

## Red Guilt

by Shaurya Arya-Kanojia

*Finally, you're gonna get beyond psychotherapy with its cheesy moral relativism, Richard LaPenna says in The Sopranos. Finally, you're gonna get to good and evil.*

Something about the line picks at me. I find myself going back to it a lot. But I'll go on a limb and give it a spin. People aren't inherently good or evil. What people are, are either busy or bored.

And I am... bored.

And lonely. *Desperately* lonely. Because, four years ago, I lost my friend to a horrendous car accident. The friend who stuck with me for thirty-six years; despite my idiosyncrasies, despite my overbearing pessimism, despite my vehement dislike towards... well, a lot of things.

I'm a classic cynic. The kind scholars should be writing research papers on.

And, as you can note, I have a bit of arrogance as well.

Anyhow, today, on this otherwise gorgeous day – the sun warm and crisp, a cool breeze out and about, and the day bright and vivacious – I find myself bored and lonely. You know how lethal that combination can be?

Soon, I get angry. That anger turns redder, becomes fury. A minute later, I... start seeing red. The red that signifies danger. The red that is the symbol for evil.

You see how boredom births evil intent? They aren't wrong when they say an empty mind is a devil's workshop.

I'm a fifty-year-old man who retired from his job in advertising a month ago. I quit voluntarily. There was no bad blood with anyone, nor was I, in corporate talk, 'made redundant.' Mind you, as the head of the creative department, my last two campaigns profited the company immensely.

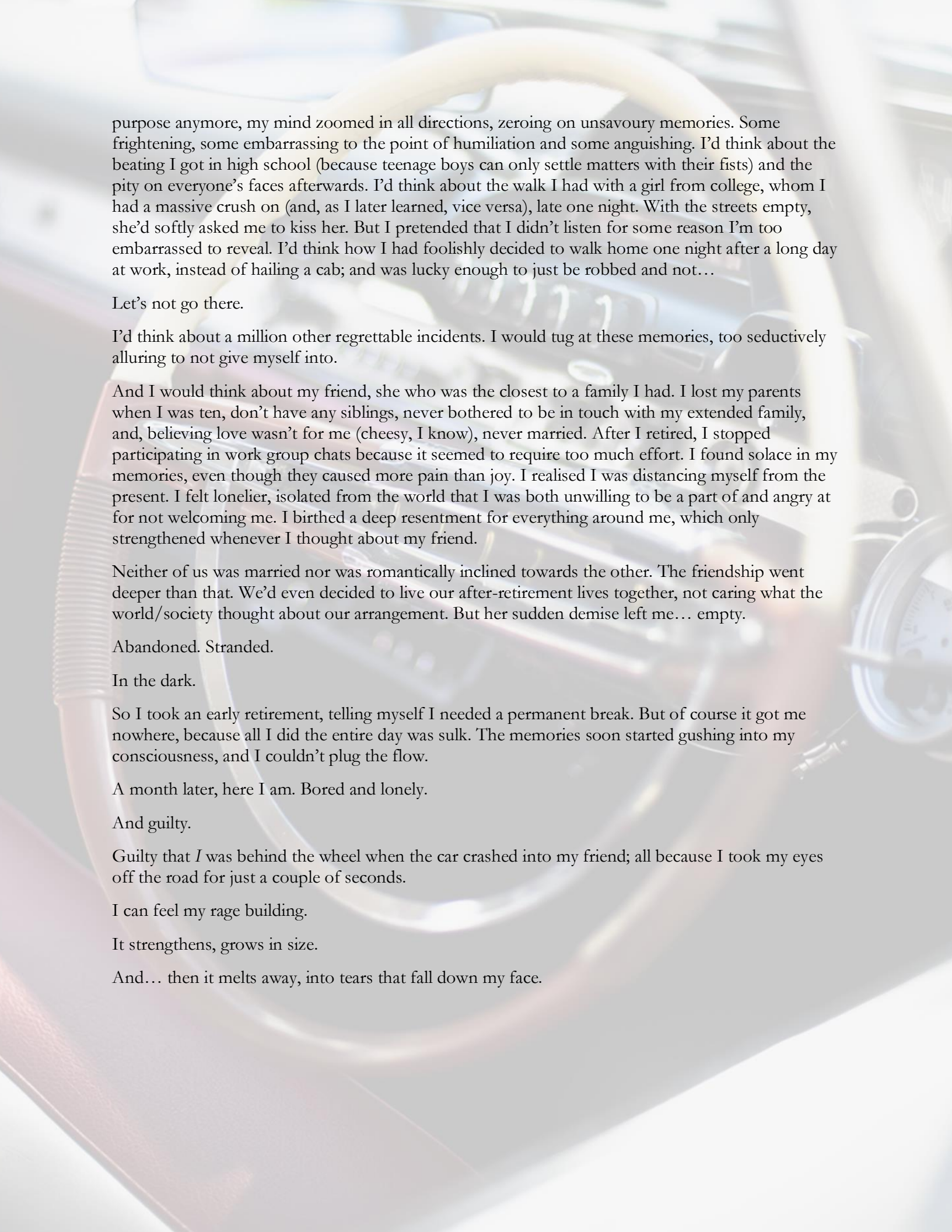
I left because I'd had enough. That rigid routine chasing me – get up, go to work, come back, sleep, and repeat the next day – was starting to become tiresome. Lately, the prospect of doing nothing, or at least nothing that was planned, was beginning to seem lucrative. I thought I was overworked, nothing a weeklong vacation couldn't cure. But one day, I suppose, my patience wore out. And I put down my papers to what I hoped was my team's disappointment.

Though, I won't lie, I did notice the smirk on my second in command's face.

As much as I was eagerly looking forward to this *exciting* phase of my life, it was difficult, and also terrifying, to fall in a non-routine where days were wide open. *It's a new lease of life*, a friend had remarked shortly after I retired. *You'll enjoy it.*

Two weeks in, I wasn't. If I thought a routine, no matter how inflexible, was hard to deal with, sitting idle on a Wednesday afternoon was far from enjoyable. I would put on the TV, then shut it after flicking through a few channels. Or sit with a book before, ten pages in, I'd lose my patience and put it aside. Or go for a walk and, after a few steps, turn around irritated because I couldn't decide where to go.

Time and again, my empty mind, where the devil was setting up his workshop, was starting to reminisce; memories that till now my busy mind was able to keep out. Without a constructive



purpose anymore, my mind zoomed in all directions, zeroing on unsavoury memories. Some frightening, some embarrassing to the point of humiliation and some anguishing. I'd think about the beating I got in high school (because teenage boys can only settle matters with their fists) and the pity on everyone's faces afterwards. I'd think about the walk I had with a girl from college, whom I had a massive crush on (and, as I later learned, vice versa), late one night. With the streets empty, she'd softly asked me to kiss her. But I pretended that I didn't listen for some reason I'm too embarrassed to reveal. I'd think how I had foolishly decided to walk home one night after a long day at work, instead of hailing a cab; and was lucky enough to just be robbed and not...

Let's not go there.

I'd think about a million other regrettable incidents. I would tug at these memories, too seductively alluring to not give myself into.

And I would think about my friend, she who was the closest to a family I had. I lost my parents when I was ten, don't have any siblings, never bothered to be in touch with my extended family, and, believing love wasn't for me (cheesy, I know), never married. After I retired, I stopped participating in work group chats because it seemed to require too much effort. I found solace in my memories, even though they caused more pain than joy. I realised I was distancing myself from the present. I felt lonelier, isolated from the world that I was both unwilling to be a part of and angry at for not welcoming me. I birthed a deep resentment for everything around me, which only strengthened whenever I thought about my friend.

Neither of us was married nor was romantically inclined towards the other. The friendship went deeper than that. We'd even decided to live our after-retirement lives together, not caring what the world/society thought about our arrangement. But her sudden demise left me... empty.

Abandoned. Stranded.

In the dark.

So I took an early retirement, telling myself I needed a permanent break. But of course it got me nowhere, because all I did the entire day was sulk. The memories soon started gushing into my consciousness, and I couldn't plug the flow.

A month later, here I am. Bored and lonely.

And guilty.

Guilty that *I* was behind the wheel when the car crashed into my friend; all because I took my eyes off the road for just a couple of seconds.

I can feel my rage building.

It strengthens, grows in size.

And... then it melts away, into tears that fall down my face.