

A Moment's Regret

By Ron Klosterman

The man had been watching a TV set through the plate glass and bars of Kwon's Hi-Fi when a shout from behind caught his attention.

"Hey buddy!"

The shout had come out of nowhere from a car that had pulled alongside the curb. It had fanned slush onto the sidewalk when it skidded to a halt. The man at the TVs turned at the waist and pointed a finger to his chest.

"You Freddie?" the driver asked.

"Yeah, that's me," Freddie said, looking down at the back of his pant legs where the cascade had splattered him. He scowled and gestured for the driver to hold on. He then turned back to the TV screen where he had been waiting for the weather report, but the news had gone to commercial.

Growling in agitation, Freddie hunched his shoulders and stomped his feet on the pavement. In an attempt to get his attention, the driver honked his horn again and revved motor up several times.

"Jesus fuck'n Christ! Just hold on a sec," Freddie said, waving his hand behind him.

###

The phone, next to Freddie, had started to ring but he was more interested in the snowy reception of his TV screen than in answering it. After several more rings, he heard his wife pick up the receiver in the kitchen.

"Freddie, phone."

Freddie extinguished his cigarette and propped the receiver between his shoulder and his ear. The familiar voice of his boss, Paul Cangemi, echoed out.

"Freddie?"

"Yeah?"

"Gotta job for you and Vinnie to do."

"Tonight?"

"There a problem?"

"There's a bliz...well, no, no problem at all," Freddie said, readjusting the receiver to his other ear and sitting up. It was going to be a long night.

"Didn't think so."

Freddie got up to look out his window and down onto the street where the snowfall had created a scene similar to what he had been watching.

"Where you at?" Freddie said, barely making out the dark silhouette of the limousine parked at the curb.

"Downstairs."

Freddie paused for a moment before answering.

"Hold on and I'll be right down."

Hanging up the phone gently, he was startled by his wife's voice.

"Where are you going?"

Realizing she had been standing in the doorway of the kitchen the entire time, he replied quickly.

"Out."

"Out where?" she said.

“Out. Where are my cigarettes?”

Moving some papers on a coffee table, he uncovered the pack hurriedly headed for the door.

“You goin’ to be back tonight?”

He stopped and replied, “Maybe.”

Freddie waited for a response and then turned around to say goodnight. He could only see his wife’s back as she reentered the kitchen.

“Damn’t,” he said, under his breath and left the apartment.

###

A man in his late fifties, wearing an old fedora and a pair of bifocal glasses was leaning up against the payphone as Freddie lifted the gate on the elevator. Freddie embraced his boss, who was a capo in the Palilla family, and kissed him on both of his cheeks. Paul smiled at Freddie and nodded his head.

“How you doin’ kid?”

“Great—what about yourself?”

“You know me, I can’t complain.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

“Listen, I gotta car comin’ by pretty soon, at nine-thirty to be exact,” he said, putting his arm around Freddie’s shoulders.

“It’s nine-twenty right now,” Freddie said, looking at his watch.

“Yeah, I know. Pretty short notice, the old lady will understand. Anyway the driver’s a Tony Marlowe. Ya know him?”

“No, never heard of him,” Freddie said, shaking his head.

“Well, no matter, this Marlowe, let’s just say he has been, how do I put this, less than discreet, a real piece of work, this one.”

“Less than?” Freddie said, looking at Johnny’s face.

“Okay kid, there no getting around you. He said some things—some very disparaging remarks, mind you—about a friend of ours,” Johnny said, as he withdrew a cigar from his pocket and snipped off its tip.

“Who?”

“Angel Mike. Now, this is a serious problem that must be taken care of,” Johnny said, making a quick—almost nonexistent—gesture of firing a gun with his hand. Freddie nodded his head and looked at his watch again. He was never the killer, but he was often needed for cleanup—an equally messy job for the psyche.

“He’s going to pick you up across the street, over in front of that Korean joint,” Johnny said, pointing out the front door.

“Anyone else coming along?”

There were always the killers.

“Yeah, I want you to take the Samoan with you.”

“He still live over on 49th?”

“Yeah—above Moony’s, the bail bonds,” Johnny said, placing the cigar in his mouth.

“What bout Vinnie?” Freddie said, as he looked out the front door. Vinnie was the usual suspect with Cangemi. The snow was still falling and the wind whipped it around in the street.

“You go and pick him up too—over at?” Johnny snapped his fingers several times, as he tried to recall the name. “You know, that steakhouse on the corner of Lafayette and Bowery.”

“Yeah, Smok’n Joes,” Freddie said.

“This is an important job kid. Do it right and the next time they open up the books, maybe just maybe, you’ll get to sign in,” Johnny said, as he snapped open his lighter, touching the flame to the tip of his cigar. “You been doin this a long time and I keep my word.

###

The blaring sound of the car’s horn brought Freddie’s mind back to the TV. The weekly forecast was currently being shuffled across the screen and the outlook was bleak. All the days had cardboard clouds and snowflakes attached to them.

“Another week of this shit,” Freddie muttered, sinking his head low enough so that the upturned collars of his coat covered his ears. Finally heading towards the vehicle, Freddie noticed the driver. He was in his late twenties with greased back hair, tied into a ponytail. It seemed like he was the last guy they had buried. What a night for a job, Freddie thought, as he examined his watch.

The weather had dropped six inches of wet snow and it was slowly increasing in intensity every minute. On any other night he would not have minded but tonight was the coldest, and nastiest it had been all winter. His joints ached and his lungs burned from the chilly air.

“Get your ass in the car,” Tony said, motioning for him to get in. Freddie got in and began rubbing his hands on his pant legs.

“So—what d’ya think?” Tony asked.

“About what?”

“The Merc?”

“What? She’s a ’79. Right?”

“Yup, brand fuck’n new, got the landau roof and all this,” Tony said, grazing his hand across the electric switches that operated the windows and door locks.

“Yeah, she’s a real gem,” said Freddie, finding the heater controls.

“You can say that again—too bad it ain’t mine,” Tony said, as he laughed and revved the engine up twice.

Freddie gritted his teeth as he heard the engine rattle from being over-revved.

“Man, you look fuck’n co-old. You must have been freezing your cajones off, standing out there?” Tony said, putting the car in gear and stomping the gas pedal to the floor. The sound of the vehicle’s tires spinning on ice suddenly stopped as traction catapulted the car on its way.

“Tell me boutit,” said Freddie, as he slid back in his seat. Shivering, he hunched over and extended his arms where his hands could reach the vents.

“Don’t ya think this shit is great, though?” Tony said, grinning, as he punched the gas and turned the steering wheel, causing the car to fishtail in the road and pin Freddie up against his door.

“Don’t you have any chains on the tires?” Freddie said, gripping the dash of the car and pulling himself upright.

“Chains? Chains are for pussies.”

“Well, let’s stop and put some chains on. Can’t you tell were in the middle of a blizzard.”

“I could drive across a glacier if we were in the middle of an ice age baby, so don’t go get’n your panties in a bunch,” Tony replied. He then over-corrected the car and drove up on the curb before steering back into the street, as Freddie, wide-eyed, looked out the back window.

“Say d’you see that curb back there? I don’t think Vinnie wanted Evel Knievel for a driver.”

“Say, d’you talk to Vinnie?”

“Yeah the other day but your driv... Hey, watch it man.”

“Relax—and stop bust’n my balls. I knows what I’m doin.”

Freddie braced his back up against the seat by pressing his legs to the floorboard, meanwhile Tony forced an on coming car off the road.

“Get a license...Jackass!” Tony said, flipping the other driver off.

“Pull over,” Freddie said reaching for the steering wheel, but Tony slapped his hands away.

“Hey, Forgetaboutit—my old man useta run whiskey for Capone and he’s the one that taught me how to drive,”

“Cut the crap and slow the fuck down,” said Freddie.

Laughing, Tony slowed the car down while Freddie reached over and turned the radio on. A crackling montage of voices poured over the speakers as he tuned for a station.

“Lighten up man, I’m just fuck’n round a lil bit,” Tony was saying but Freddie had quit tuning and began to increase the volume.

###

Tony was ecstatic that Vinnie had chosen him to be the driver for a heist. This was a great opportunity for him, the score, although modest, outweighed the risks involved—at least according to Vinnie. Tony wanted to talk to Freddie about the heist, but decided he did not want to shout over the radio. Instead, he reached in his pocket for a pack of gum and felt the butt of the pistol he had brought along. He pulled out the gum, and tore the package open with his teeth.

“Want some?” Tony asked above the radio, pulling a piece out of the pack and offering it to Freddie. Freddie shook his head, his eyes closed. Tony reached over and turned the radio down, causing Freddie to open his eyes.

“Say, hate to interrupt you there, but where we goin?”

“Over to 49th. Moony’s bail bonds.”

“That’s where Vinnies at, eh?”

“No. We gotta pick someone else up first,”

“Who?”

“Toamotu.”

“The Fish Tank?”

“Yup.”

Tony had heard of Henry “Fish Tank” Toamotu. The Samoan, at six foot—three hundred pounds, had once been a professional wrestler. He had blown out both his knees in a bizarre accident where the ring had collapsed while he was standing on the top turnbuckle.

Unable to continue wrestling, Henry became a bodyguard for Johnny Cangemi, and later a leg breaker in charge of debt collections. And because of his size, he was also a common pick for these jobs.

Tuamotu and Vinnie were often the muscle, Tony knew that, but hopefully there would not be any more people coming along. He knew, the more guys involved, the less his take would actually be.

###

49th street was hazardous, as the snowplows had not made their way to that part of the city. Tony steered and counter steered the car down the street, finally bringing it to a stop in front of Moony's.

“Honk the horn,” Freddie said.

“You know Fish Tank?” said Tony, as he honked the horn several times.

“A little. Well, here he comes. The one and only,” said Freddie, as the Samoan came running out of the dark wearing zebra-striped sweat pants and a flannel work shirt.

“D’ya think he’s cold?”

“I guess he’s got a BTU rating or something,” Freddie said, getting out to let Henry into the backseat. Freddie watched as the car visibly lowered from the outside and Tony could feel the car’s weight shift from within.

“Get in and shut that pneumonia hole, Freddie,” Tony said.

Wiping the sheen of sweat from his forehead with the front of his shirt, the Samoan let out a long deep breath and the car was suddenly awash with the smell of tuna fish.

“How’s it goin?” Tony said, looking back in the rearview mirror. The Samoan grunted and leaned back, letting the shadows of the car conceal his presence. Tony was left with Henry’s outline, which swelled up and down with heavy breathing.

“Where to?” Tony asked Freddie.

“Smok’n Joes.”

“They open at this hour?”

“Vinnies there, so it’ll be open,” Freddie replied.

###

“Honk the horn,” Freddie said, as the car came skidding to a stop. Tony honked the horn three times, and the doors opened, releasing Vinnie the Gun.

Everyone knew that Vinnie was the man who would replace Johnny Cangemi when the time came. And the times were coming. Johnny wasn’t that young anymore.

The man walked on spindly legs, which the wind tested with every gust. They were not the legs of a killer, yet he continued to strut towards the car nonetheless with his face turned away from the wind. The soft hum of the outdoor sign suddenly went quiet and the lights flickered off, casting shadows in front of the building.

A gust of wind struck Vinnie full force, causing the tails of his trench coat to float up around his head. At that exact moment, the sign began to hum loudly and the lights flared back to life in the cold weather. The illusion that had enshrouded the Gun faded, slightly.

“Mr. Massario,” Tony said, getting out of the car to let him in. Vinnie’s black eyes, perched behind light sensitive glasses, pierced into Tony’s. Neither the dark orbs nor the taut skin showed any hint.

“Don’t ya think you could’ve got a four door?” Vinnie said, as he turned away from the horizontally driven snow and ducked into the back seat.

“Where to,” Tony said, not letting the jibe get to him.

“Just drive down the block a-ways,” Vinnie said, looking over at Freddie and nodding.

“How’s it goin Freddie?”

“Peachy. How d’you like this here weather?”

“Cold but so many things in life are—Henry?” Vinnie said, as he nodded at the Samoan who grunted.

“So what about the job, Vin—I mean Mr. Massario?” Tony asked.

“You’re goin to love it, my friend. It is everything you have lived your life for. Just turn down this alley coming up and drive till we get to the dead end,” Vinnie replied, as his face split into a smile, revealing pointy, white teeth that shined in the dark.

###

The snow had become tumultuous, as Tony picked his path down the alley, between dumpsters and knocked over garbage cans. Tony’s face was only about ten inches from the

windshield, as he squinted to see the obstacles that flanked the car on both sides. The snowfall had become so bad that the wipers had problems keeping up with the demands of cleaning the windshield.

Twenty minutes and several intersections later, Tony finally came to a stop, twenty feet away from a large brick wall.

The dead end was completely devoid of light, and the snowfall was so heavy that everyone's vision only amounted to about five feet.

A sharp snap in the darkness of the back seat produced a metallic clacking and an eruption of flame. The small orange petal rose in the darkness, stopping to light a cigarette, which provided a brief glance at the profile of Vinnie's face. The features were unremarkable compared to the dark, piercing eyes, which glared in the light. The metallic clack rang throughout the car again, as the orange plume of flame disappeared into the cloak of night. Now, only a small burning tip of the cigarette could be seen. Tony opened his mouth, but shut it as he felt the cold twenty-two thousandth's diameter of a revolver barrel pressed behind his ear. Tony spit his gum out onto the dash, and smiled into the rear view mirror.

"What? I just shit myself, right?" Tony said, shutting the car's lights off, but the feral eyes, glinting from the back seat, revealed to Tony that this was no joke. His smile collapsed and he hastily reached for the door handle.

"Uh-uh," Vinnie said, shaking his head and pressing the gun harder behind Tony's ear.

"Get out, ve-ry slow-ly," Vinnie said, as he positioned himself closely behind Tony.

Freddie, watching from the passenger seat, noticed Tuamotu had slunk forward in the seat, ready to pounce on Tony like a wild animal.

"What's goin down, Henry?" Freddie said, as Tuamotu pulled a cut-off cue stick from a holster on his calf, concealed by a Velcro flap.

"Johnny wanted him roughed up a bit," Tuamotu said, as he began to exit right behind Vinnie. Turning back to Freddie, Henry told him to wait there, emphasizing it with a bestial grunt. He could see the big Samoan for about a second before the darkness and the snowfall concealed him from sight.

Several minutes passed, and Freddie could still not see out any of the windows, at all. The snow had dropped at least two inches, which had accumulated upon the windshield. He reached over to the steering wheel and turned on the wiper blades. A dull hum, followed by a sharp crack, preceded the discharge of a bright blue spark from the fuse box beneath the dash.

"God Damn't!"

Freddie pressed the switch to roll down his window and the whine of an electric motor echoed throughout the car, as the window descended. Snow poured in from the accumulation and he reached out and began wiping the snow from the windshield with his arm and hand. Suddenly, four flashes from the dark recesses of the alley caught his attention.

"Finally, now let's hurry up and get the fuck outa here," he said, realizing the flashes of light came from gunfire.

###

"Keep moving," Vinnie said, pushing Tony into the darkest corner of the alley. A pair of trashcans crumpled under Tony's weight, as he tripped over them. Rolling onto his belly to stand up, Tony reached into his coat pocket, and gripped the pistol that he had brought with him. Meanwhile, the Samoan had come up from behind Vinnie with his jimmy-stick, rolling the end of it into the palm of his hand.

“Tony, I guess you’ll be wonder’n why were about to beat you half to death?” Vinnie said, dangling his revolver at his side.

“No, why is that?” Tony replied, as he wiped the snow off his face and stood up, still holding his hand in his pocket.

“Angel was very upset, when he heard what you said about his hospitality,”

“Fuck you. I never said nut’n disrespectful about that old prick,” Tony said, as the Samoan slowly advanced towards him.

“Well, no matter. Tatalone needs no approval from the five families to whack a two-bit, piece of shit like you. Henry, start with his knees, and work your way up to his neck—then I’ll plug him,” Vinnie said, leaning up against a dumpster.

Tony pulled the revolver from his coat pocket and fired in their direction. The snow had started coming down even harder than before, making it impossible for Tony to see anything, let alone the two men he shot at. Reloading his gun, Tony looked around, but could not even see his hand in front of his face. If he could only make it back to the car, he thought, then he might have a chance.

###

Freddie had waited almost five minutes before he decided to go have a look. It was impossible to see anything in front of him. Stumbling his way, towards where he had seen the flashes of light, Freddie’s foot touched a large object lying in the alley. Reaching down, Freddie could feel out the form of Henry Toamotu.

“Henry? Henry, you alive?” Freddie said, feeling for the pulse on Toamotu’s neck. His hand touched a warm, wet spot that surrounded a hole. Looking around, he stood up and walked several steps, until he bumped into someone.

Instantly, five shots were fired and Freddie felt the first two enter his stomach, before he collapsed to the ground. The numbing sensation accompanied a pain similar to a bellyache. Freddie’s mouth became dry, as he tried to stick his fingers into the wounds, to keep them from bleeding.

Bad mistake, he thought as he blacked out from the pain. In the darkness of the alley, two bright lights flashed forth and slowly moved back down the alley.

###

Tony ran in the direction of the car, after firing several shots at the person he had bumped into. Then he crashed into the front bumper, which doubled him over.

“Sonova..!”

Feeling his way around to the driver’s side, Tony got in and flipped on the headlights. Tony was baffled when he clicked the windshield wiper switch, and nothing happened.

“You gotta be kid’n me!”

Looking back in the rearview mirror, Tony’s eyes suddenly went blind, as if a bright light had been flashed into them. He could feel something rattling in his head and a high pitched ringing made his temples ache. Beginning to wonder why his nose was running, Tony reached up to wipe it, surmising it was from the cold weather. Unable to remember how to wipe his nose, another flash of light caused him to forget how to do anything at all.

###

Freddie awoke to find himself blanketed under an inch of snow. His body shivered as he tried to get up, but his mind had no control over his body anymore. The shivering was slowly beginning to subside and was being replaced with a feeling of warmth, starting in his chest. He smiled as he noticed a junk TV set.

He really wanted to slap the TV to adjust its snowy reception but his arm would not budge as it was pinned under his body. Something treaded softly towards him and passed by to jump on top of the TV set. The brightness of the screen suddenly gave way to the dull earthy hues of the National Geographic. He had been waiting for a special on birds of prey to air, but then Johnny had called.

The yellow eyes hovering above the TV moved up to stare at the sky and Freddie barely noticed. He was suddenly startled by the wailing-meow from the dark shadow.

Shaking his head, Freddie looked back to the TV screen and noticed that it was broken. What was happening, he thought, as he rolled onto his back and looked up at the sky. The snow had started falling again and several dark spots floated in the air above him. Freddie's eyes blinked, trying to banish them but they continued to circle above his body. Always on the outer edges of his sight, he could not get a clear view of what they were.

"What the hell," Freddie said, as a spot moved out in front of his eyes where he could see it. Three more moved into range and he thought he could make out black wings.

"Birds? What the fuck?"

A high pitched screech caused Freddie to scabble away from the avian forms. If he could only burrow down into the ground, he could escape their sharp talons. If he could only crawl under one of the dumpsters, he could hide from their eyes. Yet, he could not burrow down nor could he crawl away from them. He could only wait.

Trying to draw a deep breath, he felt the sharp pain and realized the truth that they had brought him, and amongst the howling wind and the curtain of blinding snow, a sigh of regret could be heard reaching for a kitchen door.

Ron Klosterman was born in obscurity and grew up listening to 80's hard rock. He is now a Chicago-based writer, living in obscurity, and still listening to 80's hard rock.