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**M**y mother and her madness nearly killed us all one dark and gray winter morning. It was just after five a.m. and I was peacefully lying in bed. In a few short hours, Dad and I were going to take Mom back up to Philadelphia. I knew that wasn't going to be easy. Lots of times over the last four or five years, we've had to resort to this, in order to buy ourselves a few weeks or months of sanity—an escape from living with her Dissociative Identity Personality Disorder.

Mom always fought the idea of going to stay with her family in Philly, but this time my father was adamant. Dad felt a heightened sense of urgency about getting her out of the house. He wanted my mother's oldest sister to watch her for a few days, while he worked on making the necessary arrangements to have Mom readmitted to the Institute of Mental Health. Dad's desire, his need to make all of this happen *now*, was because of what he discovered yesterday morning. My father was in the master bathroom of our two-story, twelve-year-old, contemporary home, when he noticed that one of the fishing magazines, he usually kept next to the toilet, had a lump in it. It looked like something was stuck in between the pages. When he picked it up and opened to that page, what he found inside was a large pointed fillet knife. Unsure as to why the knife seemed to be hidden, he brought it into the bedroom, where he found my mother. "Ann," he said, showing her the blade. "What's this doing in the bathroom?"

**A**nn is my mother. She is fifty years old with olive skin, soft hazel eyes, and short salt-and-pepper hair. Sadly, Mom has the look and feel of a lost soul unable to move beyond her childhood, and incapable of admitting she needs help. Sitting on the edge of the bed, in clothes she has worn for the last three days, my mother became anxious when Dad showed her the knife, pushing for an answer as to why it was in the bathroom. Stammering at first, she blurted out, "I...was...using it to clean the tile in the shower. The grout needed to be scraped, so I brought it upstairs." Dad knew she was lying because Mom hadn't cleaned anything in years—but he decided to play along. "Then why was it hidden between the pages of the magazine?"

"Oh, I...um..."

"Ann, tell me the truth," he demanded. "Why was the knife in the magazine?"

His insistence on knowing the real reason for why it was hidden brought on crying. Mom soon agreed that the cleaning story wasn't true. She dropped her chin to her chest and tearfully told her husband of nearly twenty-two years, "I brought the knife upstairs to use on myself."

Upon hearing that, Dad lightened his tone and moved to comfort her. After all, it was just eighteen months ago when Mom attempted suicide. She drank half a bottle of carpet cleaner, swallowed a handful of aspirin, and stabbed herself in the stomach with a butcher knife.



**M**y father, Frank, is forty-seven years old and looks like he belongs in the middle of *The Godfather*. With his European hairline, pencil-thin mustache, broken nose, olive skin, and broad shoulders, he is a younger version of Marlon Brandon's *Vito Corleone*. When we were growing up, our friends used to tease my brothers and me about having a father in the Mafia because he looked the part so well.

Dad was "old school," a man's man, full of confidence and swagger, loaded with integrity, poise, and gifted with a silky smooth singing voice. If we lived in a different part of the country, our friends' needling wouldn't have meant much. But everyone knew the Mafia ran Atlantic City in the 1980's, and my father stood out in our small suburban town like an Italian sore thumb.

*Frankie the Voice* was the nickname my friends came up with to describe Dad's sinister Mob look. Though he was the most affectionate and supportive father any son could ask for, at times, he brandished a no-nonsense edge thanks to his ten years in the Army Reserves. When that edge was combined with his signature dark sunglasses, popped collar and black leather jacket, Dad looked like the Boss of Bosses, or *il capo di tutti capi*.

The Mafiosi who ran Atlantic City were really Philadelphia gangsters who had migrated southeast, and lived on Georgia Avenue in the Little Italy section of the East Coast Gaming Capital. They were Italian. They were infamous, and just like my father, some of them were concrete contractors by day, in the up and coming casino town. This only seemed to heighten the Mafia mystique Dad so often projected.

Even though he looked like a Made Man and was cavalier about hanging-out in the Mob's clubs and bars, Dad knew never to get involved with them—for his drive, his hunger, his *purpose* was his family.

My mother, my two brothers and I were why he worked so hard to become a success in the concrete business.

**I**t was because of this bravado he embodied—this aura of southern Italian machismo—that I was so startled to hear him scream from his room down the hall. Lying half-awake in my bed under the covers, on that dark and gray winter morning, three words pierced my soul as Dad screamed, "*Oh God, no!*" Each syllable laced with the terrorizing realization that *Frankie the Voice* was about to die.

At any other time, if my brothers or I screamed like that, Dad would come running to save the day. Once, when a burglar attempted to enter our house, my brother, Tony, saw him and shouted, "*Dad! Dad! Someone's trying to break in!*" My father leapt out of bed—completely naked—grabbed our Louisville Slugger, and chased the man through our massive backyard. Dad was hollering and screaming, and scaring the shit out of the would-be intruder—but that was then.

On this day, my father awoke to find that my mother wasn't in bed. Often, she chose to sleep fully-clothed on the floor in the den downstairs, but this time was different. Dad knew Mom had been in bed with him last night, and that she was normally a late sleeper. This is why he was so surprised to wake-up and find that he was alone at five a.m.

From bed, he heard noises downstairs. It sounded like the opening and closing of drawers. The thought occurred to him that she might be searching for a knife in the kitchen, but he remained under the covers, half asleep.

Dad didn't fall asleep until three-thirty a.m. He was uneasy since finding the knife in the fishing magazine, and tried to stay awake until dawn, so as to keep a close eye on Mom, but fatigue got the best of him.

Shortly after he heard her rummaging through the drawers in the kitchen, Mom appeared at the top of the stairs. She was wearing what she always wore to bed—dirty panties, and a filthy button down dress

shirt. But for some reason, my mother lingered at the top of the stairs mesmerized by a black and gold crucifix hanging on the wall outside my parents' bedroom.

From bed, my father could see her through the doorway. Not wanting to wake my brothers or me down the hallway, he softly called to her, "Ann, what are you doing?"

She didn't answer. Instead, Mom walked ever so slowly into their dark bedroom. Making her way across the foot of the bed, she stopped at the window overlooking the meadows, and glared at the glittering Atlantic City skyline in the distance.

"Frank," she said, "I don't wanna go back up to Philly."

My father took a deep breath, and tried to gather his thoughts. Before he could respond, Mom turned and walked across the room. Stopping at the bureau, she eerily turned over several framed baby pictures of my brothers and me; it was like she didn't want us to see what she was about to do. After finishing with the photos, Mom slowly made her way to her side of the bed. My father rolled to his right and slightly propped himself up onto his elbow. He softly said what he always said.

"Ann, you wouldn't have to go if you would just try to help yourself, but Philly seems to be the only answer right now."

All of this took place very calmly. Mom seemed like she knew what she was doing, and Dad was just too tired to make sense of what was going on; he could barely keep his eyes open. Yet, he noticed that Mom seemed to be holding a white, bunched up towel in front of her stomach. Struggling to focus his eyes in the dark, he soon realized that what he thought was a towel was actually one of Mom's sweaters. Thanks to the moonlight bleeding through the window behind him, Dad had a sense that Mom was using the sweater to hide something—but he didn't know what.

As the seconds ticked, in what seemed like slow motion, Mom leaned in towards him from across the bed. Dad thought she was coming closer in order to talk to him more intimately. Yet—in a flash—she dropped the sweater, causing the terrified sound of his ferocious scream to fill our house with those three fatal words, "*Oh God, no!*"

It was in that moment that I jumped out of my bed. I didn't even think; I just moved. I felt the adrenaline grow with each step as I raced down the hallway towards my parents' bedroom convinced that *Frankie the Voice* was about to die....