



GOD'S ASSASSIN?



by

FRANK PAINE

A Short Story

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“Brrrrng! Brrrrng! Brrrrng!” went the telephone on the stand next to the Reverend Benjamin (“Ben”) Sloan’s bed. He opened his eyes sleepily and looked at the digital clock next to the telephone. It said 3:47 A. M.

“Oh my God! This can’t be good!” he thought. He wondered if it might be somebody’s idea of a joke. He picked up the receiver, and though unenthusiastic, said “Hello.” He was a bit tentative, as if he’d be surprised if someone was actually there. But, as a minister he thought he should answer, just in case there was a real emergency.

He heard several coughs, as if the person on the other end of the call was having trouble breathing. After a few coughs, the other person finally said slowly, “Is this Reverend Sloan?” The voice was hoarse.

“Yes,” Ben answered. “Who’s calling? You do realize, don’t you, what time it is? Couldn’t this wait for the morning when our office is open?”

More coughs followed. Finally, “I’m sorry to wake you Father, but I’m dying. Within an hour or so, I will have bled out, and will be unable to talk at all.”

With this, Ben’s professional training kicked in. “OK, I hear you. Can I call someone to get you some assistance? Or barring that, where are you, so that I can come to you?”

GOD'S ASSASSIN?

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=====

More coughs. "No, I just want to talk to you. I have a little story to tell."

"OK, give me a moment. I want to go to another room so that our talk doesn't interrupt my wife's sleep. She has to get up very early."

"OK." Ben got up, put on his moccasins and a t-shirt, and walked silently downstairs and sat on a couch in his living room.

"All right, I'm here. Who did you say was calling?"

More coughs. "I didn't say."

"Oh," said Ben. "I guess you didn't. OK. You said that you are dying, right? And you said something about bleeding out? That sounds really bad, but you don't want medical attention. How did this happen?"

More coughs. "Patience, Ben. Good things come to those who wait. Doesn't the Bible say something like that? Anyway [cough, cough] Let me explain."

"OK," Ben said again, beginning to feel a bit frustrated.

"Ben, I'm an assassin. Have been for thirty years. I had to carry out [cough, cough] a hit tonight. My final hit, because it went bad. I was severely wounded [cough, cough], and though I made it home, I'm bleeding out. I've got only 40 or 50 minutes left to live."

GOD'S ASSASSIN?

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=====

Already, Ben could feel that the other man was weakening. “And you don’t want medical attention?” Ben asked again.

“Ben, you don’t understand. I’ve been wounded before, and I know how much [cough, cough] worse this is. I’m terminal.”

“What went wrong?”

“The hit was supposed to be easy, piece of cake so to speak. At least that’s what my contractor said, but bad guys were waiting there for me. Somebody let the cat [cough! cough!] out of the bag.”

“So why are you calling me? And let’s see, you don’t want to give me a name, so I assume that you’re worried about criminal charges...”

“No, no, no, Ben. I’ll give you my name. I won’t be alive to face prison. I’m Oskar Bremer. I doubt that you’ve ever heard of me. There’s no reason why you would, but I’ve hung around your church a good bit. I’ve admired what you have done with [cough, cough] young people to keep them out of the street life, and that’s why I thought to call you. This wasn’t supposed to happen—the hit was supposed to be easy.”

More coughs ensued. “You know,” Ben said. “You really don’t sound well. Isn’t there someone I could call for you?”

GOD’S ASSASSIN?

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=====

“No,” Oskar replied. “I will be gone before anyone can do anything for me. It’s almost all I can [cough! cough!] can do to talk to you.”

“What would you like to talk to me about, then?” Ben continued “You’re not looking for absolution of sins, or anything like that, are you? I mean there’s little I can do in that department. For an assassin.”

[Cough! cough! cough! hesitation] “No, Ben. Not absolution. I’m a bit beyond that I think. But I’m alone in the world—no family or anything—I just don’t want to die without someone knowing why.”

“Well, what is it you want to tell me? And who do you want me to pass it on to, Oskar?” Ben was feeling even more frustrated at this point.

“Well, I’ll be dead shortly, and then it doesn’t matter.” [Cough! cough!]. Oskar was silent for almost a full minute. Then: “I went military right after age 18. Learned to kill lots of ways. Pistols, rifles, all kinds of guns, knives, grenades, hand-to-hand. [Cough! cough!] I was a Delta soldier, special ops, dark ops, CIA. They gave me a couple of languages. I could read and write, but I didn’t go to college. Thought I’d do that when I retired. [Cough! cough!]”

[More coughs!] Another full minute of silence. [Hoarse voice] “I was in for fifteen years. High stress. Wounded a few times. No attachments. That life doesn’t work well with marriages. Maybe you’ve seen that, Ben.”

GOD’S ASSASSIN?

by

Frank Paine

=====

“Yes,” Ben replied. “I’ve dealt with a number of marriages that came under pressure because of military demands, including my own. I was an Army chaplain. Maybe you didn’t know that. Served in Afghanistan and Iraq, then out.”

“Then you’ve [cough] seen it. When I got out, killing was all I was good for. Too late for college—my own fault. [Cough! cough!] Could have but didn’t. Then a friend called. Was forming a small mercenary company, wanted me to join. Why not? Needed the work. Was something I could do well. Went on a few assignments.”

Oskar was struggling to breathe and coughed frequently. He rested for a moment. “Then my friend, we’ll call him Johnny, he got hit on an assignment. Not killed, just disabled. Couldn’t go on missions. So, I buried him in Yemen. In the desert. Was eight years ago. Had to go on my own, but still all I knew was how to kill. Good at it too but getting older.”

More coughing. ” Got tired of killing, but what else to do? Then I heard about the dark web, the Tor browser, so forth. Took on single hits. Only hits I could do by myself. Matter of security. Keeping low profile. Very successful. Could charge \$50,000 a hit plus expenses, more for high risk jobs. Three hits a year kept me very comfortable. Most outside the country, places where I spoke the language.” Silence followed. More coughs.

“God, that hurts!” Oskar exclaimed.

GOD'S ASSASSIN?

by

Frank Paine

=====

“What exactly is the matter?” Ben asked. Another minute passed.

“I’ve got about ten bullets in me, all mid-section. And they hurt.” Oskar’s volume was dropping, almost a whisper.

“Go on,” said Ben. “How did you justify your killing?”

“Oh, they were all bad people,” Oskar replied.

“How did you know that?”

“I checked them out. Only went after folks certifiably bad.”

“So, you were a vigilante, then. Judge, jury, etc., etc. What garbage!” Ben was really impatient now.

“Yeah, a sort of vigilante.”

“So, I ask you again, why’re you calling *me*?”

“Coming to that...I’m not a good person, Ben. I know that.”

“But,” Ben interrupted, “how can vigilantism ever be justified?”

“Well,” Oskar replied, “we know that good things happen to bad guys, and bad things happen to good guys. Why shouldn’t bad things happen to bad guys? At least that’s my little thought on the matter.

GOD'S ASSASSIN?

by

Frank Paine

=====

“Also,” he continued (and by this time it was only a whisper), “isn’t the main thing how much good we can do with what limited resources we have?”

“What do you mean?” Ben asked.

Another silent minute went by. “Father, isn’t your job to do as much as possible as the resources of your parish allow?”

“Yes, that’s more or less it.”

“And it’s better to do good than to do bad?”

“Yeah.”

“Sounds like just the flip side of vigilantism.

“Well, Father, I’m going [Ben could barely hear him] in a moment. Almost out of blood. But I have one more thing to say.”

“Okay.”

“Something involving a job I was on took me through your neighborhood.”

“I wonder who that was a hit on,” Father Ben thought, but didn’t say.

“It was in the late afternoon, and I was just wandering around the area, and watched some junior activities going on at your church. I stopped to

GOD'S ASSASSIN?

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=====

watch. And then I returned there almost every evening. I really came to see what leadership potential you were giving these kids,” said Oskar. “If I’d had that, my life would probably have been different.”

Ben heard Oskar’s phone hit the floor.

At about 10:00 AM that morning, Father Ben received a telephone call. His caller introduced himself. “I’m Brian O’Toole, an attorney with the firm of Gresham & Wiley, in Chicago. Is this the Reverend Benjamin Sloan?”

“It certainly is, Mr. O’Toole. What can I do for you?”

“I’m calling on behalf of one of my clients, Mr. Oskar Bremer, who has just passed away. We are acting as the executors of his estate. He has named your church as the sole beneficiary under his will. We need to discuss the details of transferring his assets to the church. Fortunately, he had no debt, and kept his assets very liquid and easy to dispose of if that’s what you wish to do.”

“Oh my God”, Ben responded. “What sort of assets did Oskar hold?”

“Mostly cash and securities. A littler real estate, but not a lot.”

“How did Oskar make his money?”

GOD'S ASSASSIN?

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"I don't know," said O'Toole.

"Well," said Ben. "I guess I should ask this. How much are we talking about here?"

"\$ 1,543,279".

Ben's phone dropped to the floor with a clatter, and then he picked it up again.

"Did I hear that right? You said \$1,543,279? No cents?" he laughed.

"No, no cents." [The lawyer chuckled].

THE END