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Too Many Words

Frankie asked Sam to marry her on the last Tuesday in March, under the street-light in front of Hal's Barnyard Bar. She did it because both of them knew he would never get around to asking, and because the very slight wrinkles around her eyes were getting larger much too quickly for her to wait on him—or anybody else—any longer.

They got married in the small church on Dapple Street, Frankie's family making a big Italian to-do about the whole affair, but Sam's family...Sam's "family" not even acknowledging receipt of the marriage invitation. Needless to say, no one from the Feldman side ever showed up for the ceremony. Frankie tried to include Sam in every conversation, every sudden outburst of wild laughter, every love-filled hug between cousins and cousins and cousins. But as the reception came to a close, and she repeated her new name to herself in her head—"Francesca Maria Feldman"—she knew that, although she had taken his name, it would not be an even trade. Sam would never be a Cappellini.

For their honeymoon, Frankie's parents sent the newlyweds to the Poconos for a week, where the two made Janey, born nine months later and much to the excitement of Frankie's mother Sophia. Sophia, whose maiden name was Capra, would never understand her daughter's stubborn decision to break the family's "traditional" marriage to another Italian, but realized she could learn to accept it if she got a chubby pink granddaughter out of the deal. Frankie and Sam had been doomed from the start, Sophia believed—from the moment the two had met in the eighth grade, to the moment Frankie had been forced to propose to him, the poor girl. Sophia had yet to see in her son-in-law what her daughter had supposedly recognized from the beginning.

Samuel Feldman never spoke unless spoken to. Raised by his older brother, he'd never had any female to coddle him or tell him not to throw the first punch—until Frankie came along. And the fact that Sam didn't know how to "treat a lady" suited Frankie just fine, because she'd been smothered by chauvinist men all her life, and Sam was the welcome break she'd needed.

As for what Sam needed, nobody could ever really tell. When he was two years old, he hadn't yet spoken a word, and his alcoholic single mother had finally taken him to the doctor to find out the problem. Amidst her cloud of perfume and vodka, her flash of false gold earrings and her teased and hair-sprayed puff of bleached-blond hair, the grandfatherly doctor had told her that Sammy had nothing wrong with his vocal chords, nor his ear drums. Mrs. Feldman, gathering her elephant-sized purse and her silent, wide-eyed child, took the doctor's indication of lack of physical ailments to be a direct insult to her mothering, and left the office in a huff. This would be one of the last times Sam would feel the embracing arms of his mother, for she would leave six months later in the front seat of another man's Mercedes. Passed along from long-lost relative to long-lost relative, Sam and Michael eventually settled in the apartment three blocks from the Cappellini's house, Michael working two part-times, and Sam going to school whenever he felt like it.

No one expected anything lasting to begin when, outside the town movie theater on one humid September evening, the brown-eyed, eighth-grade Italian beauty approached the small black-haired rebel who had dirt under his fingernails.

“See those girls laughing behind me? See ‘em?” she asked the boy with the eyes that were always looking, always silent. “They dared me to come over here and kiss you, and I’m sure as hell not gonna give them the satisfaction of calling me a scaredy-cat, so please just...just stay right there and let me do this real quick. I swear I’ll never bother you again.”

She lied. She did bother him again. And again. And again. There was something refreshing in the way Sam just sat there and let her do all the talking, something empowering about the way her parents looked at him when he came over at midnight and disappeared into her room, something exhilarating in the way his shoulders became so broad by senior year, and the way his long hair barely brushed the tops of his shoulders, and the way his great, paw-like hands could be gentle when they cupped themselves around her chin and pulled her close.

And by the time she got back from two years at community college, followed by four at the town university—a Bachelor’s Degree in Education in one hand and a fraternity brother-induced badly broken heart in the other—he was still there, waiting for her. Waiting, with enough money stashed away from his job at the hardware store to take her out for long weekends at a downtown hotel, helping her to forget what’s-his-name from the university, who tore her heart in two and left her with nothing but what she figured was inevitable—becoming Mrs. Samuel Feldman.

“Do you think of me as being your last hope?” Frankie asked Sam one night at the hotel, her knees drawn up under the covers, and his eyes glued to the football game on TV.

“Hm?” he muttered, placing his hand on her foot and keeping his eyes on the game.

She let her brown eyes travel over the length of his long, curving spine as he leaned forward to hear the TV better, and she realized with a start that she was 25 years old, and this was where her life was going.

“Never mind,” she said.

Sam turned his head and looked at her as if he’d only just realized she was there. She half-smiled, and he leaned back and took her in his arms. As she drifted off to sleep, she heard him whisper “I love you,” and she remembered what it felt like to be safe. It helped to be with him when she needed someone. After all, it had always helped before.

The next night, she proposed. It wasn’t the fireworks display she’d always imagined that particular moment would be like, but it was at least something. There was actually more energy in the air at the moment when she told her mother, whose face promptly turned just a shade paler than the whites of her eyes, and who then proceeded to drop the pie in her hands straight onto the kitchen floor.

“Well? I love him, Mom, and he loves me, and why shouldn’t I have asked him? This is America, Mom. The nineties,” she had said calmly, picking pie off the floor.

The only Cappellini to understand was Grandma Rosa, whose leathery hands smelled like they always did—lemon verbena—when they gently clasped her granddaughter’s face, and who, in her soft Italian accent, wished Frankie nothing but great happiness. Frankie had smiled and looked toward her parents when her grandmother had said this, but neither had been paying attention, and wouldn’t have acknowledged such open-

mindedness anyhow.

And so life as a Jewish-Italian married couple had begun. The birth of Jane kept Frankie continually on her toes, especially when she went back to work as a first grade teacher, and Grandma Rosa came to live with them and watch over Janey during the day. As a result of the stress, Frankie yelled a great deal more at Sam, wishing he would yell back, and all along knowing he wouldn't. What she had once regarded as a cute and unselfish characteristic of his had now become a reason for suspicion and annoyance. Frankie had only the determination to show her parents that she could live the life she'd chosen. But sometimes she felt it took more than Sam's strong arms to chase away what lies she'd spun around herself, amidst her tiny daughter and her unlikely husband.

When Frankie yelled, Sam did listen. In Sam's mind, there before him stood the fiery chocolate-haired Italian vixen he'd always known, and, as usual, she spent all her innermost energies on him. Her words swam in him like the revival of his own sentences, gone stale and crumbled up into dust so many years ago. Sam's world was Francesca Maria, although no one seemed to know it but him.

What went on inside his head, everyone wondered? What did Sam Feldman think about when he worked morning till night at the hardware store, ringing up orders and restocking shelves and taking an hour at noon for lunch? "It's almost like I think he's a robot sometimes," he heard Frankie say to Grandma Rosa in the family room one night, while he took the dishes out of the dishwasher. "He's up at six with the alarm, he never says anything to me—let alone you—and when he gets home, he eats and watches TV and plays with Janey and goes to bed. I knew he was quiet when I married him, but this is getting ridiculous." And then Rosa, with her rickety accent and gentle eyes, "Ridiculous-a for who, Francesca? You love-a him, eh?" And Sam's ears would strain to hear her answer, "Yes, I love him." She'd pause. "But maybe..." And Janey would suddenly cry from her bed, and Sam would go in to quiet her, missing the rest of the conversation in the other room. When he'd return, he'd see the wetness in his wife's eyes.

It wasn't as if routine was somehow strange for Sam. Since he was a child, moving from house to house, he'd learned to accept the constant uprooting. Shouting at his brother never did any good, and neither did shouting at Frankie. He'd never wanted to shout at Frankie, come to think of it. She satisfied him in every way possible. So when he took the night job at the town university, he didn't even think about why, even when Frankie's eyebrows rose sharply and her lips pressed together after he told her.

It was a janitor's job at the campus coffee house, and he would be gone for only a half hour, beginning at 12:30 a.m. They'd earn a few extra dollars, and all he had to do was mop the floor and wipe the tables and wash the windows. Nothing more than a half hour's work, and then he'd be home in bed with his wife next to him, and his daughter a wall away. Things would be just as they'd always been.

But for one reason or another, things were *not* the same. Sam didn't ask Frankie what was wrong, and he didn't try and figure it out, either. She seemed almost as if having him home was a burden, and this was a feeling he'd never had before. Frankie always needed him—that was the one thing they'd always had between them. That was the one thing they thrived on. And that was the first thing to go when Sam began to leave the house a bit earlier on weeknights before he went to the coffee house.

It had been raining charcoal droplets all day when he first parked outside on the reflective asphalt and trudged through the door. Like a movie, the room was just as he remembered it from high school—dark, dry and full of drunken laughter and conversation. The juke box in Hal's Barnyard Bar played "Rock 'n Roll Party Queen" in the background, and the smell of beer filled Sam's nostrils, bringing back memories from school. Had it really been that long since he'd been there? And why had he come in tonight?

The calming taste of a cool beer was something he hadn't realized he'd missed so much—Frankie and Rosa frowned on having alcohol in the house with Janey around. He'd understood this. Part of him remembered his mother, in the years before she'd left. Part of him remembered loving her.

Leaving home early to go to Hal's soon became the usual for Sam, as did most things in his life. He reasoned that if he became tipsy in any way, he'd only go to campus early and swig a few coffees before the place closed and he had to clean up. The college kids were so nice to him, anyway, and, after a while, he went early all the time. They seemed happy to see him when he got there, after all, and he'd sit up there by the counter and talk with the kid running the place, or with the students already sitting nearby, starved for talk and avoiding their work.

Sometimes he'd wait until they asked him a question before he talked to them. One girl would always ask about Jane. He'd tell them all that Janey was fine—he'd tell them the story of when she'd spoken her first word, taken her first step, had her first haircut. Then there was the boy who wondered about Frankie, and whether or not she really was pregnant again. Of course she was, Sam would answer, and this time it would be a boy for him to play catch with and take out fishing along the river during the summer. He'd never been fishing himself, but a man had to learn sometime, now, didn't he? In the back of his mind, Sam thought back to when he'd asked his brother to take him fishing, and when his brother had refused, time and time again. After awhile, he'd stopped asking.

Did someone ask about work, or had it been Sam's imagination? He had hardly touched his coffee. It was cold now—better make him a new cup. Work was fine, he said, although you know what he really wished? He really wished the kids would leave the silver metal door to the radio unlocked so he could turn the radio on and listen to some rock 'n roll at night as he cleaned—that's what he wished. How was he supposed to get his work done quick and get home to his house if he didn't have music to work to? Songs make a person's legs move faster, he'd say, and laugh at himself, and laugh at everyone else laughing with him, too. The way they all looked at each other when he talked—it reminded him of how he had felt when Frankie had pulled him over to join the conversation between Sophia and her father on their wedding day, at the reception. He had no more wanted to listen to them than they had wanted to talk to him. But that couldn't be the way these kids felt now, because he *wanted* to talk to them. He was sure they wanted to listen.

At 1 a.m., after he finished cleaning, he would drive home through the engulfing darkness and enter the house without turning on any lights. Stale coffee taste in his mouth, he'd climb the stairs and crawl into bed with Frankie, feeling thankful that she didn't turn over and ask him how work went. She'd never asked before. He didn't know why he'd begun to be so afraid she would start now.

Sam's nights came alive when he went to the coffee house and sank down on the stool at the counter. He no longer needed the questions to get him rolling—he began talking on his own, and didn't stop for anything. He would wag his finger at the student behind the counter and tell her the radio had better be unlocked when he went to turn it on later that night. But she would only shrug and say she just followed the rules. Sometimes he would be talking about his brother when he would realize it was *his* voice making all the noise, and he'd think to himself that it sounded rusty—like the un-oiled parts of a clock that had only just started turning again. He would tell them all with his great big paw hands on their tiny innocent shoulders that he was 30 years old, and his wife's grandmother had just died in her sleep. In her sleep! he'd say, as if no one ever died that way. That Grandma Rosa, he'd say, that Grandma Rosa sold pasta in Italy when she was younger—she used to tell everyone about it all the time. You'd think those days selling pasta were some of the best days of her life or something, like no one ever did anything for her except buy her own homemade spaghetti, Sam would say, slapping the one red-haired kid on the back between cold cup of coffee after cold cup of coffee. And the radio would still be locked when he went to turn it on at 12:30.

The day of Rosa's funeral, Sam didn't go to work at the hardware store. He stood with Frankie and Janey and Sophia and Mr. Cappellini around the casket as it was lowered into the ground, and he was silent and stone for his trembling wife. He held her in his arms in the kitchen when they got home, and thought this was all she needed, all she'd ever need from him—to be held. Janey was sleeping, and Frankie was crying into his chest, and there was no Rosa there for him to eavesdrop on later that evening as she knit next to Frankie on the couch.

After dinner, when he walked into the family room to lean down and kiss Frankie goodbye on his way to Hal's, she turned her cheek from his lips, and looked down at her long fingers, twisting her wedding ring around and around her knuckle. Sam stood up. Stood.

"Why don't you stay here tonight?" she asked numbly, without raising her face.

He knew she didn't expect an answer, so he didn't give one. But this time, he was wrong. She lifted her brown eyes to him, and they were ringed with red. He'd seen that look only once before.

"Why don't you?" she hissed again.

"I work tonight—" he said, but she turned her head away again sharply like he'd slapped her.

"No!" she yelled through clenched teeth. "I mean why don't you say something? Why don't you ever *say* anything?"

He stood still, not stopping himself from talking—he simply had nothing to say. As usual.

"We're not kids anymore, Sam! We can't go everyday playing this guessing game, with me always wondering what you're thinking, and always being wrong. I'm always guessing," she said, standing up and running her fingers through her short hair. She'd cut it only last week. Had he told her he liked it?

"I don't know what you want me to say—" he said, because it was the truth.

"But I don't want you to say what I want you to say! I want you to say what *you*

want to say! Grandma just died, Sam! You can't just go on pretending everything's the same..."

"But everything *is* the same," he said, confused. He wanted a beer.

"How can...?" she said, eyes dashing back and forth like she couldn't find him.

"You don't really mean that!"

"Mean what?"

"You don't understand. Nobody understands until it happens to them," she said, and started mumbling to herself over in the corner.

Sam stared at her and tried to think. He felt as if something were slipping away from him that he'd gotten used to having for too long. He tried to put his arms around her, but she threw them off and spun at him. Her words were like venom.

"No! No, that won't work this time!" she yelled.

"It worked before."

"Yes, but this is not 'before,' and I'm not who I was 'before,'" she said.

"Before,' all I needed was your strength. But that's not enough anymore—why can't you see that? Why don't I deserve to be talked to?"

He looked at her.

"I hear how you talk to all those students at the coffee house—like, like *they're* the ones who need to hear your voice, like *they're* the ones you share your bed and your house and your daughter with, like *they're* the ones who need to hear you every once in a while. Don't you think there's something wrong when I feel like I need to go there to hear you? Why don't you ever talk to me? Why, Sam?"

"Because you never listened."

The words echoed strangely in and out of the house walls like the swish of a candle being blown out. They filled years of role-playing, and each one being what the other wanted them to be. They filled her loud reports at the dinner table about her day of teaching, and his silent smiles when she laughed at Janey gurgling in her highchair. They filled her proposal, and her gathering him up when she'd returned from college, having given up on love and settling for the arms that didn't speak, but held. They filled Sophia's knowing stare.

When Sam tried to start up conversation that night with his young friends, somehow he couldn't get started. Somehow, through his drunken eyes, he saw for the first time how they glanced at each other, annoyed when he sat down, how they searched for excuses to leave with their tired eyes, how they shrank from his touch when he slapped them on the back. He felt his words dry up in the well inside him, slowly and slowly recognizing the He he used to be. He didn't even remember saying "yes" when she'd asked him under that streetlight years ago. He thought he'd only sighed.

And later that night, when he walked over to the radio to try to open the door, he didn't expect the metal door to be unlocked. But for some reason it was, and he switched it to the rock 'n roll station, dancing around the coffee house on the dirt-trodden floor, singing aloud to himself for the first time in his life.

—Hillary Campbell '00