

Following the Trail
By
J.E. Clarke

FADE IN ON:

EXT. SIDEWALK - NIGHT

Darkness makes storefronts look *almost* alluring. One plate glass window boasts a generic sign:

NISKIN CPA - GET YOUR TAXES DONE QUICK & PAINLESSLY HERE!

A bell jingles. The door opens. As...

FRANK NISKIN (40s) shuffles out.

Hiking up one sleeve on his Men's Warehouse bargain bin suit, Frank glances at his watch and groans.

FRANK

That late? Jeezus H. Christ!

Every movement a heroic effort, Frank fumbles to lock the office. Then stumbles to his modest, ancient car.

INT. FRANK'S CAR - MOMENTS LATER

At the wheel, Frank rubs heavy eyes. He squints at passing headlights. The road zips by as he drives.

FRANK (V.O.)

It's funny what life can toss at you. One minute, life can be so dull, it's intolerable. But it's still secure, well planned out. Until that curveball whacks you between the eyes. In a split second, all of your priorities change. Or at least come into focus, sharper than ever before.

Frank droops. His head nods. Just as...

...something STREAKS towards the car!

Jolted by adrenaline, Frank wakes. Swerves. He *almost* side swipes at street sign.

And slams into a pot hole. BUMP! That's the only impact. Whatever the streaking thing was... it's gone.

Frank's hands shake on the wheel. Lighting a cigarette, he drives on.

EXT. FRONT OF FRANK'S HOUSE - LATER

Even more modest than the car. Frank parks his wheels, driver's side facing the curb.

Calmer - but more drained than before - he slides from the vehicle. Bestows a kiss on the hood.

FRANK

We may both be past our warrantees, but
my reflexes and your steering wheel still
work.

A howl of anger jolts Frank from his soothing thought.

TERRY (O.S.)

What the Hell do you think you're doing?!

Frank whips around to find -

That comment's not aimed at him.

At a nearby house, TERRY WATSON (30s) fumes in his doorway, bellows at wife MARIE (30s) down the street.

Clutching a book bag half filled with clothes, Marie shrieks back.

MARIE

What does it look like? I'm gone!

Frank sighs, rolls his eyes. This is a drama he's seen (and heard) before.

Shrugging, Frank drags himself across the lawn.

FRANK

That's right. Home sweet home.

But almost trips over STRAY CAT WILLOW. The calico purrs, weaves between Frank's legs.

FRANK

Begging for food, at this hour? Even
homeless kitties should keep regimens.
Late night snacking makes us fat.

Frank pats his own stomach to illustrate the point. Behind him, the domestic crisis roils on.

TERRY

Enough with the hysterics. The whole
neighborhood hears you, Marie!

MARIE

Good! I hope they find out what you are!

A small whimper behind Terry. Son BRADLEY WATSON (8) pokes an anxious head through the door.

BRADLEY

Mom?

TERRY

Bradley - back to bed! Your mom's just being crazy again.

(points at Frank)

If guys like that see anything, it's your mom abandoning her son!

MARIE

Let's see who wins custody in court!

TERRY

(snarls)

If you try, I'll fucking -

He looks at Frank. Stops.

Embarrassed by the spotlight, Frank fumbles with his front door keys. Drops them, bends down to pick them up.

Pets Willow as an afterthought.

FRANK

Yeah, lady. You're my witness. Except for a few of us, humans aren't much good.

Frank slips in the door; leaving Willow to her travels. And the Watson family drama alone.

INT. FRANK'S LIVING ROOM

Meticulously clean. But it's still a man cave; one that screams: no future. Even less hope.

Turning on the TV, Frank collapses on the couch. The eleven o'clock news babbles.

Out in the street, wheels SCREECH. Already drowned out by Frank's snores.

EXT. FRONT OF FRANK'S HOUSE - MORNING

An identical suit, though less wrinkled. A red eyed Frank shuffles towards his car.

Walking around the front, he beelines for the passenger side, poised to toss his BRIEFCASE in back.

Then freezes at the sight of the door.

It's dented. Red spatter - covers every inch!!

FRANK

That's not. Oh God. No.

World tilting, he bends down for a closer inspection. Touches one of the red dots. Rubs his fingers.

FRANK

Blood?!?

INT. FRANK'S CAR - FLASHBACK

Frank nods off at the wheel. Something streaks towards the car.

The sound of tire hitting pothole echoes in Frank's ears. THUNK!

FRANK (V.O.)

It was a pothole. I think?

(beat)

Then again, I didn't stop.

EXT. FRONT OF FRANK'S HOUSE - PRESENT

Frank stares at the damage, stunned.

FRANK

I'm going to jail. Aren't I?

A screen door CREAKS. Frank swings around.

And sees Terry standing on his porch. Terry backtracks. Frank croaks and waves.

FRANK

Stop!

Terry freezes, side-eyes Frank's car door.

TERRY

(laughs nervously)

What'd you do there, man? Cut yourself shaving in the side view mirror? Don't you know that's what bathroom's are for?

FRANK

No! I... uh, Terry, tell me the truth.
Was this here when I parked last night?

Terry's eyes flash with fear.

TERRY

How the fuck would I know? You saw where
I was. On the porch, not looking at your
car. I had other things to do.

Frank's eyes drift toward the blood. There's lots.

FRANK

I couldn't have been that tired. How
could *anyone* not see... this?

FLASHBACK

A hostile Terry bellows at his cringing wife.

TERRY

If you try, I'll fucking -

He looks at Frank. Stops.

PRESENT DAY

Frank gulps. Turns to Terry, voice pitched low.

FRANK

Where's Marie, Terry?

TERRY

Sleeping, OK? And that's not your
business!

Terry storms back inside, slams the door. CRACK!

Frank winces, stares transfixed at his car.

FRANK

Maybe I'm crazy. But it *sure looks* body-
sized.

His finger hovers over his cell: 9.... 1....

Terry's screen door SQUEAKS. A defiant Frank looks up.

FRANK

Mr. Watson, maybe you can intimidate your
wife, but...

But Terry's not on the porch. It's Marie this time.

FRANK
Mrs. Watson! Uh, you're here?

MARIE
Mr. Niskin?

FRANK
Call me Frank. I mean, we *are* neighbors.
Marie's anxious eyes dart to Frank's car.

MARIE
I'm really sorry about Terry's temper. He
doesn't mean it, but he's got a short
fuse. About your door...

Frank holds his breath. "Here it comes."

MARIE
We'll pay for the damage, I promise.

FRANK
Mrs. Watson, what exactly happened here?

MARIE
Terry stopped me from acting crazy again.
I was clumsy, and tripped. That's all.

FLASHBACK

Frank enters the house, shuts the door.

Free of any witnesses, Terry lunges off the porch, and
grabs Marie. The two argue. Struggle.

Terry slams his wife against Frank's car...

PRESENT DAY

Frank silently scans Marie. Sees bruises, but no cuts.

FRANK
He hurt you.

MARIE
He didn't. I just bumped your car. It's
pretty weak metal. You should check that
out.

FRANK
But the blood -

Storm clouds gather in Marie's eyes.

MARIE

Terry would never hurt me... that way!
Sure, sometimes he gets heated, but when
he does, he goes away and blows it off!

FRANK

Mrs. Watson, if you feel unsafe at home,
I promise to be your witness...

Marie stabs a finger at Frank's cell.

MARIE

I don't know where that blood came from,
but don't you call 911. Cops just make
things worse!

Trembling, she slips into the house like a ghost. Closes
the door - and is gone.

Ever the CPA, Frank calculates his options.

Squatting, he takes pictures of the door and blood - from
every angle his stiff body allows.

FRANK

Police or not, this evidence should be
preserved!

Straightening up, he reaches for the back door to toss
the briefcase in...

And spots Bradley Watson on the sidewalk.

Boy and Frank exchange looks across the car's hood.

FRANK

Bradley, isn't it?

The boy doesn't say a word.

FRANK

Son, I bet you saw what happened last
night. After I went home?

The boy nods. Stares at Frank, goggle eyed.

BRADLEY

Mr. Niskin, can you help me?

Frank's heart melts.

FRANK

Of course! No-one's asking you to take
sides...

BRADLEY
I can't talk to Mom or Dad.

FRANK
I'm sure your parents mean well, but -
Bradley holds up a BLACK TRASH BAG.

BRADLEY
I don't know what to do!
Confused, Frank rushes around the car to the sidewalk.
Bradley lifts a corner of the plastic...
Revealing poor Willow's cold furry face.

BRADLEY
Dad was so mad after you left, he didn't
look where he was going.

FLASHBACK

Terry tosses Marie into the house. Storming over to his car, he guns the motor. Floors the gas.

A cat SCREAMS. Blood splashes Frank's parked car.

Terry doesn't notice. Or stop.

PRESENT DAY

Bradley stares up at Frank. Tears glisten in lost eyes.

BRADLEY
Willow wasn't yours. But you loved her,
right?

Frank nods. Can't bring himself to talk.

BRADLEY
I tried to bury her in the empty lot over
there.
(points)
But the soil's too hard. And I can't use
our backyard. Dad's real careful with the
lawn.

Frank gently takes the plastic bag.

FRANK
I know a better place. Where you can
visit. And the soil's soft.

EXT. FRANK'S BACKYARD - LATER

The two squat over a freshly minted kitty grave.

Frank pats dirt down, lays pebbles over it as markers.

Bradley fashions a makeshift cross with two sticks. Makes a heart shaped pattern with the pebbles. Frank nods.

FRANK

Nice touch.

BRADLEY

Should we say a prayer?

FRANK

I don't often... well, if you want.

BRADLEY

(thinks, intones)

Dear God, please make sure Willow gets lots to eat up there. She likes Tasty Treats, the Salmon kind.

FRANK

(improvises)

And plenty of scratches behind the ear. She's a sucker for that. The left one.

In the distance, an unseen Marie calls from the porch.

MARIE

Bradley Watson, where'd you go? Your breakfast is getting cold!

Exchanged wan smiles between man and boy. Bradley and Frank stand up.

FRANK

Listen to your mother: go home. I promise, I'll buy flowers and make this even better. Later. After work.

BRADLEY

Thanks, Mr. Niskin.

With that, the boy scampers off. Frank continues his thought, alone.

FRANK

But I'll stop at social services this morning. Filing W2s can wait. No-one should live like this.

Dusting off his suit, he turns towards the tiny grave.

FRANK

Or die. Someone has to care.

EXT. FRONT OF FRANK'S HOUSE - MOMENTS LATER

A stiff Frank heads for his trusty car.

FRANK (V.O.)

It's funny what life can toss at you. One minute, life can be so dull, it's intolerable. Until that curveball whacks you between the eyes. Your priorities might not *really* change. But you sure as hell discover what they are.

Frank slips behind the wheel. Starts to drive.

FINAL FADE OUT: