

Walking To Gibraltar, Chapter 12: In Which Frank Consults A Mirror

by Frank Indiana

The trouble didn't begin with the boy/friend. But the boy/friend didn't help.

Frank had spent the day in Chicago. New project for Science and Industry. He hung out in the corners and watched kids interact with the exhibits. Blow into the room. Push, pull, whack, move along. Read? Not so much. The only things that captured their attention were images of themselves. Shoot a little video, put me in the scene. Take my picture. Hold the mirror for me.

He thought about it all the way home. How to engage them. Project their faces onto a statue. Build an interactive climbing wall. Engage them long enough to make them stop and look. Connect them—really connect—with his exhibit. Maybe they'd learn something in spite of themselves.

Night fell. Lafayette. Thorntown. Lebanon. Zionsville. His stomach flipped at the prospect of arriving home. He wished he had another place to go. He wished he could keep driving. He turned off the highway and took the back roads into town.

At nine-thirty, he pulled into the driveway. Astrid met him in the kitchen. Smiling. "You've had a long day," she said.

He agreed. "Good, though. I have some ideas for the exhibition."

"Uh-huh. Hey...there's something I want to talk about with you. "Astrid wanting to talk was rarely a good sign. But she didn't seem angry.

She sat at the kitchen table. "There's been something bothering me for a long time, and I finally realized what it was. I don't have any male friends."

This caught him by surprise. "I have plenty of friends, Astrid. You've never wanted to do anything with them."

"That's not what I mean, Frank. Those are your friends. I'm talking about my friends."

Astrid did not have many friends, period. No "girls" she went out with. Never more than one at a time. Astrid had trouble liking any two people at any one time. Even Frank and Max: one of them was usually on the outs.

"I need a male friend, and I think I've found one."

"Really? Who?"

"His name is Ted."

"Ted. How do you know Ted?"

"He's one of our painters."

One of—holy shit. "You mean the guys painting our house?"

"Well, he's one of the owners. Actually, his brother is the owner."

He knew the guy. Five-eight. Dark hair. Glasses. Seemed like an okay guy. But now every encounter played in his head like a slideshow. The first day. Sitting on the roof. Drinking Mountain Dew under the willow tree. Laughing—was Ted laughing at him? When he drove away the other night with Max?

"I've been seeing him for a couple of weeks. Tonight we went to the driving range."

"You—you had a date with him?"

"We hit golf balls, Frank. And we went to get ice cream."

They hit golf balls. Jesus H. Christ. Jesus Fucking Christ and his brother Henry. So far as he knew, Astrid had never hit a golf ball in her life.

"A couple of weeks?"

"Last week—when you and Max went to the concert. We went out for a drink. And we hit golf balls once the week before that."

"When?"

"Just one night. You thought I was at the Y."

"So tonight was your third date?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Frank. We had ice cream."

"And don't forget the golf balls, Astrid."

"Well. You don't play golf. Maybe I want to learn."

"Maybe you want to fuck the painter!"

"Now you're being an ass, Frank. We hit golf balls. We had ice cream. He's just a friend."

"Then why are you sneaking around behind my back?"

She wasn't. She was telling him. They'd started talking and hit it off. She liked this guy, and she was going to keep seeing him. No, Ted was not completely comfortable about the whole deal. "Please don't tell his brother, either. He'll get fired."

But—what? "I thought you weren't doing anything wrong."

"We weren't."

"Then why would Ted get fired?"

"It's just sensitive, Frank. It looks bad."

"It sure as fuck does."

He could not believe it. He—Christ. He was still holding his briefcase. He turned his back and marched up the stairs.

"I'm still going to see him, Frank," Astrid called after him.

He froze in the hallway. He couldn't go into the bedroom. He couldn't go into Max's room. The guest bedroom didn't lock. The bathroom would have to do. He locked the door and threw his briefcase. It exploded against the tile.

He looked in the mirror. Here he was, right in the middle of his fucking life, immersed in it and disconnected completely. He didn't know shit about shit.

He looked in the mirror. Cuckold. That was the word. A ridiculous word for a ridiculous man.

He looked in the mirror. Goddamn, he was ugly.

