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One Last Time

by Richard Lewis

I landed in London on a wintery evening, after a ten-hour flight from Los Angeles. We were behind schedule; the reluctant plane having refused to leave on time. I felt tired and hammered, like a post driven into the ground, though the synthetic reek of kerosene that hit me as I disembarked, soon stirred me.

The previous day my stepmother had called, her breathless voice sobbing, “I’m so sorry Martin but your father’s had a stroke and is not expected to survive; can you come?”

“I’ll take the next flight,” I replied weakly, feeling sick and shocked by the unthinkable news.

My father and I had always been distant and life just seemed to keep on throwing obstacles in the way, though last time I saw him he was the same as ever. I’d imagined him as being indestructible. How could he be dying?

I called the hospital and was told, “come quickly he’s not got long.”

Taking the underground into the city, the train crawled at an agonising rate, due to freezing conditions and I thought, ‘please, please, I must get to see him one more time.’

Finally arriving at Paddington I was met by a suffocating blast of stale air, like the breath of a million terminated souls.

Although a desperately sad occasion, it felt good to be back in London. I was glad to escape the monotonous heat of Southern California, with its sad palm trees and dusty streets.

A place that could shrivel your spirit like a dried raisin.

I nursed a conflict about where I belonged. London, where I grew up, or LA where I'd lived for twelve years, complete with an American wife and two American children. It seemed I still didn't know if I was leaving home.... or coming home.

Little did I realise but two blocks away from the hospital, dragging myself along as fast as my weary legs allowed, another obstacle lay in my path. A youth with a ferocious temper had me in his sights, hoping to put the fear of god into me so I'd give him what he wanted.

I saw the grey hooded man approaching twenty yards ahead, then as the gap closed he suddenly swung around, producing a knife. "Give me your wallet and phone or I'll cut you," he snarled. Reacting without thinking, I lashed out with my flight case, swinging it up so that the steel edge caught him square under the jaw; the lucky strike sending him careering into the gutter.

I ran, leaving him floundering, thinking, 'no one's going to stop me getting to see my father.'

As I entered the ward a sweet medicinal smell enveloped me, evoking memories from my accident-prone childhood. My father lay, still as a mill pond, his waxen face unrecognisable to me. I held his hand and said, "dad, it's me." After a few moments his heavy lids half opened and he gave a faint smile, whispering, "Martin."

As his eyes closed for the last time, a tear ran down the side of his face and two hours later he was gone, leaving me to grieve not just for my father but for the relationship we never had.