

Parsnip Soup

Frank opens his eyes and sees an angel. A vision, a heavenly being, with clouds of golden hair spreading out around her head and waves of light emanating from her body. She sits in the captain's chair beside the window, her head bowed, reading a book.

He turns over, or tries to turn, to see the angel better, but a pain shoots up his leg from his ankle, his back wrenches into a spasm, and his head throbs with a hundred booming beats. So maybe this isn't a beatific angel, but an avenging one, some representative of purgatory come to make sure he suffers for his sins. He sighs, and a pain like a knife sears his chest. It's only what he deserves.

Gingerly, tentatively, he reaches over to the bedside table for his glasses. He brings his arm back, glasses in hand, squinting as the sunlight hits his face.

The angel looks up and pushes back her halo of hair. She winks at him. Did he see that correctly? Do angels wink?

"Hi, Frank," She winks again, this time with a grin.

He manages to fit his glasses over his nose, hook them behind his ears and keep his head up enough to see this vision sitting in his chair. Her hair is actually a light red, and she has freckles. And the halo of radiating light is the sun coming through the window behind her. He opens his mouth to speak.

"Heather," she says. "Heather Brae, from Mona's Store yesterday."

"Oh." He sinks back onto his pillow and, without opening his mouth too much, since any movement of his head brings that screeching pounding again, mumbles, "I thought you were an angel."

"You want a bagel?"

He shakes his finger back and forth.

"You're only supposed to have soup and Jell-O and stuff like that." She has a high, pinched voice, not very angelic.

He stares up at the ceiling, then shifts his eyes back to look at her. "What," he says, pronouncing each word very slowly, "are you do —"

"Mona sent me to check up on you," Heather says, gathering a bright yellow shawl around her shoulders. "And I brought some parsnip soup. Do you want some?"

He shakes his finger again. Parsnip soup. It sounds like something his grandmother would have concocted, something she'd force you to take as a "constitutional."

Mona. Mona sent the angel. And now he remembers. The storm, the ice, the moose, and then Mona. And then the hospital. Did they give him something for pain? He shifts his gaze over to the nightstand and sees the bottle of Percocet.

Heather sees him looking. "Do you need a pain pill?"

"Yes."

She gives him a pill, along with the glass of water. Now he has managed to sit up a little, and he can handle the pill and the water himself.

Heather sits down again on the chair and gives him a most beatific smile. "A reporter called."

"A reporter?" Has somebody found out about the merger? He's been working on it for months, first the restructuring of Questwander, then the merger with Feral Journeys, two startup adventure businesses. But the whole thing was supposed to be top secret. He glances around the room. This room has always been dark, except on a sunny morning like today, with the east light streaming in the window. Patsy used to complain that the cabin, and the bedroom in particular, was gloomy, but he always loved the summer-camp feeling of it. He closes his eyes and nods off again.

When he opens his eyes, morning sunlight pales the weathered pine walls and sharpens the air, and the smell of the wood fire zings the air with something fine and crisp, like the sound of a string quartet that wakes you into consciousness. He's beginning to feel better.

But what about this reporter? Where are his merger files? In the far corner, behind Heather, his birch desk looks undisturbed. On top of the desk, in the same place he left it, lies his briefcase with the Questwander folder in it. Three empty beer bottles are lined up beside it. Heather sits beside him, serene, reading her book.

He clears his throat. "Now, what's this about a reporter?"

She looks up. "They want a story about the accident."

"Accident?"

“You know, being out on the ice, the Fast Squad, the fire trucks, the dramatic rescue.”

“Oh, God.” The pain in his head comes back like the thrust of a knife.

The phone beside the bed rings.

“Want me to get it?” Without waiting for a reply, she picks up the phone. “Frank MacFarland’s residence,” she says in her almost-squeaky voice. “Yeah.” She turns and faces him, and her hair swings around in the sunlight. “It’s for you, Frank.” As if it might be for someone else.

“I don’t want to talk to any reporters.” He slides further down in the bed, but the sheets are so twisted that he pushes up against a fold and doesn’t get very far.

“I don’t think it’s a reporter.” She thrusts the phone toward him.

Frank takes the phone and holds it up to his ear.

“Dad.” Erica’s deep voice cracks, as it always does when she’s upset, and the sound of it brings a cascade of feelings and a flutter in his heart. “My God, Dad, what have you done?”

“Erica,” he says. “I’ve been meaning to call you.” How many times has he said that in the past few years?

“They called me from the hospital. My God, Dad, I can’t believe you would go and get into another accident. You just recovered from that broken arm you got skiing in Utah.”

“Take it easy, baby,” he says. “I only banged up my ankle, and I’m a little sore.”

“They told me you broke two ribs! Dad, you’re fifty years old. Doesn’t that mean anything to you? You can’t go walking out on a half-frozen river in the middle of a storm.” Since she’s been in Boston and earning her living as a social worker, Erica seems to have acquired Patsy’s parental attitude toward him.

Frank feels his ribs and winces. Now he remembers what they said at the ER. Two cracked ribs and a very bruised ankle. They thought the goose egg on his head was from falling on the ice, too, and he didn’t disabuse them of that notion. But he couldn’t avoid the lecture on alcohol abuse. And yes, he did drink too much. *Mea Culpa*, he thinks, mentally beating his chest, the thought of which makes his chest hurt more.

Now there's some kind of tapping on the window, and another golden-haired head, glowing in the sunlight, peers into the room. A boy. He's gesturing and mouthing something to Heather.

"Well, Erica," Frank says into the phone, "thanks for calling. Someone's at the door. I'll call you later." He puts the phone back on the receiver.

"That's just Eli," says Heather.

Eli is shouting something through the window, and Heather steps closer to it. "Okay," she shouts back, "come in, but leave your snowshoes outside."

Frank lies back on the pillow, remembering that solitary retreat he'd been envisioning for this weekend. Heather is picking up the clothes that are strewn around the room, and she loads one arm with the beer bottles from the desk. She pauses and gives him an ambiguous look. "I know," he says, "I drank too much."

"I didn't say that." Her face softens into a compassionate smile, and now she does look like an angel of mercy, tall and stately in her yellow shawl and long red skirt with shiny discs all over it. She's cradling the beer bottles as though embracing his sin with forgiveness.

He feels moved to confess. "Six bottles of Otter Creek. I don't know why I did it. I never drink more than two beers. Maybe because of the headache. And then getting stuck out on the ice like that. God Almighty, this is not Frank MacFarland! I've skied the glaciers out in Oregon and flown small planes into the Bob Marshall wilderness to rescue people myself. I'm not a person who needs to be rescued."

"Yes. Well." She gives him another ambiguous look and carries the bottles out the door and into the main room. He seems to be developing a credibility problem here. At the hospital, the doctor shook her head, in disgust or resignation, after asking how much he had consumed, and the nurse gave him a scolding and a brochure for a treatment program.

When Heather comes back into the room, her red skirt sparkling, he clears his throat. "Did Mona say anything about me?"

Heather starts "Say anything about you?"

"I mean, anything negative. Or positive, for that matter? I mean, that was a pretty strange experience, and I wouldn't want her to think me a complete fool."

Heather's face flickers into a half smile. "She didn't say anything to me." Eli is behind her. "Do you mind if Eli comes in?"

"Not at all. Hello, Eli," Frank says, rallying his normally hearty tone of voice. He's definitely feeling better now. Maybe he will eat something. But not parsnip soup. He wants a hamburger.

"Hi, Mr. MacFarland." Eli stands in the doorway. He's wearing black spandex pants and a sleek black parka with gray stripes on the sides, and his golden-edged Afro is matted, flattened on one side and sticking up on the other. "I heard you went out on the river." His eyes are bright, and he looks eager to hear the story.

"An aborted rescue mission," says Frank. "A moose calf."

"Cool," Eli says, and gives a low whistle.

"But don't follow my example. Or you'll end up in bed with broken bones and all the women in your life giving you lectures."

Eli laughs and puffs out his chest, staking his claim with the men of the tribe. "Yeah," he says, his voice an octave lower.

He's making light of it, but Frank feels a wrenching in his stomach that has nothing to do with the physical pain. Frank MacFarland is someone who doesn't shrink from danger, who forges ahead when forging ahead is called for, whose heart goes out to anyone in distress and who fights for the underdog. By this age you have a pretty good idea of who you are and what you would do in any given circumstance. His foray onto the ice was a noble attempt to save a moose calf, and he'd probably do it again. But that look Mona gave him - was it puzzlement or disgust? - made it clear she doesn't see it that way.

When he was with Patsy, he had a vision for how he would live. Surging ahead, pioneering new frontiers, fashioning his octopus life with fingers in every pie and bringing them together into unique enterprises. After Harvard Business School and then Merrill Lynch for ten years, he went off on his own and for the past five years he's been consulting for the adventure travel business. But back then Patsy couldn't see his vision, his creativity. Maybe he did get too manic at times, too involved in his projects and neglectful of those around him. The day he saw this truth he was humbled. And enlightened. When you can break through the crust of self-definition you've built up and

see what others see, you learn something valuable. He learned that he could use Patsy's criticisms to grow and change. But he just didn't change enough for her.

Heather tidies the bed, pulling and smoothing out the brown duvet. "Frank, can I get you some soup before we go?"

"No, thanks, I'll go out and get a hamburger."

Heather hesitates, looking puzzled. "I don't think you're supposed to drive on Percoset. Especially not twenty miles to West Paris for a hamburger. We'll go up to Mona's and get you some frozen burgers." She winces.

"We don't eat meat," Eli says, with a confidential look.

Frank sits up and begins to swing his feet around to the floor. Nothing hurts now, but he moves cautiously. "I'll come with you."

"Oh, but –" Heather clenches and unclenches her hands, takes a step and then looks out the window.

"I want to thank Mona for saving my life." And to show her that he is not some invalid. And maybe, too, there's something he can do to help *her* out.

Heather's face softens. "Well, okay. We'll wait in the main room while you get dressed. Let me know if you need any help." They depart through the door.

"No help," Frank says to the door. He stands up and staggers as a wave of dizziness hits him, steadies himself and limps to the wall where his flannel shirt is hanging on a hook. He slips out of his pajamas, letting them lie on the rag rug, and slowly puts on his shirt. No problem. He takes his jeans and under shorts down from the other hook. This is a little more difficult, but he manages without bending too much. He goes to his duffle bag, still packed and on top of the bureau, and takes out a pair of wool socks. But when he leans down to put them on, he gasps. The ribs are excruciating. He lies down on the bed and brings his feet up, just barely managing to get the socks on over the bandage-wrapped ankle without moving his chest too much.

He walks out to the main room, where Eli is poking the fire in the wood stove with the tongs. Heather, standing at the kitchen alcove, opens the door of the little blue refrigerator and puts something into it. Probably the parsnip soup. There's not much else in there except bagels and cream cheese. If he's starving, he can eat the soup.

Frank limps to the door, and opens it, stepping out onto the porch.

Below him the Abanoosic Valley shimmers, the browns and greens of the trees softening the stark white of the snow, and beyond the valley, as clear as he's ever seen it, with its pristine snow cap, Wild Mountain rises into the sky. The air is warm and the sky a delirious blue. Snowshoe tracks crisscross the yard, and in the driveway spots of bare earth expose the deep ruts that will soon become mud.

"Spring in Vermont," says Heather, stopping beside him, "- for about a half hour."

"Damn," Frank says. "This would be a perfect day to ski the trails up on Wild."

"Not after all that rain last night."

"Did it rain again? I didn't hear it."

"All night long, thunder and lightning, the works." Heather steps back into the living room, while Eli carries his snowshoes to the car, and now Frank notices that the snow has sunk about six inches since yesterday and the snowshoe tracks are filling with puddles. Water trickles through the driveway ruts.

When Heather comes back, she hands Frank a metal rod painted with some kind of flower design and a jaunty handle at one end.

"What's this?" he says, aghast, holding it away from his body.

"A cane. It was with your stuff from the hospital."

"Frank MacFarland use a cane?" He props it against the wall beside the door and proceeds to walk down the three steps of the porch. Okay, so he has to limp, but he's not feeble. And he doesn't want to look like an old codger in front of Mona, who's probably ten years younger than he is.

Heather shrugs, goes to the driver's side of the car and gets in. Frank steps carefully along the path. Luckily he shoveled it out last night, otherwise he'd be in big trouble now. He eases himself into the passenger seat of the Subaru station wagon. What is it with these Vermonters and Subarus? Every other car he sees in Vermont is a Subaru wagon. Eli is already in the back seat. Heather turns the key, and the motor hums.

On the Wild Mountain Road, the car picks up speed, but then abruptly slows as Heather tries to ease over a pothole and a pain shoots through his chest. "Ooh," he moans.

“Sorry, Frank, but I can’t go much slower.”

He opens the window and breathes in the mountain air, washed clean by the rain and sun in a cobalt sky.

“Look at the river!” Eli shouts. The Abanoosic River has transformed itself again, and now a flotilla of ice chunks rushes along on the current, the chunks colliding into each other and forming jagged heaps that jam into the branches and rocks piled up along the banks and in the shallows. A roaring sound grows louder as they come in sight of the covered bridge with its’ weathered plank siding and red roof.

“The river’s about four feet higher than yesterday,” Heather shouts above the roar. She slows down the car. “But what’s that fire truck doing there?”

The Wild Mountain fire truck, surrounded by people, is parked about twenty yards ahead of them, and directly across the river another fire truck, smaller and a paler shade of red, squats in another hub of people milling and rushing about. A burst of panic sears his gut and he flashes back to yesterday. Stranded on the ice, the roaring water, two fire trucks.

On the road in front of them, the fire chief, in a yellow slicker and high rubber boots, stands and shouts through a bullhorn. He sees them, flags down their car and walks toward them. Heather pulls over and rolls down the window. “What’s going on, Cappy?”

Cappy Gold leans over and peers into the car. “You can’t cross the bridge,” he says. His grizzled iron-gray hair and intense blue eyes and a tiny red jewel in one pierced ear all seem to glitter, reflecting the snow and ice. He sees Frank in the back seat. “How ya doin’, buddy?”

“A little sore,” Frank says. “And thanks for yesterday.”

“Part of my job.”

“But, Cappy,” Heather says, “why can’t we go across? We have to get to Mona’s.”

“You’ll have to go to West Paris now to get across.”

“But that’s twenty miles!”

“One of those ice jams rammed into the bridge. Almost knocked it off the pilings. There’s another one, a bigger one, upstream, and if the river rises any more, it’s coming this way, too. We don’t know what’s going to happen.”

“Mom!” Eli exclaims. “Let’s get out and see!”

“Eli, wait,” says Heather. She slumps over the steering wheel. “My God, the bridge,” she moans. “That bridge has been there since eighteen fifty-three. If it goes down, Mona will die.”

Frank closes his eyes and leans back on the headrest. If only he could get in there and help. Like that time in Montana, when the hikers fell into a crevice and they had to lower the rope ladder from the helicopter, Frank MacFarland at the controls, steady and strong as steel. If he had a copter now, he could hover over the river and spray some chemical that would dissolve the ice so the water would flow harmlessly under the bridge and away. He imagines Mona, her blue eyes like sparkling pools gazing up at him, grateful, adoring.

A crashing noise, louder than the din of the roaring water, startles him awake. Heather and Eli are gone.

Ahead, people scurry around the fire truck, and a few men stand on top of it, pulling on a huge chain link contraption. Frank opens the door and steps out into the sunshine and commotion. Eli and a few other children around his age stand in a subdued group watching the river.

“Hey, kids,” Frank says, “what’s happening?”

“Nobody will tell us,” says Eli, in a sulky tone. “We have to stay back here or go home, Chief Gold says.”

From here to the bridge, the riverbed is motionless. The ice and snow form a still mass that is jammed up against the bridge. Frank scans the crowd. Where is Mona? Heather, in a silver parka over her glittering red skirt, huddles with a bearded young man and a woman holding a thermos. About ten people stand around the fire, and another group clusters near the bridge. A young man is talking to Cappy, writing in a notebook, and a young woman beside him takes pictures. Good. The newspapers will have forgotten about Frank MacFarland by this time.

But where is Mona? Across the river, mist rises from the snow-covered ice. There. She's standing on the bed of the fire truck, pointing and gesturing to a man pulling on the huge chain. The chain contraption extends around the far side of the bridge and across the river to the other truck. "What the hell are they doing with that chain?" he says aloud, although no one is close enough to hear him. "Trying to hold up the bridge? How insane."

Mona is looking this way, so he raises a hand and waves, but she doesn't see him. She disappears as the mist spreads and swells, and then the mist dissolves and she appears, then is obscured again, like a bird flying through fog.

His ankle throbs with a searing pain, and his ribs hurt with every breath. He hobbles over to Heather, who is holding a steaming coffee cup and talking intently with the young man. She looks up with a frown. "Frank, I'll take you home," she says, reading his mind.

In the cabin, Frank goes straight to the bed table and takes another Percoset. Then to the kitchen alcove where he takes out a bagel, heats up the parsnip soup, sits down and takes a spoonful. The soup is thick and white and garlic-y with flecks of orange carrots, creamy and light and tangy. It is, he decides, the best soup he's ever eaten.