

Frankie's Demons
By Myers Reece

The night had obviously gone wrong, but what exactly happened? Frankie awoke with terrifying visions of a flabby shirtless man stumbling to the corner Mini Mart. In the dim glow of neglected streetlights, the walrus man had at first looked like an apparition, but as he stepped farther into the light he began to look more and more, disturbingly, like a giant turnip, rolling to some uncertain fate. But beyond the cryptic turnip ghost, Frankie remembered nothing.

"I'll find answers!" he shouted in his empty apartment, before throwing on moccasins, his weekly pair of jeans, the best-smelling shirt of the pile and his favorite coonskin cap.

He would avoid his parents as long as possible today. That much was clear. They wouldn't know how to solve the mysteries of his evening anyway, unless he had made it into the newspaper. Had he? Frankie ducked into a coffee shop to steal a newspaper, avoiding eye contact with patrons and staff. No doubt they were judging his coonskin cap. They *always* judge his coonskin cap. A quick glance of the newspaper rendered no evidence of the evening, which was good, because it would have been evidence of a crime.

The coonskin cap had gained notoriety within the community following one of Frankie's more substantial meltdowns, which did make the newspaper. He had escaped out the window of a locked room at a party, where he was under surveillance for severe alcohol consumption and general volatility. Frightened neighbors would later report seeing him weave through their yards, shedding clothing. One man submitted ketchup-stained sweatpants as forensic evidence. And by the time he passed by poor old Fran Brown's house, he wore nothing but the coonskin cap.

After Fran called the authorities, police tracked him down at a venerable local institution for veterans, the Eagles Bar, where he stood outside naked demanding to speak to the Eagle. He proved self-aware enough to describe the phenomenon of penis shrinkage to a baffled female officer. When he would point this out later, to highlight his composure during a traumatic moment, people agreed that self-awareness was the point, but not the point he was trying to make.

On this morning, with alcohol still surging through his bloodstream, Frankie decided without any apparent reason that his first stop would be Tom's house. After he rang the doorbell, he heard someone come to the door, followed by frantic whispering and a pause. Then Tom opened the door.

"Hello, brother-in-law," Frankie said.

"Are you still calling me that?"

"We don't stop being family just because of a few troubles."

"We never were family, Frankie. You dated my sister for, what, three weeks. Maybe a month?"

"Semantics, Tom. You've always been a man of ruthlessly precise semantics."

"What do you need this morning, Frankie?"

"Answers. I need answers, Tom."

"Answers to what?" Tom glanced nervously back inside.

“Are you shielding the family from me?” Frankie asked.

“If you’re still drunk, which it looks like you are, they don’t need to see you.”

“Fair enough. Step outside then.”

Tom closed the door behind him and the two men stood on the front porch. They were peers only in age. Tom had climbed much farther up the life ladder, as Frankie called it, while Frankie could hardly get past the teenage rung even though he was 33.

“I don’t want to push my troubles on you, Tom, but I need to figure out what happened last night, so if necessary I can properly defend myself against the authorities, whether they be police or parents or girlfriends.”

“What did you do?”

“That’s what I’m asking you.”

“How should I know? I didn’t see you last night.”

“Okay then. I can check you off the list of possible witnesses. See, that was helpful.”

“Did you hear that you did something bad?”

“I’ve heard nothing. I’ve seen nothing. I can only operate on intuition. I’m guided by that hunch that bubbles up after a black, boozy night to tell you things aren’t right. You know, that inescapable feeling that you’ve fucked up.”

“I haven’t gotten that feeling since the last time I hung out with you.”

“Precisely. So you know what I’m talking about.”

“I’m sorry, Frankie, I need to have breakfast with the family. Good luck on your search. I’ll let you know if I hear anything.”

“Thank you. Tell your family hi, or don’t if it will frighten them. Godspeed.”

Following the major coonskin incident, and other minor ones, Frankie had heard a great many words tossed around town, words meant to categorize and point fingers, words like “asshole” and “drunk” and “bat shit crazy.” One night at a typically uneasy family dinner, he had paraphrased an ancient proverb by shouting, “Sticks and stones! Your words are futile! I am a man of bones!”

The words that stuck with him most, however, were from someone he couldn’t specifically remember, though he had a vague feeling the words meant something. That forgotten person had said, “He’s so smart, but he has demons.” What were these demons? He pictured tiny gremlin-devil-muppets feeding on his brain, or maybe even his soul. Or were they less tangible? Were they childhood traumas festering inside him? Were those the demons this forgotten person spoke of? Frankie had once taken an alarming amount of LSD and come to believe, in a moment of sweaty terror, that his legs no longer functioned. Confronted with his new legless fate, he shrieked, “You demons, give me back my legs!” But those demons seemed like something altogether different than the ones the forgotten person had mentioned.

Whether the demons were gremlin-devil-muppets or childhood traumas – he was beginning to believe they were the latter, though he could only envision them as the former – Frankie had learned he could drown them with booze. He would consciously envision a flood, greater than Noah’s, of liquor and beer careening off the walls of his throat, and then rushing without discretion to the

dangerous recesses of his brain and bladder. Despite the inherent self-damage, he knew the demons had no chance of surviving such a flood. He had never discussed his flood theory with anyone, but it was front and center in his mind when he began drinking the previous evening. Maybe he had told someone about his theory. Maybe the evening's answers lay in those demon discussions. Maybe Tess held the answers. It suddenly occurred to Frankie that Tess had told him about these demons many years ago, but he couldn't grasp their possible existence without assigning them physical forms, which he was only able to do recently with the gremlin-devil-muppets.

When Frankie arrived at the dumpy boutique clothing store where Tess worked, she conducted her usual routine of rolling her eyes and immediately pretending she was engaged in a thoughtful text message conversation. Of all his ex-girlfriends, she had the cruelest routines.

"I won't bother you for long," Frankie said, "but I'm wondering if you saw me last night or heard anything about me?"

"Why don't you ask Haley or Ann? Or maybe Brandi? I'm sure you saw one of them last night."

"I understand your exasperation. I always have. But I'm going through a period of powerful and unnerving self-reflection, and I just need some answers. Namely, I'd like to know what happened last night because I think it might offer important insight that I can use on this taxing journey of self-discovery."

"Here's some insight: you're a piece of shit."

"It's true, I am a man of great desire and great flaws. But can you please just help me out?"

"I didn't see you last night, thankfully, and I've heard nothing about your night, thankfully."

A customer opened the front door and let in a gust that caused the coonskin tail to flutter, brushing softly against the back of Frankie's neck. He giggled. Tess abruptly turned away and stormed off toward an employees only room, no doubt mistaking Frankie's sudden levity for something more sinister than a tail tickle.

Frankie left the clothing store with the creeping understanding that he wouldn't find the answers, at least not these specific answers. Some things, including evenings, are never meant to be recovered. But had he not been taking bold steps forward on this nebulous path to self-discovery, a path that he believed might eventually lead to self-improvement? Was the previous evening a setback or just a sidestep? What exactly had happened? Frankie felt panicky: these questions swirled inside him with the same gnawing uneasiness as the forces he had come to identify as the demons. Should he drown them? He sat down on a park bench to consider.

Frankie then realized, through a mechanism he recognized as clear thinking, that nothing good would come of unleashing another demon flood. Demon floods were always strategy number one when confronting the mean little bastards. So he had to resort to strategy number two: running. He could run somewhere far more beautiful and forgiving, somewhere where he would find answers, somewhere where he would be understood and maybe even accepted. Those somewheres existed, he was sure. He could see them and feel them and

almost smell them. If he could just get there, he could postpone the demon flood for another day.

So he closed his eyes and began the journey, with his coonskin tail flapping in the wind and splinters from the park bench digging into his butt. He would find those lands of warmth and embrace, those fertile valleys beyond the jagged peaks, those hills of mercy where childhood traumas were not demons but only ghosts, those places, so distant yet so close, all right there inside his head.