

Rip Cord

2500 words

ted.gross@comcast.net

Judd came home from playing golf and there was a knock on the door, and Joelle was crying and she said Frank had a heart attack after lunch and died.

Judd stood there a second. Then he embraced Joelle. She was trying to talk in between sobs. Judd said it's okay and patted her on the back, which didn't do a damn thing and felt weird.

She said they'd had hot dogs for lunch and at first she thought he was choking on one, but that wasn't it, and she called 911 and started CPR as best she could remember it, but Frank never breathed.

She said her kids are coming in and she doesn't know what they're going to do about a service. She said her girlfriend is on her way, she's stuck in traffic on 17.

Judd went inside and got her some kleenex. He said you're trying to wrap it into a neat package, and I can't blame you.

She said well thank you for that. Judd asked if he could help with any part of it and she said no she needed to go, and she went back across the street.

The kids, Mike and Jeannie, stayed for a week, and Judd mostly stayed out of the way.

There was no service, it got reduced to a family graveside thing, with the plan for a celebration of life on Staten Island this fall, where Frank was from and had big extended family. Joelle and the kids agreed don't make any of those people schlepp out to Phoenix.

Judd gave it a month and invited Joelle over for a barbeque, along with some neighbors. She looked fine, but still seemed preoccupied. Someone asked if she had any ideas yet, where she wanted to be.

Joelle said she was glad for the concern, but no, she doesn't have any ideas yet.

The way Judd intended it, everyone else leaves and then he and Joelle have some time together and it doesn't look too strange.

The Nelsons unfortunately were quite comfortable and took Judd up on every offer he made--seconds on dessert, sure we'd be honored to sample some of that Port--and they (mostly the wife) were big storytellers. Judd gave them credit, they weren't spring chickens and

they had physical adventures, such as jumping off a cruise ship into the ocean, though Judd didn't have it straight where.

Finally Joelle stood up and said she was going to have to go home and check on something, and she'd be back, and that did the trick, the Nelsons stood up too and apologized for overstaying, and Judd said don't be ridiculous.

When Joelle returned Judd left the lights and music the same and she followed him into his dark bedroom and they went to town on each other.

'Pretty clever,' Judd said after. 'How you cleared the deck. Like Pavlov's Dog.'

'I saw a man discuss that on Oprah,' she said.

'That?'

'Different ways in which people respond to suggestions . . . I'm grateful to you for doing this by the way. I do feel better now, I'm not just saying that.'

Judd wasn't sure what she meant by 'doing this'-- the barbeque or the act--but hopefully it applied to both. He said, 'Well it was good to finally meet Mike and Jeannie. Jeannie looks like Frank.'

'Yes,' she said, 'sadly Mike and Frank had some issues. That's why you didn't see them.'

‘That applies to Jeannie too?’

‘No, but she’s in New Hampshire, we’d go there.’

‘And you’re thinking of maybe going there now?’

Like you got grilled on?’

‘Yes I’ve thought about it. Jeannie’s been separated from her husband since November.’

‘So she could use your support. Like a big sister.’

‘And the reverse too,’ Joelle said.

Judd said, ‘Did Frank have any inkling about us, d’ya think? I asked you this once before, I know. You said you didn’t think so.’

‘He probably did.’

‘Sheez. Just like that? *Yes?*’

‘He was a good person. He wanted me happy.’

‘Man. I mean he did tell me once, when you were off playing tennis. Things were looking grim with the foreclosure, you guys had all those boxes packed up, so maybe he was more introspective than normal.’

‘Told you he wanted me happy?’

‘Told me she’s 18 years younger than him, he can’t reward her the way he used to.’

‘He’d convey that to me as well. I reassured him I had everything I needed.’

‘That true?’

‘Unh-huh, it was.’

‘So this little business . . . you asking me to go to the spring training game when Frank was playing poker in Vegas . . . and so on . . .’

‘It’s been fun, but it hasn’t meant anything.’

‘Nothing you needed,’ Judd said.

‘Correct. I hope I’m not hurting your feelings.’

‘Not at all,’ Judd said.

‘Except you’re not sure you mean that.’

‘You got me there,’ he said.

She said, ‘You honestly weren’t expecting--with Frank passing--there would be an escalation.’

‘Amusing way to put it, but no, I was hoping there *wouldn’t* be one.’

‘Okay now you’re confusing me.’

‘I kind of had it down, I was afraid there’d be too much on my plate. With Frank going.’

‘Yes, you like your routines, you’ve made that clear . . . Would you want to try again?’

‘You mean morph it into a relationship? Like I say, I can’t go there.’

‘No. Now, I mean.’

‘Oh. Nah sorry, I can’t go there either.’

‘I get that,’ she said, getting up to leave. ‘Outside your comfort zone. Plus the golf exhausted you, no doubt.’

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Six months went by. Judd never did hear if that big celebration took place on Staten Island. Joelle disappeared a few times but it could have been to visit Jeannie. Or Mike, who lived in Indianapolis. Judd didn’t ask about any of it.

They saw each other occasionally for dinner at restaurants. She flew to San Diego once when Judd had some old business there, and she spent the weekend and they went in the ocean.

Then Joelle decides to do some renovations. Judd starts noticing--not at first, but a few weeks into it--the contractor is staying later than he should be.

One night the truck’s still there when Judd’s getting ready to go to bed. It’s not there at 7 in the morning when he takes his walk, but you might as well check, see what’s up. So he rang the bell a couple times and no one answered.

Joelle typically parked in the garage so Judd looked through that little side window and nope.

He caught up to her later at the neighborhood fitness center. ‘How’s the home improvement business?’ he said.

She said, ‘It’s fine. The kitchen’s almost finished. How have *you* been?’

‘You don’t think,’ Judd said, ‘it’s a bit early to be fooling around like that?’

‘You’re an odd person,’ she said, and she got on the elliptical machine and that was kind of that.

The guy started coming around on the weekends too. You’d hear power tools fired up now and then. Not quite as steady as you should.

The next time Judd spoke to Joelle she was rolling the garbage cans out to the curb. Judd said the guy looked younger than her, and she said he was and she went inside.

The next time he spoke to her was at Christmas when she announced she was going to Mike’s, and to stay safe during the holidays and be good.

Judd asked if the renovations were about done and she said oh gosh no, we’re doing a complete rehab. That Frank always wanted to but was allergic to the dust.

Separately Judd wondered where the money was coming from. It was only a couple years ago that Frank

and Joelle were getting foreclosed on. Frank mentioned an investment that went sour, a piece of property in Montana near Flathead Lake where they intended to build a cabin, and that snowballed against the house in Phoenix.

There was a workout and they saved the place but Gee, a top to bottom rehab, you'd have to figure 100 grand. Judd was thinking people surprised you, how they socked away money.

Judd ran into Joelle at Trader Joe's. He asked if she wanted to have dinner sometime, there's a Peruvian place he read a review of.

She said that's a nice thought, but that Judd you've become a bit of a pest honestly. Judd said okay then.

Sometimes Joelle would get in the truck with the contractor and they'd drive off. They always came back with a load of materials, like they'd been shopping at Home Depot, but often it took way too long to come back.

Judd decided to get a hold of Jeannie. He tried to think how to do that. You weren't going to ask Joelle obviously. It took a while on Facebook but he found Mike in Indiana and then there was Jeannie as Mike's friend.

So Judd sent her a message. That maybe your mom is moving too quickly into her next stage. That she may not be thinking clearly.

Jeannie answered promptly, that that's ridiculous, and I appreciate you informing me of this.

In the morning Joelle came storming over mad. 'Did you speak to my daughter? What on earth gives you the right? I'm not believing this.'

'I did indeed,' Judd said.

'You know something? I wish Frank was still around, to kick your ass. I really do.'

Judd said, 'When the trustee's sale got handled, and I had my little something to do with it, Frank put his face in his hands and called me a worthy human.'

'That's too bad. He'd need to revise that.'

'I told him cut it out, if you can't help a neighbor, then what are you?'

Joelle stood there a moment. '*That's* what you're doing Judd? Helping a *neighbor*?'

'I feel I am, yeah.'

'I mean I knew you were deranged--and that fantasyland skydiving story, yeah right, your parachute didn't open--but you've reached a new low. I'm truly sorry I met you.'

‘That did happen,’ Judd said, ‘the way I told you. I was taking a lesson and something went wrong but luckily the reserve chute opened automatically. Dumbest idea of my life.’

Later there was another message from Jeannie, she was on her way out.

The next day there was no sign of the contractor but there was a rental-looking car in Joelle’s driveway.

Judd figured it would be appropriate to say hello, and he went over there.

‘Oh Mr. Shrang,’ Jeannie said. ‘Again, I appreciate your looking out for my mom.’

‘Well is she, like here?’ Judd said.

‘I am,’ Joelle said, coming around the corner from the kitchen.

‘Have to say,’ Judd said, ‘she’s shooting daggers at me, your mom.’

‘Yes, well that’s *her* problem,’ Jeannie said.

Judd asked how long she was staying and Jeannie said a few days, maybe a week, it’s kind of up in the air.

Judd said in that case he was inviting them both to a little backyard thing tomorrow night, and Jeannie said that sounded wonderful actually and Judd invited the Nelsons again too.

Jeannie came on time, brought a nice carrot cake, and the Nelsons asked when Joelle was coming.

‘She may not be,’ Jeannie said.

‘Maybe an understatement,’ Judd said.

‘Really?’ the Nelsons said.

‘Me and Mom,’ Jeannie said, ‘we have some issues to work out.’

‘There always are Dear,’ Mrs. Nelson said. ‘When we lose a loved one there is a ripple effect.’

‘Inevitable,’ Mr. Nelson said.

‘Certainly,’ Jeannie said, ‘but we had issues before Dad passed.’

Judd asked how everyone wanted their burgers and that was about it for the deep discussions, and there was plenty of good humor the rest of the way, Judd thinking more than last time when Joelle *was* here, though admittedly that was a month after Frank expired.

The Nelsons did their thing, told more stories, and were leaving earlier this time. Jeannie told them she was amazed at not only *what* they’ve done, but what they’ve *retained*.

Judd said he agreed, so many details in there.

When they were gone Judd said, ‘Out of left field. Would you want to go bowling?’

Jeannie said absolutely. Judd said oh. In that case there's the AMF, he said, a little tired but does the job, or a new one opened in Scottsdale, 22-laner.

'I vote for that,' Jeannie said.

The 22-laner turned out to have a reality bowling theme, every inch of the lane lit up with various gimmicks like you were inside a video game. Jeannie said she loved it, and thank you for suggesting this.

They were in Old Town, there was a college vibe, and they hit a couple of bars after, and by the time Judd dropped her off it was 1 in the morning.

At lunchtime Judd saw Jeannie go somewhere, and Joelle coming over and attacking him wouldn't take long now.

'Are you for real?' she said. 'You're actually angling . . . to get it on with my *daughter* now?'

Judd said whoa take it easy, he's not angling anything of the sort and let's don't be projecting.

Judd added that he invited Jeannie for another barbeque tonight--he's going to pick up some rib eyes--and she's welcome to come too. Joelle about-faced and left but Judd had the impression if she had the right implement handy she would have smashed one of his car windows, at the minimum.

Jeannie was right on time again, brought potato salad this time, and it was balmy out and Judd commented this is why we live down here, at least until June kicks in.

Jeannie said once she got out of high school she vowed *never* to live here, and she loves having the true four seasons.

Judd asked if she'd made any progress with her mom . . . and what was the story there anyway?

'No,' Jeannie said. 'Mom is stubborn, as you probably know.'

'Meaning there's a lot she doesn't tell you?'

'She *tells* me everything,' she said. 'But doesn't fill in the blanks to my satisfaction.'

'Hmm,' Judd said.

'I know that doesn't make sense. My dad for example. She told me he had an affair with someone in the neighborhood.'

'Holy Toledo . . . You mean like years ago?'

'See I think. That's what I'm saying, I'm not sure.'

'Well when did she lay *this* on you?'

'Yesterday.'

'I'll be honest,' Judd said. 'Now why would she tell you something like that?'

Jeannie said, 'Would a good answer be, to justify her own indiscretions?'

'And you're sure about those, because?'

'I'm *not* sure. Except she's a sneaky person. You see Mike next time ask him, he'll tell you the same.'

Judd said he had to run up to Flagstaff tomorrow, it's not like she wanted to come along.

She said sure, she's down with it.

Judd said well in that case, his thing should be pretty quick, so they can do a little exploring.

She said she's been there a few times but there's always something new.