

Payback

by Foster Trecost

My pace is about right for someone my age and it takes forty-five minutes to get there; used to take less. Gone are youthful scoots down the sidewalk. These days, kids scoot past me. I hope they don't mind. I never did, but I never came across anyone with a chair strapped to his back.

My mother always brightens when I walk into her room, then a sallow nature overtakes the short-lived smile. It's as if she expects someone else, and disappointment sets in when she sees it's only me. Truth is, it could only be me. More truth: she doesn't even know me.

I sit next to the bed and cover her hands with mine. Her bones are brittle, so I'm careful. Her skin reminds me of late fall leaves, and I massage her hands with lotion, then move on to her hair. I'm no stylist, but by the time I finish, it looks pretty good. She used to lick her fingers to smooth unruly patches of my hair and sometimes I do that to her, but not often.

I tell her stories of when we were all together. I confess to inventing a few, but mostly they're the same stories I've told before. Still, I tell them as if for the first time and she listens like she's hearing them for the first time. On occasion I get the smile that greeted me, but mostly she just nods.

After lunch I make tea with water barely warm enough to steep, but she doesn't seem to mind. She sips and I sip, and the tea is gone within a few minutes. Things that once took longer now pass with a quickness never known before.

I kiss her forehead and say I'll be back tomorrow. She has no concept of tomorrow, but I say it anyway and when I walk in she'll smile like she knows me. And for those few seconds I believe she does. I strap the chair to my back and leave.

The walk home takes more than forty-five minutes because I'm tired. Kids continue to scoot past and I smile and remember, thankful I still have memories. Then one stops and asks me what's

with the chair. I'm not sure how to answer, though I know the answer: for many years this chair bore my weight. Now that it no longer can, I bear the weight of the chair. But I don't say that. Instead I say at my age, one never knows when a rest is needed and it's nice to have a place to sit just in case.

The answer satisfies him, but not me. I should tell the truth.

