

Frank had only one talent

By Jean Baptiste Leclercq

Everything was quiet under the sky of Arizona.

Mike, Dan and Joe were flying in circles in the sky, gliding with their long dark wings above the half-ruined church. The arid sun was drawing their inked shadows on the ochre ground, along the bell tower, ripped open by a storm years ago, along this wall slumping on itself, his stones falling one after the others like dead teeth, and the stained-glass long blown away by a sandstorm.

A cart pulled by a scrawny gelding had come from the South, raising a cloud of dust on the road, and it was that cloud which had lured the three scavengers. A cart going toward the church, in full day, could only mean one thing: food. So they had spread their heavy scythes-like wings and had lifted themselves from their creaking dead tree, to rise into the burning sky, and check that.

They arrived just in time to see the cart stop, next to the broken fence which was pretending to demarcate the graveyard. There were only four people. Two dirty and stinky men, wearing gloves and a scarf around their face. And a couple, him well-dressed as if he was on his way to the bank, and her completely naked. Her flesh was white like alabaster, and her charcoal black hair was covering her closed eyes.

The two men unloaded the corpses and, like bags, put them in the dirt. Dan saw them and went gliding a little lower, hoping they would leave them there. That way, they wouldn't even have to go terrorize this pathetic loser of Frank. But the grave diggers lingered a little while on the man's corpse, searching his pockets and sharing the paltry loot they found. The woman's corpse, they did not touch, though from where they were, the vultures could see a little cross twinkling around her neck.

Then the two guys took tools from the cart, a pickaxe and a shovel, and they went sweating even more on the dry soil and the smothering dust. Dan went lower still toward the bodies, slowly, hoping he could start pecking while they were busy, but one of them spotting him, threw a stone at him, which stroke the wooden cart with a muffled noise. Dan flew up, and the three scavengers landed on the church's roof, to watch, and wait. There was no hurry.

When the earth had locked the bodies up, their place in this world only marked by a wooden plank trimmed with symbols, and the dust cloud had gone far enough, Mike, Dan and Joe slowly flew down to the ground. Time to visit this pathetic loser of Frank.

They didn't need to look for him. He was expecting them, rubbing his clawed paws one against the other. He had sent his wife and kids inside, for he knew that, if he disappointed them, they would come back for him and his family, and would not miss any of them. Frank was like any other mole: gray, fearful, and near-sighted. He had only one talent: digging the ground.

- Hi guys! He said, making a start on a shaking smile.

They did not answer, and surrounded him in silence. They were almost five times taller than him. When they circled him like that, he couldn't even see the sun.

- Look, guys, please, not today. My in-law's here, and she's got a fragile heart, and...

- Oh yeah? Said Joe, bringing his sharp beak closer to Frank. Then maybe we should eat it, her heart! She'd be less of a pain!

- You'd be relieved, Frank, admit it! Dan said with a grin that twisted his yellowish beak. In-laws, they fuck your life up!

Mike said nothing, simply observing him with weary eyes. That was classic from Joe, the troublemaker no smarter than a gerbil (and at least, gerbils had comeback); classic from Dan, who fancied himself to be clever, and thought his jokes would prove it; classic from

Mike, who seemed lost in an eternal melancholy, the kind that could only be caught by beings feeding on dead people.

- Get to work, you loser! Ordered Joe, and he seized the little mole in his beak, and threw him on the tomb's fresh soil. Frank crashed in a small cloud of dust and got up, coughing, trying to remain dignified despite Dan and Joe's high-pitched laughs.

- And hurry up! Shouted Dan. If we get too hungry, we'll go eat your kids.

Frank cleaned the dust out of his fur, and gaze at the grave under his paws, trying not to let hatred and terror smother him. He cursed himself, like he did every time. What the hell was he thinking, moving here? He had insisted, his wife didn't want to come, she didn't feel like sleeping next to the dead. It'll be quiet, you'll see, he had told her. The kids will have plenty of space to play. You idiot. One doesn't raise one's kids in a graveyard. Now your family leaves in fear, and so do you, and you can't touch your wife anymore because your hands disgust her, and anyway the simple contact of a body reminds you of those graves you have to dig, and those bodies you have to exhume.

Frank had only one talent, which the vultures lacked: he could read. He let his teary eyes wander a few more seconds on the outside world, and there, the solution revealed itself, written in big letters on the wooden planks used as a tombstone. He had to screw up his eyes to see it distinctly. That was it. The beautiful, sneaky Solution, and its almost mechanical proceedings. Mike.

- Hey guys! He called. Which one do you want? The girl or the dude? I'm tellin' ya, the girl, she's young! And women are tender, generally speaking, especially the young ones.

The scavengers raised their beaks and looked at him with suspicion. Joe didn't know what to say, and Dan even looked like he smelled trouble. But it was Mike who Frank observed, a hazy stooped silhouette according to his near-sighted eyes. His sad drowsiness had gone, his eyes had lit up. For some reason that Frank could not understand, and did not want to, Mike was affected by human's charms. And the sudden idea of sticking his beak in bosoms, thighs, in a belly, or legs, woke him up. The girl! He shouted without even asking the others. Then he turned quiet again. Frank silently thanked Mike and his weird appetite. He had just condemned himself and his associates.

Frank spat on his claws and started working with a renewed energy. At last, the end of the tunnel. As soon as the naked woman would be facing the sky again, his problems would be over. They would finally be able to leave, and get closer to town. Towns were nice, too, to raise one's kids. No vultures in town. No corpses. And, icing on the cake, his mother-in-law would stop pointing out to her daughter that the man she never wanted as a son-in-law had forced her to live in a graveyard. A poorly frequented one, additionally.

His hopes for a better life helped Frank forgot his tiredness, the dust, the burning sun. He moved the soil like never before, he threw clods in the air, leaping with joy, scattering above him. The coat of ground between him and the young dead woman became thinner and thinner. Soon, he was below the surface, partially in the shadow, and the vultures' mockeries almost inaudible. This is only the first of a long series of improvement, he promised to himself.

Frank had only one talent, which the vultures lacked: the sense of smell. And long before he finally unearthed the skin made of wax, inert and white like a church candle, he had the time to breathe fully the noxious smell coming up from the ground, that smell that confirmed him his plan was going to work. He dug again, revealing the naked woman under the ground, in a strangely sensual posture. Mike would enjoy this.

Frank came back to the surface:

- Lunch is ready! He called.

The vultures rushed into the grave, starving. Immediately, they stuck their beaks in the dead flesh and delighted themselves. Frank would usually look away from this sight, but

this time, he watched them with rapture while they shredded the skin, splash each other with the blood, tearing down the organs.

- Tasty, isn't it, guys? He even dared to say. None of them answered. They were too absorbed by their meal. Mike had his beak sunk to the hilt in the woman's genitals, glued with blood, and he was making little grunts of pleasure while he devoured her. This time, Frank looked away. That guy was fucked up.

One hour later, the corpse was half-eaten, and the vultures laboriously took off to their dead tree, weighed down by the meat in their stomach. Frank watch them disappear with relief. Three days, no more, that's all the life expectancy he'd give them. He cleaned the dust out of his paws, whistling, and got back to his home, happy for the first time in years. He couldn't wait to tell his wife how he had tricked the vultures.

Behind him, on the young woman's tombstone/wooden plank, were written the few words that sentenced the three scavengers to death. Simple words, carved with a knife. 'Laura S. 1803-1826 – Spanish Flu'

Before sunset, Mike, Dan and Joe would bleed to death from every hole. And everything would be quiet under the sky of Arizona.