

Bear Claws and Cocktail Class

3700 words

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‘This *case*,’ Frank said.

‘What’re you talking about?’ Marli said. ‘Not still.’

‘Unh-huh. Like I said, you can call it what it is. An obsession. I won’t be offended.’

Frank had a house in the Sunset. Marli moved in. She was twenty years younger.

Frank had seen a guy on YouTube build an office in the garage, and after Marli moved in he did the same thing.

You had a self-contained booth against the back wall between the washer-dryer and hot water heater. The way the YouTube guy worked it, you had to boost yourself up into the thing, meaning the floor was a few feet off the ground, and that allowed you to store stuff underneath, though Frank didn't store anything under his, the garage was already too full of junk. He did love the up high concept, that was clever thinking by the guy.

The guy’s was 5 x 5 and Frank made his 4 x 7. This gave the option to sleep out there on a camping pad if something happened, which it hadn’t yet but still.

He wasn't as flexible as the YouTube guy, his joints typically popped when got up in the morning, but he added one of those metal handles old people use in the shower along with a couple blocks for his feet, and son of a gun it felt good to climb into the thing and shut the door. Kind of like the fort his grandpa built in the backyard for him when he was a little kid.

He threw down some cheap carpet, picked up a desk at *Ikea*, and you were basically there. The electricity, he ran a 12-gauge extension cord to a multi strip, plugged in lights and the computer stuff and one of those \$39 fan heater jobs, and that kept the place quite toasty.

The design had no window but that was fine, you didn't need to look out at the garage. The main thing, you could lock the door--both when you were in there and when you weren't--and Frank made sure not to leave any extra keys around.

Frank putzed around out there but what he liked doing best was trying to solve the Zodiac case. He had maps on the walls, the locations of the 4 canonical crimes, he had the cryptic ciphers that the asshole sent to the newspapers, and even a couple of police reports printed out. Those you assumed were classified, since in theory it was still an open case, but you had these

fanatics (like himself) on the internet forums and it could take a few years but eventually they got all that stuff through Freedom of Information requests. What space was left Frank filled with reprints of old news clippings from Paul Avery, who handled the case at the *Chronicle*.

‘It’s the most head-scratching unsolved American crime case since JFK,’ he reminded Marli. ‘What, you think I gave up?’

‘I never said that,’ she said, ‘but I assumed you cooled the jets. You said it yourself, the DNA didn’t pan out. Wasn’t that the one new development? In like 40 years?’

She had a point. Advances in DNA technology had solved several cold cases the last few years. The Zodiac people tried, they retested letters the killer sent, hoping he'd left traces of himself behind. They came up empty.

Frank was in high school when the San Francisco crime occurred. He lived a mile away. It was real spooky there for a while, you watched your back when you went out at night.

There were a few witnesses who saw the killer leaving the scene. They helped the cops with the composite sketch that was famous back then. Frank

found out about 5 years ago that he knew one of those witnesses, not well but in grammar school, and that helped renew his interest in the case.

‘You remember when we walked the route?’ he said to Marli. ‘I’m still wrestling with, did he take the Golden Gate or Bay Bridge?’

Marli said, ‘That was actually fun. It was more we were walking around on a nice day, and less you lapsing into your zone.’

She called it a cult once, when they were late for New Year’s at her sister’s because he was on a Zodiac zoom thing that went long, but she decided that was a little strong and hadn’t gone quite that far since.

She wasn't way off of course. He'd bring up the case to random people, see if they were familiar with it, and if so, did they have any thoughts. Once he introduced it to a couple of German tourists who thought he was a nut job and walked away quick.

Frank said, ‘I keep trying to picture it. The guy fleeing through the Presidio. Out the gate onto upper Broadway, into the parked vehicle. Like I showed you, right? But then . . . he’s got both options, both bridges.’

‘You said he turned left, and bottom of the hill he was on the bridge approach to the Golden Gate.

Remember you made me ride with you and time it, like 6 minutes to the toll plaza? What about the video you made for your group? I couldn't sit through it but wasn't that your big conclusion? The killer escaped to the North Bay?'

'That was the conclusion of Dave Toschi as well,' Frank said, 'and the guy who wrote the book, that they made the movie from.' Toschi was the lead detective on the case, played by Mark Ruffalo in the movie. (Avery, the *Chronicle* reporter on Frank's wall, was played by Robert Downey, Jr.)

'So the experts agree with you,' Marli said.

'Yeah. Not sure they pounded the pavement like you and I did. Back then, you could drive straight down Broadway, NOT make the left turn, and past Chinatown and North Beach you had that ramp that fed into the *Bay Bridge*.'

'All right, that I can't picture,' Marli said.

'Pretty sure I explained it to you. The whole shebang came down after the earthquake, the World Series one. All that overhead freeway shit along the Embarcadero.' Marli lived in Utah then, never was in San Francisco until she came out for a paper dolls convention 11 years ago and didn't go back.

‘Fine,’ she said. ‘So what you’re telling me, he didn’t necessarily live in the *North Bay*. Or the East Bay.’

‘I guess.’

‘And didn’t you also say that even if he did use the Golden Gate, he could have crossed over at Novato to Vallejo? I believe it’s Highway 37?’

‘Yeah I did say that,’ Frank said. ‘This friggin *case*.’

Marli said, ‘Honey maybe you need a break from it. Give it a few months, even longer. You’ll come back with a fresh outlook. We can start playing pickleball, the Gerksons are having tons of fun with it.’

Frank hated that idea. You have to say *good shot* to some doofus and not mean it at all. Plus all that time wasted.

Substituting pickleball for good old fashioned Zodiac research--not too subtle about that, was she.

Frank said he was going to take a drive.

Often when he took a drive he’d head up to 19th Avenue and then through the park to California Street, then angle like a magnet into the neighborhood, Presidio Heights, where it all went down on October 11, 1969.

That being an otherwise quiet Saturday night. The poor cabdriver picked the guy up downtown, and the

guy shot him at the drop-off, at the intersection of Washington and Cherry.

It got treated for two days as an unfortunate cab robbery gone bad, and then the letters started coming in, matching the letters that claimed the four previous victims. The letters toyed with police, and threatened to shoot up a school bus.

Frank tried to explain it to Marli, why this was different than other serial crimes, the atmosphere that overtook the Bay Area, with this guy sitting back laughing and taunting everyone and never getting caught. Maybe you had to be there.

Frank had a girlfriend at the time, she lived in the Richmond with her mom, and Frank would ride his bike over there on Monday nights, when the mom worked a second job. Sometimes he took Clay or Sacramento, but plenty of times he took Washington, meaning he rode right through that intersection at night.

She lived in a two-unit building, the upper flat. She would drape a beach towel over the fire escape to signal that her mom *had* gone to work, just in case.

There was some shenanigans, high school stuff, and they de-virginized each other. So there was that. She

went to a different school, which was kind of cool. It fizzled out senior year.

Couple of unrelated things lately had Frank concluding life's too short, so what do you got to lose, maybe . . . and this time instead of Presidio Heights--where you parked the car and re-hashed it step by step for the umpteenth time, *what did I miss?*--he veered left on Geary and drove to where she used to live.

If he could remember it. He thought it was 21st Avenue, the south side of Clement, but when he got there he wasn't sure, and too many of the buildings were similar. He did remember there was parking underneath hers, not directly below but sort of to the side where you ended up down and in back, and one place had that so he took a chance and rang the bell, the upper unit.

A guy answers on the intercom, friendly enough, has an accent. The sound quality of the intercom's not great and Frank asks if he wouldn't mind coming down for a second, and instead the guy buzzes him in.

Frank goes upstairs and the guy meets him in the foyer. 'This's a ridiculous long shot,' he says, 'and sorry to otherwise disturb your evening--someone I used to know lived I'm pretty sure in this flat? We're talking decades ago. Any trace of those people, where they

might have gone to? Like a piece of junk mail for ‘em, sneaking through the cracks and getting delivered here ever?’

‘What were their names?’ the man asked.

‘The one I knew was Cynthia. She’d be my age now. For the life of me, the last few minutes in the car I’m trying to remember her last name and I can’t. If I did, I could have tried searching for her myself, online, wouldn’t have to bother you.’

‘Factor?’

Frank took a second to process it. ‘Yes! Jesus, I remembered it was one of those last names that shouldn’t have been. Wow.’

‘You’re in a bit of luck my friend,’ the man said.

He explained he was the landlord, had bought the building in ‘05 and had a heck of a time getting her out. All he wanted to do was move into his own house he bought, but the liberal tenants’ rights system, he said, made that impossible. In the end he had to fork over 60 grand to get her out, otherwise we’re talking a few years in court, easy, with no guarantee.

Frank said, ‘I’m kinda shocked actually she was here that long. I mean we were kids when we knew each other, like 16.’

‘Oh no they do that,’ the man said. ‘An established unit in the city is like gold. People die and the kids take over. We can’t raise the rent, so only a fool moves.’

Frank was thinking that’s *me*, like an idiot he didn’t try to hammer *his* guy for a few bucks when he moved out of his rental. He saw an article recently, there were lawyers now who *helped* you extort your landlord, it was a cottage industry. What can you do.

Frank knew what this guy meant, they could raise the rent a *little* every couple years, like a ridiculous 2 percent, if that. Veteran tenants did have the deal of the century compared to someone coming in cold.

‘Well, good to hear you resolved it at least,’ he said.

‘Yes. It was unpleasant. My sense was she was a nice enough woman but I never encountered that side of her.’

‘Had her game face on,’ Frank said. ‘She was an okay person back then. People change though.’

The man told him to hold on a second and came back with an address book and flipped to the F’s.

‘I don’t have a phone or other contact,’ he said, ‘but I do have a forwarding address. Again this is from 15 years ago, so no idea if it’s valid.’

The man wished him luck.

The address was in Pacifica. Frank google-mapped it, it was back up in the hills, a few miles from Highway One. It looked like a single family house, modest but pleasant. It showed Cynthia as the current owner.

It occurred to Frank that *Christ*, maybe the 60 grand she stiffed the guy for was enough for a down payment back in '05--though he doubted it, even then.

Well . . . it was getting dark but tomorrow's another day and why not give it a shot.

At breakfast Marli told him one good new thing on her calendar is a class she found at City College, how to make perfect cocktails, all different types, and she read wonderful reviews of the instructor and the first class was tonight and she was excited.

Frank said that sounds great, and I'm going to take a run down to Pacifica, try to find someone.

He could go either way with it, if she wanted to come, fine . . . but she didn't, she said she wouldn't see him at dinner but there are some of those tamales from Trader Joe's in the freezer if he wants them.

He got a cup of coffee in downtown Pacifica, which wasn't much, it was about two blocks, and checked out the beach. He was more nervous than he should be, was stalling it.

There was no doorbell he could see, just one of those big iron knockers, and he didn't want to scare anyone so he tapped with a knuckle.

A woman answered, she looked a little disheveled, one of her upper side teeth was missing. She wouldn't be old enough to be Cynthia, she was probably half her age. Frank said he was an old friend, if he indeed had the right place.

'Sure,' the woman said, 'You *just* missed Mom, she went to the store, but she'll be back soon.'

Frank said thank you. There was a low cement wall by the front shrubs and he sat there and waited.

It took about an hour, so not so soon, but Cynthia pulled up in a 25-year-old Honda and was lugging big bags of groceries out of the back seat.

'I'd offer to help,' Frank said, 'if you still trust me.'

She put down the groceries and said, 'Frankie. Oh my God. This is surreal.'

She stood there a second, and then kind of charged him, and they embraced, and didn't let go for a while.

He said, 'I was like 90 percent sure it was you . . . but I wasn't ready to bet the house on it . . . Sheesh. You figured *me* out pretty quick.'

‘My step-daughter texted me a little heads up,’ she said, ‘so I had that to work with. I was bracing myself for *some* old friend.’

‘I’ve changed a lot,’ he said. ‘Wouldn’t recognize myself from back then.’

‘Not as much as you think,’ she said. ‘And your voice was kind of the kicker . . . Can you come in?’

The kitchen was neat, pots hanging on an overhead rack in descending size, the counters clear and scrubbed. Frank remembered her bedroom back then, everything in its place. The room always smelled vaguely of ironing and starch. Surprising what you remember.

She made coffee and Frank polished off two cups, figuring he’d pay for it later, the bladder not what it used to be. But this was so much fun.

The step-daughter, Olivia, joined them and she was awfully sweet, and it was pretty clear she thought of Cynthia as her real mom.

‘We’re best friends,’ Cynthia explained. ‘Wouldn’t have it any other way.’ She squeezed Olivia’s hand.

Cynthia asked about him, were there kids and such in the picture. ‘There are not,’ Frank said, ‘Hopefully I have it right this time. My partner, she’s very tolerant. Even puts up with my Zodiac Killer bullshit. Mostly.’

‘Wait now,’ Olivia said, ‘I saw something on Dateline, it wasn’t *on* that, the Zodiac, they were dealing with a different case, but one of their experts, or law enforcement people, he brought *up* the Zodiac case.’

‘Jeez,’ Frank said, ‘this was recent?’

‘Unh-huh.’

‘What did the expert say, do you remember?’

‘No, sorry. I was into the main thing, the husband drops the wife at Walmart, he gets gas, comes back, and she never comes out. But there’s more to it. Somewhere in Tennessee.’

Cynthia said, ‘You got excited there Frankie. Did you miss something important?’

‘Okay, little context,’ he said, ‘I’ve been doing mostly that, the last few years. Trying to solve it. Bizarre way to spend time, I know.’

‘Not that bizarre,’ Cynthia said. ‘I worked with a gentleman once. He told me when he retired he was going to walk all day. Not just *take* a walk but *really* walk, like 8 hours.’

‘Did he? End up doing that?’

‘I have no idea. But it’s so nice to catch up, I’m tickled to death actually, I won’t deny it.’

‘She likes men,’ Olivia said. ‘I don’t have a dad any more. Should say I *do*, but he lives in Minnesota.’

‘Ah,’ Frank said, ‘that’s tough then . . . Your mom and me, we go back--not all the way--but with various people kicking the bucket here and there . . .’

‘Sweetie, he’s saying don’t take your friends for granted,’ Cynthia said.

Frank said, ‘I’ve wondered about you over the years. Human nature. Never took that extra step.’

Cynthia straightened up. ‘Frankie you’re not . . . slowly but surely telling us . . . you have something terminal.’

‘Nah, nah,’ he waved it off. ‘Sorry to get a little heavy there. What triggered it yesterday, heading *over* to the Zodiac crime scene, I remembered riding my bike *through* there to see you at night.’

‘That’s the first time you ever thought of it?’ Olivia said.

‘You’re a smart woman,’ Frank said, ‘and kind of relentless. You’d be a good detective. Maybe you can help me with the case.’

‘Sure. I’d love to.’

‘Wow, I was joking. Well--and you guys are going to roll your eyes at this one, and if not I can tell you’re

faking--I built a special elevated cubicle, just to work on the case.'

'It'd be fun to see that,' Olivia said. 'How are you going about solving it?'

'Jeez. She's serious,' Frank said.

'Oh yes,' Cynthia said.

'Well, my latest thought, is why not DNA-test the cab? It's still in an SFPD evidence warehouse after all these years. I mean sure, they fine-tooth-combed it back then.'

'But forensics is different now,' Olivia said. 'Look at CSI.'

'Exactly. I had some guy tell me--I met him in a Starbucks, okay, but guy said he consulted for Google once-- that they can put a camera in something like--so say a cab--and blast the images all over the world, in quarter inch squares. You assign people their own square, and they go to town, see what they find.'

'That may be a little much,' Cynthia said.

'Yeah, so forget that,' Frank said. 'I'm also thinking, even a microscopic piece of dandruff, bouncing off the killer's head--say barreling down Pine Street toward Presidio Avenue--which they didn't quite fine tooth

comb back then--that could yield a DNA profile. I mean in theory.'

'That's brilliant,' Olivia said. 'We need to make that happen.'

'Oh,' Frank said. 'How would we?'

'For starters, we'd have to work up a presentation to San Francisco police, and schedule time with the detectives still on the case. Isn't that obvious?'

'Except there *are* no detectives still on the case. That went south about 20 years ago.'

'Okay . . . Then you get a college--like a criminology class--and you work with the teacher, create an assignment--let's see, like, *Can a cold case from 1985 get solved from what's inside a car?*'

'Sweetie, *that's* brilliant,' Cynthia said.

'It is,' Frank said. '19-69 actually, but same difference I guess.'

'There's other ways too,' Olivia said. 'This is all so exciting, what you're doing.'

Cynthia said, 'Perhaps it's even *better* if there are no detectives on the case.'

'For sure,' Olivia said, 'much more opportunity.'

'You think?' Frank said. 'You're kinda sounding like me, but more fired up.'

‘If you’d like to give *me* an assignment, I’ll be happy to try,’ Olivia said.

‘Well heck,’ Frank said. ‘Do you have a car, and stuff?’

‘I’m sorry, I don’t drive.’

‘I can drive her,’ Cynthia said. ‘What did you have in mind?’

‘Nothing specific,’ Frank said, ‘just kind of, go over the case, from the start? I can pick her up, not a problem.’

‘Work with you in your special office, you mean?’ Olivia said.

‘Yeah, why not,’ Frank said. ‘Do some field research too, I have couple thoughts in that department . . . One example’d be check out a trailer park in Santa Rosa, where a guy once lived.’

‘Great!’ she said.

‘Just so you know what you’re getting into--after 50 years we’re not gonna solve this baby overnight.’

‘I’m down with that,’ Olivia said. ‘A hundred percent.’

‘I see.’

Cynthia made another pot of coffee and brought out some bear claws.

Frank was thinking how would you work it, did the *Ikea* desk take up too much room to fit a second desk? And could she climb up there in the first place? And more importantly, did he really want any help?

He thought of pickleball with the Gerstons and figured those were simple solves.