


FICTION

You're Death

by Tom Miller



Frank Puglisio works as a fighter. The stroke he had five, six years ago should have killed him. Frank didn't have to pray it didn't; instead he took three in the emergency room like a vampire. Would've taken more, but Nurse Nightingale spotted him. "You're Death," she said when they hauled the third guy out. They wouldn't park anyone near Frank again until he walked out of the hospital a couple of weeks later. He beat that aneurysm in his brain like he won forty-seven of forty-eight bouts. "It's not just your fists," Frank says. "It's your heart."

Frank could've gone pro like a lot of his cousins and his little brother, Meat Head, but Frank got the fight game all figured out. "Promoters are a bunch of blood-sucking worms." Frank became a bounty hunter instead when he got out of the joint. He lifts a pastrami on rye to his mouth, fills it and eats. "I'm a Pagan. I worship all living things," he says and licks juices from his fingers. "It's a hell of a lot older than Christianity and it don't have no respect for human life."

He ain't forty yet, and he looks like a heart attack two minutes before the ambulance. Even cigarettes don't touch his appetite. "Lots of appetites to feed," he says, smiles at the small-boned waitress pouring him coffee. "I'm a warlock, you know—a white witch." Maybe so. But, he knows a lot about surviving—the ring, the joint, and a stroke that should've killed him. He'll kick your ass.

The stroke hit at breakfast: biscuits and gravy at Bud's Cafe. "Felt this sharp, sharp pain right here." Frank puts his finger to his eyebrow, the rest of his fingers a juggernaut of rings, and points back through that thick Deigo hair. His wife called the doc. "Yeah, yeah," Frank said, and told the doc his wife was out in the car when the doc said he'd call

an ambulance for the hospital. Doc gave him something good for the headache though.

Frank had to get home. Some things doctors don't understand. Frank's family was calling with a job, his Sicilian Family. "You don't tell those guys to leave a message." So, Frank drove east, all those cars at the end of swirly tunnels, right next to his hubcaps quick as can be, and then from here to the mailbox again. Got worse when Frank parked and had to get to his house. "I remember the keys," he says and holds up those short, plump fingers like he just dropped a handful of grapes in a cup. "The phone rang, then—I don't know. I came to in the hospital about six. I know that on account a what time I got home." His dad waited in the emergency room.

"I want a cigarette," Frank said. "They think they're not going to let Frank Puglisio have a cigarette because they're bad for him? Hell, everything's bad." But, after a while they let Frank walk outside with Big Eddy.

"May as well let him enjoy one," the doc told Big Eddy. "May be his last."

The Meat Head always got all of Big Eddy's attention. His kid brother lost ten fights in the Navy, and still Big Eddy keeps pictures of the Meat Head in the ring, the boxing gloves from his Golden Gloves match which the punk lost. "I won forty-seven out of forty-eight fights," Frank tells Big Eddy, "and you never came to a goddamn one."

They brought the first guy in for some kind of routine thing. By then they'd taken Frank's clothes. He's lying there all drowsy with his hairy butt hanging out of the hospital gown. "They don't give you all those drugs to make you better. They want to soften you up, make you do things you don't want to do. Like being in the joint."

Frank kept hearing the first guy say he

Sometimes Frank got together with members of the Family, maybe six of them. They'd worship.

was dizzy. "I know something's wrong," the guy says. "I'm afraid I'm going to die."

"Nothing's wrong with you," Nurse Nightingale says, and pulls the dinky little curtain.

"Something's wrong," the guy says.

Nurse Nightingale leaves him for a minute. The drugs wash over Frank. He remembers a beach when he was a little kid in Sicily. He made some promises then. Pretty soon the guy on the other side of the curtain says his heart's going, like a basketball's filling up inside his chest. They give him nitro, but it still can't put enough oxygen in the first guy's blood. People scramble. "Adrenaline!" a doc yells. "Beeb." Son-of-a-bitch flatlines. All that chaos.

"Whew! He went quick!"

The next guy drank too much. Smell everything coming out of him—puke, sweat, snot, mothballs, and booze. They take his jeans off him and set them under the curtain in a rumpled pile of urine stink so bad it woke Frank up.

"I ain't takin' anymore dope!" Frank tells Nurse Nightingale. He grabs the handful of tape and needles stuck in his arm and rips them out, his blood all thin from the stuff they been dripping into him. "Frank Puglisio ain't taken no orders!" Nurse Nightingale lightens up a little.

Frank's got his eyes open some. Big Eddy still waits around at the hospital. They ask him to talk to Frank, let them start an IV again but, pretty soon, Frank's all alone again, letting his eyes close, all alone like when he fought in the ring, only he stood up then. Yeah, maybe thirty, forty guys around the ring, but just Frank and two other guys inside the ring, and neither one of them on Frank's side. Kept tagging this guy between the eyes until both sides of his nose ripped open like a busted tomato, blood all over Frank and him. Maybe Frank did that down in Buena Vista. No gloves in that fight. No referee. Moved Frank to Cañon City for hard time after that fight.

The second guy never really comes out of

it. Frank can smell him coming apart on the other side of the curtain: his liver gone, stomach rotted away, nothing left of his brain but a vacuum tube for Night Train Express. Choking on his puke. Giving up.

"Get him out of here!" Frank yells for Nurse Nightingale. "He stinks!"

Sometimes Frank got together with members of the Family, maybe six of them.

They'd worship. You know, the earth, the sun, and all the time the water's been here, the life in everything. Some guys in the joint got into pentagrams, black robes, and tattoos. Frank didn't blame them. After all, they was in hell. The joint is hell and they was all in it.

"I just want to do my time," Frank said. Six or seven of them stood around him. Some loudmouth said he wanted to fight Frank, said he and his buddies was gonna make Frank their punk. The guard broke it up. But, the Loudmouth's time came up in Buena Vista. Frank, the Loudmouth, and four other guys cleaned up cigarette butts in the yard before dinner until the guards followed the four other guys in to eat; just Frank and the Loudmouth left outside all alone.

"Come on, Frank, you know I was only joking."

"Yeah, yeah," Frank told him. Then, Frank showed him—you don't challenge a warlock, ever, and think you can joke away that fight. If it'd been the Meat Head, Big Eddy would have thrown in the towel for the Loudmouth. But, Frank wouldn't have quit. That's how he lost his last bout. The ref's on the other guy's side. It takes instincts to win, killer instincts. "And, that's when the ref stops the fight? Come on! You don't gotta worry about the other side cause they think they gotta play by the rules. I got other rules."

The third guy was a priest. He came in after midnight. Nice enough guy, white hair, tall, but those sad blue eyes. "No, no," he said to Nurse Nightingale, "nothing to worry about." They talked about all his years at church socials, eating doughnuts, and his heart troubles. "No need to worry."

Frank likes the priest. Reminds him of the ring. That's where Frank had no need to worry. He had on his two gloves, and the other guy had his two gloves—one guy steps out of the ring a winner. Long time ago Frank wanted to win every fight so badly he even thought about calling on his powers. Calling on, you know. But he didn't have to. "All I had to do was to use my hands." Frank says it's like cutting meat

the first time. "First you got to wrap your fingers around that cold flesh, then make the knife go wherever you want it to cut."

Nurse Nightingale flutters all around, drops in on Frank, but he don't want to talk and acts like he's sleeping. He hears the priest tell her he knows it's his time, that he's got to make his last sacrament. She stays with him until another guy comes in, not a priest, but another guy wearing a collar. They talk and talk. Frank could have listened, but he just laid there and tuned it out. It was all just mumbling anyhow.

Frank started sweating—a cold sweat, not like sleeping off whiskey. No, these drops came from ice. The aneurysm, the little piece of Frank's brain that went haywire, had to go away for Frank to live. Frank knew he'd get better if he could just lay still, shut up those two guys behind the curtain, and let the sweat just trickle onto the pillow. Near dawn, the guy in the collar went to get Nurse Nightingale. The old priest died real quick like.

Frank says he can't remember the next four weeks real clear. "Just ate," he says. "I gained forty pounds by the time I walked out of the hospital." Frank dabs the corners of his mouth with the paper napkin. "Oh, yeah," Frank chuckles, "Nurse Nightingale. When the guy in the collar brought her back, she checked on me first." Frank had his blood pressure steady, his temperature down. Frank was just laying there, about to go to sleep, a big smile on his face, and his hands folded over his stomach. Then she checked on the priest. That's when she said to Frank, "You're Death," and moved Frank to a room all by himself. ☺