

Walking To Gibraltar,

Chapter 2: In Which

Spousal Abuse May Occur

by Frank Indiana

The separation—the plan—had been a long time coming. After years of fighting and therapy and apologizing and, finally, silence, their marriage was about to die of exhaustion. Frank was exhausted, Astrid was—

He didn't know what Astrid was. He wasn't sure he recognized her anymore. She didn't seem exhausted, but that was before the cancer.

Of course, they had been in love. That had not been a problem. She was smart and beautiful and ambitious and she loved him, or said she did. He loved her, admired her. He wanted to protect her, and she needed protection. If he could be honest with himself, it was more likely that he *needed* to protect someone—that it was part of his firstborn-son makeup to find someone with whom he could be shepherd and provider and defender. It made him wonder about how much in love he had ever been.

He had fought for her, though, fought for them. It was his part of the dance. She pulled away, he ran toward her. She expected it. He was powerless to do otherwise.

They'd been separated before. Three times. The first had been for a month. He lived in an awful, tiny furnished apartment that smelled like five years of microwaved burritos. He left only to go to work and, on weekends, to pick up Max and take him to the video arcade. Max played at killing aliens. Frank played a side-scroller in which he controlled a barbarian with a broadsword with which he swatted trolls and orcs. Afterward, they ate Chinese and he dropped off Max at home and went back to his apartment and, for company, kept the TV on all night.

The second time was just a night—the one night he spent in the sort of motel frequented by truckers and murders and housebreakers from out of town. That was after she's spent half the ride home from St. Louis throwing her snotty Kleenex at him. When he'd had enough humiliation, he balled the tissues in his fist and threw them in her face. Astrid called this "assault" and, when they got home, ordered him to leave. He begged his way back into the house the next morning and ate shit for a month.

The third time was for six months. Again, he took a bad furnished apartment with a Murphy bed and a countertop for his computer. By this time, he worked for himself, so he barely had to leave the room except for weekends with Max. Max was into bowling, so they bowled. Sometimes Max stayed over and they watched *Mystery Science Theater 3000*. They ate Chinese. Astrid let him come home after four months of therapy with a social worker who believed Astrid had been abused by her father, even though Astrid couldn't remember one instance of abuse. Somehow, though, Frank was exactly like her abusive father. Even though the assault with the Kleenex was about as close to abuse as he'd ever gotten.

The fourth time was not going to be temporary—this, he had promised himself. It was why he'd been so reluctant to agree to move out in the first place. If he was leaving again, he was leaving for good.

And now he wasn't going anywhere. Cancer changed everything. Cancer was not something he could allow her to face alone. Cancer was going to be the glue that held the marriage together, and it was motherfucking super glue.

