

Leaving

Frank lay in bed with his hands under his head as his sister hurried to pack his rucksack that morning. He stared at the hardwood ceiling, squinting to make out shapes from the streaks of darker colors over the lamp: a fern, a sword—maybe a large squirrel if he turned his head the right way. He had no trouble ignoring Jesse's frantic motions until a hint of sun came through the windows to illuminate the room, blurring the edges of his imagination. He sat up and brought his feet to the floor.

Jesse, who had been hunched over a chest by the door, looked up and gave Frank a nod. "Sun's coming up; we're out of time. Go get your shoes."

Frank walked over to the front door to grab his ratty brown boots. He'd been so upset about their state when he first received them from Bear, but now he considered himself lucky because they were warm and pretty sturdy. He made his way back into the bedroom. He didn't call out for Jesse to come join him by the front door even though it made more sense for her to do so. She wanted to see him again in the room, and Frank didn't think she asked for much. He stood before her and waited for instructions.

Jesse gestured at the boots. "Put them on."

Frank knelt to his knees and pulled the laces tight until the tips of his fingers turned red.

"I packed two pairs of trousers and a clean shirt. It's not much, but I wanted to make sure you have enough food." Jesse stood up and dusted off her skirt.

"I don't get hungry much," Frank mumbled.

"Frank, I won't have that now. You promise me you'll eat right and take care of yourself."

Frank stood up and grinned, ready to give her the half-hearted 'of course I will' that used to drive Ma crazy, but the look in Jesse's eye washed the color from his face.

"Yeah, Jess. I'll be fine." He took the rucksack that Jesse held out for him and placed it on his back. The two of them made their way to the back door.

Jesse's hugged him hard and didn't let go. "Move fast, and don't spend time with strangers at least until you're out."

Frank nodded and patted her back. "Don't worry about me, Jess. I can take care of myself."

Jesse released his torso from her grasp but still gripped his wrists. "So can I, Frank. I'm going to be fine."

Frank just looked at her.

"Be careful. I know how you get. You have to plough through." Jesse put her hand on Frank's cheek. "You say you can take care of yourself, but I don't believe you."

"Hey—"

"I'm telling you, Frank." She looked at him with eyebrows raised.

"Remember."

He nodded. He knew.

Frank nodded.

"Okay, go. Bear should be gone by now."

Frank stepped out on the back porch and sprinted into the field. He used his hands to make a path through the crops and only glanced back once, long enough to see his sister disappear into the farmhouse he used to call home.

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An hour later, on his way through town, Frank considered shielding his hands from the morning cold, but the day ahead seemed so bright that he decided against it. There weren't too many people up and about yet; Frank noticed a couple of shop owners removing large padlocks from their doors. He laughed to himself as he pictured the locks with their rightful owners, the giants of the valley. Their thick fingers would have trouble maneuvering the delicate keys.

Frank looked down at his own fingers and tried to rub some of the dirt off of his left hand. He and Jesse didn't get to wash off much; Bear thought it was a waste of water. Bear was always trying to save; when Ma disappeared, Bear took Frank out of school. Frank had liked school. But the way Bear saw it, they didn't have to pay for school supplies anymore. Frank approached the edge of town that he didn't recognize. Bear never let him go into town, but when he was younger, Ma would take him and Jesse into town once a month to reward them for good behavior with sugary snacks from the creamerie. She would hold it out in front of her, but before she gave them their cups, she'd say, "Don't eat it too fast. Once it's in your stomach, the fun's over." Frank had always gobbled his share in a few bites and eyed Jesse's on the walk home until she would sigh loudly and give him a bite of hers.

Frank saw that the creamerie was closed now. He jammed his hands into his pockets and continued on his way.

A voice called out from behind him. "Hey, son."

Frank froze. He couldn't speak or move. His heartbeat became the only thing he could feel.

"You there, come over here for a second."

As quickly as he felt crippled, Frank could move again. He turned around and tried to suppress his smile at the stranger calling him over. The man had graying hair and trousers that fit him a little too snug around the waist.

"Listen, boy. My back's not what it used to be, and I've got a whole lot of boxes to move in shop—see that's my truck over there," he pointed at a truck across the road. "Can you help me bring them over?" Frank glanced up at the sky that was becoming gradually lighter. He thought about it for a few seconds and then gave the man a quick nod. Frank took off his rucksack and placed it by the store's porch. Bringing the boxes across the street wasn't too difficult. Frank wondered whether this man actually needed help or had some ulterior motive, but he also knew that he sometimes underestimated his own strength. When he brought in the last one, he dusted his hands off and offered one to the shop owner.

"I'd best be on my way, sir."

"Thanks, son," he paused for a moment. "Are you from around here?"

"No, sir. This is my first time in this town."

"How do you like it?"

"It's seems well enough. I guess it's probably different later in the morning?"

"It sure is. You haven't seen anything yet." The man used his hands and arms as brushes to paint the marketplace and bustling streets. Frank smiled and nodded every few moments.

"What's your name, son?"

"Ben."

"Ben, are you looking for work? I can offer you a good deal. I could use a good worker like you."

Frank shook his head. "No thank you, sir. I'm headed out to Bettasburg, and I've got a long day ahead of me." He was actually headed Plytown.

The man looked overjoyed. "Well, why didn't you tell me? I'm headed that way myself later today," he exclaimed. "If you help me run the hardware shop, I can take you there by vehicle."

Frank formed the 'no' in his mouth before he stopped to think about the offer. Bettasburg was pretty close to Plytown, and the ride would

certainly leave Frank less exhausted. Jesse would probably throw a fit if she found out. But he was leaving now. He never had to tell her.

"Actually, that sounds great. What do you need me to do?"

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Frank soon found out that there was much to be done and heard. Rex, as he asked Frank to call him, had owned the hardware store for thirty years. He usually had help from his grandkids, but they'd recently told him to go to hell, the ungrateful bastards, and Rex was having trouble staying on track. His wife died a couple years back, and ever since, his kids stopped showing him the respect he deserved. He missed her sometimes but also knew she was in a better place.

"I suppose it's for the best. She'd roll over in her grave if she saw the way her spawn were treating me." Rex took a swig from his mug, relaxing at the front corner. "How're you doing with those shelves, Ben?" Frank, who had his arms full of trinkets, mustered up, "I'm okay. Not done yet." He tried his best to put everything up on the shelf at once, but a single bulb escaped his hold and came crashing on the floor. Rex swore and rushed over to the scene.

"I'm so sorry, Rex. It just—it slipped out of my hands." Frank's heart started to race. "I thought I had a handle on it. I really thought it was fine." He really thought nothing would have fallen. "I'm such an idiot. I'm so sorry."

Rex bent over and examined the shattered glass on the floor.

"Pipe down, kid. This is nothing."

Frank watched Rex closely, as if he would suddenly change his mind.

"Accidents happen. My grandkids were terrors and compared to them, you're an angel."

"I really am sorry. I could have been more careful."

Rex waved him away. "None of that. Finish putting those up on the shelves and come back up to the counter when you're done." Frank took each item one by one and carefully put them up on the shelves. It took him a lot longer than he anticipated, but at least the merchandise would be safe. Rex continued to tell stories from his comfortable spot at the front of the store. He seemed pretty talkative, but Frank appreciated the change.

Bear never really told any stories. Occasionally, he'd drop a line about how Ma disappeared because she didn't care enough about them to stay or some bullshit. Frank didn't buy it. He knew Ma missed her kids as much as they missed her.

"You about done yet? I didn't realize I hired myself a snail for the day." Rex chuckled at his own joke.

Frank placed the last item on the shelf. "Yes, sir. I'm finished now."

"Well get on over here, so I can give you more stuff to do."

Frank made his way to the front of the store and waited for instructions.

Rex reached below the counter and pulled out a clipboard. "What are you headed over to Bettasburg for anyway?" He handed Frank the clipboard. "I've got to go visit my aunt." Frank glanced at the sheets of paper before him and searched his brain for the details. "She's real sick, and Ma can't go herself because she's got to mind the business."

"Oh dear, what's she got?"

Oh no. What did she have? Frank shrugged. "They don't really know. The doctor said it's exhaustion, but we think it's something else. She's never been out for this long before." He straightened his posture and held the clipboard a little closer.

"Yeah, those doctors don't really know what they're talking about sometimes. Best of luck, son. Maybe if the shop isn't busy, we can close a little early so you can get there sooner."

"Oh don't put yourself in any trouble—"

"It's no trouble. It's decided. We're closing shop an hour early today."

Frank was taken aback. "Thank you. I really appreciate it."

"Don't thank me yet. We've still got a long day ahead of us, and I need you to start inventory the back room." Frank nodded and followed Rex to the back.

As soon as they entered the room, Frank knew that he had a huge task before him. The shelves filled with goods went up to the ceiling and there were boxes strewn all over the floor without order. Frank didn't even think this task could be completed in one week, let alone one day. He had a sneaking suspicion that Rex had avoided doing inventory until someone else was there to do it for him.

"Have at it. Remember to look inside the boxes because the labels might not be right." Well, that defeated the purpose.

"There's a step-ladder in the corner if you need it."

Frank nodded. He would need it.

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Hours later, Frank hovered over maybe the fifteenth cardboard box and flipped through the pages on the clipboard, hoping to find a listing for 'red wrenches'. The clipboard had no record of their existence, but there they were, never touched before, waiting to be sold. Green wrenches, sure, they were on the list even though there were no green wrenches to be found. Frank started to understand why Rex's grandkids might have pitched a fit.

The familiar jingle of bells attached to the store's front door rang out. Frank heard Rex's friendly voice.

"Hey there, sir. What can I do for you today?"

The voice that answered made Frank's heart stop. He opened the door a crack and peered out to the store front.

"I need to buy some new work gloves." Bear's deep growl sounded annoyed. "Mine have worn out."

"Well, how'd that happen now?" The sound of Rex rummaging behind the counter kept Frank from bolting.

"I've had the same pair of gloves for two years. How do you think it happened?"

Rex cleared his throat. "Here are a few options that we've got." Rex laid them out on the countertop. "And how come you haven't gotten a new pair in so long?"

"I've got to take care of my kids."

Frank ground his teeth. Bear was not his father.

Bear tossed a few gloves aside before picking up a green glove to his left and examining it in the light. "This pair's okay, I guess. It's the best you've got?"

"I've had a pair of those gloves last me years, sir." Rex's tone became defensive.

"Well, with the work I do, they'll last me a few months at best." Bear paused as Rex quietly collected the gloves on the counter to put away. "What's this stamp doing on here?"

"That's just the mark of the maker, sir. It'll wash off."

"Is that what you tell customers to keep them off the shelves?" Bear smiled, and Frank felt sick. "That's a dishonest sales tactic there."

Rex furrowed his brow. "It'll wash right off." He dropped the pen he was holding, and the noise startled Frank. "I'll wash it off right

now." Rex walked over to the sink, and Frank heard running water.

Bear laughed, a deep chesty sound. "Don't get your knickers in a twist, old man. I'm only just saying what everyone else thinks out loud. Anyway, I'd prefer my gloves dry to marked."

Frank turned off the tap and took a few quick strides back to the counter. He pulled out a pair of crisp, new gloves and held them out to Bear. "Here you go. That'll be five coins."

Bear grinned. "That's a hefty sum, don't you think?"

Rex took a deep breath. "I don't choose the prices, sir. I only sell what they give me."

Bear fingered through his pocket for change. "Well then, you don't do much, do you?"

Rex shrugged and accepted the coins that Bear offered. "Thank you for your business, sir."

"Sure." Bear headed towards the door. He turned back once before he left: "I'll be back if these give me any problems."

The jingles sounded once more and then there was silence. Frank noticed his chest moving steadily up and down and saw Rex approach the back room. Frank closed the door and grabbed his clipboard.

Rex opened the door and shuddered openly. "He's a nasty one." Frank didn't say a word.

"He's come in here a couple of times. Never a 'hello'. Never polite."

Frank wasn't surprised, but he was careful not to agree. He started to calm down a bit.

"You know, his wife left him years back. Hear he used to beat her. Probably beats those poor kids."

"You don't know that." As much as Frank hated Bear, he couldn't help but get a little defensive.

Rex seemed taken aback. "I don't know what?"

"How do you know he beat his wife or her kids?"

"Well, I suppose I don't for sure, but he seems like the type—"

"And if you think he's hurting his family, why don't you do something to help out?"

"Well, I don't know for sure—"

"So you shouldn't go making assumptions." Frank pretended to check boxes off on the clipboard.

Rex scratched his head. "I suppose you're right," he paused for a second. "But he is nasty."

Frank looked up at Rex. "Oh, I'm sure he is."

Rex seemed to accept these words as encouragement. "Yeah, you can just tell he is. People deserve some respect." He paused. "Beater or no beater, I wouldn't want to be his kid."

"Yeah, that'd be awful." Frank decided not to say anything else on the subject.

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Hours later, when the sun started to say its goodbyes, Rex told Frank he could stop checking the inventory.

"If you just head over to the truck, I can lock all the doors." Frank stepped outside and let the cool air envelope his shoulders and body. He walked over to the truck's passenger seat and looked back. The hardware shop seemed so far away from where he stood. He saw Rex over the hood, carrying something that he then threw in the back of the truck. The locks clicked once Rex turned his key.

"Let's hit the road."

Suddenly, Frank remembered: "Rex, we can't leave yet, I forgot my rucksack."

"Don't worry, kid. I threw it in the back of the truck."

Frank sighed with the relief.

"Got something important in there?" Rex started the engine.

"Not really." Frank waited for a moment. "My Ma made it for me, and I wouldn't want to lose it."

"I hear you, son."

The ride to Bettasburg was long, but Rex let Frank open the window so the air wasn't too stuffy, and the radio was on. Frank looked out the window and watched as fields and trees raced in the opposite direction. Branches stretched out like arms, and barn window sills made for strained runners. Frank was glad he didn't walk. Bear might have found him. A few hours later, the truck slowed to a stop. Rex stepped out of the truck, and Frank followed suit.

"I don't know where exactly you're headed, but this is as far as I go."

Frank looked around. He guessed the walk to Plytown would be an hour. He looked at Rex and held out his hand.

"Thank so much for bringing me here, sir."

Rex took his hand. "No problem, son. You did me a great favor by helping me sort through that back room." Rex reached in the back of his truck and pulled out Frank's rucksack. His fingers touched the yellow embroidered letters when he handed it back. Frank.

Frank looked up at Rex, who gave him a smile and a wink.

"You make sure to give my best to your aunt."

Frank could only nod as Rex got back into the truck and turned around. He waved at Rex until he couldn't see the truck any longer. So many thoughts flew through Frank's mind, and all he wanted was to speak with Rex. Frank wasn't sure what to make of the whole situation. But instead of dwelling, instead of trying to wrap his head around what had just happened, he whispered to himself: "Thanks."

Then he turned around, put his rucksack on his back, and headed down the road.