

Paths to Extinction

(1)

So, what did you think?

About what?

Christ, Fran, it was on every channel. You couldn't miss it.

Well I could and I did, because I'm too busy to watch TV.

Bullshit. I push until my sister admits that okay, maybe her television is on and yes, she might have heard something about the guy who shot himself at a Board of Education meeting. But she hasn't actually *watched* it.

More bullshit. Fran lives in three rooms of our old house, a space that measures 538 square feet. The second floor is boarded up to save on heat. Her TV takes up an entire wall. There's literally no room where you can't see it.

Effective, though.

Please. He got lucky.

The guy shot himself in the head, Fran. I consider that foolproof.

Well, you'd be wrong. You can't just stick a gun in your mouth and expect everything to go your way. There's a lot to consider – the caliber of the gun, trajectory of the bullet, site of the wound, anxiety level, health issues, regrets, distractions, an itch and,

I don't know, maybe a dozen more. Not to mention that only ninety percent of gunshots to the head are fatal.

Okay, so he got lucky.

Anything could've gone wrong, Birdie. Stop by after work tomorrow, okay? I need help while Carl's away.

Our brother isn't away, he's in the hospital, and won't be home anytime soon. He moved in with Fran last year, after his divorce. His wife, a beautiful, bad-tempered trophy, decided she wanted nothing to do with him. Didn't even want him living in the same town. She blamed Carl for her daughter's death, which was nonsense because he wasn't even home when it happened. There was talk of charges being brought, but nothing came of it. I think he's better off. At least I did until yesterday morning.

He'd be dead if Fran hadn't gone into his room to wake him, and she only did that because the cable went out again. My sister panics if she has to talk to strangers, especially on the phone. I don't know how she was able to call 911.

Fran wasn't always this way. I remember her as a smart-mouthed teenager who regularly sent our dad into a rage. Carl and I used to be afraid of her. Now, she hides in the bathroom when the doorbell rings, and breaks out in hives when she collects her mail. She believes it's a delayed panic response, something like PTSD, but worse. There's no treatment, of course. I guess the cure will be discovered when Carl and I are no longer around to do everything for her.

So, the cable went out, as it does at least once a week, and if it hadn't, my brother wouldn't have made it to the hospital in time. Another life saved by technology.

Bring dinner, okay?

I can't come. We have staff meetings on Tuesdays.

Tomorrow's Wednesday.

Right. I meant Wednesdays.

Then, come on Thursday. And bring fried chicken, in case Carl gets discharged. That's his favorite.

Sure, Fran. So, listen. I've been researching lockjaw.

Do people even get that anymore?

All the time. You just step on a rusty nail.

You step on a rusty nail.

Maybe you could put manure on an open cut.

If I lived on a farm.

Mulch could work. Didn't Carl plant some bulbs in Mom's old garden?

How long does it take?

Eight, maybe ten days. Ever had a tetanus shot?

Not unless someone broke in and gave it to me in my sleep.

So, it's an option.

I'll look into it. Don't forget dinner.

I dropped off a bucket of KFC and left as soon as Fran started talking about the velour joggers she ordered from Amazon. Sometimes, it scares me to be around her.

When I look at Fran, I see myself, or how I'll probably end up in a few years. Pale as milk and dangerously thin, with a wardrobe consisting solely of pajamas, because who needs clothes if you never leave the house?

When we were in school, Fran was tough and funny, and smarter than everyone. She sat for all my exams and managed to get me a near-perfect score on the SAT. Fran's the reason I got scholarship money, not that it made any difference. I dropped out of college after one semester.

You should've finished.

That was a long time ago.

You could have been a teacher, or a lawyer.

Be serious.

Oh, B., you're so much smarter than you think.

I like my job.

Right. And, I like hearing squirrels run around in my attic all night.

See? We talk about normal things sometimes. I wish Fran was right, but at the end of the day I know who I really am. Sure, I may be bright, but I don't have the kind of

smarts that earn you scholarships and promotions, or that delighted look people give someone they've underestimated. Fran does, though. She may not be great at everyday life, but she remembers everything she's ever learned. I remember the past.

(2)

You're listening to Life in the Positivity Zone with Brother Gabriel. What's your name and where you calling from?

Shannon from Chesilhurst.

What's your question, Janet?

Shannon.

You gotta question?

I, um, want to know if I should go back to school.

You'd think Brother Gabriel would know my voice by now. I call his show at least twice a week. He's been out of rehab for months and swears he's clean, but I'm not convinced. He mixes up names and drops calls, and when he's tired, he curses at the callers, who are mostly middle-aged women from places like Fayetteville and Long Island. Once he made fart noises in the middle of a reading.

Let's see, kid. Your spirit guides – you have four, didya know that?

Yes, I've –

That's pretty rare. I've only seen that a couple times. You ever call before?

Never.

Well, your guides say you need to make a career change. Pronto. You're in the medical field, right? I see a white lab coat.

I wear scrubs. They're green.

So, you're a nurse.

I answer phones in a dental office.

That's what I thought. Not where you belong, according to your guides. They're telling me you need to go to school far from home, so you can fulfill your destiny.

Why can't I go to school here?

Too many negativities. You have to go somewhere north, or maybe northwest. Got a map handy?

You mean an atlas?

Whatever. Think about going into the healing profession. Nursing, maybe.

I'm afraid of needles.

All part of the job, kid. I see a father energy around you. He's standing real

straight, with his arms folded across his chest. Looks pissed. Sound familiar?

Nope.

Maybe someone who was *like* a father to you? Who's the man with the letter S in his name?

No one. It's not my father. It's not anyone.

Probably for someone on hold. Line jumpers, I call 'em. You got rudeness even in the spirit world. Okeydokey, so you know what to do?

Go to nursing school.

Far away. I see you graduating and making a ton of money.

Really?

Your guides say so. It has to be true.

Thank you, Gabriel.

No, thank *you*, Janet. And, God bless.

Sometimes I'm on hold for hours, and still don't get through. More people than you'd think call radio shows in the middle of the night. I give a different name and town each time. Brother Gabriel has a rule about calling too often.

(3)

I'm considering a house fire.

Apartment fire, in your case.

I fall asleep with a lit cigarette.

You don't smoke, Birdie.

I start.

At forty-one? Highly improbable.

What if I leave a candle burning on the nightstand?

You'd never be able to fall asleep.

How about the living room? On the coffee table, near a stack of newspapers. I'll start getting the *Times* delivered.

Too obvious. Maybe next to a box of tissues.

Okay.

Is it scented?

Does that matter?

People don't light unscented candles unless the electricity goes out.

I'll pick one up tomorrow.

Make sure it's vanilla.

My sister doesn't call Brother Gabriel as often as I do, and she never asks a question. She gives a fake name and describes her dreams to him in a French accent.

Either she's trapped in the woods with a gang of steroid-enhanced spirit guides, or getting her clothes ripped off by dead boyfriends. It's a waste of a call, especially knowing how hard it is to get through. But, whenever Yvette from Sicklerville is on the line, Brother Gabriel tells his listeners he needs to feed his cats and plays Cirque de Soleil's *Mystere* for a solid ten minutes.

I might be going back to school.
That's great, B.
Not around here, though.
What do you mean?
I don't know. Oregon, maybe.
Oregon? *Oregon?* You're kidding, right?
Brother Gabriel says there's a lot of negativism for me here.
Is that even a word?
He thinks I can only be rich and successful if I leave.
You're moving three thousand miles away because some guy on the radio told you to?
Not just him. My spirit guides, too. Did you know I have four?
He says that to everyone.
I've only heard him say it to one other person, and honestly, I think he just felt sorry for her.
Oh, Birdie.
What?
We both know he's a fraud.

Fraud or not, I need to talk to Brother Gabriel, asap. Carl is curled up on his hospital bed since yesterday, refusing to eat. He never should've moved back home.

(4)

What's your name and where you calling from?
Tammy from Pitman.
Pitman, huh? I saw the Amazing Kreskin at the Broadway there, back in the day.
Know who that is?
A singer?
Not even close. What's your question?
I was hoping to connect with someone.
Sheesh, Pam, do you listen to the show? Ever?
All the time.

Then you know I can't control who comes through.

It's my brother.

He's passed?

I think so.

You *think* so?

I mean, yes, he's passed.

I'm actually getting a father spirit. Small man, nicely dressed. Good-looking.

Debonair is the word that comes to my mind. Intense, though. Very, very intense. Mean anything to you?

I don't think so.

Sounds like a maybe. Psychic amnesia, I call it. You'll wake up in the middle of the night and it'll all make sense. Just don't call me then, okay?

What about my brother?

There's no brother spirit here.

I don't understand. Last night, I fell asleep on the sofa while bingeing season nine of *Autopsy* and when I woke, the cable was off, and the room was dark. Something brushed against my cheek, a hand, but softer. Kind of like water in the shape of a hand. It was so gentle, I felt like crying. Maybe I did cry. My body went cold, and I started to shake. The hand was a claw now, clutching at my stomach, pushing my lungs against my spine, trying to keep me from breathing. I thought I was dying. All those times Fran and I talked, we never imagined death could hurt. I vomited something that felt like hot steel. It kept coming, wave after endless wave, until my throat burned. When there was nothing left, I would doze off, but after a few minutes, the urge to vomit would wake me. I was trapped inside a slowly turning wheel of pain and sleep. I heard someone whisper and felt the hand again, the soft one, wiping sweat off my face. I don't know why, but I knew it was Carl. He was trying to help me. This was his way of freeing me from my past, and the debonair son of a bitch I still loved. He was here to save me.

Some time later, the TV went back on. I was alone, shivering in a room that smelled like the creek behind Fran's house. I tried to call Brother Gabriel, but all I got

was a recording telling me to stay in the Positivity Zone and call back during regular programming hours.

What time is it?

Sorry, Fran, I just –

No, I'm glad you called. I have an idea.

Is it about Carl?

Carl? Why?

No reason.

Okay. Tell me what you think. I establish a pattern of sleepwalking. That could take a while normally, but I connect it to some medicine I'm taking.

Melatonin?

Unreliable.

Ambien?

Too many side effects.

Trazodone?

An antihistamine, B. You know, like in allergy medicines. Something you can buy over the counter for me.

Antihistamines cause sleepwalking?

According to the Mayo Clinic. Anyway – and this is the easy part – I just walk into traffic one night.

You live in a cul-de-sac, Fran. No one drives by your house, especially at night.

I'm not talking about the street in front of my house. I'm talking about a highway.

You'd have to leave the house.

I'll figure it out.

So, who knows if you sleepwalk?

What do you mean?

Is anyone at your house?

Sure. You.

I told you, I'm not moving in.

Then, Carl.

I don't know about that.

You don't know about what?

Nothing.

Seriously, what's going on?

Seriously, nothing. It's just – did you hear about the schnauzer that was torched by a bunch of kids and thrown in a creek? The guy who found him was a vet who performed reconstructive surgery, and now he's living on a farm in Willingboro. The dog, I mean. He has his own Facebook page with like, a million followers. You didn't hear about that?

Go to bed, B.

Breaking news: Carl is not only alive, he's sitting up in bed, eating, joking with

the nurses and insisting he's ready to come home. His doctor is transferring him to the psych unit for evaluation.

More breaking news: don't buy sushi from a food truck.

(5)

Monique from –

Lemme guess –Paree?

Shamong. Can I talk to you off the air?

Sorry, kid. Not how I do things. What's your question?

I don't have one.

Well, in that case –

No, wait. I'm Yvette's sister.

You're shittin' me.

It's true.

I gotta go feed the kitties now, folks. Be back in a jiff. In the meantime, enjoy the music. So, what's your story, mon cheri?

It's about something that happened when we were kids. Something bad.

I'm all ears.

We were young. Really young. My brother Carl had just started second grade, and Fran – I mean, Yvette – and I weren't much older. Anyway, we were sitting at the kitchen table, doing homework.

And?

It was my father's rule. He'd check as soon as he got home from work. If he saw anything but homework on the table, we'd all get punished.

Sounds like a real ballbuster.

He had a lot of rules. My mom was at the kitchen counter, fixing dinner. She was humming the Folger's commercial. You know, the one about the best part of waking up? Or maybe it was the theme from Jeopardy. She loved that show, but she was terrible at it. Even when she knew the answer, she forgot to put it in a question.

Tick tock, kid. I gotta get back to my show, remember?

Sure. Of course. My dad – well, he came home from work, but he was different. His face was wet, like he was crying. And, he didn't have shoes on. He was dirty, and his clothes were dirty, or just wrinkled, or maybe he wasn't wearing anything.

Holy shit, he was naked? What'd your mom do?

Nothing. She couldn't. I mean, he shot her before she could turn around.

He *what*?

Well, she didn't actually know it was my father. That's what the police told us. But I think maybe she did.

Hold on, kid.

Then my dad put the gun on the kitchen table and told my brother to pick it up. He said *please*. My father never said please. Ever. And, my brother wasn't even doing

homework, but he didn't get mad, or anything. He just kept saying he couldn't do it himself.

Is this a joke?

No. *No*.

Then, for fuck's sake, stop.

I'm sorry. It's just – my brother tried to kill himself, and I need you to help us.

What the hell am I supposed to do?

Bring him back.

Your brother?

My father. The man with the letter S. For Sylvan. That was his name. You saw his spirit last week. You *said* so.

Look you got this all wrong. I don't know shit about your dad or your brother or –

Just make him come back. That's all I want. Make him tell Carl it wasn't his fault.

I can't, Monique.

Don't say that.

Honest to God, I wish I could, but I can't.

Can't you at least try?

Look, kid, I'm just a guy from South Philly. My name isn't even Gabriel. The Positivity Zone is in my ma's basement. Wait a minute, are you crying? Jesus, Mary and Joseph, don't do that.

No, I'm fine. Really.

I want to help you, kid, but -

I understand. It's all right.

No, it's not. Look, maybe I got something. A message.

From my father?

From me, Harry Zielinski. What your dad did was fucked up, and it fucked you kids up big time. I mean, here's your brother trying to kill himself, and then there's you, thinking I got all the answers, and your sister – well, she's just plain batshit. That's on your dad, okay? Tell your brother, it gets better. Or, it doesn't. Either way, he's gotta stick around. He's gotta take care of you and Yvette. Will you tell him that?

Yes.

You gotta promise. You know, so I can sleep tonight.

I promise.

You hang in there too, kid. Things aren't so bad here. Every spirit I know is looking for a way back.

Is that true?

Swear to God. Oh, and one more thing. Try not to call so much.

(6)

He was supposed to make it look like an accident. Rather than take a month's worth of Coumadin and slash his wrists, he should have gone for the stairs in the middle

of the night. Or, brought up the space heater from the basement, the one that sparks every time you plug it in. Put mouse bait pellets next to the bowl of M&M's and swallow a handful. Lean against the loose railing on the deck. Order take-out from the burger place behind the animal shelter. I could've told him. All he had to do was ask.

Are you coming with me?

Next time, maybe. The house is a mess, and I have to get food in.

You're buying food? Since when?

I order it online, and they leave it on the porch. Carl showed me.

The doctor thinks he'll be able to go home in a few days. They want him to talk to a psychiatrist first. Go on some meds.

That's probably a good idea.

Maybe we should talk to someone too, Fran.

Yeah, okay. You first.

Hey, I read about this guy who died from generator fumes.

Recently?

During that big storm last fall, when the electricity went out. He set up his generator too close to the house.

Can we afford one?

A small one, maybe.

I'll check Amazon. What time are you going over?

After work.

No meeting?

Very funny.

What are you going to say?

I'm going to tell him he's the product of bad parenting.

Really bad parenting.

And, I'm going to ask him why.

Don't bother. We both know why he did it.

Not that. Why he came back.