

RONIL CAINE



MR.
FRANKLIN'S
SECRET

A SHORT STORY

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Mr. Franklin's Secret

a short story

I worked on Mr. Franklin's farm for nine long years, until he passed away. He was on his deathbed when he told me the biggest secret of his life, something that has brought me many a sleepless night since, so I have decided to put it down on paper, hoping it would bring me some relief. If you are reading this, it means that I am dead, because after writing this story down, I am going to hide it. I have a feeling it is best for the people to learn about it as late as possible.

Mr. Franklin died at the age of eighty-three. Having no descendants or other relatives, he bequeathed his wealth to the five largest charities of the world, each receiving hundreds of millions of Swiss francs, US dollars, and euros. His staff's severance pay was no less generous, as arranged by the executor in accordance with Mr. Franklin's last will. His farm was left in our care; we each received equal ownership, and I remained the operative director.

Mr. Franklin lived on an estate of an immense size, comprised of orchards, stables, pastures, woods, vineyards, and ponds. Everything was equipped with automated systems as far as the latest technology allowed it. Mr. Franklin concocted extraordinary ideas to improve the farm. He gathered the knowledge and technology necessary for the developments and production from all over the world.

As a result, I can oversee the farm's operations with just a few taps on my phone. I even have detailed health

data on every animal, including the salmon in the ponds. Everything we produce or breed is of the best quality possible.

Naturally, the farm is self-sustaining; it has always generated all the power it needed for its operations and the luxurious life Mr. Franklin enjoyed. He insisted on it because he didn't want to upset the balance of the planet in the least bit.

The cycle of life on the farm was a marvel to observe. We recycled everything and sold the surplus. The most prestigious restaurants continue to seek our produce to this very day, because few farms are capable of offering this quality.

Mr. Franklin lived the life of a recluse, as if the farm was his sole source of entertainment. The estate was not particularly profitable, yet he was a very wealthy man. Although this left many people bewildered, no one took it upon themselves to ask questions or pry into his matters.

The villa in which Mr. Franklin lived was self-sustaining as well. It generated the power it needed, and all its functions could be operated and scheduled from my mobile device. Mr. Franklin had equipped the building with dizzying technology. Everything was automated and adjustable, from the heating to dust removal, except for the fireplace—now that was a classic piece.

No one had the slightest idea about the life of Mr. Franklin, no matter whom I asked about it during those nine years. He lived a solitary life and received visitors rarely—mostly business associates, at least that was how he referred to them. Now and again, when I exchanged a

few words with them, they praised his fairness, adding that rarely did one come across such a straight shooter in the world.

I did not put much effort into finding out more about him, and I never got any answers to my enquiries about his origin or his road to success. A few rumours circulated, but I never gave them any thought. The personnel have plenty of time on their hands to make up stories, knowing well the audience will be captivated. Except for me.

I had several discussions with his attorney, but in my opinion he was just as clueless as we were. He kept on saying that we should be glad for having such a good salary and that he had never met a man as trustworthy and well-meaning as Mr. Franklin in all his practice.

Being taken into his employ was undoubtedly a turning point in my life, but not as consequential as his death. He was the most interesting man I have ever met, and I know that I share this view with everybody who knew him.

What intrigued most of us were Mr. Franklin's travels. He had supposedly been all around the world, but in most cases nobody knew when he left or when he returned—or even who took him to the airport and who brought him back to the estate. I was the one who spent the most time in the villa, but I was not in the loop any more than the others. Occasionally he announced his imminent absence from the farm; other times he vanished without a word. I took him to the city a few times, where he told me that someone would pick him up, or to the international airport, where he never requested any further help, just waited till I left. But it also happened that he left without a notice, and we didn't see him for a fortnight, the only sign of life being an e-mail advising us that everything was fine and the date of his return.

I found his disappearances odd, but I wasn't going to investigate my employer. It was not my business whether he was the smartest thief on the planet or a secret agent traveling the world with high-tech gadgets or even a vampire flying out of the window like a bat every night, looking for warm-blooded prey. I didn't have any theories. I was just doing the job I had been contracted to do.

One thing was true, though—even if not exactly the way it is told by many: he killed the previous director of the farm. Despite the strange circumstances, it was deemed justified self-defence and he was acquitted. He was seventy-four years old at that time, the director thirty-five, but Mr. Franklin managed to kill him with a

fire iron. During the investigation, it was uncovered that the director had robbed several of his previous employers and killed one of them, though it was previously believed to have been an accident.

Mr. Franklin stated before the court that the director demanded money from him, threatened him, and—when he saw that it was in vain—charged at him. Mr. Franklin snatched up the fire iron and knocked his attacker on the head. They believed him because he still looked surprisingly strong, although the story had its weak points, leaving many wondering how a seventy-four-year-old man overpowered a despicable thief and murderer who was in the prime of his life. I didn't doubt him.

I dare say I was on good terms with Mr. Franklin. We had lengthy discussions, though mainly on general topics. Occasionally he told me about strange customs of exotic countries; other times he asked about my plans, to which I always replied that I did not have any particular plans. This was not a lie, but I wouldn't call it the complete truth either. Most of the time we ended up chatting about the farm and talking about the rare animals inhabiting it. I considered him to be a very knowledgeable man who knew his way around the world.

He did not really talk with his other employees, but I think he liked me. Before making changes or improving the estate, he always asked for my advice, and if I had ideas, he listened and supported them when he liked them.

During the nine years of my employment, I came to know him as a fair and kind old man. He wasn't the type

to crack jokes; what he said was always the truth, without the slightest distortion. When he specified a date, he stuck to it. He paid the wages and his bills on time. He never forgot to surprise us on our birthdays with a trifle or little gift, and although he expected us to be as meticulous as he was, he was indulgent when once or twice we didn't live up to his standards.

When asked about something he didn't want to talk about, he was elegantly evasive and never lied.

That is why I was so astonished by the last thing he told me before he died. Every fibre of me thinks that he was telling the truth, but I am still not capable of believing that everything happened the way he told me.

One of my duties was to let in the staff in the mornings and see them out in the evenings. Not all of them spent the whole day on the estate, but by approximately six o'clock everyone left, followed by me. I was living in the city, three miles from the gates of the estate. I used to go to work by an old electric car. I brought him breakfast and read him the news; then, if he was in the mood, we walked the estate, he looked at his horses, or I took him to the small lake with the little golf cart, where in nice weather he could sit for hours, just watching the white and black swans waltzing on the glassy surface.

Occasionally, rare species appeared over the lake, most of them brought here by Mr. Franklin from bird sanctuaries from all over the world. Among them were parrots, superb starlings, storks, hoopoes, sparrows, and his rarely seen favourites: a pair of northern cardinals. He called the male the crimson bird of happiness.

At the end of the day, we prepared him dinner and left the mansion. That is how the days passed for nine years and, as far as I know, before that too. We relaxed only when he was away.

One evening, Mr. Franklin asked me to stay a bit longer. I had no urgent business to attend to, so I stayed. He had been feeling poorly for a week by then, and he had not left the house during that time. I summoned a doctor who said that, apart from fatigue, he was fine, so he instructed Mr. Franklin to rest, take his vitamins, and eat properly. After

the doctor left, Mr. Franklin asked me not to call a doctor ever again.

The house was teeming with antique furniture paintings, trophies, sculptures, and vases. Mr. Franklin had brought interesting items home from all over the world, and the eclectic air of the mansion did not bother him one bit. He once mentioned that he was fascinated by the diversity of the world and was happy to see it reflected in his house. African carvings and masques, Asian fabrics, Persian carpets, Japanese weapons and drawings, South American statuettes, various pieces of French art, Italian wine specialties, and a fabulous, green Zsolnay figurine of two fish entangled with each other. Walking the halls of the house was an unusual experience for us, the employees. A cook who had been employed for eighteen years said that it was like a “best of art exhibition”. A caretaker opined that Mr. Franklin made his fortune by dealing with art treasures. At that time, I agreed with her, but as it later turned out, she was wrong.

The pleasant smell of Far Eastern incense hung in the air of the bedroom. In the late afternoon, as always at that time of the day, the sun cast a shadow the shape of a large golden pyramid in the corner. Dusk came swiftly, and the sun dipped below the trees at the far end of the estate.

I sat in an armchair between his bed and the window. It was comfortable, with armrests carefully carved into the shape of lions’ heads, looking ahead with a commanding gaze, as if guarding the person sitting. As I was waiting for him to speak, I traced my fingers along the fine details of the carving and the silky upholstery.

Mr. Franklin was lying in bed, his blanket pulled down to his waist and his hands clasped over his abdomen. He asked me to light the fire in the fireplace. It wasn't cold, but he wanted to watch the fire burning. He was listening to the crackling and sizzling of the logs, his eyes sparkling bright in the warm light. Presently he turned towards me.

"I am going to tell you the secret everybody is wondering about. I don't have much time left, and it does not matter any longer if anyone knows it. I couldn't tell it to anyone in my life. The answer to the two questions of how I acquired my wealth and how I can travel around the world is the same. I can jump to any place in the world with a single leap."

I felt my face crease into an odd expression. Astonished, I at first did not even comprehend his last sentence. Just like when the tongue touches sundry tastes, it needs time to realise what the food is.

Mr. Franklin paused a beat as I wiped the traces of bewilderment off my face, then he repeated, as if a confirmation that I had heard it right, "I can travel anywhere in the world with a single step. Distance for me is a mere illusion. In fact," he raised a finger, "I can leave this room without opening any doors or windows."

A sea of questions inundated me, but I didn't say anything. I was paralysed. Mr. Franklin looked at me, then shifted his gaze back to the fire. He lowered his hand, continued, and, as if reading my mind, answered most of my questions.

“With this ability it was not difficult to travel around the world. I have been to almost everywhere man can go, and quite a few places no man has ever been to. I call it space jumping. I open the space with my mind, and it unfolds in front of me, just like looking at a Christmas ball. The space curves in every direction, and I jump to wherever I want. I have always been careful not to be seen, because an onlooker would think I had leapt out of the void. I’ve been cautious and have never been caught. I never boasted with my abilities or with my wealth. I never made bets on going somewhere in a short time, nor became a magician. I simply enjoyed life and that was all. My conscience let me get away with occasional theft and trickery here and there, but I have never caused serious injury to anyone. Though I had many opportunities to misuse my abilities and I could have committed all the crimes of the world without ever being charged with one, I did not do so because I have principles. I always have. In much the same way, I could have saved many people from death or could have made the world a better place, but I did not do that either. Perhaps out of selfishness, perhaps because I did not want to interfere with the natural course of events, of that I am not sure.”

He was getting weaker. His speech slowed down as he continued.

“Apropos the murder. I really did kill the previous director in self-defence. This was the only time I used my ability against someone, but I was left with no choice because I was already an old man. That bastard was young and fast and strong, but I drove him crazy with disap-

pearing and then emerging somewhere else. In the end, I found an opportune moment and smacked him on the head with the fire iron. He dropped to the ground in an instant and did not move again. I never felt remorse for the incident. If not me, then sooner or later someone else would have got to him. Fate catches up with everybody, often when they do not expect it at all.”

He paused for a beat and shifted a quick glance at me to check if I was paying attention. He looked content. I looked at him with widened eyes and clutched the lions of the armrest. Absurd, but I was wondering in which part of the world he could have grabbed the armchair and how he had brought it home.

“A long time ago it gave me more satisfaction,” he continued. “Nowadays, I just don’t feel like doing it anymore. But I am going to show it to you. You deserve it; you are a nice person, and you listened to me. But before that, I need to tell you that your sense of time may get confused while leaping through space. I don’t understand why, and as far as I see, scientists would not be able to explain it either. When I leap through space, time slows down for everybody else, but no one senses it except me. Therefore, I save the time of the trip and a little additional time as well. According to my calculations, I am approximately a hundred and nine years old, but if I add the time of my voyages, it may be even more. In the end, I still feel like an eighty-three-year-old man. Odd, isn’t it?” He chuckled, though it sounded more like a hoarse rattle.

He became thoughtful then. I got up and added a couple of logs to the fire while my mind filled with more ques-

tions. What he said coincided with what I knew—or rather, what I didn't know—about him. But still... how was all this possible? It couldn't be. Is Mr. Franklin a superhero who keeps his powers secret? Can he go to the moon?

“Come closer,” he said. “Sit down on the bed.”

I sat. Mr. Franklin pointed at the window looking over the vegetable garden. Birds were flying around briskly in the dusk, the hedge beyond the garden was partially visible, and the trees hid the sun. We were both looking out the window.

“Let's wait a bit,” he said. “Soon it will come.”

I sat in silence, staring out the window, until I saw the dark sparrow perched on a branch. In the next moment, the windows disappeared. Everything slowed down as if I was in a dream and the events were unfolding below the surface of the water. Then I noticed that it wasn't a sparrow, but a male northern cardinal. It was frozen mid-air, about three feet from me. Its red wings were spread open. The window and the walls and the armchair all disappeared, but I could still see their shapes—distorted, blurred, elongated—in the periphery of my vision. I had the feeling that if I stood and took a few steps, I would be in the vegetable garden. I could easily walk out of the room through the walls and windows. It felt the most natural thing in the world. I could touch the bird even though just a few seconds earlier it had been on the other side of the closed window.

I was stirred out of this splendid numbness. The windows emerged again, and the cardinal flew away. I looked at Mr. Franklin. His eyes were settled on the fire again.

“Yes, it really happened,” he said.

I stood, stepped to the window, and touched the frame, but it was as solid as usual. It was a real window with real glass in it. I returned to the armchair.

“But how is this possible?” My voice trembled like a child’s who has just seen a magic trick.

“I will tell you, although it does not matter.”

His voice trailed off into a dry cough. He cleared his throat, then closed his eyes. I thought he wouldn’t open them again, but then he spoke while watching the gentle dance of the flames.

“You might have guessed that I am not of this age,” he said. “I was born four centuries after you.”

I did not think I could be more stunned, but then I felt that it was possible. I was happy he was not looking at me because my jaw must have dropped to the ground while my eyebrows shot to my forehead.

“It was a horrible time,” he continued. His face grew grave, with an air of sadness written on it. I felt he was speaking more to himself. “At least for me. Everything was dominated by technology, and human relationships were superficial, mostly digital. Many things were possible, but totalitarian rule controlled everything. The human brain was programmable just like mobile phones today. That was how I acquired my ability. My father paid for it, and it was uploaded to my brain. I got this ability to save time on travelling. My father had it as well. He was making business deals all over the world, and sooner or later I would need to step into his shoes. A comfortable life awaited me, the life of business, fortune, luxury, and

abilities. I was born into the top five percent of society. Those outside this social class had never even heard of these technologies. Possessing such abilities goes hand in hand with being under continuous surveillance and control, but that was not the problem either. It was the world and its impersonality. Wherever I went, I saw the same: the technology that dominated life, and the people who lived hidden behind devices and applications. Like a virtual world. I was contemplating suicide when I heard of a machine under development at a North American college lab that made leaping through time possible. The live tests did not receive approval, and further research was hindered by the supervision of the military. I made the decision to go back in time, to an age when technology was still a comfort, but not yet dominating humanity. I did something no one else was capable of repeating after me. I circumvented the security system, then escaped through time. I had been making plans for one and a half years, and I was very careful to avoid the surveillance system's attention."

Mr. Franklin coughed, but it was a different cough, languid, hardly audible.

He continued: "It was to my advantage that they weren't alert. They would never have thought that a rich twenty-something (or anybody for that matter) would throw away his present life. A few more seconds of hesitation and I would have been caught, but I managed to escape. I can't go back, and nobody is allowed to follow me here. I can well imagine the chaos that my disappearance has caused. The restrictions that were implemented

despite the fact that they have no idea whether I survived or not. I didn't bring anything here except my ability."

He sighed the sigh of a content man before telling the rest of his story.

"That is how I got here. I made a good decision. I had a wonderful life. I've made a lot of friends all over the world. I've been travelling all my life. Travelling is the best way to enjoy life. These are wonderful times, and the planet is beautiful. You can still talk to people or use gestures when you don't speak the same language, laughing at the situation. Family still means something, as does loyalty."

He closed his eyes before whispering his last words. "I had a good life."

I needed all my strength to comprehend and imagine the strange things he had told me. I wanted to ask him a few questions but I noticed that his eyes remained closed. His blanket was still pulled down to his waist, but now his hands lay clasped on top of it.

He was gone.

He left me alone with my questions and to wonder whether what he had told me was all true or just a morbid joke. The wall that he'd opened, was it really space bending and folding upon itself? Or was that just my imagination? Despite all the oddities he had just told me, I would never be certain.

I spent the night making calls to the authorities and to a funeral parlour to make the proper arrangements for his interment. The first light of dawn washed over my house as I arrived home. I slept a few hours and returned to the estate to announce the news to everybody concerned and to take the necessary measures.

At noon I was sitting on the patio to rest a bit, reflecting on what Mr. Franklin had told me the night before. It all sounded so unreal, yet at that time, in the room, I believed him. I remembered the stories and gossip that I'd heard from him, and about him, and everything I'd seen with my own eyes. It began making sense.

In the end, he did not live the life of a recluse as we believed. It was just that this was his place of retreat after his adventures around the world. I think this farm was his garden where he could relax. Whatever the truth is, I believe him because that is how the pieces of the picture fit together: his life.

The End

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