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The Conversation

The light crunch of snow under his feet was pleasing to him as he walked briskly down the sidewalk. The sound pulled him away from his train of thought, compelling him to acknowledge his surroundings. The concentration of his gaze shifted from the sidewalk upward and he noticed the liveliness and intensity of the city. He had lived there for nearly two years but the diversity of New York had never ceased to amaze him. Now completely conscious of his surroundings he watched the cars quickly drive by, then halting in an instant, prompted by the traffic lights. The lights hung, suspended like drops of color on an otherwise grey canvas. People hurriedly brushed past him, pushed along by some invisible force. Their cold, impersonal, gazes sent a shudder down his spine, giving him a certain uneasiness. He quickly glanced back down in contempt towards the city. His thoughts shifting back to the reason of this walk. He almost couldn't handle the thought of seeing him again. *"Why did he want to see me after all this time? What will he say? What have I accomplished?"* Three years of college to no consequence, he still couldn't decide what direction to take, what he wanted out of life. The questions burdened him like a yoke atop his shoulders. *"Will he understand....no he won't....it's best not to dwell on it."*

Michael was a young man of medium height and build. His face was slender with straight cut lines of muscle, accented by his warm blues eyes. They held an air of innocence and gaiety, a rarity in a city such as this. His light brown hair was short but unkempt, much like the carefree manner with which he conducted himself. His attire was simple, a brown jacket, blue jeans, and worn sneakers. Michael's peers had generally considered him good looking but he had never paid much attention to the fact.

He walked quickly and with purpose, noticing for a brief moment his breath as it crystallized before him. He stopped suddenly at the door of the cafe, hesitating briefly.

"You can turn back now," he said to himself. He shook his head as if to answer his own question, firmly grasped the handle and opened the door with confidence.

When he stepped in he was immediately confronted by the warmth of the café. The air warmed his numbed face and hands bringing to attention how cold he had actually been. His eyes panned the room quickly, noticing nothing in particular, except at the far end of the café a man sitting alone at a table. The man noticed him and gave a slight wave of recognition. Michael could feel his confidence slowly depleting like the sands of an hour glass. The distance between him and the empty seat across from the man seemed like an eternity, a far away place that he had no desire to travel to.

"Why am I here....too late to turn back now....you had your chance." He slowly walked the distance, hesitantly smiling as he sat down.

"Hi dad."

"Hello son, you're late."

Michael felt no guilt, disregarded the accusation and continued. "How are you?"

"Fine, and you?"

"I'm good."

His father glared at him indifferently, with an expression of expectation. His bright blue eyes were cold and calculating, seeming to pierce through his own. Michael felt a slight moment of uneasiness as his father looked at him. It vanished however, when he realized how worn his figure had become from the years of resentment and bitterness. By his face one would guess that over a decade had passed from their last encounter to this. In reality it had been just under two years, but one could never have told. Henry was a tall, powerful man with a much older, mature complexion than that of his son. The innocence had long been drained away and lines of bitterness etched the curves of his face. His mouth curled in the corners with an arrogant contempt, a morose spectacle of a man. Henry was a lawyer for 'Brown, Williams, and Petersen,' one of the cities top firms. He was always well dressed and carried himself with pride. The sole driving force for which he did everything in life was success, to compete. It was because of his capitalistic ideals that no time or energy was left for the other things in life. He had always viewed emotion as the weaker side of human nature and treated his relationships likewise. Henry had very little respect for a man with no goals, no driving force that

pushed him to succeed, and because of this Michael felt he had always resented him.

Michael had finished his 5th semester of college but could not apply himself to one particular field of study. He could not grasp the idea of putting one's future into a singular common goal. Because of this he continually struggled to find his field of expertise, the one thing that set him apart. "*Please don't ask about school,*" he thought to himself, but knew that it was the only question on his father's mind.

"Since you probably won't bring it up, how is school?"

"Can I get you gentlemen anything to drink," the waitress unconsciously interrupted.

"I'll have a Coke," Michael answered with a feeling of relief, knowing this would delay the inevitable if only for a brief moment.

"Coffee," Henry replied gruffly, making it clear to her that she had interrupted this prestigious meeting.

"I'll be right back with those drinks," glancing briefly at Michael as she turned to walk away. He noticed it and pondered the idea of approaching her, but the idea quickly escaped him, as he had more pressing concerns to deal with.

"It's going well. I just started my Christmas break."

"Have you picked a major?"

"No...no...not yet."

"Why not?"

"I just really can't decide what I want to spend the rest of my life doing."

"Weren't you decided on being a physician?"

"Another eight years of school doesn't really appeal to me any longer," he exclaimed with a hint of sarcasm.

"School is good for you, it builds character."

"*As if you should be the one to talk of character,*" Michael thought to himself. He felt frustrated, he knew this would not lead to a solution; nothing would be solved by having this conversation. Yet something kept him there, a sense of desire to stay a talk with this man, his father.

"Here you are gentlemen, one Coke and one coffee. Would either of you like something to eat?"

Henry studied the menu, while Michael sat waiting. He had eaten there several times before and knew what he wanted.

"Do you need a few minutes sir," she asked innocently? Michael hadn't recognized her and could tell she was new from her jubilant politeness.

"Yes please," Michael answered knowing his father wouldn't. As he sat waiting, he slowly looked about the café, intently watching people come and go. Through the frosted window of the café he noticed the merchant shops across the street. They stretched for about two blocks, a strip of home in an otherwise unfriendly city. There they stood nestled between the tall, harsh towers of businesses. He had passed by them many times before and they had always given him a sense of comfort, longing. Maybe he admired the shop owners, or maybe it was the fact that they were different. He had always hated the idea of devoting one's life to the pursuit of money, compromising values for success, and had always found anyone who did so to be empty, devoid of character. Henry glanced over the top of his menu and Michael could feel his eyes fixed on him. He turned back around to boldly meet them.

"What about law school," his father asked with a hint of amusement.

"I don't really want to follow in your footsteps." It was not meant to be offensive but Henry reacted subtly, almost as if he had been disarmed momentarily.

"Is there anything else that interests you?"

"I'm not sure yet, but I'll let you know when I figure it out."

"You need to have a means to an end; a goal to reach for, if not you'll be in college till you're an old man."

"Then I guess I'll have built myself quite a character by that time," Michael replied with sarcasm. He grinned as if to let his father know he had been joking. Henry did not smile but looked at his son in bewilderment. He had never been able to recognize the simple joy in laughter, never quite understood it, and for that had never been fond of humor.

"Well there is no use talking about school, since you can't make up your mind about it."

"I guess not."

The waitress returned and purposefully spoke to Michael. "Have you decided

what you'd like?"

"I'll have the cheeseburger and fries," said Henry, realizing she was not looking at him.

"And I will have the club with fries."

"Okay, I'll have those out in a bit".

Michael looked at his father in amazement. "All that for a cheeseburger and fries?"

"Well that's what I felt like having."

"So you weren't just trying to give her a hard time," Michael said accusingly.

"By all means no, whatever would give you that idea?"

"Well I know how you like to test people, and be in control of the situation."

"It's not like she has a difficult job," Henry said with a smirk.

"What are you talking about, being a waitress is no walk-in-the-park. You're on your feet, constantly moving, and have to deal with irritable customers such as yourself."

"I wasn't that bad to her," Henry said defiantly.

"We'll see when it's time to pay the check," Michael calmly said, while looking off to the side. Michael could sense Henry was becoming defensive and irrate, and knew he needed to change the subject quickly or face disaster. It was too late however and Henry had to have the last word.

"You're just like your mother," Henry said sadistically.

"I should be so lucky. Let's just drop the whole thing." Michael said with frustration. Henry knew he had lost face with the last comment, but realized there hadn't been anything to lose.

"How is your mother?" Henry asked with scornful reproach.

"Do you care?"

"Not really," Henry's final words were sharp and devastating. Michael was unaffected however, as if the words had fallen on hardened scars of his past. He had become desensitized from years of harsh words such as these. A long silence followed and neither made an effort to talk. Instead both looked about the café as if something more interesting, or important, were taking place around them. The waitress returned with food in hand. "Here you are gentlemen."

“That was fast,” Henry praised in astonishment.

“Yeah, they’re usually pretty quick here.” Michael replied. The familiar silence fell over the small table and they both sat quietly eating. Michael wanted to speak but couldn’t find the words. They choked off in the back of his throat and he felt suffocated. He wanted to stand up and scream but his legs felt weak. Neither looked at each other while eating, but merely stared off into some unknown train of thought. Time seemed to stop and out of curiosity Michael glanced up at the clock on the far wall. “*I swear it’s moving backwards,*” he thought to himself. The second hand casually ticked away the minutes and he felt it laughing at him, taunting him. The waitress stopped by several times during the meal and these few moments seemed like his only escape from his thoughts. At last she delivered the bill with a smile, and as she walked away he swore to himself he would return alone.

“You gentlemen have a nice evening,” she said with finality. Henry pulled out his wallet and dropped money casually over the linen cloth. Michael could tell this was awkward for him too and felt somewhat relieved. He finally mustered the strength to speak again and as he opened his mouth, Henry’s phone rang muffling the words that poured out. They fell upon deaf ears as Henry talked loudly to the absent party. “*Now he has something to say,*” Michael thought to himself as he tuned out his father’s conversation.

“Sorry about that,” Henry exclaimed.

“Still working those sixty hour weeks, I see.”

“Of course, I wouldn’t have it any other way.” Henry hesitated for a moment then proceeded. “Listen, I know it’s been two years since we have really talked, and it’s partially my fault. We live in the same city and there is really no excuse for us not to visit each other once in a while.”

“I suppose, just let me know when you can fit me into your busy schedule.”

“Well how about lunch sometime this week?”

“Do you actually want to go or are you just being polite?”

“A little of both, but I thought you might like to.”

“Okay, but I won’t hold my breath.” The two stood up and walked side-by-side towards the door. They didn’t exchange any physical goodbye, however both were

relieved and filled with a sense of satisfaction. Henry opened the door to the café and Michael boldly walked out into the winter evening heading one way, while Henry took the other way. Both resuming their daily schedules as before.