



Home Draft, as "Frank Money"

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FRANK MONEY

1.

THEY STOOD UP LIKE MEN. WE SAW THEM. LIKE MEN THEY ROSE.

WE SHOULDN'T HAVE BEEN ANYWHERE NEAR THAT PLACE. LIKE MOST FARMLAND IN LOTUS, GEORGIA, SIGNS WARNING A CERTAIN KIND OF TRESSPASSER WERE PLENTIFUL. IN ADDITION TO THREATENING SIGNS, WIRE MESH FENCES WITH WOODEN STAKES EVERY TEN OR SO FEET ENCLOSED THE PROPERTY. BUT WHEN WE SAW A CRAWL SPACE THAT SOME ANIMAL HAD DUG—A COYOTE MAYBE OR A COON DOG—WE COULDN'T RESIST. JUST KIDS. THE GRASS WAS SHOULDER HIGH FOR HER AND WAIST HIGH FOR ME SO, LOOKING OUT FOR SNAKES, WE CRAWLED THROUGH IT ON OUR BELLIES. THE REWARD WAS WORTH THE DAMAGE GRASS JUICE AND CLOUDS OF GNATS DID TO OUR EYES, BECAUSE THERE RIGHT IN FRONT OF US, ABOUT FIFTY YARDS OFF, THEY STOOD LIKE MEN. THEIR RAISED HOOVES CRASHING AND

STRIKING, THEIR MANES TOSSING BACK FROM WILD WHITE EYES. THEY BIT EACH OTHER LIKE DOGS BUT WHEN THEY STOOD, REARED UP ON THEIR HIND LEGS, THEIR FOREARMS AROUND THE WITHERS OF THE OTHER, WE HELD OUR BREATH IN WONDER. ONE WAS RUST-COLORED; THE OTHER DEEP BLACK, BOTH SUNNY WITH SWEAT. THE NEIGHS WERE NOT AS FRIGHTENING AS THE SILENCE FOLLOWING A KICK OF HIND LEGS INTO THE LIFTED LIPS OF THE OPPONENT. NEARBY, COLTS AND MARES STOOD ALOOF, LOOKING AWAY. THEN IT STOPPED. THE RUST-COLORED ONE DROPPED HIS HEAD AND PAWED THE GROUND WHILE THE WINNER LOPED OFF IN AN ARC, NUDGING THE MARES BEFORE HIM.

AS WE ELBOWED BACK THROUGH THE GRASS LOOKING FOR THE DUG OUT PLACE, WE LOST OUR WAY. NEITHER OF US PANICKED UNTIL WE HEARD VOICES, URGENT BUT LOW, ON THE YONDER SIDE OF THE FENCING. I GRABBED HER ARM AND PUT A FINGER TO MY LIPS. NEVER LIFTING OUR HEADS,

JUST PEEPING THROUGH THE GRASS, WE SAW THEM PULL A BODY FROM THE BACK OF A MULE AND THROW IT INTO A HOLE ALREADY WAITING. ONE FOOT STUCK UP OVER THE EDGE AND QUIVERED, AS THOUGH IT COULD GET OUT, AS THOUGH WITH A LITTLE EFFORT IT COULD BREAK THROUGH THE DIRT BEING SHOVELED IN. WE COULD NOT SEE THE FACES OF THE MEN DOING THE BURYING, ONLY THEIR TROUSERS; BUT WE SAW THE EDGE OF A SPADE DRIVE THE JERKING FOOT DOWN TO JOIN THE REST OF ITSELF. WHEN SHE SAW THAT BLACK FOOT WITH ITS CREAM-COLORED, MUD-STREAKED SOLE BEING WHACKED INTO THE GRAVE, HER WHOLE BODY BEGAN TO SHAKE. I HUGGED HER SHOULDERS TIGHT AND TRIED TO PULL HER TREMBLING INTO MY OWN BONES BECAUSE, AS A BROTHER FOUR YEARS OLDER, I THOUGHT I COULD HANDLE IT. THE MEN WERE LONG GONE AND THE SUN WAS A CANTALOUPE BY THE TIME WE FELT SAFE ENOUGH TO DISTURB EVEN ONE BLADE OF GRASS AND

MOVE ON OUR STOMACHS SEARCHING FOR THE SCOOPED-
OUT PART UNDER THE FENCE. I THOUGHT I COULD FORGET
ABOUT IT AND JUST REMEMBER THE HORSES. THEY WERE SO
BEAUTIFUL. SO BRUTAL. AND THEY STOOD LIKE MEN.

Breathing. How to do it so no one would know he was
awake. Fake a deep rhythmic snore, drop the bottom lip. Most
important the eyelids should not move and there must be a regular
heartbeat and limp hands. At 2:00 a.m. when they checked him to
determine if he needed another shot they would see the patient in
room 17, sunk in a morphine sleep. If convinced, they would
loosen his wrist cuffs. The trick of imitating semi-coma was to
concentrate on a single neutral object. Ice, he thought, a cube of it,
an icicle or an ice-crust pond, or a frosted landscape. No. Too
much emotion in frozen hills. Fire, then? Never, too active. He
would need something that stirred no emotion, encouraged no
memory—sweet or shameful. Just searching for such an item was

agitating. Everything reminded him of something loaded with pain.

Visualizing a blank sheet of paper drove his mind to the letter he had gotten—the one that had closed his throat: "Come fast. She be

dead if you tarry." Finally, he settled on the chair in the corner of

the room. Wooden. Oak. Lacquered or stained. How many slats

in its back. Was the seat level or curved for a bottom. Hand

crafted or machine made. If hand crafted who was the carpenter

and where did he get his lumber. Hopeless. The chair was

provoking questions not blank indifference. He would have to

concentrate on something else, a night sky, starless or, better, train

tracks. No scenery, just the endless tracks.

They had taken his shirt and laced boots but his pants and army jacket (neither an effective suicide instrument) were in the tiny closet. He just had to get down the hall to the exit door that was never locked after a fire broke out on that floor and a nurse and two patients died. That was the story Crane the orderly told, but he believed it was simply convenient for smoke breaks. * Still, before
^

Handcuffed in the back of the patrol car,
he swerved his head to see where
he was and where he was going.
Nothing in particular stood out except
a ~~diner~~ ^{the} flashing an OK DINER sign, and
a ^{huge} yard sign for a ^{tiny} Church: AMEZION.
If he succeeded in getting out the
door he was would head for Zion.

*

^

escape, he would have to get shoes somehow, someway. Walking anywhere in winter without shoes would guarantee his being arrested and back in the ward until he could be sentenced for vagrancy. Interesting law, vagrancy, meaning standing outside or walking without purpose anywhere. Carrying a book would help, but being barefoot would contradict "purposefulness" and seal a complaint of "loitering." Better than most, he knew that being outside wasn't necessary for legal or illegal disruption. You could be inside, living in your own house for years and still men with badges and guns could force you, your family, your neighbors to pack up and move—with or without shoes. As a four year old he had a pair though the sole of one flapped with every step. Residents of fifteen houses were cleansed from the edge of tk town. In spite of threats from lawmen and pleadings from his friends, one elderly man refused. He was beaten to death with rifle butts and his body tied to the magnolia tree in his own yard.

2

MAMA WAS PREGNANT WHEN WE WALKED OUT OF TEXAS. SOME FAMILIES HAD TRUCKS OR CARS AND LOADED ALL THEY COULD. OTHERS, LIKE MINE, WALKED FOR MILES UNTIL MR. TK CAME BACK FOR US HAVING DROPPED HIS PEOPLE AT THE STATE LINE. MY SHOE SOLE FLAPPED UNTIL PAPA TIED IT UP WITH HIS OWN SHOE LACE. I HAVE EATEN TRASH IN JAIL, KOREA, HOSPITALS, AT TABLE AND FROM CERTAIN GARBAGE CANS. NOTHING, HOWEVER, COMPARES TO THE FOOD PANTRY IN TK. I REMEMBER STANDING IN LINE AT CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER WAITING FOR A TIN PLATE OF DRY-HARD BISCUITS ALREADY SHOWING GREEN, AND PICKLED PIGS' FEET. IT WAS THERE THAT MAMA HEARD THE WOMAN AHEAD OF HER EXPLAIN TO THE VOLUNTEER HOW TO SPELL AND PRONOUNCE HER NAME. MAMA SAID IT WAS THE SWEETEST THING AND THE SOUND OF THE NAME WAS LIKE MUSIC AMIDST THE ARGUE AND HEAT OF THE CROWD. X WEEKS

LATER WHEN HER BABY, DELIVERED ON A MATTRESS IN
REVEREND BAILEY'S CHURCH BASEMENT, TURNED OUT TO BE
A GIRL MAMA NAMED HER YCIDRA, TAKING CARE TO
PRONOUNCE ALL THREE SYLLABLES. EVERYBODY ELSE CALLS
HER 'SEE'. I ALWAYS THOUGHT IT WAS NICE, HOW SHE
THOUGHT ABOUT THE NAME, TREASURED IT. AS FOR ME NO
SUCH MEMORIES. I AM NAMED FRANK AFTER MY FATHER'S
BROTHER. LUTHER IS MY FATHER'S NAME; IDA MY MOTHER'S.
THE ONLY INTERESTING PART IS OUR LAST NAME. MONEY.
OF WHICH WE HAD NONE.

A mean grandmother is one of the worst things a body could have.

Mamas are supposed to spank and rule you so you grow up
knowing right from wrong. Grandmothers, even when they've
been hard on their own children, are forgiving and generous to the
grandchildren. Well, that's the way it should be. For me it wasn't.
Mama and Papa worked from before sunrise til dark and maybe

they never knew that Miss Noella poured water instead of milk over the shredded wheat me and my brother ate for breakfast. When we had stripes and welts on our legs we were cautioned to lie, to say we got them by playing out by the stream where brambles and huckleberry vines grew. Even our grandfather was silent I guess because he was scared Miss Noella would leave him the way his first two wives did. She was the third wife of Salem Money so he never made a sound when the salt pork was halved for the two of them and all we got was its flavor. Well, yes, they were doing us a big favor letting us live with them after Mama and Papa got run out of Texas. The house was big enough for two, maybe three, but not those two plus all of us. Papa, Mama, Uncle Frank, my brother, and me. Mama and Papa slept on a pallet on the floor; Uncle Frank in two chairs put together; me and my brother slept on the back porch, taking turns in the hammock and the wooden swing. Our parents worked two jobs each—Mama picking cotton in the day and sweeping the lumber shacks in the evening. Papa and Uncle

Frank were field workers and very happy to have jobs since most of the young men around here had enlisted in the war and when it was over didn't come back to work cotton or lumber. Then Uncle Frank enlisted too. He got in the navy as a cook and glad about that because he didn't have to handle explosions. But his ship sank anyway and Miss Noella hung the Gold star in the window as though she was the honorable mother who had lost a son. Mama's job at the lumber yard gave her asthma, but it paid off because in a year we were able to rent our own place from Mr. Shepherd who drove in from Jeffrey every Saturday morning to collect the rent money. Such a relief to be in our own house and let Mr. Haywood put us on his list of people who needed supplies from the general store in Jeffrey. Sometimes he would bring chewing gum and mint balls, free, for us children. Jeffrey has the stores and a bank and a school. Where we live, Lotus, is separate with just houses and two churches, one of which has teachers for reading and arithmetic.

BAD WAS HAPPENING TO MY EYES. BAD, BUT FIXABLE. I
WONDERED IF THIS WAS HOW DOGS OR CATS OR WOLVES
SAW THE WORLD. I GOT OFF THE BUS AND WALKED TOWARD
A CHEVRON STATION, ITS BLACK FLAMES SHOOTING OUT
FROM THE V. I WANTED TO GO IN THE BATHROOM AND
LOOK IN THE MIRROR TO SEE IF I HAD AN EYE INFECTION, BUT
THE SIGN ON ITS DOOR STOPPED ME. THE SUN HURT SO BAD,
ITS MEAN LIGHT DROVE ME TO LOOK FOR SHADE. I DIDN'T

3

YELL. I DIDN'T SMASH ANYTHING, ANYTHING AT ALL. THAT
I CAN TELL. NOW I CAN TELL WHEN IT'S COMING. THE FIRST
TIME I WAS QUIET. JUST SITTING ON A BUS NEXT TO A
WOMAN. HER FLOWERED SKIRT WAS A WORLD'S WORTH OF
COLOR. HER BLOUSE BRIGHT RED. I SAW THE HEM OF HER
SKIRT TURN, THE FLOWERS BLACKENING, HER RED BLOUSE
WHITE AS MILK. THEN EVERYBODY, EVERYTHING. OUTSIDE
THE WINDOW TOO...TREES, SKY, A BOY ON A SCOOTER,
GRASS. HEDGES. ALL COLOR GONE LIKE A BLACK AND WHITE
MOVIE SCREEN. I DIDN'T YELL THEN. I THOUGHT SOMETHING

BAD WAS HAPPENING TO MY EYES. BAD, BUT FIXABLE. I
WONDERED IF THIS WAS HOW DOGS OR CATS OR WOLVES
SAW THE WORLD. I GOT OFF THE BUS AND WALKED TOWARD
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THE SIGN ON ITS DOOR STOPPED ME. THE SUN HURT SO BAD,
ITS MEAN LIGHT DROVE ME TO LOOK FOR SHADE. I DIDN'T
YELL. I DIDN'T SMASH ANYTHING, ANYTHING AT ALL. THAT
WAS LATER ON WHEN THE PAIN WOULDN'T STOP. NOW I
CAN TELL WHEN IT'S STARTING. THAT'S WHEN I HIDE.

tk

4

WOMEN ARE EAGER TO TALK TO ME WHEN THEY HEAR MY LAST NAME. MONEY? THEY CUCKLE AND ASK THE SAME QUESTION: WHO NAMED ME THAT OR IF ANYBODY DID. IF I MADE IT UP TO MAKE MYSELF FEEL IMPORTANT OR WAS I A GAMBLER OR THIEF OR SOME OTHER KIND OF CROOK THEY SHOULD WATCH OUT FOR? WHEN I TELL THEM MY WHOLE NAME, FIRST AND LAST, THEY SCREAM WITH LAUGHTER AND SAY: THERE AIN'T NO SUCH THING. ALL MONEY IS FALSE. NO END OF PLEASANT TALK AFTER THAT AND IT'S ENOUGH TO KEEP OUR FRIENDSHIP GOING WAY AFTER IT'S DRIED UP JUST SO THEY CAN MAKE LAME JOKES: HEY, MONEY, HOW YOU MAKING IT? HEY, MONEY! GOT SOME? MONEY, COME ON OVER HERE. YOU OWE ME.

TRUTHFULLY, OTHER THAN A FEW QUICK OPPORTUNITIES, I'VE KNOWN ONLY FOUR WOMEN. THREE OF THEM WERE SERIOUS RELATIONSHIPS AND I LIKED THE SMALL BREAKABLE

THING INSIDE EACH ONE. WHATEVER THEIR PERSONALITY,
SMARTS OR LOOKS, SOMETHING SOFT LAY INSIDE EACH. LIKE
THE BREAST OF A BIRD'S BONE, SHAPED AND CHOSEN TO
WISH ON. A LITTLE V, THINNER THAN BONE AND BARELY
HINGED, THAT I COULD BREAK WITH A FOREFINGER IF I
WANTED TO, BUT NEVER DID. WANT TO, I MEAN. KNOWING
IT WAS THERE, HIDING FROM ME, WAS ENOUGH.

IT WAS THE FOURTH WOMAN WHO CHANGED
EVERYTHING. IN HER COMPANY THE LITTLE WISHBONE V
TOOK UP RESIDENCE IN MY OWN CHEST AND MADE ITSELF AT
HOME. IT WAS HER FOREFINGER THAT SCARED ME AND IF IT
WASN'T FOR THAT LETTER I'D STILL BE HANGING FROM HER
APRON STRINGS. SHE HAD NO COMPETITION EXCEPT FOR THE
HORSES, A MAN'S FOOT AND YCIDRA TREMBLING UNDER MY
ARM.