

Will Broderick
While It Lasted

Slumped in his brown leather recliner, all the air gone out of him, Frank reminded me of one of those cheesy inflatable Christmas elves, post-holiday, piled in a twisted heap on a muddy front lawn. It was warm in the living room, even with the blinds blocking the late-summer sun, but Frank was wearing a baggy grey sweater and a skuzzy white ski cap with a blue New York Yankees logo.

I sat across from him on the matching brown leather couch, palms resting on my knees. Resisting the urge to slouch, I was forever hoping to discover a position that would relieve the pain radiating from two herniated discs, a constant reminder of my years driving a delivery truck for a beer distributor, often too drunk to notice the popping in my back as I hustled down the ramp behind a dolly stacked with the day's order of kegs or cases.

"The doctor says I'm not gonna make it if I don't eat and drink more."

Frank's voice was hoarse, not much more than a dry whisper.

"I don't know, I just don't have any appetite. I used to love milk shakes, but as soon as I take a sip, I feel like I wanna puke."

A flap of skin below his chin jiggled slightly as he spoke.

For most of his life, Frank had been a formidable figure. A tugboat captain from the early 1980s until his retirement five years ago, Frank had the requisite barrel chest, thick forearms and bushy grey beard. If anyone asked what a tugboat captain looked like, you just pointed to Frank. Into his mid-60s, despite a few extra inches around the waist, he was still a force, not a guy to take lightly. But that all changed 18 months ago when he woke up one morning unable to talk, unable to get out of bed and unsure where he was.

During his early rehab from the stroke, we gave him the celebrity treatment. Somebody stopped by almost every day. A few of us showed up on Sundays to watch football. It was all very upbeat, an invitation-only pep rally, plenty of encouraging talk.

"You got this Frank."

"You've been through worse than this."

"My money's on you, pal."

"You'll be back in the game before you know it."

And we believed just about every word; after all, this was Frank the Tank.

His speech returned, a little garbled but you could understand him. He was getting the strength back in his left leg and arm and starting to get around with a walker. Wowed by Frank's toughness, the physical therapist predicted that he'd be walking unaided by spring and back behind the wheel of his vintage 1993 coffee brown Mercedes sedan just in time to pull

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up at Glenbrook golf course with his clubs stowed in the trunk. We were convinced that the second coming of Frank couldn't be too far off.



But the only thing that came along was another stroke, and, within days of the second stroke, a PET scan found colon cancer. The surgery and the chemo, along with a now completely withered left arm, took most of the fight out of Frank. With a lot of help, he could just barely make it outside and onto his scooter for a painfully slow two-block ride to the main entrance of Tall Pines Village.

Gradually, the number of visitors dropped off. It was hard to see Frank in this condition and even harder for him to be seen. The physical therapy sessions ended months ago. A visiting nurse continued to come by twice a week to check Frank's vitals and meet the insurance requirement.

I'd like to say that I still show up because I'm such a loyal friend, but the truth is I don't have much else to do except keep track of my monthly disability check, make a daily stop at Dunkin' Donuts and submit the occasional article about one of the local high school sports teams to the Barnesville Chronicle. If I had a park bench in my orbit, I'm sure you'd find me stationed on it tossing peanuts to a legion of squirrels and pigeons. Instead, a few times a week I log some early afternoon hours on Frank's couch while he marks time in his recliner and presides over a serving table populated with a dented box of tissues, a tall glass of stale tap water and a super-sized bottle of antacids. Needless to say, there's no talk of the golden years.

"Well," I said, "you need to start eating and drinking, big guy. It's better than the alternative."

Frank grunted. It had all been said many times. I closed my eyes and listened to the soft clatter of another perfectly formed ice cube being released by the refrigerator into the freezer bin. A faint gurgling beneath the folds of Frank's sweater signaled that the processed contents of his stomach were en route to his colostomy bag.



"Hi, Sam. How y'all doin'? I thought I heard you come in."

It was Loretta, sweet Loretta. She had come down the hallway and was now leaning against the curved end of the kitchen counter. An oversized pink hoodie reached well below her waist. Black tights covered her shapely legs down to her bare feet and polished red toenails. That sweat-shirt covered a body that still draws plenty of attention from men of all ages, particularly for a woman on the plus side of 50. Her dark brown hair was pulled back in a ponytail. The few streaks of white, along with her high cheek bones and luminous grey-blue eyes give her an exotic, slightly dangerous look.

"I'm just fine, Loretta. It's always good to see you. You doin' alright?"

"I guess," she said. We're gettin' by, Sam. You know how it is."

When Frank got together with Loretta the consensus was that he hit the lottery. She moved up from San Antonio to the Barnesville area in north-

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east Pennsylvania about three years ago to put some distance between herself and an obsessed, violent ex. Her brother cleared out a room for her in the bi-level where he lived with his wife and teenage son. A would-be building contractor, brother Cooper had migrated north 30 years earlier to take advantage of the housing boom that spawned a galaxy of developments that nearly swallowed Barnesville.



Loretta was working as a cocktail waitress at the Blue Sky Casino the night she met Frank. While serving drinks at the craps table where Frank planted himself a few evenings every week, she was fending off some unwanted attention from a drunken patron. The behavior escalated from unwanted to unacceptable when the guy reached underneath Loretta's skirt and grabbed her butt. Loretta yelled and Frank was on his feet to deliver a single punch that knocked lover boy out of his chair and onto the casino's stain-resistant burgundy carpet, his nose spewing blood and his tan Stetson upended on the floor above his bald head.

That move earned Frank a lifetime ban from the Blue Sky, but it also paved the way to dinner and drinks with Loretta. Within three weeks she had moved out of her brother's house and into Frank's cozy brick-fronted ranch in Tall Pines Village, an over-55 community of better-than-average homes on one-acre lots. And for awhile, the rest was history. You never saw one of them without the other. Every so often I'd catch a glimpse of Frank's Mercedes gliding down Main St. in Barnesville, Frank at the wheel and Loretta's head nestled against his big shoulder.

"I just don't know what we're gonna do, Sam." Loretta stared straight at me, without so much as a glance in Frank's direction. "You know I'm very fond of Frank. He was good to me and we had plenty of great times, but I didn't sign up for this. I'm no caretaker, I know myself. That's why I never wanted kids. It's all I can do to take care of myself."

Pausing for a couple of beats, she nibbled on her bottom lip and shifted her eyes to the bookshelf above my head.

"Cooper says we should think about a nursing home. Sacred Heart out on Manor Drive is supposed to be nice. I just know we can't go on like this. Poor Frank. I hate to see him this way. I don't know, I guess we'll figure it out."

She sighed and disappeared back down the hall, never once looking at Frank or even acknowledging that he was in the room.

But he was there alright, and he wasn't happy.

"Get me the fuck outta here," was all he said.

Before he could rock himself out of his recliner and onto the floor, I grabbed hold of him and together we hobbled out to the carport where he settled onto his scooter. Not that long ago there might have been a joke from one of us about Frank going for a spin on his lowrider. But nothing seemed funny as he motored out into the mid-September sunshine and down the cul-de-sac where he turned onto Mountain View Drive.

Left arm dangling like a snapped halyard, sweater flapping in the breeze, Frank chugged past a grid of tidy green lawns, each dotted with

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bouquets of pinwheels and American flags. To keep up, I had to break into a jog. When the scooter banged over a speed bump, Frank didn't flinch. You could still see traces of the old captain. But this was about as far as you could get from the glory days of Cap'n Frank in the wheelhouse of his tug, shepherding a barge out of New York Harbor.



We reached the stone wall next to the entrance, where we usually lingered for a few minutes, watched a car or two whiz by on Rim Rock Road, and looked out at the dark contours of Laurel Mountain. Frank was in the habit of saying something about what a good run he'd had and that he knew he was a lucky guy. Today, he kept that to himself.

Behind us, a shrill whistle rose from the field beyond the stone wall. I watched as a red-tailed hawk glided low to the ground over a patchwork of wildflowers, weeds and hardpan, reached the other side of the field, flapped its wings and disappeared into the tree line.



For a moment, I thought the squealing was coming from the woods. But it was out on the road, where a white pick-up truck was fishtailing down Rim Rock before screeching to a tire-burning stop a few hundred yards from where I stood. What looked like the mangled remains of Frank's scooter jutted from the front right bumper. The driver bolted from the cab and ran toward me. I started to run too, and we met next to a steep ditch that paralleled the road. Frank was sprawled at the bottom.

Dancing a jig on the shoulder of the road, the driver, a wide-bodied kid in rust-colored overalls, unloaded on me and Frank.

"Jesus Christ! You gotta be kidding me. What the fuck is wrong with this guy? He pulled right out in front of me. What the fuck!!"

I jumped into the ditch and almost fell right on top of Frank. Over my shoulder, the kid kept yapping.

"What the hell was he doing out there anyway? The guy must have a death wish."

"Hey, hey, give it a break and listen to me!" I was shouting. "I don't have my phone. Would you PLEASE call for help? He's in bad shape."

"Bad shape? Looks to me like that old boy's next stop is the funeral parlor."

"You're a funny guy. Real funny . . . Now just call 911 you asshole. We need help."

Frank's legs were splayed at unnatural angles from his body, his arms raised above his head as though signaling for a touchdown. Blood oozed from his mouth and nose and, above his closed eyes, against all odds, that ratty knit hat was clinging to his head. He was as dead as anyone could be. I was sure of it. I reached over and picked up his atrophied left hand. The fingers looked like they were welded together.

"Jesus, Frank," wasn't much of a prayer, but I moved on to some Our Fathers and Hail Marys and personal petitions.

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Somewhere around the middle of my third Lord's Prayer I realized that the sirens in the distance had landed right next to me and trailed off to a groan. I popped up as though somebody might catch me doing something wrong. A state policeman was slowly climbing out of his car and adjusting the chin strap on his hat, while the red strobe light on the car's roof beat time against a dark cluster of pine trees. He pointed at me and the driver of the pick-up, barked at us to stay put, then opened the trunk of his car, pulled out some flares and began placing them on the macadam around the pick-up.

Two EMTs got out of the ambulance and hurried in our direction. First to reach us was an older guy in suspenders with a white beard that started somewhere on his neck and quit when it reached his jawline. He walked to the edge of the ditch, peered at Frank and let out a short whistle. His partner, a young woman in her late teens or early twenties with close-cropped blonde hair and a nose ring, leaned forward and offered me her hand.

"Hello, sir. This is Ronald and my name is Becky. Can I ask you to come up out of there so we can get a look at your friend?"

With Becky's help I scrambled up the side of the ditch and onto the road. Within seconds, muscle spasms in my lower back doubled me over. Eyeballing the frayed shoelaces in my worn-out black Nikes, I was silently cursing everyone and everything that had brought me to this exact moment—Frank and his rotten health, Loretta's big mouth, and my own empty life—when Frank's long Mercedes roared out of Tall Pines Village and skidded to a hard stop behind the police car. Loretta hopped out and sprinted toward me, stumbling when one of her flip-flops dug into some loose cinders.

I took a deep breath and slowly ratcheted myself up until I was face to face with Loretta.

"Don't tell me. It's Frank, isn't it?"

She ran over to the ditch, peeked in, then ran back and threw her arms around me.

"He's gone, isn't he, Sam? Oh God, we never said goodbye and now he's gone."

"You're okay, Loretta. Easy now."

I hugged her. "You did the best you could. This isn't your fault. We all say things we regret."

Loretta pulled back and drew a bead on me. Her voice was low, almost a growl.

"My fault? Frank was miserable, Sam. Y'all know that. He had no kind of life. I think this is best for everyone. Matter of fact, I *know* it's for the best. Beating myself up won't help Frank now. Frank wouldn't want me to. He wanted me to be happy."

"Well," I mumbled. "If you say so, then it must be true."

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Loretta fished a pack of Marlboro Lights out of a pocket in her sweat-shirt, lit one, took a noisy drag and, shivering slightly, crossed her arms over her chest, the cigarette fixed in her hand like a bayonet.



Standing in the middle of the road, encircled by flares, the Jackson County coroner was shaking his head and listening to the big country boy, who was still squawking about that crazy old bastard on his scooter. Off to the side, the EMTs had hauled Frank out of the ditch and strapped his body onto a gurney.

Becky walked over and solemnly presented me with Frank's grubby hat as though it was a folded flag at a veteran's funeral.

"I'm sorry about your friend. He was gone before we could do anything."

"Yeah," I said. "He sure was."