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Nostalgia

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NOSTALGIA

Jacqueline Adams

Was death not a beautiful thing?

Aaron watched out the window of his plane as it hurtled towards the brilliant blue surface of the Pacific Ocean, a looming wall of water waiting to catch them at the end of their free-fall and smash them into pieces.

Aaron reached up to feel the metal outline of his grandfather's dog tags tucked out-of-view beneath his t-shirt.

He watched a thick plume of smoke billow and develop outside of the window, momentarily obscuring his view of the world outside.

Time slowed around him until it came to a standstill.

Regrets.

It was something his grandfather had talked about a lot during his last few weeks. A topic brought up each and every day that Aaron visited the Hospice facility in the summer weeks leading up to his final year of college. But regrets weren't something that Aaron had ever cared to think much about. It was a subject he assumed that he would reserve for contemplation at a much later stage in life, or at least not for several more years. At 24, and still young in his career as a journalist, Aaron wasn't one for nostalgia and "what-ifs." He always preferred to drive himself forward, never caring much to cast backward glances over his shoulder along the way.

Now though... He stared death in the face: Smoke and flames streaming from the port-side engine on the airplane causing it to visibly wobble and tilt beyond the pilot's control. With everything around him seemingly frozen, Aaron's thoughts settled on his grandfather's constant talk of regrets...

Don't wait too long to think about what you regret most in life, His grandfather would tell him. Because if you do, you'll be just like me, contemplating all that 'could have been' but laying around being unable to do anything about it.

Typically, when his grandfather would say things like that, Aaron would just give a small

twitch of a smile and nod until the topic of conversation changed. However, just like his grandfather, Aaron was realizing too little too late to be able to act upon anything. He could see just what it was his grandfather had been trying to convey to him during those bedside chats.

Do you regret anything, Aaron?

Aaron could recall his grandfather asking him that question on multiple occasions, but he would always shrug the question off, never even answering himself on the matter. If anything, he felt that he probably regretted so much that he didn't even know where to start.

The smoke cleared away and Aaron glanced out the window towards the horizon where a pale blue sky met the richer and deeper hues of the ocean.

Do you believe in God, Aaron? Another unanswered question from another day.

What was he supposed to tell his grandfather? Aaron didn't think he believed in anything, Christian or not, but he knew that his grandfather was a Lutheran. How was he supposed to tell somebody on their deathbed that he wasn't sure that he thought they were going to heaven? So he said nothing, remaining silent.

For Aaron, religion was a notion so vast that it was easier to avoid than to confront head on. Besides failed early attempts at Sunday School and classroom mentionings of beliefs and religion in the occasional college course, Aaron had hardly given the idea a second thought. But now he wished he would have. Or at the very least, tried. Tried to understand and have faith whether he was successful or not. Not even necessarily to gain the salvation that he most certainly felt he would be denied in the next minute when his world came to an end, but just because at that moment he felt as though a part of him was empty. As though he had missed out on some huge part of life that would have made everything worth it. Would have given things more purpose. Would have helped to explain why things were the way that they were. Beyond anything else, Aaron knew that it was a part of his life that he shouldn't have been so quick to give up.

Aaron thought of his sister.

Two years older than him, an accountant for a steadily-growing business, she had always seemed more accomplished and responsible than him. His last conversation with her had

been the night before—an argument over money and their parents' retirement plans, all stuff he could hardly even remember the details of now.

When I fought in Vietnam, there were nights in the foxholes where all I could think about were regrets. Regrets over things that I had said, thoughts about every last conversation-gone-wrong before I was deployed... I realized that they could have been my last. I realized that, if I didn't come back home, I couldn't change whatever those last words were. Friend or family, those could have been the last things they ever heard come out of my mouth.

Aaron would watch his grandfather grow very quiet every time he mentioned Vietnam. The silence was always so much more different than any other kind of quiet brought about by the end of a conversation or a sentence. Everything would seemingly become very still and his grandfather would gain a sort of far-away look in his eyes. Aaron knew that in those moments his grandfather was no longer lying in a hospital bed at a Hospice facility, slowly starving to death as his body rejected both food and drink. No.

He was in Vietnam, staring out of the foxhole at midnight, at a foreign moon, surrounded by the death and pain of his company, uncertainty always lying in the moments and days ahead, and constantly thinking about people he didn't know if he would ever see again. Aaron always felt something with that kind of silence; a sort of tension, a sort of reminiscence emanating from his grandfather's very being. It was overpowering.

Aaron didn't care what he had been arguing over with his sister. He didn't care about the details, about who was right or wrong. All he cared about was regret. How he said nothing to try and make up with her. How he didn't even call her before he got on the plane that morning.

Never take 'next time' for granted, Aaron. 'Next time' may never come. Tomorrow is never guaranteed. If you ever get in an argument with someone, give them a kiss on the cheek and a 'love you' goodbye before leaving. Never walk away angry from a loved one. Conversations can always continue. Conversations can be left unfinished and it's okay. Anger and resentment, though... They never solve anything being left unfinished. Never leave anger hanging because it doesn't tend to go away like that.

Aaron remembered his senior year of college. He remembered the first girl that he had ever really loved, the girl he was going to marry. Then he remembered the heartbreak that she caused him. He remembered the ensuing depression that fueled Aaron into a lifestyle

so focused on school and career that he became blind to everything else going on in life around him.

You know what I regret, Aaron? I regret not going to college when the war was over. I regret not making up with my father before his heart attack. I regret not living closer to my mother after he was gone to help her out with things. I regret not learning how to throw a baseball, and then not being able to teach that to your dad... I regret that, because I did that, he wasn't able to teach you... His grandfather looked at Aaron and winked. Good thing you ended up figuring that one out by yourself, champ. And then his grandfather sighed and stared up at the ceiling. Wish I would've quit smoking sooner, gone to the doctor more... Maybe take those vitamins he told me about all those years ago. Then maybe I could've stuck around for just a bit longer. Spent more time with you. Watch a World Series with your dad... I've never been to a World Series game—always wanted to go. Maybe travel the world a bit more beyond what I've seen with a pair of combat boots and a rifle...

Aaron would watch as tears leaked from the corners of his grandfather's eyes. He felt a pang in his chest, a longing to be able to help his grandfather do something, any of the things, that he regretted not having done yet. But throughout all the heartbreak his grandfather anguished over in that Hospice room, never once did Aaron contemplate regrets for himself.

Like everything else in that final year of college, Aaron ignored what he was told and ignored what was really happening all around him. He pushed the statements to the back of his mind, working harder and harder to land the career of his dreams. Never mind what his life looked like alongside of that.

Aaron had failed year after year to see the endless opportunities that existed all around him. He failed to see fulfillments of life, love, adventure, hope... All ignored in the drive for the ultimate career. He'd worked himself into the ground to make the Dean's List at his school every semester... And yet he had failed at life itself. Weekends and vacations filled with family and friends, all of the things that made life worth living, all of the things that made life more than just a job and a paycheck... Aaron had blinded himself to.

Aaron looked to his left. Across the aisle sat a woman—a mother—with a child of no more than a year strapped to her chest. With one hand she clung tightly to the armrest by her side, wrapping her other arm protectively around her child as she tried to shield it from the horrors of everything happening around them. Her eyes stretched wide full of

panic, her body rigid and frozen. Aaron could see that the woman was obviously traveling alone. More than that, there she sat spending her final moments all by herself knowing that not only was she unable to change her fate, but she was also helpless to do anything to protect her child.

Never take anything for granted, Aaron. Because it isn't until we can do nothing about it, it isn't until we are at our worst, when we realize how great we had it. And by the time that happens, by the time you realize that, it's going to be too late, son.

The mother's wild look caught Aaron's oddly calm gaze and locked on. Without thinking, he reached across the space between them and took her hand in his. She looked down at the gesture and then back to him. Aaron watched her suddenly relax, almost as if he had just promised her that everything was going to be okay... Or perhaps had helped her in accepting their fate.

He squeezed her hand reassuringly and watched as the baby shifted its head to peak through a gap in his mother's embrace, his stark blue eyes the very color of the heavens outside the plane windows. Aaron smiled, the corners of his mouth twitching upwards.

In that moment, time unfroze. Aaron could suddenly hear the screaming of passengers all around him, the roaring of the wind, frantic instructions indistinguishable over the plane's speakers.

Aaron squeezed her hand again and allowed his mind to go blank.

That, he did not regret.