

The morning came like any other autumnal morning in Ottawa, Canada. The trees outside of Frank Geron's window offered a palette of dark reds, brilliant yellows, and burnt oranges interlaced with the blacks of limbs and some greens where the leaves of summer hadn't yet changed to the colors that presaged their deaths.

Frank, a resident of The Valley, an assisted living facility for seniors, decided that day he'd decamp for home, back to New York where he belonged. This decision was not a "spur of the moment" thing. Frank realized The Valley wasn't going to be the place for him the very first time he saw it from the roadway; even before Thomas, his son, drove up the U shaped driveway and stopped in front of the door, already opened by a smiling man wearing a black suit, a white shirt and a green tie with small yellow circles on it. The building resembled a small hotel, or perhaps an exclusive country club. From that seminal moment, Frank began to plan his escape. It took him three months to think through all of the details, and convince the staff and the other residents that he was happy in his new surroundings and experienced hardly any trauma as a result of his move from New York to Canada and The Valley. But he was a consummate actor and they were willing to believe whatever he told them because he knew what they wanted to hear.

Frank's going to live in Canada was an agreement between him and his son if Laura, his wife, predeceased him long before her actual death in late spring. Living close to Thomas provided him with some measure of security with regard to his father's wellbeing. He would have his meals on time, medical care when he needed it and pleasant surroundings in which to live out the rest of his life. Frank was grateful for his son's thought-fullness. He was all too aware that sons and daughters abandoned their aging parents to the mercy of strangers or badly managed old age homes that were nothing more than "holding pens" for the aged until death claimed them. But his son's concern for him didn't outweigh the reality of the situation in which he placed him. It was the daily routine of the place that finally got to him.

For most of his life, he had been a free-lance author. Time was something he dealt with in his own way. He seldom wore a watch. If he was into what he was writing, he would work at it until he was too exhausted to continue. That was his way and Laura accepted it. "Routine," he would say, "was good for some people, but he wasn't one of them." Life, he maintained, should be full of surprises; so that on Wednesday you didn't always have meatloaf for dinner. But institutions needed to regiment the lives of those who either worked in them or, like him, were committed to them for having lived long enough to become worrisome to their children.

Since there weren't any fences or a security kiosk at the entrance to the driveway and the residents were free to walk around the grounds or even to the town, less than a half a mile from The Valley, no one would suspect he'd decamped until lunch when his place at the table he shared with three other residents two women: Sally and Tina, and one man, Gilbert, would be empty. But by that time, he would be on a train bound for Montreal and there he'd switch to the train that would take to the Grand Central Station in New York and cab back to his apartment. Actually, it once had been two apartments: a one bedroom deal and a two bedroom space. But he had the walls removed between them and used what had been the smaller one as his studio. In a rental building, he had been the only one who actually owned his apartment. And as far as he knew, he still owned it because Thomas, who managed his finances, never mentioned anything that remotely suggested selling it or it had been sold.

At breakfast, Frank was his usual smiling self, taking part in the tiresome conversation about the weather and the "gorgeous colors" of the various trees and other botanicals that surrounded The Valley's building. He never told anyone that he was an author, not even the staff member who had interviewed him when first arrived... He determinedly hid who and what he had been from the staff and the residents alike. Whatever they knew about his life was a fabrication, even Thomas, who was

present at the initial interviews was taken aback when Frank told the interviewer that he was salesman for a toy company for most of his adult life. And when it came to his service record, even though he didn't serve in the Canadian Army, he never mentioned his service the United States Marine Corps during the Korean War, and the several awards that were given to him for outstanding bravery under enemy fire. None of it was any of their business; besides, when it came time for him to "make his getaway," the less they knew about him the more difficult it would be for them to track him before they became hysterical and phoned his son to notify him that his father had "skipped town," so to speak.

After breakfast he announced that he intended to walk into town to buy a shaving cream and few other items he needed. Gilbert offered to accompany him. Frank assured that he wasn't in need of company and that he'd only be away a short time. It was a narrow escape. He had to be at the train station by ten thirty. It was already nine-fifteen. Having walked the distance between The Valley and the train station many times at moderate pace, he knew that he would arrive at the station with fifteen minutes to spare before the train came, time enough to go to the locker where he'd previously secreted a small innocuous blue duffel bag with two changes of underwear, and pair of jeans, two pairs of socks, a sweater and a light jacket. Once he was settled in his old apartment, he would purchase what he needed for the winter. He had several credit cards and eight thousand dollars in cash which he had withdrawn from his own account before moving to Canada.

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Because he was nervous, his pace was quicker than it had been during his dry runs to the station giving him more time to get his duffel bag out of the locker and then to sit on a wooden bench to wait for the train. The additional time increased his anxiety. Someone from The Valley might walk into the station, recognize him, and that would cause him to abort his escape and come up with the plausible reason for being there with a duffel bag filled with clothing. That possibility had occurred to him before because he gave himself a margin of only four minutes between getting his duffel bag out of the locker and boarding, buying the necessary ticket and the train. But because he'd quickened his pace, he already had purchased his ticket and was forced to wait. The situation caused his heart to race; and though it was cool in the waiting room, he could feel the beads of perspiration slid down his back.

This was his most adventurous undertaking in years. Ordinarily, he lived the quiet life of a retiree; something, his son said he deserved. *Deserved*, he thought ought to be stricken from the language. No one deserved anything as far as he was concerned. *Earned* was far more to his liking, and even that word didn't in any manner way or form explain the hours of boredom concealed within it.

He was one of the lucky few, a successful author and screenplay writer who wrote under the pseudonym of Ken White because he eschewed any sort of notoriety, even to avoiding attending the various functions that honored his work lest he betray his real identity. Only his agent, Steven Jarvis knew who he really was. The money he earned put him in the millionaire category. He'd had "a good run" as he told his son when he realized that his time was over, that what Hollywood and the Indies wanted were not in the well of his imagination, and the same condition existed in publishing. The only writing he presently did was to make entries in his journal; and those were, at best, desultory.

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Frank looked at the large clock on the wall opposite from where he sat. There was still ten minutes to wait before the train arrived assuming it would be on time. Depending on how he defined they could feel excruciatingly longer or shorter. A jet flying at six hundred miles an hour would travel sixty miles, as distance that would be passed the border between Canada and the United States. Or,

if he was making love to a woman, not that it was possible anymore and hadn't been possible years before his wife had died, ten minutes could feel like an exquisite eternity or an ineffable momentary explosion pleasure.

Suddenly Frank smiled; not a big smile, as if his rictus muscles and not his brain remembered the previous time he ran away, made his escape from his family and became "a runaway." Sixteen and on his own all the way to California. Hitchhiking, riding the rails, working as dishwasher when he ran out of money and sometimes taking a bus when he had the money to do it. So many adventures, being picked up by a woman and her daughter and sleeping with both of them at different times, almost having his head crushed by car. Never knowing or caring what the next day would bring. Returning home three months after he'd left to be ostracized by his sister Roslyn and be called a bum; and was told by his father that he was on his own, he would get nothing from him.

He heard the sound of the train's horn as it neared the station and was ready to stand and walk to the gate. In a matter of minutes, he would be boarding it and on his way to -- He felt himself tightening up. Every muscle in his body seemed to constrict. Where was he going? Back to New York. What would he do there? What he was doing where he was. But he'd be totally alone. All of his former friends were either dead or living in Florida. He was caught in a sudden frisson of fear.

The train arrived and the gate to the platform was opened.

Frank looked to his right and left, though he didn't know what he hoped to see. A friendly face maybe. He clutched his small duffel bag to his chest. And then it was over, his body sagged. He sat on the bench again. He felt the tears skid down his cheeks. He was too old, too frail and too frightened to run anywhere. He needed the security that Happy Valley gave him though he hated the place and now he had reason to hate himself and his timidity.

He looked up at the clock on the wall. If he walked quickly he would still be in time for lunch.

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