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Fiction Writing

No Regrets

Jared let out a long, deep sigh as he boarded the commuter train. He had always thought of himself as an old soul. After all, he waited until age 30 to freeze. Most of his friends had done it at 24 or 25, some as early as 21. For a year or two, he had decided that he would never undergo the procedure—just allow his body to age naturally like in the old days. But when the first strand of gray appeared in his auburn hair, he quickly changed his mind. Freezing, of course, did nothing for life expectancy—that had been a stipulation from the beginning in order to keep the population at a sustainable level. It simply locked in your physical appearance for a good fifty years. Once the effects wore off, as they inevitably did, people went to a thaw center for a quick albeit natural death. It really was easier that way, Jared thought. Before freezing was developed, his grandmother had died of Alzheimers—a slow, miserable descent from brilliance to wretchedness, one neuron at a time. Now diseases like that were a thing of the past. When it was over, it was over, and everyone just accepted it.

Truth be told, things were not far from over for Jared. Today was his fiftieth thirtieth birthday, not that anyone was counting. To all his friends, he was just thirty-year-old Jared the entrepreneur. If real age had been an embarrassing topic before, it was now downright humiliating. Sure, his experience was valuable, but real age was the sort of thing that you only discussed at the end of a long week after one too many drinks.

Thirty years young, and not a second of regret. It sounded trite, perhaps, but since the day of his freezing, Jared had never looked back. Really, who would choose a life of gray hair and wrinkles, achy bones and a swollen prostate over fifty solid years of marathons, parties, and romance? It was better for society, too. Why waste decades of your life cooped up in a retirement home or leeching away social security benefits when you could be working at the trendiest companies, buying all the coolest new products, and otherwise fueling America’s economic engine of consumption until the day you died? True, in a matter of months or years his smooth young skin would slacken, his thoughts would become muddled, and suddenly one morning half a century of aches and pains would hit him like a freight train, but it was a small price to pay for the fifty great years the procedure had given him.

Just as he had plugged in his headphones for a soothing ride home, Jared saw an oldster approach him. The man’s hair, or what was left of it, clung to his shiny head like strands of old dental floss. His hands were adulterated with liver spots and his face lined with the sort of wrinkles Jared only saw in vintage photos. His charcoal suit stood out like a sore thumb in a sea of brightly colored pants and gently glowing Digi-Shirts, making him look more like a moving museum piece than an actual human. Great, fifty times thirty and I have to sit next to the grim reaper himself, Jared thought. Suddenly the oldster called out to him, “Jared Baker! How are you, old friend? It’s been so long. What was it, class of two thousand—”

“Not important,” Jared said, cutting him off with a chuckle. He was racking his brain to remember who this person was, how they had met, when they possibly could have gone to school together. Of course, most of the oldsters went off the grid, so it was hard to remember them anyway amidst the deluge of new photos and comments from his friends, who were always travelling to exotic new locations, posting reviews of the latest and greatest restaurants, and providing endless evidence of their amazingly busy and fantastically happy lives.

“Anyway, it’s been…what, half a century since we were both writing philosophy papers in that dingy little dorm room? Man, those were the days…”

Suddenly, it came back to him. Kyle Shepherd, his brilliant, handsome, talented college roommate. Really, this musty-smelling old dishrag of a person was the one and only Kyle Shepherd who once upon a time wanted to change the world? “Kyle, it’s been so long I hardly recognized you!” Jared exclaimed. “What are you doing out here?”

“Just had to sign a contract in the city,” he said. He did not seem phased in the slightest by his appearance or the stares it elicited. “You?”

Jared explained that he was headed home from work, which inevitably launched them into a conversation about their careers. Jared told stories about his latest project developing a one-stop entertainment aggregator app, and Kyle explained how he and his wife had come to manage a thaw center in the area.

Unlike most of Jared’s friends, Kyle had always seemed eager to settle down. In fact, he married Jenny the summer after graduating from college, which seemed early at the time and would be practically criminal these days. Few people married at all, and no one got married before freezing. Why limit yourself to one entrée in the smorgasbord of life’s romantic opportunities? Jared had enjoyed plenty of relationships, but he only seriously thought about marriage once, with Bernie. He and Bernie had been together, although not exclusive, for nearly ten years, more than long enough for the novelty and infatuation to mature into the kind of companionship he imagined married couples had in their best moments. But eventually more exciting prospects came into Jared’s life, and it was time to move on. Maybe that’s why Kyle and Jenny had chosen not to freeze, as an insurance against ever finding something better. After they turned 31 and were no longer eligible for freezing, neither could stand a chance in the dating pool of eternal youth, so for better or for worse they were stuck with each other. It seemed like an awfully boring life.

“Jared, why don’t you join us for dinner tonight? Our granddaughters are here for a visit, and I know they’d love to meet you.”

Granddaughters? Granddaughters!? There was hardly a notion of paternity anymore, much less grandchildren. Most children grew up communally in taxpayer-funded nurseries before entering a public boarding school. Why entrust novices with all the responsibility of raising a child when the job could be done better and more efficiently by a team of well-trained experts? Jared himself had championed the program as a way to give every child an equal chance for success, fighting the naysayers who saw it as another scheme for parents to shirk responsibility.

“Well?” Kyle said, still looking at Jared expectantly?

Was this going to be his birthday celebration? Dinner with oldsters at the thaw center? He was curious, though. The grandchild element was just too fascinating to pass up, and he had never actually been to a thaw center before. “Alright, why not?” he said.

For the rest of the train ride, Jared updated Kyle on the status of their old friends. Will had moved to New York a few years ago and was still working in investment banking. Caroline made it big in the opera world and had just returned from performing in Paris. It was amazing that Kyle didn’t know any of this, but perhaps that was the consequence of no social media.

“I guess Jenny and I have sort of become hermits,” Kyle admitted with a sigh. “It’s just that between caring for our own family and all the residents, we thought it best to focus on the people around us. You know, the people who need us the most.”

Jared raised his eyebrows but didn’t say anything. He needed no one, nor did anyone need him. What a terrible thing, to be dependent on another human being like that.

“Okay, and I don’t have a clue how to use the dang stuff. We just got behind and never caught up!” Kyle exclaimed.

“Well, some things never change, I guess,” Jared said with a chuckle. Kyle had always been the last to jump on the technology bandwagon even in college. “Remember when you tried to send me that paper letter after graduation? It was months before I finally checked my mailbox and found it there. Then the ink was so smudged that I couldn’t even read it!”

“It was supposed to be a personal touch! You know, a handwritten letter?”

As they reminisced over the details of the letter incident, the train slowed to a halt at its final destination in San Jose. A short car ride later, they found themselves at the gates of Tithonus Senior Living Center. Of course, the term senior *living* center was only a vestige from days gone by, as the residents were only living in the strictest sense of the word and even then weren’t said to live very long. It was a modern building shaped like a giant glass egg with windows tinted so dark as to preclude even the slightest guess as to what occurred inside. Jared was curious but apprehensive. Thaw centers were mysterious places that few people liked to even think about, much less visit.

As they entered, the staff greeted them kindly at the desk. The environment inside was austere but clean. Beyond the front desk was a cavernous atrium illuminated by sunlight that shone through the glass at the top of the egg. In the distance a gloomy-looking oldster in baggy sweats sat with his eyes glued to the TV. Otherwise, the place seemed nearly deserted.

“Most residents are still napping right now,” Kyle said. “Just wait an hour or two until dinner time, and it will be a zoo down here.”

They made their way to the elevator and up to Kyle’s dwelling, a donut-shaped apartment on the tenth floor near the very top of the egg. As Kyle walked in the front door, he saw two children arranging a small army of stuffed animals in neat rows on the living room floor.

“Grandpa!” said the younger one, running towards him with a smile. She looked to be maybe nine or ten, although Jared really had no idea.

“Playing school again today, are we?” chuckled Kyle. “Analise, Lizzie, this is Jared. He was my roommate back when *I* was in school.”

“Hi Jared! Wanna play with us?” Analise asked.

Before he could respond, Jenny walked in. “Is that Jared Miller? Jared, it’s been so, so long. How are you?” she asked, clasping his hands in hers. After spending time with Kyle, Jared was more prepared for the changes in Jenny. Her long blonde hair had faded to gray, lending her a certain air of dignity. Her face appeared worn and tired but happy, with wrinkles from years of smiling and laughing etched in around her eyes and mouth. Her hands felt delicate but at the same time resilient, as if they were determined to continue going about their business regardless of what the fragile bones had to say about it.

“I’m well, thanks” Jared responded. “It’s really great to see both of you again. I thought you had just dropped off the face of the Earth!”

“Well, sometimes it does feel that way,” Jenny admitted. “But dinner’s ready. Why don’t you join us?”

They sat down to a delicious meal of meatloaf, vegetables, and rolls. Cooking had become somewhat of a lost art, as most people ate at work or went out to eat. Jared couldn’t remember the last time he’d had a real home cooked meal. It tasted good and felt satisfying in a way restaurant food rarely did. Over dinner they chatted about all the mundane pleasantries—work, old friends, sports. Every few minutes, Lizzie interrupted with a proclamation that she would absolutely not eat her vegetables today, which was inevitably followed by Kyle or Jenny’s explanation for why she needed to do so. Finally, when Jenny threatened to deprive her of dessert, Lizzie reluctantly stuffed a few pieces of broccoli into her mouth, scrunching her face into a terrible scowl each time she chewed. It was as pitiful as it was endearing.

But before any dessert could be served, they were interrupted by the buzz of an intercom. “Dr. Shepherd,” said the voice, “Ann is making a scene and refusing to eat again. Could you help us out down here? You’re the only one she listens to.” Kyle and Jenny exchanged a knowing look.

“Be there in a minute,” Jenny said, getting up to remove her apron and walk out the door. Kyle stood up to do the dishes, and Analise and Lizzie ran in the bedroom to play, seeming to sense that dessert would be a long time in coming.

“Jenny is the psychiatrist for the facility,” Kyle explained. “You’d be surprised how many people lose it here. They say it’s months to death after you thaw, but for some it’s actually years. A lot of the time people just can’t deal with seeing their thawed reflection and living cooped up in a facility. About half of them are on antidepressants.”

Jared shuddered at the thought of being imprisoned in a thaw center for years, caught in a sick limbo between life and death. Still, it was better than dying one day at a time over a period of decades, each new wrinkle or achy bone a reminder of one’s own fragility and mortality. “Kyle,” he said cautiously, “I know you see the dark side of freezing, but I think we’re better off this way, we really are. Sure, death is hard. It’s always been hard. But, you know, staying young and healthy and resilient helps. It’s let me make the most of life.”

Kyle sighed, looking out the window and into the atrium below. Residents were hobbling in for dinner, many clinging to walkers, some pushed in wheelchairs, and a select few walking without assistance. “Try telling that to them. Do you think it’s really death that scares them? It’s their own lives. They wake up and for the first time realize that they’re completely replaceable, that the world will be no different without them. One day they’re living their lives—the parties with scores of exciting friends, the cutting edge work at the sexiest companies, the passionate relationships that never get old because the partners keep changing. Then they wake up and, poof, it’s gone! Turns out the friends were more like acquaintances, the cutting edge was just an illusion, and the relationships were just empty hookups. They thought it was all building towards something Kyle, and…it wasn’t.”

“Oh, and life is so much better for you, is it?” Kyle said, beginning to get annoyed. “You with your self-imposed exile to the kingdom of the living dead? What’s your grand and important contribution to the world?”

“I never said it had to be grand and important. It just has to *be.* I have Jenny and my children and my grandchildren. I have people who love me, and I love them regardless of what we look like or how much money we make or where we travel. I know it sounds clichéd, but that what really matters in the end.”

“Well, lucky you. Glad you’ve found that elusive true love nonsense. Thing is, it just doesn’t happen that way for most us. Frozen or not, it just doesn’t happen that way!”

Kyle was calm, measured, like he had been through this debate a thousand times. “It doesn’t happen because you don’t let it.”

“Grandpa,” Katie said as she rushed into the room. “Jenny stole my doll and she won’t give it back.” She was tugging on his sleeve as he followed her into the guest bedroom.

Jared seized the opportunity to slip quietly out the door. Then, unable to contain his frustration, he stormed past the elevator doors and into the long spiral hallway that hugged the side of the building, gradually winding down to the floor. The words stung more than he was willing to admit. But who was Kyle to speak for Jared or the residents, for that matter? What did he and his boring life have against everything Jared had accomplished? Jared would walk past every single thawed out oldster on the way out, mentally congratulating them on a life well lived, a choice correctly made. Mathers, Chan, Smith, Maybury…one isolated compartment after another.

Then he paused at the sight of a familiar name a few doors down. Could it be? Perhaps he had been a little older than Jared, but not by much. Jared slowed his pace to a tiptoe, not wanting to make himself obvious. The door was halfway open. He crept in. There, asleep on a hospital bed and dressed in an austere white hospital gown, lay Bernie. His once tanned and supple skin was now eerily pale and seemed two sizes too big, covering his body like a wrinkled bedsheet. His perfect hair had thinned and grayed, but it still fell across his forehead in the same casually beautifully way as when they first met. He looked gaunt and corpse-like, although the beeping monitor to his right seemed to indicate he was merely asleep. It was the first time Jared had seen him since the break-up. How long had it been? Five, six years? He had lost track. At the time, he thought we was leaving Bernie for someone better, but when that ended after only a few weeks, Jared had just given up on love as an altogether unprofitable venture. Maybe Kyle had a point.

He closed his eyes for a moment and saw him and Bernie living where Kyle and Jenny were now, each balancing a grandchild on one knee. He saw them laughing at each other’s gray hairs and wrinkles, living out every cliché of growing old together. By now he was inches away from the bed. He reached out and touched Bernie’s fragile hand, letting himself really imagine for the first time what might have been. “I’m sorry,” he whispered as Bernie’s eyes began to flicker open. He hoped it wasn’t too late.