

BROTHERS ON A HOSPITAL BED

The parking lot resembled an ashtray that'd just been rid of its contents—empty and gray, except for a woman taking turns swatting at her two sons while wheeling her father to their car. Frank drew back the heavy cloth curtain. It would snow soon, he thought, and somewhere some chestnuts roasting over an open fire stood a chance of being quite a pleasant scene but not here. This was a hospital—where winter was born.

Some years ago, in the psychiatric unit at Bridgeport Hospital, Frank remembered the night they watched *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* on the projector in the cafeteria. In the morning, Spit, gave them a little dose of his theater degree. No vandalism, or coup, or anything like that, just a conga line right out the window of his room. The nurses— just this once, let him have his moment. When Frank finally made his way through the window, he was surprised to learn it was spring.

“Cigarette?” Jackie woke up asking brokenly. His ribs were bandaged, various cuts and bruising along his arms. His eyes purple radishes and his lips looking as if they tried taking a bite out of a hornet’s nest.

“Can’t smoke in here.”

“Well, got anything for me?”

“Stover’s,” Frank replied setting the chocolates down on the plastic cart by his bedside.

“Now it’s a party,” said Jackie. As an experiment, he tried raising his arms—currently looking more like two swollen grey clubs of mortadella, above his head, and failed rather quickly. Frank wondered if Jackie was still drunk.

“What happened this time?”

“This time,” Jackie probed.

“The policeman said your car was in the breakdown lane and you were sleeping in the grass with a bowling ball in your hand.”

“There was an incident at Keno.”

Jackie laid there in his crypt looking yellow, and red, and purple, and gray. Frank could see just about every bone in his body— whereas only a few years before, fresh out of the service, he was fit and tanned, not a hair out of place, his cheek bones sitting high and nobly on his face.

“You always take it too far. That’s your problem, Jackie.”

“I won’t have it Frank. I won’t have any of this.”

“It’s always one more dance, one more drink— “

“And you’re some kind of fuckin’ saint?”

“One last word with some shithead at the end of the bar— “

“Enough.”

“I’m just sick of it, is all. Ma is sick of it.”

“And what about you, Frank?”

“What about me?”

“You’re sober? You’re on the straight and narrow?”

“I don’t have a problem,” Frank said with distinction, working quickly to repudiate his brother’s implications, “and I certainly don’t let it affect my personal life”.

“Bullshit,” Jackie snapped.

“I’m not the one lying on the bed.”

“No, no you’re not,” Jackie whispered, purposely keeping his voice soft and tenderly so he could slowly increase its volume to match the severity of what he was about to say, “But, they did put you in the looney bin.”

“Fuck off Jackie.”

“Who came to visit you Frank? Huh? I didn’t even recognize you. One sock on. Did I read you the riot act? Did I abandon you? You, my brother. Gone mad. Don’t act like you aint ever been here. Remember Muriel’s wedding? You couldn’t even stand up. That was you, man! You don’t remember that? Give me a break. “I don’t let it affect my personal life”. Bullshit. You’re a liar, Frank. You’ve always been a liar. Like when you took mom’s checks and ran off to Canada. You know who called me? Janie. Janie, alright. You took her pills Frank?”

“What?”

“You took your wife’s pills?”

“Why on earth would you two be talk— “

“She had just had a C-section.”

“You know noth—”

“She could have died!”

“—what it takes”

“For what? A few Vicodin!”

“—wrestling with a mortgage”

“Oh, bullshit.”

“—being a husband”

“Give me a break.”

“—Raising a son “

“I STUCK UP FOR YOU,” Jackie yelled but his voice broke like a child’s.

There was a knock on the door and before either of them could answer, a nurse spoke.

“Gentleman, there are other people in this unit who are trying to get some rest,” she said in a fair but unyielding voice. “Mr. Morris, if you and your brother cannot keep your voices down, I will have to ask him to leave!”.

With that she closed the door and left them in purgatory.

“I told Janie you were taking Pop’s death hard. I stuck up for you, Frank. So, cut me some slack here, Frank. I know I gotta straighten this out. You don’t think I know that? You took up all of their time. Mom and Pop. Wherever you went, whatever you did, they’d just take it. Take it on every time. You know what Pop did when I told him I enlisted? He turned on the game and passed me a beer. I served my country, Frank.”

Frank watched his brother's face writhe as he carried on like this, watched as the muscles in his neck served as exclamations for every impropriety revisited.

Frank found the room quiet again and the two of them sat together in silence before he grabbed some things for Jackie. "I told them two sausage biscuits," Frank said, handing Jackie a McMuffin. "Here," Frank said grabbing a few paper towels and breaking up Jackie's food into bits. "You're the second kid I've fed today," he joked as they ate, sitting together on the hospital bed, both of them eating in the same hurried, devoted, way,

"How's Junior?" Jackie asked.

"Not so much a baby now. Almost a full head of hair."

"Good. That's good. He looks like you."

"Yeah, maybe. He's got Janie's nose though."

"Dodged a bullet there."

"Janie never said a word," Frank said between bites. "But I knew she saw me."

"You shouldn't fuck this up, Frank."

"I was banking on her silence. I didn't really care either way. It was like I was possessed."

"I know the feeling."

They finished eating and the head nurse, Mrs. Mendale, came in and checked on Jackie's vitals and changed his pillows. After she left, they took turns guessing her age. She couldn't have been more than thirty years old. Thirty-five, maybe. Frank thought Jackie was in good hands.

"I don't think I'll ever forgive myself," Frank said.

"Yeah but you decided that a long time ago," Jackie told him.

Jackie fell fast asleep and Frank sat by his bedside. He got up and stretched a few times and went to the cafeteria and bought some black coffee for himself. He bought some snacks from the vending machine for later if Jackie was feeling up to it. When he got back to Jackie's room he laid out some clothes for him on the chair, so he'd have some fresh clothes for whenever they'd let him go, but then he thought that if they didn't let him go and Jackie had to stare at them all day it'd be a mistake. He folded them nicely and left them in a bag behind the chair. Mrs. Mendale came to visit again, and Frank thanked her for being so patient and kind. "Don't let him give you any shit."

"I won't," she assured him.

It was true, by the time Jackie was a young man, their parents had become resigned to their fate, but he'd never know what it was like in the beginning. The Girl from Ipanema and slow dances in the living room. How his father would get drunk and stalk around the house, monopolizing the air. How a bowl of baked beans thrown at the wall felt like torrents of rain after a long agonizing draught. Jackie couldn't know things like that. Things like Thorazine. Mandrax. Largactil. Paraldehyde injections. How strong his father's hands had been, wrapped around his neck.

He gave Jackie one last look before he left. He was still sound asleep, breathing gently in contrast to motoric beat of so many of the machines in the room. I've failed, Frank thought. He wanted to rip Jackie out of his sleep and throw him around. Shake him. Hug him. Tell him he loved him. More than the fear of life or the fear of death. He thought of Janie. He'd won the lottery meeting her. He clenched his fists until he lost feeling in his hands to show himself the beast he'd become if anyone were to do to her any harm. He thought of his son, Frank. Jr. and at

that point he began to cry. He got up to leave and even though none of them would hear it, he started to whisper, "I love you, I love you, I love you."

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