

SAM SHELSTAD  
**FRANK**

ALICE SAT WITH HER HANDS folded on the bar and occasionally sipped her beer. Tillman was late. She thought about going home, but she had paid for the room, so she ordered another beer. And while the bartender was pouring her a new one, a hideous man walked in.

“Thought you’d show up, Frank,” the bartender said. “How was it today?”

“Evening,” Frank said. He took off his coat, tucked it somewhere behind the bar, then came back around and sat three stools down from Alice. “Was fine. Stout, please.”

He looks like a bat, Alice thought. His face was all scrunched up and his hair looked like rat fur. He wore a suit, but it wasn’t a nice one like the kind Tillman always wore. It was brown, but like a dog-food brown.

“Hey, Miss,” Frank said. He looked right at Alice with his terrible face. I hope this isn’t going to be something, she thought.

“Hello,” Alice said.

“Here for the convention?”

“No.”

“Frank,” Frank said, extending his hand. Alice had to get up to shake it.

“Alice,” she said. She sat back down on her stool, but then Frank got up and moved one stool closer. I knew this was going to be something, she thought. If only Tillman was here. And it probably looks like I’m a prostitute, because why else would I be sitting here all dressed up with this ugly man. But maybe I’m no treat either. Which would explain Tillman not showing up. Maybe he walked in the door and saw how I’ve aged since last time and walked right back out.

“Your brooch,” Frank said. He pointed at the silver owl on Alice’s sweater. Tillman had bought it for her. Maybe it was corny of her to wear it, but she did.

“Yes,” she said. “My little owl.”

“Can I tell you a story, Alice?”

Alice nodded at Frank, looked at her watch, and then at Frank.

“So when I was a kid, there were these woods near my house that I used to play in,” Frank said. “One day I was fooling around in there—I was nine at the time—and I saw this little man in a coat through the trees. He was about a foot tall, wearing this funny little coat, just walking along. I started following him, and he didn’t seem to notice me.

“The woods stretched pretty far and this tiny man kept walking, slowly. I followed him for maybe twenty minutes. It was hard to keep track of him because he was so short. But I kept up. And then, when we reached a bit of a clearing, I saw that he wasn’t a little man in a coat, but an owl. It was this owl, just walking through the forest in the middle of the afternoon.

“I kept following, though, and eventually the owl walked into this concrete pipe that was lying there. It was like a section of a sewer or something. So anyway, I walked up to the pipe and looked in. The owl was gone, but there was a guy lying in there and he was dead.”

“Wow,” Alice said. “What happened?”

Before the ugly man could answer, however, the bartender came over and told Alice there was a phone call for her. She excused herself and went to the other end of the bar, where the phone was placed for her to use. She knew that it was Tillman on the other end, because no one else knew where she was. But maybe one of the girls from the office found out and she was about to get another lecture. *Of course he didn’t show up, they’d say. Girl, this is wrong. It’s so not good for you, and it’s not good for his poor wife, either. You both deserve better than this.* But they didn’t know how it was. They were all beautiful and had husbands.

“Hello,” Alice said.

“It’s me,” a voice answered. It was Tillman. “So guess what. Jane decided to come down with me. This is the first chance I’ve had to call.”

“Jesus. Can you get away? What do I do?”

“You know I want to be there. But Jane’s here at my hotel, and I’m in meetings all day. Sorry Alice, but you better go home. If she saw you around the city, you know.”

“Jesus.”

“Yeah. Just pay for the room and I’ll send you some cash when I’m home. Okay, gotta go. I’ll try and call soon.” A dial-tone replaced Tillman’s voice, but Alice kept holding the phone to her ear. Good thing I got my hair done, she thought. Good thing I spent all that money on my hair and drove all the way to goddamn Windsor and lied to my parents about having the flu and missed their anniversary dinner so I could drink with creepy men.

“Okay, well thanks for calling. See you tomorrow,” Alice said to nobody, and hung up the phone. She went back to her stool. She noticed that the two people who were sitting at the table in the back were gone, so it was just Frank, the bartender, and herself. It was a big room, and it was Friday night—both of these facts made the empty bar feel emptier.

“Sorry about that,” Alice said to Frank. The bartender put the phone away and disappeared. “So what happened? After you found the dead guy in the pipe?”

“Well, I said ‘hey’ a few times to see if the man was sleeping, but he didn’t wake up. And I just knew he was dead, you know. I could just tell. So I turned around and walked back home, got my dad. He called the constable and I took everyone to the spot. It turned out to be this guy from Detroit who overdosed on pills. Nobody knew what he was doing there, but there he was.”

“Jesus,” Alice said. She imagined Frank as a little kid, but could only picture the bat-faced man, but smaller.

“And nobody cared about the owl part of it,” Frank said. “Or they didn’t believe me. I kept telling them I found the body because I followed the owl, but they just thought I was traumatized or something.”

“Well, yeah,” Alice said.

“But it was frustrating, you know? I mean, the body was a big deal, but people die all of the time. It was the owl that was interesting, and yet everyone was worried about the little boy who found the corpse. They thought I was scarred by it or something. But I wasn’t. What affected me was this owl.”

“Because it wasn’t just that you found the body,” Alice said. “It was that you were, like, meant to find it. Because this strange owl led you there. That was the amazing thing.”

“Yes!” Frank clapped his hands together, and moved one stool closer so that they were almost touching knees.

“People always focus on the wrong things.” Alice realized that she probably sounded a little drunk. And she was a little drunk, and would be

unable to drive back to Toronto now. But it was true, what she had said—people always focused on the wrong things. Like the girls at the office who tried to make a charity case out of her when she was fine. How there was this thing that made her happy, or was at least something exciting in her life, but Laura and Kate and Brenda and the others all tried to “help” her. How, after Tillman moved away, they tried to set her up with Steve from the office, who was fat. Which, no offence to poor Steve, was a little insulting.

Alice and Frank talked about their jobs, their parents, and the music that played over the bar’s speakers. Hotel guests poked their heads into the room as they passed through the lobby, but nobody came in. The bartender put a few chairs up in the back.

Alice offered to get the next round, but the ugly man said he had to drive home. He walked around behind the bar and put on his coat.

“Come on,” Alice said. “There’s a couch in my room, you can stay here. Let’s have another.”

Frank took off his coat and sat back down. Alice felt a hand slide over to her left knee, but she didn’t slap it away. She closed her eyes and pictured Tillman—he had beautiful hands.