

## Longtime Companion

That's my friend Frank, sitting over there in that chair pretending to be asleep, dressing gown half open, hands twitching, skinny twisted fingers with black veins that look dried up. Any minute now he'll open one eye to check on me. There it goes.

He's dribbled all down his shirt. I'll clean that up for him.

"You've left a right mess here in the kitchen," I tell him. "Take me the rest of the day this will. Shall I put the telly on?"

Can't hear myself think with that radio he's got blasting out, not tuned properly.

He's sat up now, forward in the chair, blinking like he's just poked his head out from a bunker. His hair's all patchy and sticking up every which way so I give my fingers a good lick and pat it down flat for him. "There now, you don't look half bad. Hold still and I'll get that muck off your dressing gown."

He starts coughing, and I slam his back good and hard. He's only got one lung so that's on over drive. He can quite easily fill the bottom of a bucket with phlegm.

The window has been left open and I can hear the kids from over the road playing on the same patch of grass that Frankie used to. They sing this song to him to the tune of The Wild Rover but they change the words. They've got quite good at it over the years: "*I've been a wild rover for many's a year, I spent all my money on faggots and queers.*" Trouble is, I get the tune in my head and can't stop humming it. Drives Frank mad.

This time yesterday I left the place spick and span; now here I am stepping over a packet of melting ice to try to find a dry spot on the counter away from a flattened tube of toothpaste. Not easy with a bag of bananas, cheese and gin - the only things Frank will let pass his lips. There was a time, he told me, that he wasn't nearly so fussy.

Frank is nearly blind and has lost his sense of smell, otherwise known as sensory deprivation. Something he used to pay a small fortune for, apparently, when he was a young man. You're paying a high price for it now, I tell him. He narrows his eyes and grins.

I find a clean spot on the counter and put my bag down to check inside the kitchen cupboards. As usual they're empty. "My bag can go up there out of the way," I say to no one in particular.

The radio is on so loud. Some Newstalk rubbish. No wonder he gets depressed.

"You have a party last night?" I ask him.

He slowly turns his head towards me but keeps his eyes closed. "Oh sure, Jean. You try stopping me. Cocktail waitresses and male strippers. I couldn't decide if I wanted A Slow Comfortable Screw Up Against the Wall or have my collar felt by a topless Guard."

"Well they went straight for the hard stuff. You're out of Sensodyne."

"Who let you in?" he suddenly snaps.

"I got a key cut remember?"

"No I don't remember."

"Well how else did I do it?"

"I thought you were going back to London?"

“For the hundredth time Frank you need looking after. I can’t help being a good Samaritan.”

He goes quiet for a bit then.

“You don’t have to do any of this. I can manage,” he says eventually.

“See all this mess, Frank? I clear that up. All that post? I pick it up and open it.”

“You don’t have to,” he shouts.

“I don’t mind, love. Besides, it’s good for you to have a bit of company.”

I live a few doors away, in a flat almost exactly like Frank’s, which is just one of the things we have in common. Another is that we both live on our own and don’t mind the odd glass of gin. My mum, God rest her, wouldn’t allow it in the house. I came to Limerick from London to sort out her affairs when she died and found Frank trying to get the key in the door, his shopping falling at his feet. I went to help him; opened the door, put the shopping away and that was it really. We just clicked. I’d come over every now and then to pick Mum’s post off the mat and run the taps. At some point I’d knock for Frank to see if he was alright. He’d make up some excuse about being busy, but I could see the mess inside. I had it cleared it up in no time. After a while I moved over, lock, stock and barrel. Nothing for me in London, I told him. The Lord moves in mysterious ways. Which even Frank thinks is incredible.

He got cleaned out in Yonkers. This nubile Cuban boy picked him up in a bar and filled his aging head with lustful thoughts. By the time he suggested they go somewhere a little more private the tranquilizers were kicking in. Frank woke up the next morning alone and minus his bank account details. He had a good job and had taken early retirement to lounge around a big pad in New York. What I call

living the High Life. Had to sell it all and move back to Limerick. Must have been a bit of a come down.

I get him to tell me the story sometimes, late at night when there's nothing on the telly. I'm not really interested in the boy or the drugs but in New York City. NYC.

"What's it like?" I ask him on those nights.

"A naughty Disneyland, Jean," he tells me with a twinkle in his eye. "You could be anything you wanted and do anything you wanted. The place was alive with disco. Dance floors were lit from below, wall to wall mirrors, tanned waiters in hotpants, parties in penthouses overlooking a city pulsing beneath you. You never knew who you might bump into: Liza, Freddie, de Niro, Stallone, Joan Collins. It was just like one of her sister's bonkbusters. At four in the morning the place was still buzzing in your ears. Once I saw a man in nothing but a fur coat and yellow hat hand a beggar a hundred dollar note only for it to be snatched away by a woman on rollerskates."

I rest my hand on my and close my eyes and try and imagine the skyscrapers and the people in their fancy clothes, drinking champagne, carrying it with them into the taxi, and Frank there right in the middle of them holding court. It's like another world. I mean, what I'd give to meet Joan Collins.

I look over at him, there in his dressing gown and shake my head.

"I said it's good for you to have a bit of company."

"I've got all the company I need thank you," he grunts. "Anyway, what have you done with my tickets? I've been looking for them all morning."

That's one of my jobs today, to start packing for Frank's trip to visit his daughter Maureen in New York. I've hidden his tickets in a safe place so he

doesn't use them as toilet paper or give them to the kids next door. He hasn't seen Maureen since he couldn't get back into America after he was diagnosed with that cancer you get from going with men. He couldn't understand it. Said he didn't pose any danger, that he could barely go to the toilet on his own. Which is true. I told him to calm down and remember that he was quite capable of scaring women and small children.

When President Obama changed the rules, we went down to the travel agents the very next day and got him a return flight to JFK. Frank had the money ready in a plastic bag and we emptied it out on the counter, all coins and curly notes.

"I've put the tickets in a safe place," I call out, taking off my outdoor shoes and slipping on my comfies I keep in the press. "Would you like a cup of tea? I'll put the kettle on."

"No thank you," he rattles back.

Suit yourself.

Apart from looking after Frank, I like making up pictures from bits of magazines to make new pictures. I used to do ones of places I thought Mum would like. Beaches and supermarkets, that kind of thing. I'd always put horses in too as I love anything to do with them. Now I make up pictures of houses in New York like the ones Frank would have stayed in. He gets these magazines delivered so I go through them and cut out any nice looking sofas, chandeliers, swimming pools, flash cars, policemen, firemen, stuff like that, and add them to my scrapbook. Frank goes mad when he opens the magazine and finds a big hole in the page where a man's what-not should have been.

The other thing I love is television, especially the chat shows. Frank's got Sky with a choice of over six-hundred channels.

I turn off the rubbish he's got on the radio and put on the TV, settling on a show about celebrities gone bad. It's another world.

"It's another world, Frank," I call out, but he's not listening.

He tries to lift his head.

"Turn the radio back on."

"Now then, don't get worked up. Let's watch something to lift our spirits. Which reminds me, you need to take your pills."

"I don't want them."

"Listen to Jean. I worked at St Thomas' hospital when I was back in London."

"No you didn't."

"Yes I bloody well did."

"You made the tea."

"And the rest."

"You weren't a nurse."

"That's your opinion."

"It's the medical profession's opinion."

He gets like this sometimes.

I fetch six different bottles of pills from the cupboard. Enough to open a chemist. Those kids will break his windows for them one day. They love all this stuff, happy to get high on anything. All I need is too much sugar.

As well as real medicine, Frank insists on taking something that looks and smells like a dried up sock. He got it off this old Chinese man around the back of

the Milk Market in Mungret Street who told him it was a well known cure for his condition. He saw Frank coming. Of course he did, says Frank, he sits outside the fucking shop. I get cross then and tell him there's no need for swearing. He'll be sorry when he's before Him being judged. Do you know what he says to that? I'm not on X-Factor Jean, turns his head away and falls sound asleep.

I get him his tea and tell him to open wide, popping in one pill from each bottle, a sip of tea and then a bit of that smelly Chinese stuff in hot water. The horses out the back smell sweeter. I can see them now, out there shimmying around, the kids trying to jump on their backs and feed them grass. They catch me at the window and make faces like I'm nuts and want to touch them.

"Fatty?" one of them calls over. "Do you want some of this?" and grabs himself.

He can't be more than about eight. I still believed in Father Christmas at his age.

Animals are better company than people, especially horses. In my flat it's all horses: plates, cups, tea towels, pictures, ornaments, even my bed sheets. My mum, God rest her, got most of it for me, every time she saw something she bought it. Frank had this lovely plate with plough horses on it, so I took it for my wall. He won't notice.

Sometimes, when I have five minutes, I go through the photos he keeps in shoeboxes in his bedroom cupboard. You would never know it was him: all these men with sun-tanned, muscular arms, blond hair and tight trousers. I told him they looked a bunch of Duke of Hazzards' extras and he didn't like it. Well, what's wrong with that? Everyone looks so bright and happy.

He's got his head set on going back to New York to see Maureen but I think his heart is back there in those photos of Long Island.

I put the pills back in the cupboard and go for a sit down.

"Will you look at that, Frankie," I call out, turning up the television. "I know her."

He lifts his head and tries to focus, fumbling for his glasses. "Do you now, Jean? You never cease to amaze me. I do believe it's that model, what is her name?"

"Mary?"

"No," he scowls.

"Anne?"

"Christ, Jean, shut-up. I'll get it." He frowns and holds the bridge of his nose. His nails need cutting. "I have it! Cole," he beams. "Cheryl Cole."

"Really, Frankie? Well she's taken a turn for the worst. Look at her there, she looks like she's been sleeping in People's Park." I take a sip of his tea. "Awful isn't it, someone so beautiful ending up like that. She looks like Ann or hexic."

Frank starts to cough and brings up enough phlegm to fill a breakfast bowl. I wash it down the sink and rub bleach around the bowl, then I bleach everything else, the work top, the mugs and the remote control. You can't be too careful.

"Do you want another cuppa, Frankie?" I call out to him.

The wind has picked up and rain slices at the window. I thought we might have gone out for a walk but Frank wouldn't stand up to a gust.

I make him a banana and cheese sandwich instead and pour us both a glass of gin. I'm going to need it the mood he's in today. The liquid spins in the glass, crystal and shiny. I take it over and put the plate and glasses down on the table in

front of him. He sits forward but the food is just a few inches too far from his reach.

The gin goes down nicely and I can feel my head dropping.

I must have fallen asleep because next thing I know I sit up with a start, it's nearly dark and the window still open.

"We're lucky not to have been burgled, Frank."

No reply. I push myself up, which isn't easy because of my size, and turn on the light. He's not in his chair. I go through the flat but no sign of him, not even passed out on the loo or slumped on the terrace out the back. The fear of God in me, I head for the front door. He's had a head start to anywhere. I call out his name and the kids on the grass copy me and call me a rude word.

I try and think where he could have gone and head for the main road.

"Did he have his slippers on?" I ask the kids and they screw their fingers to their heads like I'm nuts.

I try and run as best my legs will carry me and then thank God I see him, hunched over on the seat at the bus stop, the narrow one most people can't sit on, but his bum is so skinny it props him up just right. I rush over and put my arm around his shoulders, pulling his dressing gown together, shaking my head at his mucky toes. This young fella, covered in Adidas and acne, stares at us.

"Go away," Frank says, trying to hold his head up. "I need to get to the airport. I need to see Maureen."

"Oh yeah," I say. "Looks like you got dressed up for it 'n' all."

"Leave me alone. Can't you understand. I don't care anymore."

"Come home, Frank. I'll make us a cup of tea."

“I’m meeting Richard. At the bar with the yellow umbrellas and saucer ashtrays. Let go of me.”

I wink at the fella staring.

“Richard’s in America, love. Come on. Your feet will turn blue.”

I tie the dressing gown cord tight and he looks like a sand timer, grains falling through a tiny hole from one end to the other.

Getting him back to the flat, I have to practically carry him, the kids circling round us shouting *fatty* and *skinny* so even I laugh. What must we look like?

Back in his chair, he rests his head on the dirty patch and closes his eyes.

“Lucky I was here,” I tell him. “With you going walkabouts and your health as it is, I’ll stop over tonight. I can bunk up on the sofa.”

“Don’t even think about it,” he says, still with his eyes closed.

“It’s no trouble. You still got them biscuits?”

“You ate them all.”

“I never. You cheeky old sod.”

“You did. Eating is something you do in your sleep.”

He’s rambling again so I go off with the duster, getting deep into every little crack and hole, finding old bits of toenail, which reminds me to go back and give his feet a good bleach. Anyone would think I was slicing his toes off.

It’s late so I re-heat his dinner and take it over to him. His mouth is moving but he’s not saying anything and I wonder if he’s dreaming. His eyes have got so big they are bulging from his head and his fingers are twitching ten to the dozen.

“What’s up, Frankie?” His mouth opens and closes. “Don’t tell me you’ve had an accident.”

His pyjamas are all wet and so is the chair. I lift him up and take him into the bedroom, pulling off his trousers and looking for a clean pair. Not too easy around here. I fish out some old ones from the washing basket. “They’ll do.”

Frank has got these funny marks covering his body: purple blobs snaking his skinny legs. He runs his fingers over them like he’s trying to trace something, a memory perhaps. His what-not is lying all flat and limp on his thigh. I’d never seen one before I saw Frank’s. Useless old thing. All he can do with it is wet himself.

Suddenly, he grabs my wrist. “I had this house on Fire Island,” he says urgently. “A big house filled with people drinking and dancing. One wall was just windows, sliding windows where you could walk out onto a terrace and feel the Atlantic on your face. Friends would stay and we’d sip wine and gossip about who was in the papers like the summer stretched ahead of us every day. Then they got sick and died Jean, one by one. But I can still see them, looking out over the ocean; the smell of warm air, of salty skin as dark as wet sand, the moonlight like snow on the ocean.”

“Sounds like someone’s had too much gin,” I say, pulling up his pyjamas and tying them at the waist.

He sits hunched up on the bed, wiping his finger under his nose and twitching his hand on his knee. I open up a wardrobe full of suits, good ones, that don’t fit him anymore.

“Which one do you want to take with you to New York?”

“That suit there, the black one. Not that one, the one next to it.”

“They’re all black your highness. Blimey Frank, Maureen won’t recognise you.”

“Lay me out in that one. When the time comes. Make sure it’s that one, Jean. I want your word.”

It’s an ugly old thing. The one next to it will look much better.

We shuffle back into the sitting room and I put a plastic bag over the chair for Frank to sit down. He grips my arm tight so that it hurts, then falls to one side with his mouth open. I turn on the television and flick around the channels.

“Frankie?” I call out. “You’ll never guess what. They’re only repeating The Adventures of Black Beauty. Well I never. When I was a little girl I used to pray God would give me a sister like Stacy Dorning.”

No word from Frank, which is unusual. He’s normally right back to me with a comment. Something smart like: “The last black beauty I saw was in a sailor’s uniform on shore leave.”

His eyes have glazed over. He gets that way sometimes, normally around pill time.

I go to the kitchen cupboards and fetch them.

“Come on, open your mouth and take this.”

I pop the pills in and hold the mug up to his hand, a special one with a handle on each side like a baby’s. He’s got a plate too, with a bowl in the middle and a bit round the edge to catch any drips. I use it sometimes when I’m having a snack and he’s nodded off.

He tries to brush my hand away. “Don’t do this, please. Let me waste away in my own filth.”

“I’ve told you, Frank, it’s no trouble.”

Honestly, he's such a drama queen. I pop another pill in his mouth and sit down on the sofa, rest my feet up on the table and start cutting out bits from his magazines.

©Rebecca Kemp