

TYRANNOSAURUS

THE THIRD TIME Frankie Clay quit drinking was his favorite because he was positive he could stop for good. His brothers had sent him to a center all the way in Minneapolis. “The best place to dry out in the whole country!” they said, after showing him the brochure. They told him Hank Williams cleaned up there, and that fact alone convinced Frankie to go. Once he found out they were lying, he didn’t care anymore. He was determined to quit whether Hank Williams had or not. By the time he left Minnesota, he’d completed all of the twelve steps except for apologizing to those he’d wronged and believing in a higher power. More importantly, he had a strategy.

Frankie knew he possessed an ambitious but inattentive heart. His desires, strong as they were, only ran in one direction at a time. If he started wanting something else as much as he wanted booze, then he wouldn’t have the emotional capacity to remain a drunk. Now he just had to start wanting something so bad he couldn’t concentrate on liquor, and that was easy. He wanted lots out of life, but most of all he wanted witnesses. The thought of strangers telling stories about him over supper tables for generations after he was gone thrilled him even more than the prospect of an unopened bottle of Old Crow.

He already had one witness. Delores would always remember him and remember him well. Even if she stopped forgiving him, she’d still think of him more than anyone. But she was already old; not gray-headed old or weak-kneed old like him, but fully grown, with an established way of thinking and a mind too sharp to be impressed. Anyway, she had her own language and didn’t need to tell stories in his. He had to find someone else.

Driving south on Highway 15, back to Hazard, he became so excited about the idea that he could barely keep his hatchback on the right side of the double yellow lines. Every coal-stripped mountain and oversized satellite dish—“The Kentucky state flower,” he used to call them—reminded him of this part of Appalachia he planned on haunting for eons to come. “Frankie Clay,” he yelled out of the window through cupped hands. “Frankie Clay.” The sound died on the wind, but he kept

yelling it anyway, hoping a hint of his name would carry on some unclaimed lower frequency to one of those satellites and then come blasting through every TV and radio station, rattling all the A-frames from here to Southwest Virginia.

He was almost out of gas when he reached Hazard, but instead of filling up, he simply took his foot off the accelerator, sailed into the Dairy Queen parking lot, and parked in front of a scrawny, spotty-faced teenager with a hat and apron.

The teenager put down his broom and took one tentative step toward the car. “Are you okay, buddy?” he said. “I don’t want no trouble.”

Frankie turned off the engine and dangled the keys out the window. “Take good care of it. I’ll be back in about an hour. I know just how many scratches are on here, and I won’t abide more of them.”

The kid leaned forward and adjusted his visor. “I ain’t no valet. This’s a Dairy Queen.” He pointed up to the sign. “We got milkshakes and shit.”

“Well, then,” Frankie said, withdrawing his keys. “So you’re the guys with the milkshakes and shit. Could you at least fetch me the valet?”

“I’m getting the manager on you,” the teenager said, dropping his broom. “You’re here when I get off, I’ll fuck you up.” He turned around and walked inside.

The early-afternoon sun poured into Frankie’s driver’s side window, roasting his Honda, and making him want to scream with joy. In Minnesota, he never felt this type of relentless, dangerous heat, and he sat up at nights, scared he wouldn’t feel it again. His clothes had already sopped up so much sweat that they looked like dishrags, and he worried if he walked from here, he’d show up at Delores’s door looking as wet and bloated as a drowned corpse. Still, he didn’t think he could come home without at least a little ceremony, so he grabbed his walking stick, stepped out of his car, and began to walk down Main Street.

He kept a graceful step for a man of his weight, always tapping his walking stick to a three-quarters waltz. It felt good to stretch out to his full height, even if just for a quick walk. When he drove in that cramped car, he could feel the bulge of his stomach pressed against the inside of his forearms, but out in his hometown streets, he didn’t have to fight against his size. The joy of the day was overwhelming him, and he couldn’t keep it balled in for much longer. “Leslie?” he yelled at a red-bearded who smelled like soured buttermilk. “Leslie Sullivan, how’ve you been?” He flung one arm around the man’s shoulders in an impromptu hug.

The bearded man shook Frankie off his shoulders, leaned back, and glared.

“You remember me, right?” Frankie said. “Frankie Clay. I took you to junior prom, and we were going to elope, but my family didn’t make enough money, so you ended up marrying that blonde guy. What’s his name, Lance?”

The bearded man squinted at Frankie, and spit out a gob of his dip. “Who’re you?” he said. “Better watch yourself, talking like that.”

“Oh Lord.” Frankie smacked his forehead. “I must’ve gotten the wrong Leslie Sullivan. You look just like her, though.” He shrugged, tapped his stick three times, and then kept moving down the street.

Once he reached the window of Grady’s Pawn Shop and Tanning Salon, he stopped, turned around, and caught his breath. The bearded man was walking away like nothing happened. By suppertime, he’d probably have forgotten Frankie altogether. Clearly, he’d have to do better. He wrote his name in the dust of the store window, shoved his hair back off his forehead, and then continued walking.

His shirt felt tight and over-starched. It was one of the small comforts of home he always took for granted. Having his brothers own a Dry Cleaners meant he could always keep his shirts soft, warm, and clean, but whenever he went away, his laundry never felt right. The more he walked, the more he sweated, and the stickier the cotton felt on the small of his back. For a second, he considered stopping off in the shade for a breather, but he knew that was silly. He was so close that he could almost see the chipped, lime-green paint of her house and the ornaments in her yard. It’d do no good to stop now.

Two blocks later, across the street from Delores’s house, he saw a dirty-haired boy playing on his knees in a half circle of sunlight. Frankie stood behind the boy, waiting for him to turn around. He coughed and snapped his fingers until the boy raised his head.

“Sorry Sailor, did I interrupt you?” He clapped his hands together and cracked his knuckles. “I was just hoping you could maybe answer me some questions. First off, what’re you playing?”

“Just playing,” the boy said. He stepped aside to reveal a small hill of pebbles.

“I’ll be,” Frankie said. “That’s some rock collection you’re working on. Seriously, that could be worth something someday.” He pulled out his wallet. “In fact, it might be worth something right now.” He dropped a five-dollar bill on the ground, and the boy scrambled to snatch it up before the wind blew it away.

“All right, Sailor,” Frankie said. “Since I can’t keep calling you Sailor, you better tell me your name.”

“Bobby Lee.” He stuffed the bill in his pocket.

“Mary Lou.” Frankie patted the boy on the head. “That’s a real pretty name. You must be the apple of your mama’s eye with a name like that.”

The boy put his arms down at his sides. “That’s not what I said.”

“Okay, sweetheart, don’t get sore.” He reached in his pocket and pulled out a dollar bill. “What do you think about this?” He dangled the dollar above the boy’s head, just out of his reach. The boy jumped for it, but Frankie pulled up his hand. After each missed jump, the boy laughed, stepped back, and took a longer running start. On the fifth try, Frankie lowered the money just enough for the boy to grab it.

“You’re too quick for me, Peggy Sue.” Frankie gave a low, rusty laugh and scratched his chin. “Since you’re on my payroll now, you got to tell me your modus operandi.”

“What?”

“Your mode of operation,” Frankie said. “As in, when you aren’t stacking rocks to Jupiter, what’re your means of enjoyment? Don’t play dumb with me just because I’m blind.”

“You ain’t blind.”

“Dear God.” Frankie threw up his hands. “So now I’m a liar just because I’m fat. Not all fat people are liars, you know? Was Santa Claus a liar before he died?” He dropped to his knees and looked at the sky. “My own son’s calling me a liar.”

The boy laughed. “I ain’t your son either.”

“Well, I say you are.” He stood up and brushed the dust off his knees. “You see, I got so much goddamn wisdom that I need a progeny to pass it off on. So twenty dollars in my pocket says you’re my boy for the afternoon.”

“All right.” The boy held out his hand.

“Now hold up a second,” said Frankie. “You can call yourself my son, but to get any sort of commission from me, you got to go a step further. You got to show me that you’re willing to learn from me. Can you do that, Slick?”

The boy grabbed the bottom of his shirt and waited.

“For instance, when it comes to women, I probably know more than Jesus Christ Himself. Maybe I’m wrong, but I’m guessing your mommy and daddy don’t love you enough to teach you much. You ever kissed a girl before?”

The boy kicked up a foot-full of dust. "So?"

"So nothing," Frankie took out his wallet and threw down a twenty. "Just, I think it's time you did." He reached into his jacket pocket, pulled out a pen and a small pad of paper. "Now, I know you're young, so I'm going to make this easy for you. Can you read yet?"

The boy shook his head.

Frankie tore off a piece of paper and wrote, Give me all your money. I have a gun.

He handed the note to the boy. "Now, you see that tall woman with the red purse by the department store. Give this to her, and she'll be all over you."

The boy ran off in her direction.

Frankie stepped back onto the edge of the shadows. He kept a casual eye on the woman, careful to turn away whenever a car drove past him. As the boy approached, Frankie knelt down and pretended to tie his shoe, shielding himself behind a row of parked cars. It hurt his back to bend in that way for too long and he could feel his shirt riding up just above his belt, revealing a small patch of side-fat, but he didn't want the woman to see him, at least not until she'd talked to the boy.

From where he knelt, he could still see the top third of the woman. She had strong cheekbones and dark, almost Mediterranean, skin. Most women that pretty wouldn't get angry at a boy, but he'd been wrong before. When the boy handed her the note, she looked around and started laughing. It was a big laugh, making her black curls bobble up and down like springs. She shook her head, and Frankie jumped back into position, waiting for the boy to return.

"What happened?" He threw his arms up. "How'd you let her go like that?"

"She said no." The boy bent over, and put his hands on his knees.

Frankie shook his head and clicked his tongue. "Oh Sadie Jane, I've done you wrong. I've forgotten your youth. You see, when a woman says no, she means yes sometimes. I should've told you that." He took out his wallet. "Let me make it up to you."

The boy stuck out his hand.

"Is my money all you're after?" He snapped his wallet shut. "When I say 'make it up to you,' you think money? You've got a banker's mind, son. What if I was to beat up your brother, or marry your mommy? Wouldn't that mean a little more to you than some money?"

"I don't know." The boy's forehead crinkled.

“Well, here’s how I mean to make it up to you. First, I’ll give you some money.” He dropped a ten-dollar bill on the ground. “Then you’re going to go over and talk to that curly-headed one down the street.” He pointed to a heavy-set bleached blonde, hunched over her garden. “If you can’t think of nothing to say, then give her this.”

He took out his notebook and pen, and wrote, *I deem you worthy of passing on my genetic material. Prepare your hips for childbearing.*

The boy took the note, scooped up the money, and ran down the street.

Frankie walked slowly in the other direction, occasionally looking over his shoulder. The woman was older this time, and he couldn’t guess her mood. He began minding the cracks in the sidewalk, skipping over them and clicking them with his walking stick. From straight ahead, he heard someone call his name.

“Look who’s back?” Wade Larkin, his former boss’s son when he worked as a paralegal, stood in front of him with a briefcase and a newspaper tucked under his arm. “I thought you were gone for good this time.”

Frankie wiped his palms off on his slacks and looked away. “You know how it is.” He tried to tuck in the right side of his shirttail.

“What’s this I heard about you being in Minnesota? Your family put you there, right?”

“That’s right.” Frankie flashed a quick smile. “They had me working for a travel magazine.”

Wade chuckled and with his free hand hooked his thumb through his belt loop. “Not what I heard.”

“I was counting lakes,” Frankie said. “They say they got a thousand of them up there, but it’s just one big one they show from a bunch of different angles.”

Wade opened his mouth to speak, but stopped short. Frankie felt a tap on his shoulder and spun around to see the curly-headed woman holding the boy’s hand.

“You ought to be ashamed of yourself, making a child carry a note like this.” She dropped the boy’s hand and crossed her arms. “You must be sick or something.”

“This is where you ran off to?” Frankie asked the boy. “What’d I tell you about talking to strangers? Did she offer you candy?”

Wade patted Frankie on the back, between his shoulders. “I’ll leave this one to you, big guy.” He nodded to the woman and hurried down the street.

“People like you ought to be locked up,” the woman said to Frankie. “I’ve seen you carousing around here before. You and your buddies, making a mess of things.”

Frankie reached in his shirt pocket, pulled out his Hohner, and blew a high C. “What’s that?” he yelled. “I can’t hardly hear you over this harmonica.” He watched her mouth and blew more notes whenever she opened it to speak. “Why don’t you go back to your gingerbread house? Maybe you caught a few more boys with it, so you can leave mine alone.”

“You’re demented.” She clenched her fist and raised it. “I ought to call the authorities on you.”

“Go on and call them.” His voice turned high and hoarse. “He’s my boy. Besides, the chief of police is my cousin. Last night, my brother played cards with the District Attorney, and my father is the Mayor’s boyfriend, so knock yourself out.”

The woman huffed, spun around, and stormed down the sidewalk. She had a good dramatic walk, Frankie decided—quick, but not sloppy. She’d probably go home and tell her friends about him, maybe even stew over it for a week or two. Still, a woman like that hates most of the world anyway, and he’d probably just blend into the rest of it soon enough.

Frankie squatted down to the boy’s eye level. “Dear Lord, son, you did great. I was expecting you to do well, but you knocked the ball clean out of the park.” He put out his hand and the boy high-fived it. “Look how angry you got that fat bitch.”

The boy giggled.

“I thought she was going to cry.”

“She was.” The boy nodded and tried to catch his breath. “She was going to cry.” His face broke open into a toothy grin. “Do another.”

“All right, heartbreaker. I know when I’m dealing with a force of nature.” A car with no muffler passed, and he waited for the sound to die before speaking again. “I’ll give you one more, but it’s important. There’s twenty dollars in it if you can get a kiss.” He put his hand on the back of the boy’s neck, and guided him gently to the road. “You see that green house with the statues in the yard? You’re going to knock on that door, and if a tall Chicano woman answers, give her this.”

He took out his pen and notepad and turned away from the boy. The pen didn’t write at first, and he went through three pages of false starts. *Delores*, he finally wrote. *I’m back in town now and I’ve mostly reformed in the important ways. If I’m still more or less in your good graces, then I’d like to stay with you.*

Frankie looked up. The boy was back at his rock pile, rearranging some of the big stones on top. If he didn't hurry, the boy might wander away. He shook his pen and started writing again:

There were times out there when I thought I loved you to smithereens and times when I wouldn't think about you at all, but whenever I did think about you it was lovingly. It would also mean a lot to me if you'd kiss the hell out of this boy. He's an orphan, and he's never been kissed.

He handed the note to the boy and watched him scamper up to the house. Two semis passed, blocking his view. By the time the exhaust cleared and he could see across the street, the boy was on her porch. Frankie unbuttoned the top button of his shirt.

What if she no longer lived there? he thought. It didn't make sense, but suddenly it felt very possible. They hadn't communicated the whole time he'd been away, and he knew she'd left homes before without leaving a trace. How hard could it be to stuff full a suitcase and shoot off in the night. For all he knew, the boy could be walking up to a stranger's house, about to hand a love note to some drifter who hadn't even bothered to clear off the lawn.

When the boy knocked on the door, Frankie lost his nerve. He swung his head back and forth, looking for a tree or a truck to hide behind. His neck felt too fat for his collar, and the movement of his head made drops of sweat fly from his cheeks. Before he could decide on a direction to run, she stepped out on the porch with her hand on her forehead, like she was rubbing out a headache. She looked just the same—same piled high hair, same powder blue shorts, same enormous teeth.

She didn't smile when she saw the boy. When he handed her the note, she held it between two fingers, never breaking her glare. The boy took a step closer to her, and it looked like he was talking, but she didn't look down. After reading the note, she shook out a small laugh and squatted down to his level. The boy turned and pointed in Frankie's direction.

Frankie shrugged and threw up his hands. His walking stick felt greasy in his palm, so he brought it up to his eye, pretending to look at her through a telescope.

She crumpled the note and threw it onto the yard. Without moving her feet or lightening her scowl, she leaned over and kissed the boy. His hands shot out in

surprise, fluttering up and down and eventually resting on the top of her head. After she finished, she shook him by the shoulders, pushed him away, and went back inside without wiping her mouth.

“What happened?” Frankie asked, when the boy came running up to him.

“She did it.” He pointed to the lipstick smears above his chin. “She kissed me.”

“She what?” Frankie yelled. He threw down his stick and kicked it when it bounced off the concrete. “How could you do that?”

The boy stepped back.

“I expected a little treachery.” He marched a full circle around the boy. “But my own child slobbering all over the woman I love. It’s more than a gentle soul can bear.”

The boy’s face reddened. “You said.”

“I said what?” Frankie wiped the sweat off his forehead with the back of his hand. “I said, ‘I’d sure as shit love some manchild to climb up my woman like she’s a beanstalk.’ It’s my own fault, I guess, but did you have to take my money first? You can stop crying, too.”

The boy ducked his face and wiped away a handful of tears. He took a quick step toward Frankie’s right leg, and then froze.

“It’s all money with you lot, isn’t it? Fine.” He threw a fifty-dollar bill on the ground. “Take it, Romeo.” He threw a twenty. “There’s seventy. Eighty, eighty-one, eighty-six, eighty-seven.” He shoved his wallet back into his pants. “Sorry I can’t give it to you in silver pieces.”

The boy took a deep breath, opened his mouth, and then dropped to his knees. He grabbed at the money, wadding it tight in both hands, until he’d collected it all. A dollar bill dropped out of his fist, and he fell on it, trapping it between his stomach and the cement. He stuffed the money back in his fingers, and then shot off from a sprinter’s position, with his hands too full to wipe away his tears.

The sun hit Frankie’s eyes again, and he brought his hand to his forehead to shield his face. He walked over to the boy’s rock pile and picked up the top stone. It fit tight between the first joint of his thumb and the tip of his index finger, and he had his arm cocked back to skip it when he heard her voice.

“Have you lost your fucking mind?” She marched up to him with both hands welded to her hips. “How much money you give that boy?”

“I don’t know. Over a hundred.” He threw the stone at ground in front of a parked fire truck. “I was actually planning on dropping by later. What do you think about that?”

“That you’re a goddamn maniac. Tossing away your money, then stomping and screaming like a Tyrannosaurus.” She lifted her shirt collar and tried to fan her face. “And what do you mean by having me kiss that boy anyway? You think I got nothing better to do than kiss whichever filthy child you tell me to?”

“Now, Delores, have a heart.” He put his hands on his chest and cocked his head back. “He’s a poor orphan.”

“I don’t care what sort of orphan he is. It makes no sense to send a strange boy to my door.”

“You didn’t answer my question.” He clapped his hands together. “What do you say to me coming over in a while?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “Not for a few hours at least. I’m entertaining soon, and I don’t want you there for it.” She turned around and marched off.

Before she reached the center of the street, Frankie called out to her. “I planned on buying you flowers, but I gave all my money to that boy.”

“Then pick some,” she yelled. “Just don’t bring me no more filthy children. I got enough worthless men knocking down my door wanting kisses without you bringing me more of them.”

Frankie watched her march across the street and into her house. Once her kitchen light flipped on, he clicked his walking stick and headed in the direction of the riverbank. There were plenty of wildflowers there that nobody would miss. She’d probably let him stay if he showed up empty-handed, but she’d never refuse him with a pocketful of flowers.

It just proved to him what he already knew. Life could never throw a problem at him he couldn’t overcome. So long as he worked and worked and worked then there was nothing outside of his control.

She called him Tyrannosaurus. He liked that. No one has seen a Tyrannosaurus, but they know he was there. They still have the bones, and the bones point to the biggest monster no one has seen this side of God. It’s just imagination that adds muscle, and flesh, and a lion’s roar.

His mind went to the boy. That was his first kiss, and he'd remember it for a long time, even without the sideshow. He could grow up to be an ambassador with a Purple Heart and two trophy wives, but Frankie would still own a piece of his head. Maybe one day, he'd eclipse his previous memories, swallowing everything that came before him, until he became the dumping ground for the boy's imagination. Frankie closed his eyes and pictured his double, lodged forever in the boy's mind, growing, and changing, and moving in all the ways he could not.