

UNTIL FRANK YAKOBOVITCH

I have seen unspeakable things in my life: husbands emasculated by jealous wives; an eight-year-old girl disembowelled by a butcher; a man excoriated by a wacko who believed his victim to be the reincarnation of Saint Bartholomew.

Horrific. Shocking.

Each case I knew there was a reason, an explanation. If the detectives couldn't find it, I could. Always.

Until FrankYakobovitch.

"We ready, Frank?"

"Sure, Doc."

I have never liked this windowless interview room with its naked bulbs, rough concrete floor and cold grey walls that reek of lies and evasion. This room breaks men; renders them a malleable lump of humanity. Even the hardest have a seed of guilt buried deep within them unless insanity has rotted it away. In here, most times all you have to do is keep digging.

Most times.

Across the scrubbed table from me Frank leans back in his chair, hands in pockets. Sharply-dressed in a dark blue suit and white open-necked shirt, he looks every inch the successful financier he is. Bright-eyed, a look of utter serenity on his youthful face, Frank gives the impression of a man contented with life; the lawyer next to him looks guiltier.

That he performed his horrendous act is not in dispute. Once their trauma evaporated, the two witnesses who hid from the spray of bullets from Frank's twin Beretta 93Rs had little difficulty in identifying the smiling man who calmly sought to incinerate them. Frank never once tried to deny it. To the contrary, he cheerfully admits the work was all his own.

Insane? Possibly. That's why they brought me in. Mel Baxter, the woman who always mines the answers, whose judgment is beyond argument.

Do your job, Baxter. But remember, no way is this guy gonna avoid the chair.

I reminded them I play it straight, won't be pressured.

Sure, sure, Baxter, we got that. Just don't take too long, huh?

The first time we talked I expected Frank to throw the usual curve ball, become another person, cloak himself in a mantle of lies, falsehoods tumbling from his lips like coins from a vandalized vending machine. Instead, he told me about his mother and father, Jewish immigrants from Queens who worked hard to give their son a good education. His life: Princeton; first job Goldman Sachs; marriage to childhood sweetheart, Greta, now a

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successful lingerie model; only child Tobias, fifteen. His achievements: mansion in Boston; six-bed vacation home in Kissimmee; CEO of Five Star Investments, doing great, 20 percent year on year growth.

All verifiable.

The American dream made real.

This guy would be no pushover. Early on I decided my strategy: better to tread with care around a black hole than be sucked straight in.

He asked me about my life. I gave him some answers, sidestepped the probing about my past, my relationships.

Second time, I teetered on the edge of that black hole. Asked him why NY? Why had he come back here?

“They were here,” he said. “People I owed.”

I figured Frank’s motivation might be ethnic, maybe religious. The whole damned country saw jihadists in every dark-skinned face.

“Revenge for 9/11, Frank?” I ventured.

“Too obvious, Doc.”

“The Riyadh compound, perhaps?”

“Not even close.”

“Like to tell me?”

“Like to guess?”

So it went on. Jab. Block. Jab. Block. At the end of the session I was on the ropes. Frank grinned at me, his mind fitter, leaner.

OK, Baxter, your conclusion? The guy’s sane, yeah?

They blew a fuse when I said it was inconclusive, that I needed more time.

We told you time ain’t somethin’ we got much of, Baxter. Folks wanna hear this guy sizzle.

So here we are once more, in this room that has failed so far to reveal the nature of the mind that firebombed the Al Madrasa Al-Islamiyah School in Brooklyn.

We go though the customary foreplay. Then Frank leans forward, fixes me with his cornflower eyes and woodpeckers his temple with a forefinger. “You wanna tell them I’m messed up in here, Doc?”

I meet the stare. Say nothing.

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“You watch CNN? See the pieces on that Breivik guy? The Norwegian? The one they took down for bombing those government buildings and taking out those teenagers? You know what they said? They said the guy was sorry he hadn’t killed them all. He’d been planning it for two years. Two years and the dumb ass failed to achieve his objective.”

Seventy-seven dead, one hundred and fifty-one injured. Some failure.

Frank jabs his chest. “Not me, I don’t screw up.”

The lawyer’s hand settles on Frank’s arm. A warning.

I pull out a folder. “I thought we might take a look at these again, Frank.” I open the folder and spread the glossy photos on the table.

He leans forward, scrutinizes the images. The smile never leaves his face as he flips through the unimaginable, the unbelievable, the never-to-be-repeated-I-give-my-word hollow promise of Obama vaporized in a fireball that reduced childish flesh to ashes.

“Wow, great shots. The dude’s got real talent.” Frank picks one up, waves it at his lawyer. “Whaddaya think, Harv?”

The lawyer blanches, clamps the back of his fisted hand to his mouth.

Frank winks at me. “No appreciation.”

“Would you do it again, Frank? Kill innocent children?”

“You should have seen the flames, Doc. The way they danced against that grey sky. Awesome.”

I repeat the unanswered question, asked a hundred times by the detectives. “Why, Frank? Why did you do it?”

No answer, simply the grin.

I am inside the black hole, gyro wild, normality suspended.

Think of those poor moms and dads, Baxter. You have a child, don’t you? Your kid gets incinerated, some shrink decides wrongly and the perp gets life. How you gonna feel? Angry? Let down? You bet. You’re gonna raise hell, diss the system, make yourself a helluva nuisance. You hear what we’re saying, Baxter?

Frank whispers, “I hear you partnered up with a Jew, Doc? Aaron Greenberg, right?”

High voltage jerks my spine.

“How did you—”

“Rhino Greenberg and me, we go way back.”

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My God, he knows Rhino. Aaron rarely mentions his son who moved to Denver years ago. Rhino and I have never met, never once talked. When Aaron speaks of Rhino, pain writes itself on his face with deep, dark strokes. Strange, I have no compunction in plumbing the depths of homicidal maniacs but when it comes to making ripples on the mind of the man who stole my heart, I shy away.

“You were at school together, Frank?”

“Right through to tenth grade.”

“Friends?”

His mouth stretches in a tight line. The first time I have seen him without the grin. Could Rhino be a point of reference, a guiding light inside this inky blackness?

“Once.”

“You want to tell me about it?”

The lawyer’s hand is back on Frank’s arm.

“Take it off, Harv. She wants to know, so I’m gonna tell her.”

“Tell me what, Frank?”

“Rhino and me, we used to hang out together, real close, closer than brothers. Then one day Maria breezed into our lives. Yeah, sweet, shy, Maria Pelligrini. We got suckered, both of us hungered for her, but Maria’s big brown eyes had no time for fifteen-year-old kids. No, Maria wasn’t interested in no kids. And she wasn’t shy, neither. Maria liked men with money, fancy cars, jewels, and she knew how to get them. You follow me?”

The room temperature remains constant, yet a shiver ripples through my body.

“You ever wonder why Rhino went to Denver, huh? Why he don’t speak to his daddy, the daddy who made it big? No? Never asked Aaron why Moya left him?”

I try to block out the thought that nags me, the unwanted image straining to focus.

“Do I have to paint a picture, Doc?” He lays his palm on the photos spread on the table. “I like pictures.”

The lawyer’s back stiffens and his gaze flits between Frank and me. From the feral look I know what he is thinking.

Clever Frank.

The light shines brightly now, but it is a treacherous light, one guaranteed to lure me into oblivion. Aaron and I have been living together for almost two years. Why don’t we ever talk about Moya? Wouldn’t it be natural, to share our past, good and bad? Shouldn’t I be curious

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as to why Aaron's relations with his family are so sour? But my bitter divorce from Dean had shorn me of curiosity. Curiosity was an evil agent that poisoned our marriage.

"You gonna give them boys what they want, Doc?"

I am faced with a binary choice, no qualification, no caveat. Insane/sane, life/death, Aaron/solitude.

For the sake of society I am obliged to state my conclusion. No one will argue with me, I am the best there is. Let the lawyer think what he likes, I am not the accused here. When this interview finishes, I will climb in my Mercedes, drive my way home through the stewing heat of a New York day, explain to Aaron, holding back the tears, that I am leaving, no reason, don't take it personally, I just have to go.

Frank's eyebrows rise. "Well?"

"Goodbye, Frank, I don't think we'll be meeting again."

I scrape the photos from the table, rush from the room, bile rising in my throat.

You made up your mind, Baxter?

Sane, I tell them. Sane. Sane. Sane. Old Smokey won't be cheated after all.

People will love me for this. The immediate future holds a headline:

MEL BAXTER, THE SHRINK WHO PUT AWAY
FRANK YAKOBOVITCH, CHILD-MURDERER.

There will be celebrations in Homicide, in homes, in bars: a paragraph in the history books. Later, but not much later, no one will recall the middle-aged woman, broken-hearted, ravaged by guilt who retired without warning and simply vanished from society.