

The Aftermath of Regret

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The rain splattered onto the glass windows, the thunder struck loudly outside a small clinic in the heart of the city, which was about a few miles away from Throop University and the Shakespeare Club. Doctor Johnson, dressed in a white robe, peeked outside the window, only to have his view scattered by rain drops trickling down the glass. Sitting in his personal room, which has two doors, one leading to the outside and one leading to inside the clinic, Dr. Johnson took a sip of his favorite wine from his flask. Suddenly, someone knocks on the wooden door of the clinic.

Dr. Johnson scans the large grandfather clock in the corner of his room, *one in the morning, what would someone want at one in the morning?* Slowly getting up from his chair, Dr. Johnson opens the door, a red-headed woman around the age of forty held a blanket in her hand, which seemed to have wrapped shoes inside.

“Take this, Doc, this is important.” The woman said. She handed the blanket to Dr. Johnson, and quickly paced away.

“Sister Alicia!”

“Take care of him well!”

“Him?” Dr. Johnson was perplexed. He glanced at his medical equipments and then placed the blanket on the table. Slowly and carefully, he unwrapped the blanket, only to find a baby boy.

“Wow!” Dr. Johnson exclaimed.

In the steady weather of southern California, time disguised itself as a stagnant being. Only, that boy wrapped in the blanket could no longer fit in that blanket, and Dr. Johnson's voice became hoarse.

"Frank! Bring me water." Dr. Johnson coughed.

A fourteen-year old young man, dressed in a stained white shirt and baggy jeans, brought a half-filled glass of water to the doctor. Dr. Johnson looked at the young man, and let out a sigh, "Frank, why do you look so messy?"

Frank tried to wipe the stain off his shirt, only to realize those stains were an accumulation of dirt spots throughout the fifteen years, not a temporary spot picked up from sweeping the floor fifteen minutes ago.

Dr. Johnson shook his head, and looked at Frank despairingly, "Frank, I'm not feeling well."

Frank kneeled down on the ground, and said, "Dr. Johnson! God will not let a good person like you die!"

"Frank, you know, once a man, seemingly homeless, who was mightily sick, came at my door at midnight? He was a disaster, he appeared in front of me, like how the Second Beast appeared out of the Earth. I could not help but feel a little scared." Dr. Johnson's voice trailed off as he spoke, he paused for a few seconds, and then continued, "He asked me for help. He told me he felt pain everywhere, and told me no hospitals in Pasadena would take him in. He told me I was his last hope, his only hope."

Frank listened pensively, “Dr., you were able to save him right? You can do anything, you are the best doctor in the city of Pasadena!”

Dr. Johnson shook his head, “Sometimes a man’s got to go. I tried my best, but I did not understand his illness. The man told me he first got sick when he picked up a rat and threw it away, and then the same illness killed his daughter. He said a lot of his friends and extended family also contracted this disease during his daughter’s last rite. The man was panicking all over, I told him to calm down.”

“You are shaking, Dr. Johnson! I have never seen you shake so badly!” Frank exclaimed, and he was shocked.

Dr. Johnson took a sip of water and said, “I asked the man where he was from, and he told me downtown Los Angeles. I told him it is too late and I can see his case the next morning.”

Frank interrupted, “did you not...”

Dr. Johnson stopped Frank from talking, and clenched his fist, he took a huge sigh, and continued, “The next morning, I got a call from my good friend, a doctor in Los Angeles, it was the day before Halloween, and he told me he believes that a plague may have broken out in the Los Angeles area. He told me that he found out at funeral at a church, and the person identified as the index-patient of the plague is nowhere to be found.”

Frank could not restrain himself, and shouted out, “The man who came to you for help was the index patient! Wait, and then what happened?”

Dr. Johnson chuckled, and coughed heavily. He took a sip of water, and went on, “And then, I closed my clinic for Halloween. October 30th to November 5th.”

Frank was silent, he did not know what to say, after half a minute of silence, Frank started, “Doctor...”

Dr. Johnson sighed, “I know, Frank, I know. I was a coward. I was scared. I did not want to risk my life. It was a plague we knew nothing about. Frank, my whole life, I was a coward. I just want you to know that. I evaded the World War I draft a few years ago by the help of a friend. I do not dare to risk my own life. Frank, don’t be a coward like me. Don’t ever have regrets”

Frank, fiery with his youthful soul, said, “I won’t be.”

Dr. Johnson let out a bitter smile, “Think of me as you may, Frank. I have had plenty of remorse, that’s why on a night fourteen years ago, I wanted to redeem myself.”

Dr. Johnson shook his head, and quietly told Frank, “Frank, I need some rest, now will you please let me rest peacefully. I told you everything I wanted to tell you.”

Frank nodded and exited.

“Dr. Johnson is gone.”

Frank sobbed next to the coffin in the cathedral, and the priest, Father Les, could not calm him down. Frank yelled at the coffin, “You are a coward, you can’t even finish your damn life, you can’t finish your damn business. You could not save people, you could not...”

“Maybe you ought to have a moment here yourself.” Father Les exited the room as he left Frank in peace.

The paintings on the walls of the cathedral hung lifelessly. Frank scanned through them: a white vase with pink flowers dangling from inside the vase, with a droplet of water about to

fall from the flower; a Father saving a young child's life, who floats in mid-air emits light; a young child touched his face to a goat; Frank looked back at the coffin, bit his lips, took off one of his shoes, and threw it at the painting depicting the priest saving the life of the young child.

The painting cracked between the young child and the priest after Frank's shoe hit it.

Hearing the glass shattering, a church janitor runs into the main hall.

"What's the deal, young man?" The janitor asked, putting on his rubber gloves ready to clean the mess up.

"Nothing. I will be leaving now." Frank claimed assertively.

"What did the freaking painting ever do to you?" The janitor walked towards the pieces of shattered glasses on the ground, and examined the glass pieces.

Frank shivered, "I don't know."

The janitor slowly walked to Frank and gently patted him on the shoulder, "It's okay, grief is interpreted differently to all of us. Doc was a good person. I'm Jason by the way."

"Jason..." Frank muttered.

"Yes, Jason, what is your name, young man?"

"There is no grief in me. Johnson was a hypocrite." Frank broke in tears and ran out the door from the church.

Father Les re-entered the room, and asked Jason, "what's the commotion about? Oh Lord! The painting!"

Jason froze for a moment, and then explained, "Father, I had an accident..."

“Why are you eating bread crumbs off the ground? You can choke on the dirt, get infected by dirty things, like...like dirt.” A middle-aged man spoke as watched a mid- twenty year-old young man scrape remains of a molded bread.

The young man did not respond, but shoo'd away the pigeons who were also desperately looking for scatters of food on the ground. The pigeons flew away, dashed across the sky and swirled along the arc of the roof of the abandoned shack.

The young man gnawed on the crumbs, and he bit into the rock hard pieces, and painfully swallowed his dinner for the day. He looked at the middle-aged man and shook his head, “You said you would help me eat, Living Tree, but when have you given me anything in the past month?”

“Frank, I told you, accomplishing certain tasks would get you certain food, like food, like things you eat, you can get that by doing things, like things for me.” Living Tree smirked, and stepped on a bread crumb on the ground, and flattened it with his foot. “That’s not human food, not even the wild dogs would eat that, not that you are any better than them, like I mean you are like more worthless than a dog, like you have less value than a dog.” Living Tree laughed.

Frank felt chilly, very chilly. He was not sure if it had more to do with the wind signaling the night fall, or the unsheltered, unfed and unnoticed life he had been living for the past nine years. He just wanted to live by himself away from the real world’s pretentiousness. It was difficult to accept that his hero had not the slightest signs of courage. Frank no longer believed in virtue, as those who presented themselves as integrous hid another side of themselves away from the public, but they could not hide that from Frank.

Through Frank's years he strived for survival. He was no longer provided with food or a roof. At first he begged for food around the streets of Pasadena everyday, then he found out that it was more efficient for him to eat less frequently than everyday. At one point he stopped caring what he was eating, he has had cat food, mud, leaves, and bark. Sometimes he would find flowers that taste very sweet and juicy. Sometimes he would find a good-hearted soul who would buy him a hot dog for the day. Sometimes he would starve for two days straight. He learned to live with it and move on.

That was until he met Living Tree a year ago. At first Living Tree offered to help Frank get a job and help him eat. At first Living Tree would just have Frank make copies of these books he had, which Frank gladly did, and Living Tree provided food to Frank. Not long after, Living Tree started asking Frank to dig things out of the trash, and while Frank was reluctant, he still did it for the sake of survival. However, recently, Living Tree asked Frank to break into the farmer Josh's house and "take his secret savings and we can both split it, he has food which you can eat and jewelry passed down from his mother which was worth thousands of dollars."

Frank glared at Living Tree, and said, "The man works from dawn to night to feed his three-year-old and seven-year-old daughters, and the one time I couldn't eat for three days, he saw me and decided to feed me. You are insane if you think I am going to..."

"Why has he not fed you again?" Living Tree laughed.

"I don't want to rely on anyone to always give me food for nothing, I don't believe in good hearts."

"And who's giving you food right now, who's giving you stuff to eat, who's feeding you?" Living Tree picked up a rock and threw it at farmer Josh's house.

Frank let go of the old memories from his current thoughts. He was still cold and hungry, Living Tree stood there, it had been a month and Living Tree was still trying to persuade Frank to break into farmer John's house.

“Frank, we are out of time here, I wanted to help you and save you from starving, but you won't take my help, and take my advice. I can go do it myself, and you won't get any of it, don't regret anything when you are out here scraping for dirt with pigeons and squirrels again.”

Frank remained silent.

A week or so after the night Living Tree told him that he “had less value than a dog”, Frank paced around his habitat by the abandoned shack, looking for any sort of sustenance. He felt alarmed that he had not seen Living Tree in a while now.

It was a rainy night, which is Frank's favorite nights. There were no pigeons and squirrels around to fight for food with Frank; there was water for Frank; there were also memories of nights where he and Dr. Johnson would travel to patients' houses in Pasadena so the sick souls did not have to make a trek to the clinic in midst of the pouring rain.

Living Tree's absence had bothered Frank. Frank knew Living Tree is up to, well, somewhere, something, perhaps of no good. All of a sudden, Frank was cold, he was shivering. The weather was way colder than Frank had ever remembered it to be. *I need shelter*. Frank thought to himself. Instinctively, Frank crossed his arms and tightened his shoulders and ran towards the farmer Josh's house.

As he approached the door of farmer Josh's house, he heard two voices. Who would that be? Frank thought. Farmer Josh lives alone and goes through his plowing, reaping, herding

rituals all by himself. Frank had always respected how Josh, at a not-so-young age of forty-five, could finish all his hard labor alone. It's not that Josh didn't like people, Josh welcomed Frank into his house so kindly when Frank needed food and shelter the most, it's just that Josh was accustomed to living by himself.

"Yeah... I need to thank you a lot for today." Josh chuckled, "I don't expect help, but I like it."

"Yeah, no problem!"

Frank thought he recognized the second voice, it sounded so familiar. The one line was not enough evidence for Frank to make out who the voice belonged to.

"I will come back tomorrow as well!" Frank heard the second voice again and this time he had no doubts who the voice belonged to. It's *him*. Frank assured himself. *Whatever he was doing there in Josh's house, it's suspicious.*

Frank decided to keep observing the occasion. He scanned around for a cozy place he could utilize as a roof. He gazed into the distance and saw a pile of wood packed neatly laying on the ground. "Perfect." Frank muttered to himself, and jogged towards the pile of wood, his shoes sinking in the muddy water and his hair drenched in the raindrops. Mud splashed to his face and into his eyes and his mouth.

"I can make it." Frank sprinted towards the pile of wood with his eyes closed as he choked on the mud.

Frank opened his eyes, and the sunlight did not have any trouble finding him. *What happend? Did I die? Did I faint?* Frank got up and his back was sore, then he realized he had

been lying on the pile of wood for the whole night. He heard voices mingled with bird chirps from some distance away.

“I am going into town for a little bit today, I will be back soon.”

“I can handle it here while you are gone.”

“You sure buddy? It is quite a load.” The farmer chuckled.

“I can handle it, I’m use to hard labor, after all, we get what we want in life after accomplishing certain tasks, don’t we?”

“You are an excellent man! I will be off, take care!”

The farmer carried a bushel on his back and trekked towards the city. Frank watched the farmer disappear into distance and suddenly someone pinned him to the ground.

“Hi, Frank, thought I wouldn’t notice you in this noticeable place making noticeable sounds, did you?” Living Tree chuckled.

“What are your intentions?” Frank pushed Living Tree off him and stood up.

“Intentions? About? Me helping the poor farmer? I’m trying to do good deeds!” Living Tree exclaimed sarcastically. “My little dog isn’t capable of doing the job for me so of course I am going to do it myself!”

“What are you trying to do?!” Frank furiously inquired Living Tree.

“Make some money obviously, now Josh is gone, I could take some really good stuff.” Living Tree looked at Frank happily, and teased him, “Want to share?”

“Fuck off.” Frank told Living Tree.

“You know what Josh’s biggest weakness is? He trusts way too many people, he acts like the world is a good place. He acts like he trust people, but he lives by himself. You see the irony

here? The world just killed each other off like fifteen years ago. What wrong have you ever done Frank? Yet why are you homeless? You know, I want to get all the goodies in Josh's house. Not that I need them, not even that I want them, I just want him to understand how people truly are. I been working for him for free for a week now to build my good image in his brain. How do you think he would feel when that image is completely shattered? I am doing this for his own good, Frank." Living Tree smiled bitterly, "You know why I wanted you to do it at first? Because he liked and trusted you, but since you won't do it, I got to do it myself."

"You are disgusting." Frank mumbled.

Living Tree transitioned from his bitter smile to a fierce glare. Frank had never seen Living Tree like this before, as the Living Tree he knew always wore the mask, the mask of jest and confidence. Frank did not dare to look directly into Living Tree's eyes, but he could not only sense Living Tree's anger, but also his desperation.

Living Tree pulled out a knife from his pocket and mouthed to Frank, "Get out of my way."

Frank stood his ground. He was too scared to move.

"You know, Frank, twenty or so years ago, my father became really sick. Then my sister became infected with the same disease. My father felt guilty that he was spreading this disease, so he ran away from home. He went to see the best and most good-hearted doctor around Los Angeles. Took my sick father half a day to get to Pasadena, and guess what? That doctor lied to him. My mother died soon after too, and I been scraping a living for myself."

Frank connected the dots, twenty-years ago, Pasadena, disease, he knew exactly what happened.

“Most good-hearted doctor in L.A, ha! Biggest hypocrite more like. Now get out of my way.” Living Tree raised the knife.

Frank, don't be a coward like me. Don't ever have regrets. The doctor's advice now rang in Frank's head freshly. He understood Living Tree more, they both were forced into unfortunate situations by the circumstances of their lives;

Frank breathed, and stood his ground, firmly this time, by choice and not by fear. “No.” Frank said firmly.

Living Tree pounced on Frank with his knife, Frank grabbed Living Tree's arms. Panicking, Living Tree flicked the knife into Frank's chest. It cut through Frank's clothes and his skin, yet it did no major damage and Frank had possession of the knife now. Frank threw a punch to Living Tree's face that knocked Living Tree to the ground. A stream of blood started trailing from Living Tree's nose. Panicking, Living Tree touched his nose and trembled at the sight of his own blood. Frank raised the knife and grabbed Living Tree. Suddenly in Frank's head, a word resounded. *Regret.* Frank did not want to have regrets, Living Tree was not simply a criminal who needed to die. Living Tree was a real person, he had his own story, his own desperation, and although Frank never really saw it, probably his own joy.

Frank closed his eyes, and...

(The End)

