound, like I had been living in a silent world, and these were the first words I heard. They hung before me in alternating images: I saw a masterpiece, beautiful and intricate; then I saw a noose. I studied the sound and allowed myself to feel what I would, and then continued: "I'm at the *train* station. I've got some time. Why don't you meet me, we can have lunch."

"Lunch?"

"Yes, dad, lunch." Again, I called him *dad*, like a Rembrandt tacked to the gallows.

"Sure, son." And he called me *son*, like a van Gogh in the arms of a hangman. "I'll take a cab. About ten minutes, okay?"

Ten minutes can be lengthened in many ways, all of which were at work that afternoon. I dismissed his ten-minute arrival as it was heard, and doubled his offering; it would take ten minutes just to find his hat. These minutes, now standing at twenty, would double

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again through the course of anxiety. I paced between two ornate columns that seemed to support nothing, and was struck with the comparison: my father, little more than an ornate column, he served no purpose, a non-existent man in Chicago, a city I had never visited, never desired to visit, yet he was on his way to meet me for lunch, a meal that would last an hour at most, and then he'd be on his way. I had phoned a stranger, no different than if I'd picked a number at random. Except that he was my father.

When I caught sight of him, I saw something unexpected: he was nervous. His kerchief wiped his brow and he shifted as he walked, his eyes darted left and right.

The other recollections were what one would expect: he had gained weight, lost hair. The lunch was also what one would expect: little said, less eaten. To recall the details now would serve only to tarnish his memory, and I see no reason for that. He was my dad, and for that hour, we sat as father and son. As I walked away he called out, "I'll see you at Christmas." Even still, I've no idea why he said that.

