

"I fucked up."

Iris is suddenly disgusted and suddenly flushed by the cat-urine smell emanating from the growing mustard cloud around Duke. Iris mumbles, "I need some air!" and pushes out past Jeanne. Duke is once again oblivious to the scene, now re-engrossed in his concoction, and uncapping a bottle of Sudafed.

Too nauseous and bleary-eyed to notice Frank, who is propped up on the stoop massaging a bottle and a leg, Iris emerges from the house and heads to the corner of the porch to vomit into the rose bushes. A train rumbles through the town loudly shaking old Mardi Gras beads from the trees and the gutters of houses.

? ? ?

The rattling of the purple and green beads hanging from the branches of the withered oak outside Duke's is almost beautiful, muses Frank as Iris brushes past. It is a pity the tree is dying and its bark is peeling off and the leaves are unnaturally missing. The vapors and chemical wastes from inside must play hell with the poor thing.

Iris heads to a bush and, even sick and unsure, she is beautiful and graceful in the moonlight. Like a wounded heron escaping a gator's snapping jaws.

"I am clever," thinks Frank, "But I have my limits. Human limits. It's goddamned dicey at times. Here goes nothing." And with a painful push, heart on sleeve, he is up and over attending to nauseous Iris.

? ? ?

"It's not like the Tractor-lady said," Iris snorts as Frank hobbles over to attempt to support her and pull her red-locks out of her face.

"It never is." Frank sighs and smiles back, as if he knows who or what she is talking about.

"Maybe he does know at that," she thinks to herself, tearing. He looks good-natured, she thinks, despite a great many teeth. A lot more teeth than the average in this cranked-out burg anyway. And he only grins a little wider seeing her look.

He guides her back to the stoop where she weakly plops down as he heads back to his own perch.

"No. Don't trust the Tractor-lady. Of course, that depends a good deal on whoever the hell she is and what she says, I imagine."

"I don't much care and it doesn't matter, Frank." Iris adds as an explanation.

On second thought, Frank returns to her side to wipe her eyes with his sleeve before collapsing back in his nook, "Oh, I'm sure. All anyone should do is avoid the meanness and embrace anything good and human and nice. Everyone around here wants to get us to accept the ugly and bad and settle for what is left."

"I just thought that Woodrow would be here. I mean what sort of people—"

Frank bristles at the name, and waves it away "Yes, well. Or, perhaps, I was wrong. Perhaps, there is no niceness. Never was. It's madness."

"Frank, I don't want you to go just now."

"Oh, you can't help that. Don't be sad."

"How do you know I'm sad?"

"You must be. Or you wouldn't be talking to me. That's proof enough to begin with, I suppose," he growls softly.

She purrs back.

"Say what you like, Frank, I just wish we could just sit here all night out on the stoop and watch the sun rise."

"Naw, I'd rather we go sit in the tub and watch the bathroom sink."

"I should like it very much."

"Then, you'll see me there." Iris is not much surprised at this, she is getting so used to his jokes.