

*(sits, takes a healthy sip)*

Yes, a good bar is a sacred place. Tied one on? Said something stupid? Fell on your ass? Waited around till last call and went home with someone you shouldn't? So what! See you tomorrow, same time, same stool in the corner of the bar. That was my spot. Just inside the door off to the side, in that little nook created by the turn of the bar as it bends back into the wall. That was my spot. I'd sit, bullshit with Malachi or the rest of the reporters assigned to City Hall, and I'd do that thing where you're focused on whoever you're talking to, but you're also aware of every new person that walks in, keeping an eye out. And in my case hoping, maybe even willing HER to walk through the door. You know who. What's that Bogie line? "All the gin joints" and whatnot? I had to, you know? Because try as I might nobody else ever took her spot in my psyche. Some people, they just...imprint themselves, you know? And Joan...she had done a number and she didn't even know my fucking name!

Okay, let me back up a bit. After Columbia I took a job covering City Hall for the New York Post. It was great fun every day, and if I'm lying I'm dying. Koch was in office, and I got to travel all over the country covering him. Which was funny, because Koch hated to leave New York, so he wasn't the best interview while on the road. In fact, my best showing in the Post--because, normally all they reserved me was a few paragraphs below the fold on page twelve of the local politics section--but for this story I made page three! Of the whole paper! Third page! Quite a get, for me at least. And it came about because...we were in California with Koch, and he was in a foul mood and didn't want to talk, but he had just appeared on a morning show in Los Angeles, this was January of '86, and the Challenger Space Shuttle had just exploded. And the guest after Koch was non other than Barbara Bush. So, me and my big brain, I put seven and twelve together and got nineteen, and I thought, "Hey! She's from Houston, I bet she knew some of these dead guys." No disrespect, rest in peace and all that. So I flagged her down, said, "Ma'am, I'm Frank McCreary with the Post and I just wondered if you had a moment to talk about the shuttle?" She was so friendly, and it ended up being a very lovely little tribute to the astronauts. And it got me on page three, which was nothing to sniff at.

Wait, here's a good story: I was doing some investigating into malpractice at nursing homes in the boroughs, and there was this Staten Island nursing home that was busing old people to Brooklyn for dental care. I thought, well that's bullshit, there have to be dentists on Staten Island, right? Why you gotta bus all these seniors, put-out and sweating

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for hours and hours and whatnot? So--and it probably could have been better--but it ended up being a good exposition of the trauma inflicted on the elderly. The Post ran it, and then the Staten Island Advance picked it up, and I ended up getting an award from the Second District Dental Society of Staten Island. Some bullshit plaque for exposing the system, but still, the dinner was nice.

So, I got my plaque, and I've made the trek back from the Rock, because Staten Island was no easy commute, and I'm sitting in my spot at the Head, and Malachi is saying maybe they'll hang the plaque in the bathroom or something, which of course makes me choke on my Guinness, and I spill some and Malachi says, "Hey, quit wasting the good stuff!" and I say, "Ah, go fuck yourself it was your fault anyway!" and we're carrying on and that's when I look across the bar and THAT'S WHEN I SEE HER.

Joan Catherine LeCoursier. And she's...she's there, sitting a good ways down the bar, across the room, but IN the room, and...she's looking at me and she's smiling, still with that glow, still with those eyes, me still with my heart at the ready to be forked over, no questions asked. It's been... anyone keeping track? Well on ten years, at least. Late 80's, it was, maybe 1990 itself, but...she looked the same. As beautiful as that first day I saw her in the newsroom in Baltimore. And like that first day, I think I stared, speechless, for a good two minutes. Except this time there was no little light to tell me it was my turn to speak, there was just Malachi smacking his hand down on the bar and telling me not to scare the tourists. I said, "Mal, that aint' no tourist, that's the one." And I was just about to get up and go over, but she beat me to it. She picked up her glass of wine--which, I can see why Mal thought she was a tourist, drinking white wine at the Head--and she comes over and leans into the bar next to me and says..."Looks like you got yourself a plaque, Steve."

I said, "Joan, I'm betting you know that's not my name, and if you can get it right, the rest of your drinks are on me."

She said, "I was only planning on have the one tonight."

I said, "I didn't mean only tonight. I meant--"

And she stopped me with a hand on my shoulder. "Careful what you offer, FRANKLIN, or I may just take you up on it."

Well...that just kicked my head into another dimension, I don't mind saying. If I'm lying, I'm...