

ONE

The Phone Call

The phone ringing wakes Frank and his hand reaches out not so much to answer but to silence it. But as he fumbles with the phone he hears his brother's voice: "Frankie?" Frank's head appears from under the sheet and he rubs his eyes with his other hand and blinks a few times to focus. "Robert?"

"Yeah, it's me, Frank. Sorry to call so early but Mom wants you to know."

Frank shifts his weight so he is half sitting up and says, "Know what? Is everything okay? Mom all right?"

"Yeah, Frankie. Mom's okay but there's been a death in the family." Slight pause as Robert takes a breath. "It's Uncle Dominic, Frankie. He passed away this morning."

Frank sits upright, as a shock not unlike an electric one, passes through his body. His eyes, though open, do not see what is before him in this bedroom but look back at least 30 odd years to the man who was more like a father to him than his own father, the half smile, the sadness in his eyes, the way he sometimes seemed unsteady on his feet from years of drinking gin rickies, his beverage of choice. And his hand kindly laid on Frank's shoulder as life threw one curve after another at his youthful dreams. His Uncle Dominic, his Godfather, his role model and mentor, his wise friend. Gone. Just like that. Gone. While he laid sleeping in the early hours before dawn 3,000 miles away.

"Mom's taking it pretty hard. The oldest in the family gone now. She's been crying since we heard."

Frank turns, his feet now on the floor beside the bed, he starts to rise. Susie, meanwhile turns over in the bed next to him and reaches out to touch him. Still half asleep, she mutters, "Baby, what time is it?"

Frank cups the phone as he turns to her. "Sshh, sshh. Go back to sleep. Family business."

"Good news, honey?"

"There's never good news at the other end of a 6am phone call."

Susie, still groggy, lays her hand on his back. "You need me, baby?"

"Go back to sleep," he says gently, quietly. He rises then, moves away from the bed, Susie's half awake body, and reaches for the glass of whiskey still half-filled from the night

before. He crosses to the screen door leading out to his deck and opens it, steps outside in the dawn hours, and closes the door behind him.

"You still there, Frankie?" Robert says.

"Yeah, yeah. Just the dog." He sits naked on a deck chair and stares out at nothing as the sun slowly begins to light the sky. He takes a sip of the whiskey and then notices the dog, now awake, staring at him from the other side of the screen door.

"When's the wake?" he asks.

"Tomorrow. The funeral home will have him today."

Frank nods, listens to the dog softly whining, and sighs. He takes another sip of the whiskey, then rises and opens the screen door. The dog immediately is next to him, its wet nose pressed against his leg, its breath warm and somehow reassuring. He absently massages its neck as he resumes sitting. "Is Mom there?"

"Yeah, yeah. You want to speak to her? She'd like that."

"Yeah. Put her on."

Robert passes the phone to their mother who is standing nearby.

"Frankie? That you, Frankie?" she asks, slightly out of breath.

"Yeah, Mom."

"He passed away very early this morning. The hospital called. In his sleep, Frankie. In his sleep."

"Well it was peaceful then."

"Yes. Quietly in his sleep." She fights back tears. "He's at rest now, thank God."

"I'll come, Mom. I'll get a flight today. I'll come home."

"Oh Frankie. Can you?"

"Yes. I'll come home."

She cries then out of happiness, relief. Frank listens without saying anything at first.

Then, "I'll call when I know the flight. Just have someone meet me at the airport."

"Of course, Frankie. Of course."

"Goodbye for now, Mom. I'll see you soon."

"Bless you, Frankie. Bless you."

Frank ends the call and sits there absently massaging the dog's neck. He stares out at the backyard, the lemon trees, the cool breeze now on his face. His mind drifts back in time now as it often does these days. Back to New York. Back to home.

The phone rings at 6am, another time, 30 years ago. His Mother stands partially frozen by the phone table, shivering with fear and trepidation as the phone rings and rings, unable to touch it. Aunt Mary stands next to her and picks up the phone, her ear to the receiver, a voice from the hospital in her ear. She nods, says "yes" a few times and then listens for a minute or two before replacing the phone on its cradle. She looks at her sister who shrieks, then collapses in her arms. The sons line the banister a floor above, their eyes transfixed on the scene below. Frank, the oldest, stands next to Uncle Dominic whose hand rests on Frank's shoulder. Frank looks up at his uncle with questions in his eyes.

Uncle Dominic's eyes are more than sad, they are tragic. He pulls Frank closer to him and says in a hoarse voice, "No good news is ever on the other side of a 6am phone call."

Frank's lips quiver but he refuses to cry. He silently vows never to let anyone ever see him cry. Not this boy, not this time, not ever.

The scene shifts back to the present and Frank, still sitting naked in a deck chair, takes a deep breath and holds the dog closer to him. He wishes he had a cigarette, or that he brought the bottle of whiskey out on the porch, or that the sun would start rising in the sky.

Only later does he slide the door open and reenter the bedroom. His eyes are dry now. His hands have stopped shaking. The dead have retreated back into the shadows along the wall. He sits on the edge of the bed, numb but fully awake. Susie stirs behind him and is suddenly resting her head on his shoulder, her arms encircling his chest.

"You okay, baby? Something happened?"

"My uncle died."

"Oh I'm sorry, baby. Was it back in New York?"

"Yeah." He sighs and looks for the bottle of whiskey from the night before.

"Were you close?"

"Yeah." He spies the bottle on a nightstand and stands, crosses to it. He takes the bottle and crosses to the chair where his glass is. He pours a healthy glassful and drinks.

"You feel bad, baby. I understand. Come here and I'll make you feel better."

He looks at her and suddenly feels tired, of the early hour of the morning, of the downward turn of events, of his life in LA, anywhere. He moves to a chair and sits. Finds his phone and makes a call. After six rings, Carol picks up, her voice heavy with sleep. "Hello."

"Carol, it's me. Sorry to call so early but I need a favor."

"Sure." She covers the mouthpiece as she talks to someone else in the room. Then back to Frank. "What do you need?"

"I need you to take care of the dog for a week or so."

"Okay." Carol hesitates slightly then asks, "Is everything okay?"

"I need to go back to New York," he says. "There's been a death in the family."

"Oh I'm sorry, Frank. Anyone I know well?"

"My uncle Dominic."

"Oh I'm really sorry. I know how close you were."

"He's been sick for a while. The drinking, the smoking, not taking good care of himself."

He gets a faraway look in his eyes. "But still . . .still."

Carol's voice is soft, tender. "I know, Frank."

They don't speak for a minute, then he says. "I'll bring the dog over this morning."

"Whenever you can."

There's another pause as she waits for him to say something else but he doesn't. He just ends the call. He then goes to his computer and looks up flights to New York. Susie comes behind him and begins to massage his shoulders.

"You don't have to bring the dog to her to watch. I can do it."

"He's more comfortable with Carol. She was once his other owner."

"When you were married," she says. "But you've been divorced a long time. He's used to me, too, now."

Frank looks up from what he's doing and half smiles her way. "That's kind of you, Suze, but he's more comfortable with Carol. But you can stay here if you want. Look after the place while I'm gone. Okay?"

"Well at least that's something you trust me with."

He reaches over and pulls her closer. She bends her head to his and they kiss. Then he goes back to the computer and books a flight to New York for later that day.

"I guess you'll be glad to see your family after all this time," Susie says.

He stares at the computer screen as he prints the confirmation of his flight. His eyes blur.