

My Appointment with Tom

He just sat there crying. Raindrops rushing down his clean-shaven face like a cold gloomy afternoon. I tried to console him, like I do with all my patients, but what can you say to a man that knows he's going to die?

The sight of a grown man, hardened by tragedies only the most unfortunate endure, calling out for his mother is unsettling. And while my dysphoria is easy to identify internally, I struggle to find the word that best describes my feelings towards Tom. Pity? No, I do not pity a sick man who will be put to rest soon. Heartbroken? My heart does not break for him either. Not while there are millions who suffer in agony without the comforting promise of death. Disappointment. I am disappointed to watch a man pass without a chance at rehabilitation or redemption. If every man has a purpose in life, some purposes were just never meant to be fully realized.

I find solace knowing the family will finally be at peace. A peace I may never understand. A peace so saturated in anger, accepting it seems like a cruel compromise. The different variations of peace can confuse one's hope for happiness. Relief is not nirvana. Forgiveness is not Zen. Regardless, I force myself to believe that peace for a damaged family can be attained and can be beautiful. It helps ease my anxiety when dealing with cases like Tom's.

Thomas O'Leary is a scrawny man with scrawny features. His thinning brown hair barely holds on to his puny head. His pasty skin and ghostly face suggests he hasn't seen sunlight in ages. Looking into his pale blue eyes does not reveal his character, nor does it interpret his thoughts. His eyes are not a window to his soul. They do, however, foreshadow what lies ahead. Tom's eyes are lifeless. Void of kindness or charisma, lacking comfort or pain. Except on this day, the day when Tom allowed his tears to talk more than his reticent mouth ever had.

The IVs in Tom's wilted arms are an uncomfortable reminder of how sick he is. The barren white walls surrounding us underscore the emptiness in Tom's rotten heart. The room glares with an overhead light that emphasizes his high cheekbones, revealing that he may have once possessed a jubilant smile. But Tom never smiles. Not lately anyway. His perpetual frown contains the sadness of a dozen widows mourning their stolen loved ones. Happiness refuses to be Tom's companion. Joy rejects him like so many others in his life. Tom is alone, and he will die alone.

I was told that he had recently met with our local pastor, praying that God would conspire with him in his attempt to cheat death. It's intriguing how a man will turn to religion after all other options have been exhausted. Maybe Tom just found comfort in the words of the Lord. Maybe it wasn't salvation he sought, but merely fascinating stories from an entertaining book. I never took Tom for a God-fearing man. He just seemed so disconnected from the world to believe in anything but his own thoughts. Part of me hopes he bought in to what the pastor was telling him. I have my own reservations about religion but if a man needs God to accompany him while he lives out the end of his days, I will readily withhold my apprehension.

As my appointment with Tom was nearing its end, a certain uneasiness floated through me like the drifting smoke of a stranger's cigar. My nerves began to simmer and my heart began to ache. Tom's tears had dried, leaving the residue of regret under each eye. His newfound silence was more piercing than his cries. It was only when the warden asked if he had any last words, that he spoke.