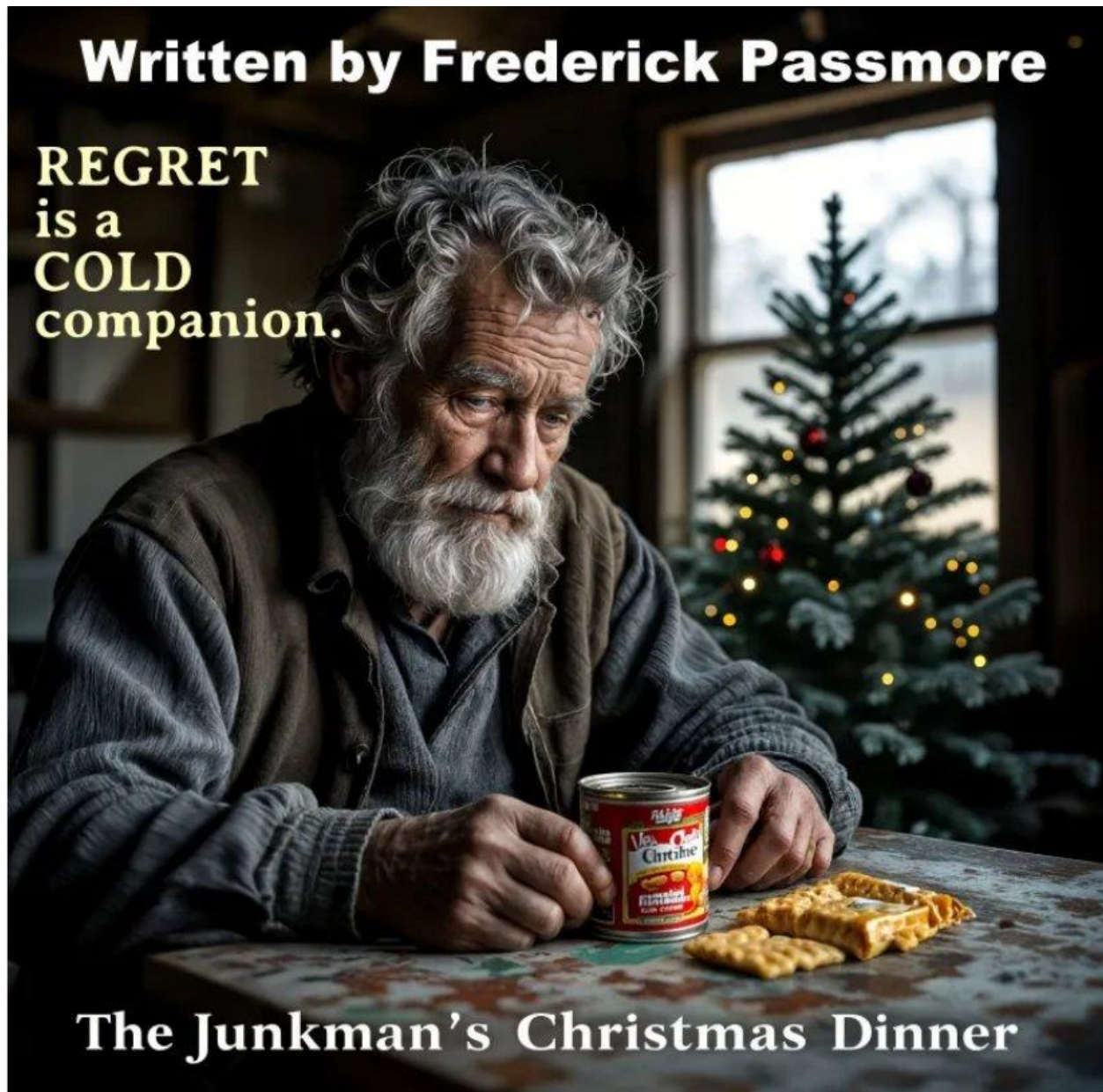




Written by Frederick Passmore

**REGRET
is a
COLD
companion.**

The Junkman's Christmas Dinner

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by Frederick Passmore
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The night came early that Christmas Eve. The cold it brought slipped through the cracks of the old security shed like an unwelcome guest and settled in the corners. Outside, the junkyard slept under a thin skin of frost. Inside, a single space heater hummed against the chill, more hopeful than helpful.

Andy Freeman pushed the door open with his shoulder and stepped into the dim light. He carried a bag of salvaged garland—faded, scraggly strands pulled from someone else's discarded

Christmas. He hung his tattered coat on a nail, set his hat beside it, and rubbed his hands hard over the heater. The warmth was small. He took what it offered.

In the corner stood a pitiful artificial tree, the kind people throw away when the needles fall and the lights refuse to work. Andy began draping the garland around its thin branches. He stepped back. Adjusted a loop. Stepped back again. The tree still looked tired. So did he.

Lord, look at this place. The thought rose unbidden. *Look at me.*

He dropped to his knees beside the tree. The floor was cold through his old trousers. His prayer came out in a whisper, half complaint, half plea.

“Send someone, Lord. Someone with a little extra. A little food. A little kindness. I’m tired of being alone on this night.”

He shivered. The words opened a door he usually kept shut.

It had not always been this way. There had been a time when Andy Freeman’s name meant something. Steady work. People who waved. A place at someone’s table. But poor choices have a way of piling up. One leaned against another until the whole stack came down. He had served time for those mistakes—not the longest sentence, but long enough. Long enough to stare at concrete walls and wonder how a man could lose so much so quietly. When the doors finally opened, he walked out thinner and quieter than before. He decided the people who once knew him were better off without the updated version.

Family was the hardest part. He could still picture their faces if he let himself. He rarely did. What would they see now? An aging man living among other people’s cast-offs, eating from cans, wearing clothes that had already been thrown away once. They would be ashamed. He was sure of it. So he stayed gone. He told himself isolation hurt less than the look in their eyes. Some nights he almost believed it.

He had tried, once, to spend Christmas somewhere else. A few years back he walked into the homeless shelter downtown. The room was warm. The food smelled good. People laughed in the corner. For a moment it almost felt possible. Then someone asked his name. Someone else asked where he was from. A volunteer smiled too brightly and wanted his story. The old tightness rose in his chest—the need to avoid explanations, to shrink, to disappear. He left before the meal was served. Walked back into the cold and promised himself he would never do that again. He did not like accepting charity. More than that, he did not like being seen, having to deal with the judgment he felt that he saw in their eyes.

So the Christmases since had been spent alone. Decorating a discarded tree with discarded garland and old ornaments. Eating what little he could afford. Talking to a God he half expected had already written him off.

What’s left for a man like me? he wondered as he knelt there. *What could You still do with someone who’s already wasted so much time?*

He rose from his knees, turned on the old radio, and found a station playing soft Christmas music. Then the announcer's voice filled the small room, reading from Luke:

And it came to pass in those days... And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling clothes, and laid Him in a manger... Fear not... for unto you is born this day... a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord... Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

Andy listened. A baby in a feed trough. Shepherds in the dark. Angels filling the sky with news too good for the important people. God coming near to the overlooked.

His stomach growled. He had not eaten all day. From the bag he took the only dinner he could afford: one can of Vienna sausages and a packet of cheese crackers. He arranged them on a chipped plate, bowed his head, and gave thanks for the little he had. Regret is a cold companion. It had kept him company for years.

Just as he reached for his fork, a heavy bang shook the door.

Fear flashed through him. *Someone come to take what little I have left?* He looked around at the scavenged furniture, the thin blanket, the rusted heater. Then he almost smiled. Who would want any of this?

He opened the door cautiously.

A man lay slumped against the frame, half-frozen, barely conscious. He appeared to be in his early seventies, with no coat, wearing only thin casual clothes, now wet from snow and smeared with mud from several falls. Andy pulled him inside, closed the door against the wind, and half-carried him to the old patio recliner that served as a bed. He covered the stranger with his own thin blanket and turned the heater closer. From the hotplate he poured a cup of weak tea and held it to the man's lips.

"Easy now," Andy said. "Just a little. Don't choke on it."

The man's eyes fluttered open. He drank a few sips, then managed a raspy whisper. "Thank you... I didn't think... anyone was out here."

"Name's Andy," he said. "Folks around here just call me the Junk Man. You all right? Anything broken?"

"I don't think so. Just cold. Been walking all day. Got lost in the woods." The man closed his eyes for a moment. "Name's Frank. Been staying at a shelter the last few months. Tried to get home. Thought my boy might take me in for Christmas. Took a shortcut... but got turned around, somehow. Just about gave up.... but then next thing I knew I was stumbling toward your light."

Andy nodded. “You’re lucky you found it. Another hour out there and I’m not sure you’d have made it.”

Frank’s voice was still weak. “I’m so hungry. Do you... have anything to share?”

Andy looked at the plate on the table—the only food he owned. For a long moment he stood still. The old familiar voice rose inside him: *That’s all you have. You’ve gone without all day. You don’t owe this stranger anything.*

Another voice, quieter, answered: *There is always something you can give. Trust Me.*

He picked up the plate and carried it to the recliner. “It ain’t much,” he said. “Vienna sausages and crackers. But you’re welcome to it.”

Frank tried to lift the food himself, but his hands shook too badly. Andy sat beside him, cut the sausages into small pieces, and helped him eat.

“Easy,” Andy murmured. “One bite at a time.”

Frank chewed slowly, eyes closed in gratitude. After a few bites he opened them again. “You always live out here alone like this?”

Andy shrugged. “Been here a while. Used to work the junkyard. When they couldn’t pay me anymore, they let me stay in the shed. Nowhere else to go, really.”

Frank studied him. “You got family?”

Andy was quiet for a moment. “Yeah. Somewhere. Haven’t seen them in a long time.”

“How come?”

Andy stared at the little heater. “Haven’t been real successful the last few years. Didn’t want to show up looking like... this. Didn’t want them thinking I came around just for a handout. Pride, I guess. Or shame. Sometimes I can’t tell the difference.” He gave a short, humorless laugh. “Truth is, I figure the Lord Himself must be ashamed of me. Man like me... what’s He gonna do with someone who’s already wasted so much time?”

Frank reached out and took Andy’s hand. He held it with surprising strength.

“Listen to me,” he said. “The Lord has already used you. I was cold and hungry outside... and inside. You took me in. You gave me the only food you had. You warmed me up when I was half frozen. This is the best Christmas Eve I’ve had in years.”

Andy looked down at their joined hands, unsure what to say.

Frank continued, voice softer now. "I lost my wife in a car accident a long time ago. Christmases haven't been the same since. Been alone more years than I care to count. Sitting here with you... it feels different. Feels like somebody finally saw me."

Andy swallowed. "I know what you mean. Been a long time since anybody sat across from me like this."

They talked a while longer. Frank told a few stories from better years. Andy mostly listened, surprised at how the loneliness in the room had faded away, like cold darkness chased away by a candle's soft, warm light. He momentarily wondered what he was going to do for food now. Then he thought of the widow who gave her two mites—all she had—and went away the most blessed. Of the boy who gave his meager loaves and fishes, only to see baskets of provision multiplied from them. And finally he thought of Jesus, who could have been born in a palace but chose a manger, who gave everything, even His life. And look what He gained.

Looking at Andy carefully, Frank ventured, "So... what happened to keep you from your family?"

The old defenses began to rise, resisting explanations, but Andy pushed them down, realizing they had not served him well in past years. "I... did some things I'm not proud of. Just kind of avoided seeing them, didn't want to bring my shame on them. Figured they are better off without me bringing them down."

Frank took another sip of his warmed tea, offering some thoughts when he had swallowed. "Don't you think they should be the ones making that decision? You might be surprised at how far a little forgiveness can go. Why don't you at least try?"

Leaning back in his chair, Andy didn't answer, but he thought about what his new friend had said. The thought wasn't as repulsive as it had been before. What did he have to lose by renewing his relationship with them? Maybe they wouldn't welcome him... but he couldn't help that. He had to try, and end his self-imposed loneliness. Once Frank was where he belonged, he purposed in his heart, he would make the same effort for himself.

A knock sounded at the door.

Andy stood, startled for the second time that night. "Who in the world...?"

He carefully opened the door a few inches. A man and a woman stood there, bundled tightly against the cold.

"We're looking for someone," the man said over the keening wind. "An older gentleman. He wandered off this morning from the assisted living facility a few miles from here. Have you seen anyone?"

Andy stepped aside and gestured toward the recliner. "I believe I have."

The couple rushed in. The woman dropped to her knees beside the recliner. “Dad? Oh, thank God. Dad, it’s us.”

Frank’s eyes widened. “Sarah? Michael?”

The son, Michael, knelt on the other side and gripped his father’s hand. “We’ve been looking everywhere. The facility called this morning. We searched the roads, the woods... when we saw the light in this window we almost didn’t stop. Thank God we did.”

Frank’s voice was stronger now. “Didn’t want to spend Christmas at the shelter. Tried to walk home. I got lost. This man found me. Took me in. Fed me. Saved my life, near as I can tell.”

Michael stood and turned to Andy. He held out his hand. “I’m Michael. This is my wife, Sarah. We can’t thank you enough.”

Andy shook his hand, a little awkward. “Wasn’t much. Just did what anybody would’ve done.”

Sarah rose and hugged him without hesitation. “It was everything. You have no idea.”

Michael made a quick call on his cell phone, then turned back. “They’re calling off the search. We’re taking him home with us tonight. We’d promised him Christmas at our house. He just... forgot.”

The whole truth was that Frank, since his accident, sometimes had spells of forgetfulness. He had perceived the assisted living center as a homeless shelter, and, determined to get to his son’s home for Christmas, set out to find his way, becoming lost in the process. Michael didn’t feel that he should elaborate further, with Frank being able to hear him at the moment.

Sarah looked at her husband, then back at Andy. Moving to Michael’s side and drawing him apart a little, she whispered something in his ear. Michael looked over at Andy, tending to his father, smiled at her suggestion and nodded to her. Moving back to stand beside Andy, she put a hand on his arm. “Christmas dinner’s waiting at our place. Turkey, dressing, all the fixings. We would love for you to come. Please.”

Frank pushed himself up a little higher on the recliner. “You heard her, Andy. Don’t stay here all alone again this Christmas. Come with us.”

Andy stood very still. The old voice tried to speak—*You don’t belong at their table. Look at yourself.*—but it was weaker now. He wiped a tear from the corner of his eye and nodded.

“All right,” he said quietly. “I’d like that.” He knew he had made the right decision by the broad smile that came across Frank’s face, reflected in the expressions of his son and daughter-in-law.

He put on his coat. Taking the extra coat they had brought with them, carried in hopeful expectation, Michael helped his father into it as he sat up. When he moved to help Frank stand, Andy stopped him. “I’ve got him.”

He slipped an arm under Frank's and lifted him carefully to his feet. Frank smiled and clapped his free hand over Andy's.

"Ready?" Frank asked.

"Ready." And for the first time in years, Andy was ready.... to renew his connections to humanity. And, he began to realize, he was finally ready to renew his connections to his own family. Maybe, he wondered, it was time to let go of the past fears and see if their hearts would be open to him.

Michael opened the door. The two men walked out together, lending each other their strength, into the cold night that somehow no longer felt quite so bitter. Behind them, Michael turned off the lamp and the little heater. Andy wouldn't be coming back here soon, if he could help it. He took Sarah's hand, and together they followed.

As they left the little shed behind, the truth Andy had only begun to understand settled deeper into his heart: the season is not about receiving. It is about giving—the way God gave His only Son so that the world might receive life, and joy, and a forever home with Him.

And somewhere in the quiet, it seemed the Lord was smiling.

The shack stood empty now, the little tree still wearing its faded garland. But the light that had shone from its window that night had done its work. One lonely man had opened his door. Another had found shelter. And Andy had discovered that when you give away the little you have, you sometimes find your hands filled with something far greater.

Grace has a way of doing that. Especially on Christmas Eve.