



Published in *More Or Less Democracy & New Media* in 2012 by Future Leaders (www.futureleaders.com.au)

As Time Goes By

Bill Smith

It had started to rain soft, gentle teardrops on the windshield. To him it felt appropriate, almost expected. A reflection of his own feelings, but he must not show this. He does not want to tarnish what he has left. The slow rumbles of the cars next to him seem to make time irrelevant today. Yet, to him, time he spent with his son was everything.

He looked to his left, a jerk of the head, a stolen glance. He doesn't want to show his face in case it betrays him. His son is looking out of the window, excited, eager to be on his way.

'I don't think I've ever seen you this excited,' he said casually to him.

'I s'pose,' his son replied. He was wed to these answers nowadays. One sentence, if that, three words usually.

It was mostly true how he hadn't seen him that excited. Although his son tried to hide it, he wasn't a very good actor; a trait, he hoped, he hadn't inherited from his father.

This thought reminded him of his son's first day at school. The whole morning he and his wife had been asking him questions to see if he was all right. Like now, he had pretended there was nothing wrong, simply another day. Unfortunately, Helen hadn't been well enough to go with him. He remembered her frail face, pale complexion. She never did get to see him go to school, or any other of those similar occasions, like today. It had just been him and Tom, silence in the car, not really expressing the apprehension they both felt, like most men

do. They had walked up to the gate together, silently, until he felt himself walking alone for a few steps. He turned and saw his son looking at him, then looking down towards the floor.

‘I don’t want to go,’ he mumbled.

‘Why? What’s wrong?’

‘I don’t want to go, I just want mum.’ He knew his son was on the verge of tears, and if it were any other reason, he would have been strict. Yet how could he be? They hadn’t explained to Tom about his mother, but he could tell there was something wrong, they had been so close.

‘Listen,’ he said taking off his hat, ‘I know this is hard for you. But you’ve got to be brave today. Have courage.’ He placed the red hat on to the boy’s head. ‘I got that hat the first day I met your mother; if you’re feeling sad, or scared, think of it, and of her.’ His son, with his freckled face and toothy smile, looked at him with eyes — her eyes — brighter than he had seen in a while. He patted him on the head and they walked in, together.

These moments of closeness were rare between them. He only remembered a few. Tom had always been a bright boy, a gift from his mother. He had trouble answering his questions. Then, one day he came home from school, unusually despondent. Some boys had picked on him because he was bad at football. He grabbed a ball and Tom and headed off for the park. They spent hours trying to hone Tom’s skills, with the ball going in every direction except towards the target. It started to rain. With a feeling of defeat, Tom said it might be time to head home.

‘Are you bothered by rain, Tom? Things are always going to hold you back in life; you’re just going to have to push past them.’ Tom’s eyes shone and he grinned.

‘Ok, let’s go,’ Tom said, the red hat sopping on his head.

Treasured memories, soon all he would have of his son.

He looked at himself in the rearview mirror. How old he was; grey hairs sprouted through his ever-receding hairline, wrinkles and late nights at work were etched upon his face. He looked towards Tom again, quickly and fervently, but with more

understanding. He was much like he once was, full black hair, strong chin, showing the stereotypical signs of youth, of progression. Tom was the future; he had his life to lead now. As his father, he had done his part.

‘Just through here, Dad,’ Tom said.

‘What a quick journey!’ It felt unreal to him how quickly it had all gone. All of it. From boy to man, right under his nose.

‘Do you need any help carrying this?’ They had arrived at the station.

‘Nah, I’m good, Dad. I’ll see you later.’ His son stuck his arm out, the traditional way for a father and son to depart. Today, tradition seemed foolish, ludicrous. He pulled his son towards him with an embrace he hoped would say more than he could.

‘Ah, all right Dad, I’ve got to go now.’ As he watched his son get on the train, the full realisation of what he was losing hit him.

‘Visit, when you’re free!’ he called.

The train slowly moved into gear and sped off. The memory of his son waving overwhelmed him, he practically collapsed onto a sticky, plastic chair. He longed to burst into tears. Only once before had he felt like this, next to a hospital bed, his wife occupying it. Memories cascaded in his mind.

That was different though, very different. He should be happy. He looked at the empty track and down the tunnel it proceeded, he shouldn’t be sad. His son had started his own journey.

He rose from the seat, searched within his coat pocket and pulled out what he had felt the entire trip, a source of strength beyond measure of any other object. Over and over in his hand he turned it, drinking in everything it meant. Then once he hit the open air, he placed the red hat on his head, breathed cool, fresh air into his lungs and headed off to a home of memories.



Bill Smith wrote this in 2011 when he was in Year 11 at Trinity College in Western Australia.