

ZACHARY FRANK

## Dark Smoke Rose

I CAME BACK WARM from a long winter run to find my daughter on the couch, feet raised, arm wrapped in a wet towel, a glass of chocolate milk on the end table where her father's ashes used to be. Part of our arrangement for her return, the mason jar of Frick's remains had been moved to my nightstand.

Norah had turned off the TV when I entered and now tossed the remote onto the couch. She was wearing the pink sleepshirt and white linen shorts I'd handed down to her years before.

"You can watch what you want," she said, then stood, holding the towel in place, and slid into her sandals. "Can you set me up?" she asked.

"Can't you wait till after we eat?"

"Set me up now and I'll be good when dinner's done."

"It just needs reheating."

She sighed at me. "Do you want me to withdraw? 'Cause that would not be good for you."

Everything I wanted to say dissolved into dumb silence. My mind would fog back then at any hint of an argument, which made it impossible to form a clear thought. I didn't reply, just tried to look upset. It always bothered me not to eat the second dinner was ready.

Knowing she'd won, that it had never been a contest, Norah finished her chocolate milk in one long sip then brought the empty cup to the kitchen, squeaking the soles of her sandals against the tile floor as I headed upstairs.

I passed her room, which no longer had a lock, and pushed open the door. It almost upset me more, how clean it was, though there wasn't much to make a mess of. A year earlier, Norah had spent hours helping me search for the camera she'd pawned. On her return, I'd boxed away most of the things she could sell and drove them to self-storage. With such obvious, unfilled space, our house had the look of a family moving in or out.

My bedroom had a reinforced lock on the door and a safe on my dresser where I kept Norah's dope kit, a black leather toiletry bag

with a gold zipper. I input the code and removed it, along with a fresh needle and a red balloon of white powder, all but weightless in my hand. I pinched it delicately at the stem, letting it dangle, and thought of Frick walking a used condom to the wicker wastebasket in our bathroom. From the nightstand, his ashes stared a jar-shaped hole into the small of my back.

DOWNSTAIRS, I OPENED a bag of lettuce and fixed myself a bowl of leftover ziti. It was early for dinner but already dark. The glass of the sliding back door shone black, reflecting me in the kitchen as I waited at the microwave and recalculated my night. I'd take my food to the couch instead of the kitchen table and play games on my phone, with the TV for background noise and my daughter set up beside me. I wasn't sweating on my run, the temperature below freezing, but could feel the sweat running down my face now that I'd stopped and stepped inside. I removed my outer layer, would wait to shower till her high wore off. With two seconds remaining, I stopped the microwave so I wouldn't have to hear it beep.

As I entered the living room, a bowl in each hand, Norah was preparing herself on the couch. She'd taken the towel off her arm and was tying the green tube of her tourniquet around her bicep. She used her mouth to pull it tight.

I took the recliner.

She'd placed her Narcan on the coffee table, another part of our agreement, and I slid it closer to me.

"Fucking calm down," she said through her teeth. "The fuck's with those noodles?"

"They're whole wheat," I said.

She swabbed her arm with an alcohol wipe then unwrapped the needle. She mixed her heroin in a small metal measuring cup, the high sides more forgiving than a spoon, then cooked it, dragging the flame in slow circles. She added a cotton ball, let it soak, stuck it.

The flash of relief on her face, before she shot the syringe, as her blood rushed the rig, emptied me. I tried not to cry so I tried not to look.

I ate my salad.

Norah looked over at me until I looked back, her pupils pinpricks but her eyes loose, starting to roll up.

"Feels good," she said, every high a surprise. She curled her legs

under her body. Her head fell back into the couch. "Don't let me do too much, though." She flashed me a grin that made her look like nobody I knew. "Promise?"

My throat was tight, my face warm and red, like I'd swallowed mouthwash.

"Promise," I said, and returned to my dinner.

AT THE BACK of my horror, there was a certain comfort. Even if she wasn't herself, spent her time high or sleeping or belittling me, Norah had brought a semblance of life back into the house, the calming presence of someone in the other room. She'd brought me purpose, too, even if it shamed me. Within a week of her return, I'd made her routine part of my own: Wake, breakfast, gym, home, Norah, work, lunch, home, Norah, work, home, run, dinner, Norah, sleep.

Sometimes I could supervise, Narcan at the ready, and sometimes Norah needed me hands-on. She didn't want to overuse the same vein, so would alternate arms. Injecting with her weak arm, she'd ask for help. I'd spent over an hour rewatching a harm reduction video from a nonprofit in Seattle: *How to Safely Inject for Another*. "Better it enters the vein than infects the muscle," a line I repeated.

The whole arrangement was my idea, after tough love had failed, had left her in a hospital bed in Orono, milligrams from death and still refusing treatment. She could live with me and use, I offered, under my care, on a set schedule and fixed amount of heroin. In exchange, no phone or Internet, and no leaving the house until she was ready for her next rehab. I was trying a new kind of tough love: not distant but present, not withholding but withstanding. Her rock before rock bottom, I thought at the time. She readily accepted.

With Norah home, despite how she spent her days, I couldn't help but remember her as a child. Memories came to me, unbidden. While her head lolled along the spine of the couch, I'd remember years back, to when she'd come home from school and nap in the living room. When it was time to study, I'd whisper her name, jostle her, rip off her blanket. I could tell when she was awake, but she'd lie there, still and curled, pretending, only getting up when I tickled her feet, which made her kick. Sometimes her heels would connect with my arms and leave perfect round bruises, and while she was at soccer practice or while I lay in bed at night reviewing the day, I'd press on those bruises with sharp affection.



AS I FINISHED my dinner, my phone chirped a reminder to proofread the eulogy Ann Womack, a science teacher at my school, had written for her son and sent me that morning. I switched my phone to silent, moved to the couch, and sat beside Norah, no longer present, letting our legs touch. She pressed into me with a sigh. Her pink shirt had caught on a cushion and I pulled it down to cover her side, knowing she wouldn't wake. Her face had flushed red, her body was pale and scabbed. I took a tube of antibiotic ointment from her kit, then took her arm, lifeless in her lap, and used my thumb to swirl a drop over her track marks.

When there was nothing else to do for her, I allowed myself to lose myself. Half-embodied, I scrolled through the TV, over and over, for the most mindless show I could find, settling on a marathon of *America's Funniest Home Videos*. I played cribbage on my phone and listened to easily frightened pets, faces forced into birthday cakes, a dock collapsed under the weight of a family photo. Grainy videos, timestamped from twenty years earlier.

An episode later, I could tell Norah was back, her breathing deeper, her eyes closed but moving. I watched her face react to the sound effects. Babies tripped, sleds crashed, the elderly tried to dance. A couple won \$10,000 for a video of a goose chasing their son across a muddy field. Norah smiled and shifted her head toward me. I held her fingers, smudged black. When she was a newborn and we were still afraid of how we could hurt her, Frick and I wouldn't use a nail clipper. We'd put her tiny fingers in our mouths and chew down her nails, licking her sleeve to remove the pink flecks we couldn't spit into the sink.

We sat there for hours, until the TV shut off from inactivity and I rose, draping Norah in a blanket. She pulled it to her chin, curled into it. In that moment, as wrong as our arrangement was, I could've kept her there forever, painless and suspended. As a new mother, I'd wake before her and only go to bed after her, whether or not Frick was up to watch over. I couldn't sleep knowing she was in the world without me.

I cleaned up my dishes then her supplies, folding her tourniquet and tucking it away, along with her torch, in the black leather bag. I threw out her filter, dropped her needle in our sharps box, placed her burnt measuring cup in the dishwasher, and, as always, felt a need to be forgiven.

I BROUGHT HER KIT to my bedroom, grabbed my laptop, and worked in the kitchen, sitting on the center island so that Norah was out of sight but could be seen through the doorway if I leaned to the side.

Because I ran the writing center at my school, helping students with their essays, and because my husband had overdosed and died, the staff at Sunrise Regional had taken to asking me for help with the obituaries they wanted to publish or the eulogies they had to deliver at their loved ones' memorials. Almost always, their loved ones had died from addiction, as Ann Womack's son had. She'd been the one to find him, which made me jealous, wishing I'd been the one to find Frick and cradle some life back into his body.

Skimming her eulogy, I focused on grammar and clarity. If I became too invested, cared too much about the details, which were always insufficient, I'd suffer. Most of them sounded the same: a long string of adjectives, a funny memory, a sweet memory, an accomplishment, a thoughtful quote, and a final acknowledgment, which was where Ann's eulogy surprised me. "Lastly," she'd written, "John and I would like to thank the Maine Detox Center for giving us the gift of more time. You gave us our son back. It may seem short, but those three months where Brandon was sober mean everything to us. We made memories I will cherish forever."

Leaning over, I checked on Norah, her mouth parting in soundless whispers. From that distance, she could have seemed nothing but tired. I'd pre-written parts of a eulogy for her, of course, had spent two years preparing to grieve her, remembering the phases she'd gone through to understand the person she'd been: a promising drawer, a jobseeker from an early age, a three-season athlete throughout high school though she was never a standout at sports, a driver's license on her fourth try. It always ended in frustration. Every attempt to describe her felt like a sad reduction, like in the eulogies I proofread, or else led me to ask, with no clear answer, where things had gone wrong. We lived in a home wilderness, my daughter and me, miserable but lucky, waiting for her to change or else leave again without word.

THAT NIGHT, I created a spreadsheet of treatment centers in the area, starting with the Maine Detox Center, and each night after, once Norah was set up, I'd add to it, falling deeper into websites, increasing my search radius, inputting insurance, researching doctor credentials. I started with columns for distance, cost after coverage, and contact

info, then added columns for length of stay and treatment method. Eventually, I developed a ranking system, awarding points for longer stays, medically assisted treatments, and transparency. I didn't factor in testimonials, which I assumed were written at the end of treatment, before patients had left and been tempted to relapse.

At times, the thought that I was doing something gave me the belief that my arrangement with Norah could work. At other times, I couldn't stand how great my suffering felt, and I'd decide our arrangement was doomed to fail, that she'd get bored or her tolerance would become unmanageable or we'd buy a batch of heroin cut with something stronger. At the heart of it all was a nagging unknown: What was my daughter going through? What couldn't she beat? I got stuck on the thought.

One night, two months after Norah came home, I brought a spoon to my room, unlocked the safe, untied a balloon, this one blue, and took a small scoop of the white powder inside. I flicked the lighter and held my breath.

The flame cupped the spoon.

Dark smoke rose.

I closed my eyes, lowered into it, stayed there until my lungs started to vibrate and burn, then let off the lighter, dropped the spoon, took a desperate breath, and forced myself on a second run, another five miles, striking the pavement like it was a form of penance.

In the shower that night, head tucked, beat of water striking knots in my neck, I washed in a hurry. My beliefs swerved moment to moment back then, which is why I took shorter and shorter showers. In part to be available for Norah, but more than that, I didn't want the chance to think, wanted my mind tethered. Still, as I rinsed shampoo from my hair, my thoughts wandered into crisis. We'd made it another day, but how many more before she chose real help? And how many more before I broke? I'd come close hours earlier. And what would real help even look like? And who was I to think I could help her, to feel sainted by my sacrifices, when she hadn't asked me to make them, when I was only keeping her alive to die slowly? I turned off the water, suds still in my hair, and thought about shaving my head.