

Slipping Away: Frank and Mattie

Jane Bowman

Mattie sits in a rocker knitting while Frank leans back in his old Lazyboy recliner and stares through glazed eyes at a 60-inch HDTV standing about five feet in front of them. Now overpowering the small living room in their small bungalow, the TV was a gift from the kids.

Frank sits up to get a closer look at the TV. He looks confused, but then a light seems to come on in his eyes.

“I know how this show ends. That guy there, he gets killed—shot, I think. Have we seen this before?” says Frank.

“Yes, Frank,” says Mattie. “You know these are summer reruns.” Mattie doesn’t lift her head from her knitting.

“Well, when the he...um heck did that happen?” Frank frowns and slides a sly look at his wife of 55 years.

“Frank, you’re doing better, but that swear jar is going to fill up fast if you keep slipping. It’s May, Frank. The TV season is over sometime in March or early April.” Mattie lifts the tiny jacket and counts rows of knitting. Sure enough, on TV, “that guy” gets shot and apparently “bites the dust.” He lies there and doesn’t seem to be breathing.

“Well, I’m going to bed. Are you coming?” Frank gets up and walks to the front door and opens it.

“Frank, that’s the front door,” says Mattie and points to the stairs.

“Oh yeah,” chuckles Frank and climbs to the landing. He pauses, looks at Mattie, and says, “I’m going to bed. Are you coming?”

“I’d like to finish this sleeve,” says Mattie as she holds up the small garment. “It’s for Elyse’s baby.”

“Who’s Elyse?”

“She’s Naomi’s daughter, she’s having a baby.”

“Who’s Naomi?”

“She’s your sister, Frank?”

“Naomi’s having a baby?”

“No, Frank, Naomi’s daughter, Elyse. It’s her first, and she’s not that young. I think she may be 42.”

Frank looks up the stairs. “I’m going to bed. You coming?”

“Well, I need to water Snuffy.” She leans down to scratch the head of Snuffy, a little Yorkshire Terrier sitting beside her rocker.

“Damned worthless dog,” grumbles Frank.

“Frank Johnson, that’s a dollar in the swear jar. And add 50 cents for the almost-swear earlier.”

Frank climbs back down and digs in his pocket for money. “What’s this jar for?”

“We’re supposed to go to Hawaii for our 60th wedding anniversary.”

“Gonna need more than this jar of money.”

“Well, I have faith in you, Frank. And at least, I’ll get to go.”

“You’d go without me?”

Mattie gives him a rueful look over the top of her glasses.

Frank strolls to the stairs and looks up them. He seems to be thinking very hard, and then says, “I’m going to bed. Are you coming?” He pauses.

“Your name’s Mattie? What’s that stand for?”

“It stands for Matilda.”

“And we’re married? How’d that start?”

“Well, I’d say in the back seat of Bill Fuller’s ’49 Mercury.”

“Old Bill, wonder where he is now?”

“Believe he’s been gone about 30 years now.”

“Where’d he go?”

“Now that’s a good question.”

“He was a he...heck of a guy.”

“Frank, the swear jar! No, that can wait.” Mattie sighs and looks back at her knitting.

Frank stands on the landing looking at his feet. “I’m going to bed. Are you coming?”

Mattie puts down her knitting; turns off the lamp and the TV. The room turns inky dark.

“Turn on the stairs’ light. It’s right behind you.”

“Where are you?” Frank’s voice is querulous.

“Right behind you, Frank. Turn on the light.” She hugs Frank and gently pushes him up the stairs.

Snuffy jumps onto the rocker and settles down in Mattie’s warm spot.