

The Old Man

by Rob Boone

The old man looked expectantly down the street, and, seeing nothing, turned back to his cup of tea.

Five dollars this tea had cost him, but it was worth it, not only for its quality- it was exceptional- but for the visitor that cup of tea would bring.

Again, he turned to look down the street, then, noticing his exposed wrists, pulled the sleeves of his oversized parka to hide them. There was a time when he had been ashamed of those wrists, of their slender proportions, but no longer. He was too old for such self-consciousness. No, now he was simply cold.

He looked around at the other guests. Most were in power suits, and sipped their lattes as if oblivious to the world around them. The old man did not envy them their youth. He knew at what price it came, and would not relinquish his years of experience for their tight-skinned assurance.

He grasped the tea cup with both hands to warm them. It was, indeed, a cold January day, and the wind was balmy. The luxurious red velvet curtains of the cafe rippled slightly, and the old man briefly smiled, thinking that even luxury must still bow to the whims of nature.

He grasped the cup again, thawing his frozen hands, then set it gently down and ran his now warm fingers down the length of his face. Like his wrists, his abnormally large nose had once caused him grief. His fingers traced the deep wrinkles that now dominated his face.

It was unusual for her to be late, but he was not a man to worry. Besides, it had been a long time since he'd seen her. Perhaps she's lost the capacity for punctuality since then.

He thought of her often, and he thought of her now. He briefly touched the white kopiah on his head, thinking of how ridiculous she'd considered it, never passing an opportunity to ridicule him, although good-naturedly, for it.

She was just a girl when he'd started wearing kopiahhs, after a business meeting with a Malaysian man had presented one as a gift. He wasn't Muslim, but it gave him a certain comfort, and had worn them since.

He realized now that people were staring. He was not one of them, and they were beginning to notice the outsider. Let them stare, he thought. I am here for a purpose. You will not make me leave, no matter how penetrating your stares.

He pulled a newspaper from his pocket, laying it out on the table before smoothing it, then finally folding it carefully to reveal the crossword section, already half-filled in.

This, too, made him think of her- the Sunday mornings by the fire, a father using the New York Times crossword as a conduit to teach his daughter the ways of the world, or perhaps just as an excuse to spend some time with her. She was young then, and uncomplicated. How much easier that had been.

Twenty-one across: "Benjamin's love in 'The Graduate.'"

These had gotten a bit easier over the years, he thought.

He thought of that film, of the amazing performance of Dustin Hoffman. Then he thought of *The Wizard of Oz*, the first movie they'd ever watched together- at least, after she'd become old enough to sit through an entire movie without getting distracted. They had reenacted the story in the backyard, pitching tents for landmarks and laying down bags and bags of sand as the Yellow Brick Road. She had done the most awful Wicked Witch impression, which, of course, had been the most adorable thing he'd ever seen.

The reenactments always ended the same way: he as the tornado, whisking her back home to Kansas (or, in this case, the kitchen) to make peanut butter cookies.

The old man sighed.

He took another sip of tea, which was getting cold.

Two down: "neighborhood."

Carefully, he wrote: C-O-M-M-U-N-I-T-Y. He glanced again at the pen. He remembered Bobbie Kopecki, who'd stabbed her with a Bic pen on the schoolbus in third grade. She had shrieked in pain, the

bus driver later told him, but then forced her lips shut and insisted that nothing had happened. She was okay.

She stifled the tears until she came home, and they came out in a flood as soon as she crossed the threshold. She had stood there, waiting for him to come to her. He had picked her up, setting her on his lap, and let her sob for two or three minutes without asking a single question. When her eyes dried, she told him what had happened, raising her skirt to show him the ink-stained bruise forming on the inside of her left thigh. He tended to the wound and took her out for ice cream, where he explained, for the first time, why good people do bad things.

The old man checked his watch.

It was a good watch, and for the longest time he'd avoided wearing it, out of defiance. It had been a gift from *him* on the old man's sixtieth birthday.

He closed his eyes and imagined the wedding. A beautiful church on a warm Sunday morning, the sun's rays bathing the church's occupants in a sea of color as they burst through the stained glass depictions of so many ancient saints. She in her snow white gown, smoothing down the fabric that hugged her hips every time the nervousness seemed to be too much. The smile that had not left her lips since she'd awoken that day, betraying the happiness that would not be contained. The rose petals being strewn along the path that she was destined to walk by a rose-cheeked girl of about five, the daughter of her lucky groom.

He imagined every moment, as he must, for he had not been there to see it in person. For that, at least, his heart ached.

He remembered, too, the fight. She met him in the park for a Sunday picnic, and he had been excited to tell her of his recent promotion when she interrupted, telling him of her plans to marry.

The old man had objected. No one was worthy of his daughter, it was true, but *he* was especially unworthy. He defended criminals for a living, and when the criminals didn't pay well enough, he chased ambulances. He seemed entirely too sure of himself- a sure sign of a man that's completely unsure of himself- and never looked anyone in

the eye while speaking. He had a weak handshake, and once, the old man had caught him treating his dog unkindly. A man who cannot treat a dog well cannot treat a woman well.

So, he had objected. He had mocked their love, telling her that it couldn't possibly be real. She didn't love him, could not possibly love that sort of man, and that was that.

She had cried. She had counted on her father's blessing, and was shocked to see him withhold it. In the end, she had walked out.

Fourteen years later, he'd received the watch. He had stood in his doorway, staring at the package on the front porch for a long time, unable to move. Fourteen years of absence, and now the unmistakable handwriting on the package shook him. Finally, he picked it up, took it inside, and opened it carefully on the kitchen counter.

When he saw the watch, his face sagged, grew older. It was not a gift from her- it was a gift from him. She was of extravagant tastes, and this was an elegantly understated watch. She had always forced her elaborate sense of fashion on him, saying he should "spruce it up every now and then." He resisted, but she never gave up. She would never give him a simple watch with a flat leather band. It was not her style.

He put the watch in the drawer of his nightstand, and didn't see it again until one day when the pain began to dull, when it was no longer a pain, but an ache.

That day, he'd opened the drawer, and, for the first time, looped the watch around his thin wrist. He was truly an old man now, and needed to be reminded of the ache, needed to live with the pain that he'd caused.

Every morning since, he had donned the watch. Now the pain and the man were one: inseparable, indistinguishable. That unity had cost him everything: his position, his stature, his life. He'd let it all evaporate the day he became aware of how meaningless those things were.

The old man turned to look down the street. So many people were going about their lives. Soccer moms from Iowa drug their kids

along behind them, trying desperately to fit all the sight-seeing into one day. Power brokers talked on their mobile phones, finalizing the deal that would finally get the attention of the boss. Teenage girls stared into window shops, desperately wishing that their bodies could more closely resemble the perfection of the mannequins.

The old man turned back to his tea to find the waitress standing above him.

"Sir, are you waiting for your daughter?"

"Yes," said the old man. "I am."

"I'm afraid she's not going to be able to make it. She just left the message with a member of our staff."

She pretended not to notice the heartbreak in his face, and instead offered to refill his cup.

"No," he said. "I think I'll be going now."

And with that, the old man slowly stood, zipped his parka, and started down the sidewalk on the long journey home.

