

Never Said

by Ben Tanzer

We're at the Park Diner. My dad Tommie is sitting across from me. He looks haggard, tired. His skin is pasty and washed-out. He's not talking, so I'm not talking either, but it doesn't matter because it's hanging there between us.

Cancer.

Motherfucker.

"Don't look so upset kid," my dad finally says, "it's going to be fine."

I look away so he won't notice that I'm crying and I see the painting of Icarus across the room. The painting has been there forever which means that Icarus has been falling forever as well, no respite in sight.

"What's next?" I ask.

"I could go home and die," my dad says, "one doctor already suggested that, or I can try this new experimental trial they are starting at Lourdes."

I don't say anything.

"Look bud, I'm past normal shit, its experimental or its nothing, but there's this hot shot doctor that just moved here and he's bringing the trial with him."

I'm still at a loss, how am I supposed to react to something like this, especially since I have spent a significant chunk of my life hating him and hoping he would die.

"Okay, don't talk," he says, "I will be at the Oncology Unit at Lourdes at 11:00am tomorrow morning if you want to join me. If you don't though, I get it."

What does he get? That he left and came home only to leave again, endlessly repeating this cycle the whole time I was growing-up? That my mom finally had to leave him, but that she came back too? That things never really changed, but that when she was dying from uterine cancer, he lovingly took care of her like none of it ever

happened and so I owe him something regardless of my other feelings?

Fuck.

"I'll be there," I say. "You know I'll be there."

When I get to Lourdes the next morning I have to cross through the room where everyone is being treated. It is white and stark, sterile and without life. Well, except for the people there. They are of all ages, and they all have one thing in common, IV's hanging out of their arms that are trying to battle some unknown assailant that is only too eager and too equipped to wipe out a lifetime of memories, screw-ups and regrets.

As I enter the doctor's office I see that my father is already sitting down across from the doctor who looks both terribly young and terribly familiar to me though I can't quite place him. There's something about him though, I know him from somewhere, somewhere a long time ago.

"Hey man," the doctor says practically jumping over his desk when he sees me, "how are you doing?"

"What, you guys know each other?" my dad says.

I pause.

"Yeah, we went to high school together, though he may not remember me. William Knox, uh, Billy Knox," the doctor says.

Holy shit, of course, Billy fucking Knox, the D&D super-dweeb who grew-up down the street from us on South Mountain. We went to school together from kindergarten through high school graduation and I probably never said more than ten words to him in total that whole time.

I had heard he went to Princeton, that he had been a Rhodes Scholar or something and that he was a hot shot at Merck now.

Damn.

"Yeah, of course," I say, "Billy Knox, what brings you home?"

"I, I mean we, really wanted to raise our kids here," Billy says, "Frankie and I."

Frankie Hill, the cheerleader? Bullshit.

"You remember Frankie Hill, right?" he asks a little too eagerly.

Do I remember Frankie Hill and how smoking hot she was in high school? Of course I do. And Billy's awfully proud of himself for bagging her. It's probably even more important to him right here, right now, than being a big-time doctor. He wants to show-off and I ought to let him.

I don't

"Uh, yeah," I say, "cheerleader, right, I think I sort of remember her."

He recoils a bit, but then plows ahead. He needs this.

"Right, anyway, I was home for the weekend a couple of years ago, I saw her across the bar at the Pine and it just sort of clicked," he says grinning, now so one-up on me there's nothing more to discuss.

Frankie Hill was from the East side of town. She was sort of trashy, and sort of awesome, with her curly blonde Eighties hair and acid washed jeans. We had actually hooked-up one time at a party. It had been drunken and hot and I thought for sure that I was going to fuck her. I'm not sure what happened though. I was so close, but I couldn't close the deal. Anyway, it was a long time ago and Billy doesn't need to know about that. Still, I wonder what she looks like now. And what the fuck she is doing with Billy. Crazy.

"That's great," I say, "please say hello for me."

"Yeah, yeah of course," he says.

"And me," my dad says, "sorry to break-up the reunion here."

"Sorry," Billy says, "that was unprofessional of me. It's just so weird being home, lots of memories. Back to work though. I expect this to be pretty straight forward. We'll run some tests this morning, we'll check the numbers this afternoon and it should be a slam dunk. This is a miracle drug and we need bodies to prove it."

"When would we start?" my dad asks.

"We can start tomorrow," Billy says. "Two weeks of radiation and then chemo infused with our drug for two weeks after that. Cool?"

"Yeah," I say, "very cool."

“Good, be in by 9:30am, we'll finalize some paperwork and we'll get at it.”

“And that's it,” my dad says.

“Yup, I'm the boss, and what I say goes,” Billy says with an authority he is only showing for the first time since we arrived.

After the test my dad and I hit Thirsty's for a round of beer to celebrate his good luck. One round leads to more, and then shots, and at some point I start thinking about Frankie Hill, our brief time together and my lost opportunity. I was so close and so into it and she just wasn't. At first she was, and then I don't know I fumbled and its funny how quickly you can fall back into thinking about the mistakes you made. But there I am doing just that until some brunette in a short dress walks by, and we buy another round and head out to her car, and I'm on top of her, and thinking about Frankie, and then, I'm waking-up on my couch, still fully dressed from the night before and its 9:20am and I am about to be really late for my dad's first day of the trial.

When I get to Lourdes, I sprint through the Oncology Unit and past all the people with their IVs, noting that my dad is not among them. I get to Billy's office and Billy is there, but my dad isn't.

“Hey Billy,” I say doubled-over and trying to catch my breath, “where's my dad, is he being prepped or what?”

Billy doesn't respond at first. He looks very stiff and formal and nothing like the day before.

“I have a question I would like to ask you first,” he says.

“Yeah, what?”

“You remember Frankie, don't you? I spoke to her last night when I got home.”

“Sure, okay, sort of, but it was a long time ago and it was nothing and I didn't think I should mention it. Don't sweat dude, you got her and that awesome. Look, where's my dad?”

“She says you forced yourself on her. That she thought it was something more casual. That nothing happened, but that she was

scared, that she wanted you to stop and you didn't want to, not at first. Is that true?"

"No man," I say, because that isn't true is it, no, not really, though even as I say this I get a flash of her face, her scared face that night and me wanting to push her for a moment, a long moment, but just a moment. "That's not how I remember it at all. We were drunk, we hooked-up and I stopped pushing as soon as she asked me to. I think there's a misunderstanding here."

"Okay, whatever. Thing is, I sent your dad home. We can't help him. He's too old and he's much too sick."

I feel like I've been punched in the stomach.

"What," I say, "you didn't mention that any of this was a possibility yesterday."

"No," Billy says, "that's odd, maybe I was distracted. Still, we have a protocol here and strict guidelines and I'm sorry I wasn't clear about that."

He's lying, bending the truth. And I'm falling. I need to push back.

"What's up?" I say. "There's something wrong about this."

I say this wanting to hear something unexpected, but I know what's coming.

"Nothing is up with this," he says, "maybe you just remember things differently than I do. Maybe it's just a misunderstanding."

"And so what can we do now?" I ask.

"Nothing," Billy says turning away, "I'm sorry it didn't work out like you wanted it to."

