

Something Other Than the Truth

by Foster Trecost

The search for my dad came to an end when my grandfather died. I had called him a month before the funeral. “Eighty-four,” I shouted. In those waning days everything had to be shouted, even birthday wishes that would have been shouted anyway.

“That’s about enough,” he said. We rambled on and I lacked the wherewithal to know it would be our last conversation. I ended the call just like I ended the ones before, fully expecting there’d be another.

I traveled by train and settled into an empty compartment. One stop later, a young couple settled in across from me. They seemed poor by the looks of their clothes, but I’m not one to decipher current fashion. Sometimes we can’t see the truth because it’s easier to believe something other than the truth. They looked poor so I believed they were poor. “Where you headed?” I asked.

Neither answered, though they looked at me, one as if to say it’s none of my business, the other with a mournful tilt. After an hour of silence, they were gone. Soon after, three men in suits sat down. Not eager for another snuff, I kept to myself until the same question I asked the kids was asked to me.

“I’m going home,” I answered, but the word *home* didn’t seem suitable. I hadn’t told the truth and felt something, not guilt as guilt was far too strong, but still something moved me enough to amend my answer: “I’m going to the place I grew up, the place that *used* to be my home.”

“I see,” said one. “But the word home, if defined as the place you grew up, would still apply.”

Many years had passed since I considered that town home, but in that minute it became home again. “Yes, I believe it does apply. I’m going home.”

At the next stop, they rose together and filed out the compartment. A moment later I saw them walking down the platform, one after the other.

My mother died during my birth and this saddened me, but at least I knew what happened to her. My father presented a different situation: of him, I knew very little. I had been told that within a week of my birth, he left. Because my entrance marked my mother's exit, he resented me, couldn't possibly raise me, so he left. That was all I knew.

"Where do you think he is?" I'd sometimes ask. My grandfather always gave a gaze that hinted deeper knowledge, and then he'd say: "Why does it matter?"

"What was he like?"

"He was a good man."

A good man wouldn't have left.

The train eased into the station and from there I walked to his house. At the front door I hesitated before walking in, fully aware the familiar setting would induce a slew of memories, each demanding to be considered with equal sincerity, but I only entertained the first: "Do you remember climbing that tree?" he asked during my last visit.

"I climbed that tree?"

"So high the branches bowed. I was sure you'd fall."

"But I never fell."

"No, you never fell. Or maybe you did."

It was a memory of recalling a memory and I wasn't sure what it meant, but I'd learn in time. After unpacking I walked next door. "You're all grown up," she said. "It's so good to see you." She pulled me inside. "You always came looking for candy."

"Did I?"

"Yes, and I always gave you some."

"What kind?"

"Whatever I had, you didn't care. And if I didn't have any, I'd give you a spoonful of sugar and you were just as happy."

But I wasn't there to talk about candy. "My grandfather's gone," I said. "But I'm curious about my dad. Where did he go? Do you know anything?"

Her eyes glazed over. "Before your grandfather left us, he shared something with me. I guess he knew you'd come knocking and he knew what you'd ask. He said there's a letter for you. It was written a long time ago, but it's time you read it. He said it's from your father."

The sun had set by the time I left. Back at my grandfather's I washed up and went to bed. The letter had waited all this time and it could wait a little longer.

Sometimes we can't see the truth because it's easier to believe something other than the truth. I found the letter and finally held something from my dad. It began with "Dear Son," and it puzzled me someone I'd never met could call me that. Then it said, "If you're reading this, I must be dead." That was okay with me and I read on, and soon realized something about the handwriting. It wasn't the unfamiliar scribble of someone I'd never met. I recognized it, even if I'd only seen brief passages in birthday cards or notes left on the table. My grandfather had written the letter. I skipped to the bottom: "I hope you can understand and if not, at least forgive me."

I'd found my dad. He'd been there all along but chose to reveal himself only after he was gone. It was almost time for his funeral, the burying of a man I'd never known alive and had no desire to see dead. And since I'd already buried him, there was no need to do it again. I laid the letter on the table and packed my things. Then I walked to the station, where I boarded the next train home.

