

Running

by Jamey Genna

Frank—I met him at an AA Halloween dance and I was horsing around doing all kinds of silly moves on the dance floor, like Jake's shlong dance he and I used to do together. I was pretending to dance, pretending it was fun, pretending to enjoy myself by getting others interested in movement, false parabolic moves, exaggerated for comic effect. Wave hands, knee jerks, foot shuffles, head bobbing. I was trying to have fun.

I went there with Sandra. She had a big nose, a big nose and crossed-over front teeth. The nose is what she hated. She had a kind of horsey laugh. I liked her laugh. I met her in Nevada in rehab. We were recovering in California.

Frank was dark-skinned, olive-skinned, and had on a flasher overcoat and hi-top tennis shoes. That was his costume. I thought he was Greek or maybe Italian, but he said no, Assyrian. He had a strong neck and dark hair, large eyes that were a little hooded. I didn't have a costume, which was unlike me.

Frank kept commenting to me on the dance floor, “Hey, you're funny,” like I was trying out for a play. Instead it ended up being an audition for a date.

We drove up to L. A. in his quiet car. Tan. Leather I'm sure, and he kept weaving in and out of traffic.

“Friendly honk,” he declared and hit the horn button, beep-beep, two times in the middle. I remembered to him how cars used to have a silver bar that you pressed on while you were waiting in the car for your parents and you were messing with the horn—getting in trouble for that. My old boyfriend would have liked that story, but Jake was in Nevada where I left him. He wouldn't stop using. I had to run away in order to save my own life.

Frank and I stood on a beach outside the restaurant, watching the surf roll in, in smooth intimate waves, playing a love

melody with the sand on our bare feet. Frank put his arms around me, under my breasts, around my rib cage, in protective possession.

"This is nice. This is so romantic," Frank kept declaring, as if his mind were already made up.

I said, "Yes, see how the ocean is cooperating," and I pulled away. "And the breeze," I said.

"Oh, you're cold," Frank said, "I'll keep you warm." And he tried to pull me in again, but instead I made him give me his jacket.

Hollywood.

They went to give us our leftover dinners in a tin foil swan, its belly full of vegetables and sea fish.

"Movie stars come here," he said. "All the time."

I looked around. I didn't see anyone.

"So-and-so and so-and-so got in a fight here once," he said. "You should've seen the help flying out of the back to see how it was going to end."

"What were you doing?" I said.

On the way home, "Friendly honk," he said.

We went to brunch on Sunday.

"I have something to tell you," he breathed. "I'm not into dating," he said. "I'm into relationships," he told me. "Are you into relationships? Would you like to be in a relationship with me?"

I didn't know what that meant, so I said sure.

It was a champagne brunch at a hotel. There were tall glass doors and windows on the way in, omelettes cooked up in front of you, stuff with whipped cream—strawberries fresher than when picked direct from the field.

He told me, "I had sex with my sister in high school and our parents caught us. They sent us to therapy for years and years."

"That's incest," I said. "Oops," and I slapped my hand to my mouth as if that were the first time I had figured out what that word meant and we both laughed and laughed.

He worked in a mental institution. He complained about the nurses and controlling the patients. I kept trying to figure out whether he was a counselor or a just a janitor. I had no desire to visit his worksite.

He wrote me a letter that week. It was two pages long with very small handwriting. It was mailed to me even though he only lived twenty-four blocks away from me. He had his own house.

The letter told me what he wanted to do to me—to my pussy with his tongue. I read parts of it to my new friend Sandra, not the tongue parts.

"Jesus," she said, "He's only known you for a week." I think she liked him.

She kept trying to pull down the letter to read the rest of it, but I wouldn't let her. I was embarrassed.

On Friday night, I went over to his house to watch TV. He told me what happened to him the night before. "I gave this guy from the meeting a ride home last night. He seemed harmless, but when he got in my vehicle he said he needed a place to stay for the night. He seemed okay, so I let him stay here and my twin daughters were over. Their mom and I aren't married. She's my ex-girlfriend. And in the middle of the night the guy got up and started roaming around the house, so I slept in the girls' room with them, on the floor beside the bed with a butcher knife I got from the kitchen. I went out there and the guy was wandering around and I told him, 'Lie down on the couch or get the hell out!' but he wouldn't leave."

He was rubbing my feet when he brought up the letter he sent me.

"It was interesting," I told him. That's all.

First, we were sitting on the couch, watching a movie. I told him, "I like to run." Then he said that he would give me a foot massage, so I took off my tennis shoes. They were Avias—cross trainers. I hadn't been able to afford a new pair of running shoes because I didn't get my discount from the sports store any more. That's why my feet were hurting. I was waiting to start the new job I'd applied for.

I was lying on the floor with him on a blanket. I hadn't decided yet whether I was sexually attracted to him. It took a great deal of effort just to take my shoes off. I kept wondering if this was how all men were in California—strange. I hadn't been with anybody. Then Frank started to move his hand up the back of my leg on the inside. It was summer. I was wearing shorts.

"Hey," I said. "I didn't. I don't really want to do that."

He got up. He pushed up off the blanket with his hands like he was doing a man push-up. He took our plates to the kitchen. On the way there he said, "What is it, fucking gold down there? Cockteaser."

I couldn't see his face to tell how he said it, but I didn't care. I started putting on my socks and tennis shoes as fast as I could. I started ripping the laces shut. I could hear him scraping the cake off the plates in there. He was yammering away in the kitchen like a madman. I wanted to get out of there before he came back in, but I slipped up on the laces and had to start over.

"Hey, hey, hey," he said. "What're you doing? Where're you going?"

"I'm leaving!" I said.

"What happened?" he said. "What'd I say?"

"How old are you?" I said. "Nobody talks like that anymore."

"I was joking," he said. "I'm sorry," he said. He was so mortified. He kept pulling my hands away from my laces and then holding my shoulders. He kept saying I'm sorry.

"Stay," he said. "I won't try anything," he said. "I promise. Please, don't go," he begged. I liked hearing that from somebody, so

I stayed for a while, but then I jogged home at about midnight. I wouldn't let him drive me. I needed the exercise.

A few days later he called me. "I ran into my ex-girlfriend," he said.

"Isn't that your kids' mother?" I said.

"Yes," he said. "She wants to get back together. She wants to try again . . . We had sex," he said. "The thing is," he said, "What I want to know is, do you still want to have a relationship with me? Do you still want to be in a relationship with me? I need to know."

I started laughing. "No, Frank," I said.

"You're angry," he said.

"No, Frank, I'm not." I was laughing. I was hysterical with laughter, trying not to let him hear. I wanted to hang up on him, but I thought if I did he would think I really cared.

"Are you pretending not to care?" he asked.

That did it. "No, Frank," I said, then, "Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha." The bank let loose, I couldn't stop it.

He called me a year later at my new job. I had gotten the job selling Nikes. My boss came and got me. He told me, "Some guy named Frank's on the phone. He said it was urgent." I thought, it can't be Frank.

"How did you get this number?" I said.

I told him, "Frank, what are you doing?"

"I broke up with my kids' mother," he said. "I really blew it with you. What I'd like to know is if you'd go out with me again. Would you like to try having a relationship with me again?"

"Frank." I said. "You had sex with your sister."

