Unfinished Business



A SHORT STORY BY CHRIS BALLARD

Excerpt from "Zombie Heartland"

"I finally woke from a deep unconsciousness to discover an even morbid nightmare of reality. The zombies had dragged my now lifeless limbs and were beginning to taste the morsels of my soul. There were maybe ten of them and I had no chance to escape as they clawed at my skin."

They began to bicker about how to prepare me for dinner.

"Should we roast him over a fire or cook him in a stew?"

"It doesn't matter!" shouted another as he took another bite out of my flesh. "Either way, he tastes like raw chicken."

"Zombie Heartland" by Frank Savage is an imaginitive and gruesome description of the macabre. It is the most exemplary exploration of horror that I have ever read. His words take you to the edge of your own sanity! Without his work as an inspiration, I think the world would be a much happier place."

- Stephen King

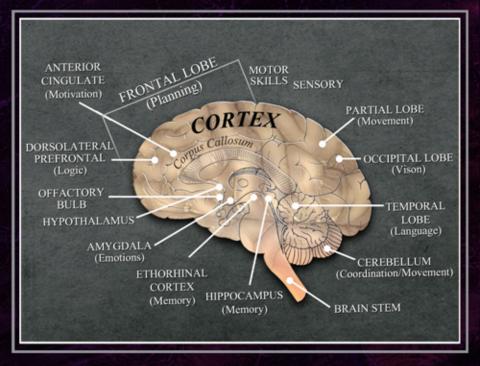
Unfinished Business

Dedicated to all those who have lost someone special in their lives.

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GRAPHIC ASYLUM PUBLISHING

Functions of the Brain





Frank

Laugh if you want, but the truth of the matter is that I am able to speak with the dead. I cannot prove it in any scientific circumstances, mind you, but it does occur. It is difficult to describe, but has something to do with the imaginitive side of the brain closely connected to a faithful morality which interacts with ethereal spirits governing the will of the mind. In other words, the dead speak to us...we just need to listen.

I didn't believe it myself until I began to investigate the thoughts I was having. Our emotions are divided amongst various sections of the brain. When the visceral organs (the part of the mind that influences our level of sensitivity) conflicts with the prefrontal cortex, we begin to lose focus on reality. The mind begins to alter course. My mind had become penetrated...maybe even possessed. There is no doubt that I was losing control of my own thoughts as they were being driven by the needs of another entity.

Let's get the obvious question out of the way. I am a fantasy writer. I was on my third book in a series of graphic novels dealing with zombie cultures taking over society at large. Hey, for me it was a realistic glimpse of modern day politics and religion! Some now say that I had become too imbedded with my literary subjects. I can easily see how they would think that was the case. It is, after all, the most convincing answer to help explain the extraordinary circumstances that have occurred.

Still, I assure you that I am uncompromised in what you are willing to believe. I can say this story is the truth as I have lived and that I now fully believe in a higher authority that can alter and manipulate our desires, ambitions, and logic. Some call it faith. Be that as it may, we are all guided in some way in life, even at times against our own will.



My Jack russell terrier leaped out from underneath the sheet covers of his bed to run frantically downstairs and out the back door in hot pursuit of the squirrels that gather at my bird feeder on the back patio. The squirrels always take liberties with their unwelcomed entitlements and Rex helps to minimize their greedy foraging ways by chasing them through the yard. It is always a jumpstart to a new day with a sense of excitement and adventure that I have come to believe propels my own creative passions.

Rex was my unconditional loving companion in life that kept my mind in check and provided a distraction from my daily stresses and responsibilities that seemed to never end. I had been told for many years to get a dog to help sway my suicidal tendencies, so I took in Rex. He ran around the backyard, did his business, and trotted back inside the house as if to say "I took care of that for you!" I gave him his treat.

We both had needs. I needed love and affection, and Rex needed to pee on my beautiful purple iris which had just bloomed. It wasn't clear which of us owned the other. Jack russell terriers can be very demanding and Rex was persistent with his distractions. He was often confused for a puppy, however he had grown in years. In fact, he had now passed my own age in dog years, yet could still manage squirrel duty in the backyard with as much spirit as ever. God forbid if he were to actually catch one. It would be shredded into a million pieces similar to the inner-stuffings of presumed dead animal toys laying on the floors throughout the house.

I was falling behind schedule with my current workload. The third edition of "Zombie Heartland" had been heavily promoted and the publisher was risking much of the company's resources to help ensure the success of my latest book in the series. I had been struggling with an ending to the story and Rex wasn't helping matters.



I make no excuses for myself. I needed to resolve the ending. I needed to finish the book to fulfill my contract and satisfy my publisher's marketing agenda. Expectations were high and I simply tend to overthink matters at times. I needed to bring the story full circle.

It wasn't a matter of some creative lacking or writer's block, so to speak, but more of a realization that my work was not up to my readers' level of sophistication. The story didn't need a surprise ending or anything twisted that my audience had not expected, but it did need to be resolved in such a way that readers could draw a relationship in their own lives. The ending would need to be more realistic. I had fantasized long enough.

Things happen for a reason, and in this case...I simply could not put my finger on it.

That's when I picked up the phone and finally called her.



It is only
in the Darkest Moments
of your life
when your friends show
their true colors





I don't typically get my life philosophy from Facebook, but when I saw this particular post, It made me think. The image was that of a rainbow filtering through a dense forest. The words read "It is only in the darkest moments of your life when your friends show their true colors." That seemed to resonate in my mind and I could not help but to become more enlightened as I could relate emphatically. My friends had become distant, especially when I was going through my divorce. They just didn't want to shoulder the burden of emotional support. I understood...even though I had been there for them through all their drama. Where were they now that I needed help?

Rainbows have always been a symbol of hope for me, and I had always wondered with amazement anytime I had seen one in real life. I think the message was clear. Those who come to you in times of need are your true friends. They show their true colors... brilliant, like a rainbow. I looked at the post again and noticed that it had come from an old boyfriend back in high school. That was a lifetime ago. It was from Frank.

We had recently friended each other on Facebook. I felt bad that he missed the recent 30-year high school reunion. As I understood it, Frank was very busy with his work and could not attend. I had not really kept in touch with him all these years, but I got the impression from others that he had become a successful writer and was on his way to fame and fortune.

It brought back many memories, but for the moment I was distracted with my own issues. My life was falling apart and I was looking for answers. The Rainbow image was a sign from God. I just know it. I was desperately in need of hope. My faith was indeed deeper than my bank account and I was praying for a miracle. This was a symbol of better things to come and I wanted to embrace it. So, I made a bold decision...and clicked the "Like" button. I may have went overboard when I actually "Shared" the image with all my digital "friends."

Frank messaged me almost immediately.



Angela and I dated only briefly in high school. We ran in different circles, but had been attracted to each other on some level. She was truly a goddess...incredibly beautiful. I had just received my Idiot degree and decided that my insecurities were more important. OK...that's my own sarcasm showing through, literally speaking. She deserved better than me and I was hiding behind a false mask of superiority. The truth is that I wasn't even in her league. That is why we broke up after such a short time. I was a schmuck! I told her I didn't want to be with her anymore. Honestly, I didn't want to be with her because I knew she would expose me for who I really was...an Idiot!

I don't want to brag, but my Facebook page has become very popular in recent years. I have numerous fans that continuously rave about my work and like everything I do. It has become an enormous boost to my self esteem and has inspired me to continue to drive my ambitions to extremes. I want to fulfill the needs of my fans and have been spending countless hours with promotional efforts and updates on social media.

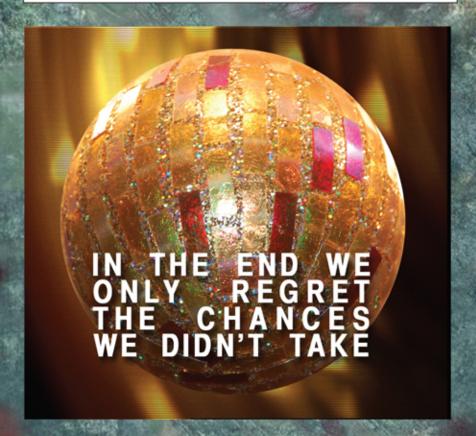
Most of my posts are updates about my "Zombie Heartland" series or something related to my career. I rarely post personal accounts or ambiguous shares. I don't have any real friends...only zombie fans and I clearly do not remember sharing that particular image. It was such an obscure post for me that I was going to delete it entirely...

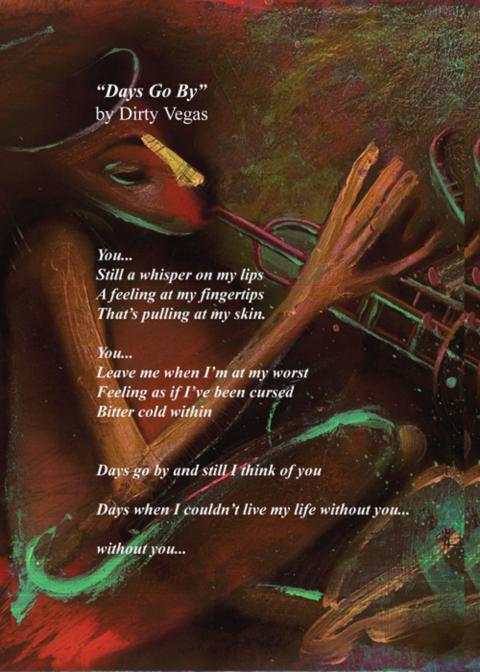
...thats when I noticed Angela's "Like."



Frank was creative. He was also a lot of fun. We had a few laughs, but that was a long time ago and memories carry on. He stood me up at a dance one night. That was very devastating for me. It hurt. I did not understand. He never explained. It was the only time I every cried to my dad. My father could not understand it either, but comforted me with the pain. That was so many years ago. Much has changed.

Frank and I moved on. I still respected him. I knew he was going to become something big some day...it just wasn't going to be with me.







messaged her. I needed to tell her how important she was to me at a time when I had virtually no self-esteem and that I was proud that she was doing well and had a family of her own. I was truly happy for her and wanted to reconnect as a true friend.

It was not so much a call more than it was a calling. I know that doesn't make much sense, but I was becoming suspicious of my own actions at this point.



Frank called me one day out of the blue. It was such a blessing to hear his voice and share the memories we had and how our lives had turned out. We talked for hours. We had a lot of catching up to do. He had obviously done some research because he knew that my father had passed away. He seemed very interested in that topic. My father was my world. When he died, I had no one left to turn for advise. My life had turned dark. It was a dark forest and I was looking for a light to shine through.



Frank

I knew that Angela's dad had recently passed away. What I didn't know was that she was going through a divorce. She had kids that would be affected and I felt compelled to help her get through the next phase of her life.

No....that's not really how I should describe it...I'm not being entirely truthful here.

Her father told me to help.

Unfinished Business Part II



Frank

My dreams became clouded with personal guilt and I could not drive those thoughts from my mind. "Days go by and still I think of you." The lyrics played on and on and over again and again. I needed to focus and concentrate on my book, but thoughts of Angela were possessing my emotions. She needed help. Her father had told me.

I never met him in real life. I did not know him at all. Angela and I only went out on a couple of dates, so I never got to know her family. I did not even know what he looked like. Despite all of this, I believe he began to influence my mind in such a way that I was losing focus on my own priorities.

My publisher had been calling repeatedly. This alone was a distraction. "Leave me alone so I can finish" was always my answer. Deadlines were pressing and they were concerned. "I will finish this! I have never missed a deadline!" I always come through under pressure. I had prided myself on my resilience to get through my challenges. This was no exception. I was committed to my "Zombie Heartland" series and nothing was going to prevent the dead from rising once again to regain control!

Only this time, I think the dead had already regained control...of me!



To be clear, you need to understand that talking to the dead is not a normal conversation. It is not an exchange of information by which we communicate. Rather, it is more of a sensation...a feeling, or to be more precise, a very acute awareness in the executive or logical region of our brain. It is an inception of the mind that takes control and becomes a facet of every calculative thought that occurs. It is a seed that grows with every effort and simply becomes the will of circumstance. It takes initiative to drive one's needs and desires to generate efforts. My actions were not my own. It was as if I had become a zombie slave to the needs of others. I was cognizant of my actions, yet suspicious of my agenda. Possession is when you are no longer in control of yourself. This was something else. I knew what I was doing and had convinced myself that my actions would be justified through my own guilt that somehow needed closure.

The mind can only endure if the body is willing. The only truthful way to describe my thoughts at the time was that I was being led from a higher place.

Call it a spiritual intervention if that makes more sense.





Without dad around, I was truly alone. My marriage had really ended years ago, but I continued to go through the motions and kept the family together through sheer determination. It was a struggle and a challenge to fulfill the needs of my two adorable children on a daily basis. They were my world. I love them both with all my heart and soul. The real problem was the other child in my life...my husband.

He wasn't big on responsibility. He didn't appreciate my efforts nor my concerns. We had become distant and our kids were suffering. I reached out for help and made an appointment with a marriage counselor. That's when he decided it was time for a divorce.





I began to talk to Angela more frequently. She had a lot of unresolved issues. I understood that and could totally relate as I had gone through many of those same situations. It was almost as if I was meant to give her some advice and counseling. I had been through divorce and instinctively knew what she was going through. I told her at the time our greatest strength could become our weakness. I related to her a story about a guy who was so deeply in love with a beautiful girl that it weakened his pride to the point of shame. Rather than take the chance to know her, he let her go in spite of his true ambition. I'm not sure if Angela realized I was talking about the two of us in school, but it gave her comfort knowing that someone was trying to explain how life can be unpredictable and I was simply there to validate her own perspective. From my own viewpoint, it was the only thing I could think of that would ease the pain and keep her mind on the path of strength and solidarity. It was an introspective insight to a calamity that had taken course on it's own measure. She simply needed to know that some things are beyond our control.

I will admit, I was in a rut myself. Things were beyond my control...maybe even controlling me. My life had been turned upside down since my divorce and hearing other people's problems gave me some vulgar confidence that I had been through it all before. Talking to Angela made me feel more human and less alone in the universe. My divorce was malicious and brutal, but that's a zombie story for another book. I wanted to help Angela. At this point, it was no longer the guilt that was driving my ambitions as much as the compassion for living and regrets of the past. She needed moral support and I was desperately trying to help her get through the pain...

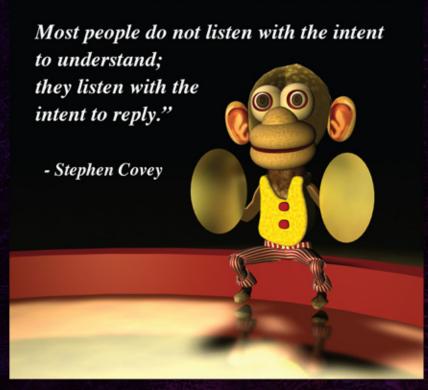
I just didn't know exactly what medicine she needed.



My life had turned upside down. I had lost my father. I was now officially divorced. My husband moved in with his own mother and we had split up the kids. My daughter would stay with me and he would keep our son. We would make arrangements for sharing the kids on alternate weekends, but for me it had become such a travesty of responsibility that my hair was beginning to fall out of my head. I was going insane. I was overwhelmed with all the tragic events that seemed to occur all at once.

Then, get this...That sonofabitch of an ex-husband quits his job! How irresponsible is that! Seriously! I was devastated. That meant no child support for me and I would have to sell the house and basically start all over again. I didn't need this shit!...I didn't ask for this!...I simply did not understand how everything had gone so wrong so fast. Life sucked and I couldn't understand how I had married someone so undeserving!

Frank's voice was the only thing that held me together. He was the only positive thing I had in my life at that point. We lived world's apart, but were somehow closely connected on an emotional level. I honestly think I would've gone mad without him helping to keep me together. Thank God for Frank. He showed his true colors. He was my rainbow in the dark.





Frank

My calls to Angela were not so much a plan of action or any kind of personal agenda so much as a distraction to her own problems. Just as Rex could take my mind off my own stresses with deadlines and unrealistic expectations, I knew I was helping Angela work through her problems simply by distracting her with stories of Zombies and how the dead could rise up unknowingly and unexpectedly without rhyme or reason and infiltrate the mind, body, and soul.

I listened to her rants. Really, all she needed was a good soundboard. Sometimes we just need someone to talk to and hear our own voice bounce back to ensure our echoes are penetrating beyond the walls of our own fortress. I offered no judgements, policies, or guidance of any kind. I simply listened to her get the frustrations of living off her chest. She simply needed someone to listen.



Frank's calls were a blessing. He was brilliant in conversation and it almost felt like we were back in high school going over homework studies and preparing for the next test. It really brought back the memories of the times we shared together. We both laughed about the silliness of our adolescence. OMG! I remember the English research. It was insane! We both spent countless hours at the local college library looking up the true human nature in Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness," or the foreshadowing elements in Shakespeare's "Macbeth."

Frank could think outside the box, so to speak. That impressed me. He was on another level creatively. I was more practical and to the point. He found ways to challenge the norm. I guess it became his gift as he became a successful writer, but he never would've made it through that class without me. For all his insight, he did not have the focus. I helped him with plot analysis, sentence structure and character development. I wasn't as creative as he was, but I understood that in order to move to the next level, you must pass Senior English!

It's funny, but I would think of him from time to time...long after our affair. He made quite an impression, but we simply went in different directions. He seemed to be more comfortable with non-conformity, if you know what I mean. He didn't really belong to anything, and yet was a part of everything. I was attracted to his confidence and self-reliance. Ironically, that was what drove us apart. He didn't really need me and I was crushed just knowing I wasn't wanted. When he left me at the dance I went home crying and my father was there for me. My father helped me get over so many of life's tragic circumstances. He's no longer here, so I try to imagine what he would say to me today.

One night I dreamed a Zombie caught up with me and was dragging me across the sands of time My life flashed before my eyes...

Then I remembered Zombies don't really exist.

It must be a nightmare!

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As I looked down I noticed footprints in the sand...
but I wasn't going anywhere.
I asked the Zombie where the tracks came from.
He replied "From You...this is the path set before you."

"What if want to alter course?"

"What if I don't like the path I'm taking?"

"Then you simply change direction," the Zombie replied.

"Maybe I don't know which way to go!" I argued.

The Zombie became agitated.

"That's why I am dragging you!" he shouted.
"If you would get up off your ass and start making
your own choices, I wouldn't be carrying around
all this DEAD weight!"

Thankfully, I woke from that horrible nightmare and began each day with a new sense of purpose.



Angela's life had gone from bad to worse. Trust me, I knew that feeling all too well. I was trying to be as uplifting as possible to someone who was picking up the pieces of a shattered life, but the mirrors kept breaking into more pieces. How could I possibly help? She was moving back with her family as a result of her divorce and lack of child support from her ex-husband and would have to minimize her finances to basic essentials. I've been there, too. I was once a struggling artist looking for anything I could find to get by, so I knew the situation was in dire straits. We all have ups and downs in our lifetime, but Angela was being hit with every tragedy at once during the time in her life when she should be celebrating her endurance and reaping the seeds she had sown. I could not help but to be completely sympathetic.

We all deal with our challenges and obstacles as best we can with what we have, but sometimes the course is stacked against us. We need help. We then look to God for spiritual inspiration, at least I do. It's during those times when we really question the Lord and ask where he's been all this time we've been suffering. We point to the footsteps in the sand and say, "Where were you then?"

God then replies, "That was when I was carrying you across the desert."

I had created a parody of Footprints in the Sand with a Zombie carrying someone across the desert as he was eating him. At the time I found it humorous and entertaining, not to mention hysterically morbid. The truth is that I now feel that I have been in God's hands for most of my journey in life and I felt compelled to give back to those less fortunate on their paths of discovery.

It was illuminating to realize how blessed I had been through the years. Don't get me wrong, I paid my dues. I sacrificed and walked through the shadows of doubt. It was not a road I would recommend or a path to follow. Call it persistence or maybe even a stubbornness of ambitious efforts, but I stuck to my guns and found a way against all odds. I believed in myself and knew I could get what I wanted if I worked hard and endured. Nothing could stop me from becoming who I wanted to be...nothing could prevent me from reaching my goals...the only thing holding me up now was me...

...So, why can't I get this damned book written?



Unfinished Business Part III



Frank

"Zombie Heartland" was a series of stories I had written set in a rural town in the middle of nowhere. A nuclear power plant had been built in the early seventies, but the government terminated funding for the future progress of the project. As a result, a group of town leaders who favored the project decided to continue to pursue the development without Federal knowledge. They were hopeful that nuclear power would bring about a lucrative energy supply that would serve as a source of the county's wealth for the future. There was only one problem...nuclear waste, which they had to dispose of in secret. They buried most of it in many of the nearby farmlands in the area, Ultimately, the community became exposed and the radiation turned the inhabitants into nuclear zombies. The politicians and religious leaders took advantage of a society that could no longer think for themselves. They swaved the community to believe that the nuclear plant was the power source of both life and existence...without which, they would all die. Furthermore, outsiders were regarded as enemies of the "Power Tower" and were to be disposed of at all costs. The nuclear zombies were easily manipulated and became savage cannibals as their farmland crops no longer provided food for their survival. It was a series of stories showcasing an analogy between the fictional nuclear zombies and our current government's corruptive powers in utilizing every resource to cover up their own bad decisions.

I never expected the book to do so well, but it had become a cult-driven success. Maybe it had more to do with timing. Vampire stories and the subculture had played out and were no longer fashionable. Readers were looking for something different. Zombies were making a comeback in the Horror genre and I just got lucky with my book coming out as the rage reached epidemic proportions.

I was still bussing tables and washing dishes at a restaurant when "Zombie Heartland" took off. Morbid as it may seem, I owe my life to zombies...I was rescued by the dead. It takes just one breakthrough to change one's life and give them meaning or purpose. In my case, it was my "Zombie Heartland."

That one big break made all the difference in my life and timing was really the key. I wanted to help Angela. She needed a big break. It was her time.



Frank was really into his work. When we talked on the phone, he would always find a way to have a zombie character enter the conversation. It was his way of using a sinister sarcasm to explain life's challenges. I love reading books. I was more of a romance novel reader than creepy horror stories. One night Frank said the funniest thing to me, "Which genre is more realistic...romance or zombies?" We both laughed hysterically!

I thought about that afterwards and realized that what made it so funny was that it probably was the truth. Romance seems more like a fantasy. I had already been married to a zombie. I told Frank I was convinced. I would read his books.



A Frank

I had already given away all my copies from the "Zombie Heartland" book series. My publisher only gives me a few hundred and I used them all by giving them to friends, family, and fans at promotional appearances. You would think I would have an entire stash of them in a corner somewhere, but honestly, the creative types never want to be put on a shelf. I didn't even have a single copy for myself.

Angela asked about my books and I told her she would not find them at her local Barnes and Noble. They just don't carry popular literature in regular bookstores. My books were only available in specialty shops or would need to be purchased online for delivery. My books were considered more along the lines of 'graphic novels' as they were illustrated in a sequence of events. It wasn't panel-to-panel like a comic book, but the artform at this time had become very vague in terms of what was art and what was literature. As a writer, I did not necessarily want the artwork to empower the story. As a busboy and dishwasher, I was willing to allow my publisher to take a few liberties as long as I got paid for my stories.

If there's one flaw with Facebook, it's the constant reminder of your friends birthdays. It is that one day of the year you have a commitment to acknowledge someone who has completely ignored all your posts since you became 'friends.' Birthdays were never a big deal for me. The world did not stop turning and begin to revolve around me on my one special day of the year, so why is it such a prominent course of action on Facebook? Social media has replaced real friends in so many ways and I couldn't give a shit about anyone's birthday.

But this was Angela's Birthday. I guess that really meant something more to me. Damn! I had not paid attention and could not get my book to her in time. I began to feel more guilt. More than usual. I would need to do something more for her. I felt she needed to be showered with gifts to show how much I truly cared for her. I could've easily ordered flowers or something simple, but I felt a need to do more. I felt compelled to do something more original. I wanted to paint again. I had been a decent artist in high school and Angela always complimented me on my efforts, so I felt inspired to create a painting for her. It was a revelation...I had an idea that had true meaning that would express my feelings towards her.

...Once again, I need to be honest and true to the story. I was spiritually guided by her father.





The last thing on my mind this year was my own birthday. There just wasn't much to celebrate other than making it through another miserable year. I was constantly arguing and bickering with my family. Both my children were often away for one reason or another. I had some physical ailments that were preventing me from having any semblance of a normal life. Frank was the glue holding me together.

I don't remember giving Frank my new address, but I noticed a very large package outside my door. I instinctively knew it was from Frank.

I clawed open the package like a giddy schoolgirl that couldn't wait to see what was inside. Frank had mailed a number of books for me to read as well as a framed painting. There was a personal note inside. That was special! It was his own handwritten letter telling me how special I was and how proud he was to have a friend that meant so much. It brought me to tears.

After I dried my eyes, I looked at the painting. Weird! Frank was very talented, though. I don't know art, but I know what I like. The painting must've been above my pay-grade because I didn't quite know what to make of it. I liked the colors and textures, mind you, but didn't quite understand the meaning. Still, I had a few walls that needed some embellishment, so I hung Frank's painting on the right hand wall next to my bed. It was a painting with two figures chained together surrounded by a heart. It wasn't really my style, but it was better than the Thomas Kinkaid watercolor I had cut out and framed.

Franks intentions were admirable. I posted my happiness on Facebook about the incredible friendship we shared.



The painting was symbolic of relationships. We're all bound together in some way by God, love, family, or business. We are only free if we break the chains that contain our own selfish needs and go out on our own. For Angela, those chains had been broken and she was left holding the shackles. If there was a message, it was simply to hold on to the relationships she had faith in, even if she felt shackled to them. It would be important for her to reach out to others rather than keep the pain hidden.

I was no Picasso. I had some old acrylic paints that had been lying around. This gave me a chance to be resourceful and start over on a fresh canvas. It had been years since I had painted so I was a little intimidated making that first mark. Soon, it was as if I were a child again with a box of crayons and my creativity was off it's leash.

Just letting go of it all and expressing yourself through art is therapeutic and energizing to the soul.

I felt reborn...as if I had found myself once again. I wanted the same for Angela.

I wanted to share with her the joy and the passion that she had so inspired in me...

...or was I now possessed beyond my control?



With all that was happening to me at the time, Frank's painting was the most wonderful gift in the world. For me, it was more about the friendship and the thoughtfulness that really mattered most. It was hard to live with at first, but the painting soon began to grow on me. I decided to hang it in the foyer as a conversation piece. I took down the unicorn painting and placed it neatly in the closet. I was tired of that one anyway.

Frank had a way of making me laugh and helping me forget my problems. He said the painting would be worth millions someday. We both laughed! It was good, but it wasn't that good. Still, it was original and different. Not really my style, but Frank had taken the time and effort and thought of me when nobody else seemed to care. The painting has a much deeper meaning to me than what is simply on the surface.

I mean, the last thing I want right now is to be naked and shackled to another. I want to be free.

I began to think more about Frank. He was always on my mind. Maybe it was the painting that had become a constant reminder. Regardless, I began to feel guilty. I had not made the effort to get his books or reciprocate in any fashion. I had become so overwhelmed and consumed with my own issues that I had completely withdrawn from any social engagements. My family was concerned and began to talk about an intervention. I told them very politely to "Fuck off!"

I think they became envious of my relationship with Frank. They would roll their eyes at me when I mentioned his name. They weren't too impressed with his painting either... or maybe they were just jealous. Frank was a famous writer and my family was afraid where this might lead. I didn't want any complications, so I had been very reserved moving forward in any new relationship. Both my kids were now away and I was left alone to work through my problems. I had a few psychiatric sessions that made me feel even more insecure. I stopped going to those.

Indeed, Frank was my knight in shining armour. He had come to my rescue. I had an idea. I wanted to surprise him on his birthday just the same as he did for me. I did not know his birthday.

I would need to do some research.



I was running up against more deadlines. Work, work, work all the time. It was madness. I could not work any harder and yet never seemed to accomplish anything. The publisher pushed the launch date back until I could come up with a better ending. They were not happy with my initial rough drafts and neither was I. The story needed a better resolution.

It isn't easy being a zombie writer. There's a lot of stress involved. As a writer, you need to explain to the audience how the absurdities and tragedies translate from fantasy to reality. There needs to be closure at times. It is the age-old question about "does life imitate art or does art imitate life?" Both, perhaps...but that's not getting me any closer to an ending.

I became desperate. I needed to finish. I was easily distracted. My Jack russell terrier had become a constant nuissance. My parents took in Rex so I could focus and concentrate on my book.

Time was at an end. Deadlines were looming.

I needed to finish the book.



Frank was absolutely right. I went to numerous book stores and could not find his work anywhere. During our conversations he would joke about that. He said that graphic novels were only available for intelligent people...and that they were in short supply. Supply and demand. There's just not that many smart people around these days! His passion for his work was both introspective and witty. Still, I was determined. I wanted his books.

He said they only sold his books in specialty shops. Comic book stores. I would be lucky to find a copy since it had been a while since the last series. He joked that I would need to show a college degree to be admitted. I didn't go to college, but I loved to read. There was only one comic shop in town and they did not have his books. They said they could order them for me, but I remembered Frank said that it would be cheaper for me to order them online myself. I asked the clerk about the publisher. He said the books were published by "Graphic Asylum" which was a subsidary of "Adventure Comics, Inc."

My personal computer had a virus and I no longer had internet at home. I had not been on Facebook in a long time, so I decided to go to the local library to order Frank's books.

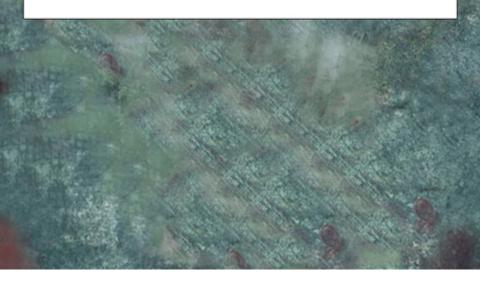


I can be impatient at times. This was one of them. I think Frank could write an entire series about Zombie Librarians! I was frustrated. I didn't know what I was doing. I wasn't up to date on the latest technology and couldn't figure out how to search on their system. I needed help and the comatose library assistant would not have known I was there unless I sat on him! I complained and gave him my best speach on the lack of consumer assistance these days.

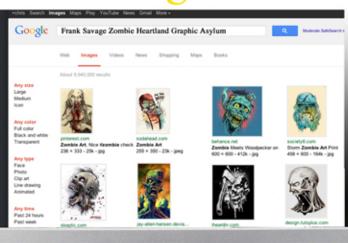
Finally, he rose from the dead and slowly crawled to my station. It was obvious I didn't know what I was doing, so he took advantage of my ineptitude. It gave him a sense of power and control knowing more than me. The sexual innuendos were dropping like bombs. I've heard them all before. Everything from his 'hard drive' to 'RAM speed." I told him I already had "Virus protection," and that seemed to be enough to let him know I wasn't interested in him.

I was only interested in Frank's books. He guided me to a Google search page.

I typed in the search: Frank Savage Graphic Asylum Zombie Heartland









I needed inspiration. I just couldn't seem to finish the book. Am I cursed? What was happening to me? I suddenly heard "Days Go By" by Dirty Vegas in my head.

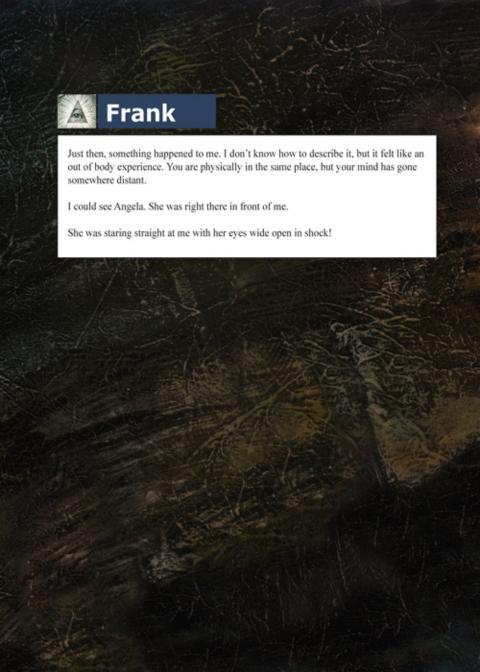
You...
Still a whisper on my lips
A feeling at my fingertips
That's pulling at my skin.

You...
Leave me when I'm at my worst
Feeling as if I've been cursed
Bitter cold within

Days go by and still I think of you

Days when I couldn't live my life without you...

without you...





I was confused.

I was delirious.

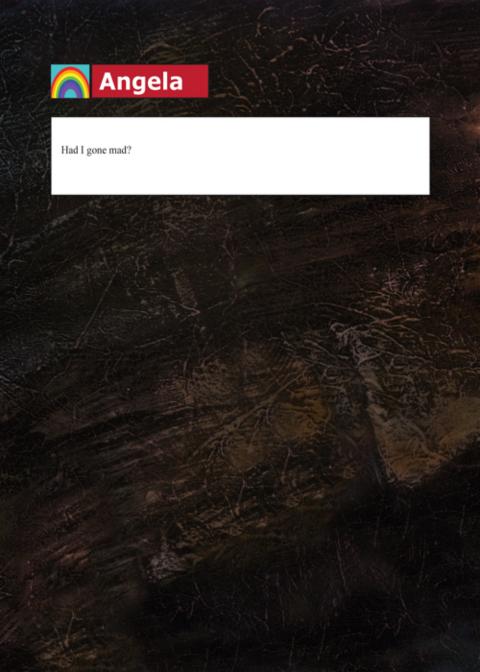
As I looked at the search page for Frank, I noticed his obituary from years ago. It happened just after the 30-year high school reunion. How could this be?

I simply did not understand.

It did not make sense to me.

I began to scream.

I was escorted away from the library.





With all the stress and anxiety I had been going through, I had began to question my own sanity. The walls had been closing in on me for some time and I was looking for an escape. Frank had become that light at the end of the tunnel that gave me hope. I was clinging onto that hope with such desperation that it became a rainbow in the dark.

Rainbows don't appear in the dark.

That is a false illusion...like a mirage in the desert. You're footprints are your own and you must walk the path with your own two feet.

I was still uncertain. Some things did not add up...or I needed some verification of the truth. I busted through the front door of my family's home. I looked at the wall in the foyer. There was that damned unicorn looking down at me as if to say, "That's right, Bitch...I've got magical powers...and I'm here to stay!"

I ran into my bedroom. There's that damned Thomas Kincaid piece of shit print I cut out from a stupid ad and framed!

Where was Frank's painting?

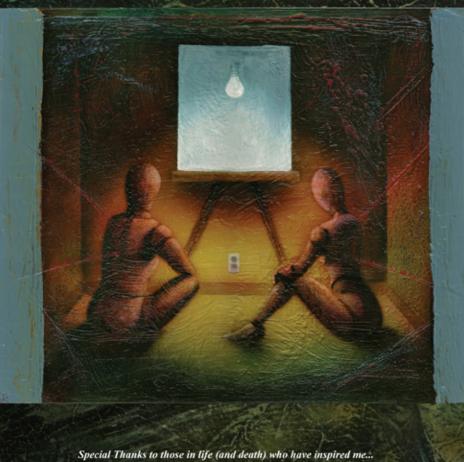


I am not crazy. I am certain I had spoken with Frank. I heard his voice. He spoke to me. They weren't really normal conversations, but we talked and I just understood. He listened to me talk about my problems. He listened to me. That was all I really wanted...someone to listen to me.

Regret is a powerful emotion. Frank regretted much in life. He regretted losing me. That much was clear. I guess in retrospect I began to think about how life could've been different. I may have become obsessed with those thoughts. Maybe those thoughts were even possessing me.

I found no evidence of Frank's correspondences. I finally realized and understood my family's concerns. They knew he had passed away. They tried to tell me, but I wouldn't listen to them. I only listened to what I wanted to hear. I needed that short thread of hope to cling to in order to survive. Maybe our best source of faith comes from our own imagination...what we truly believe.

Call me crazy if you want...but I can speak to the dead.



Special Thanks to those in life (and death) who have inspired me... There are too many to acknowlege and mention but I hope you enjoyed the story and will pay it forward in your efforts to show your true colors...especially when the world is dark.

A new canvas is there for us each day. Paint your world as you see it!

Love and Wishes!

Chris Ballard



entrails of guts clinging to my gnawed bones. The zombies had left no physical evidence of my existence.

But they could not take my soul. I no longer felt the torturous pain as I walked bravely from out of the darkness and into the light.

I began to hear voices..."

Unfinished Business

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GRAPHIC ASYLUM PUBLISHING