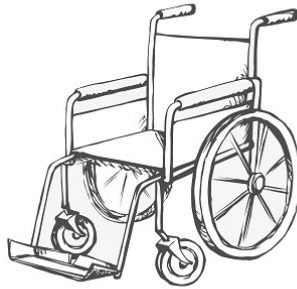


Frank

Chase Connor



“Who cries over a homeless man who screams at everyone who walks by him?”

The man had a gray beard that reached for his bellybutton, salt and pepper hair grabbing at his shoulders, two legs that had been amputated just below the knee joints, a motorized wheelchair, and a home. He smelled of cigarette smoke and Old Spice aftershave, though I wasn’t sure why since he obviously never shaved. If I had been a child when we met, I would have asked why he smelled like aftershave if he didn’t shave since kids are allowed to possess poor social skills. However, the first time he called me a “cunt,” I was a twenty-six-year-old man, not a child.

That was his thing. He sat outside the coffee shop in his motorized wheelchair and called anyone who walked by a “cunt.” The first time he called me that name, it was the end of summer, the sun was directly overhead, and beads of sweat dotted my forehead along the hairline. I had been on a run. The back of my shirt was drenched in sweat, the chest of my shirt was dark from the river of sweat that had run along it, and my legs felt like jelly. An iced coffee—and possibly a bakery item—would be my reward for doing something good for my body.

As I approached the front door of the coffee shop, the last bit of a Kelly Clarkson song was playing in my ears, and I stopped to extract my earbuds to stow them in my pocket. My eyes were down, focused on the task at hand. As one sweaty hand reached for the door handle, and the other slid my earbuds into my pocket, I heard his voice for the first time. Gravelly and deep, worn by age and improper use—possibly the habit of cigarettes—he greeted me.

“Cunt!”

I reacted like anyone else would in a similar situation.

My feet nearly rolled over each other, my hand, slick from sweat, slid from the metal bar door handle, and my head whipped around.

Sweat droplets, like confetti, flew from my hair.

For a moment's breath, my head jerked around, looking for the source of the voice and...*that word*.

When my eyes finally landed on the bearded man with two half legs sitting in the motorized wheelchair, I was certain the voice didn't belong to him. Dressed in olive green cargo pants, the bottom halves empty, folded up, and pinned to just above the knee, a t-shirt proclaiming, "Disco Sucks," and a ball cap that had seen better days, he looked like an average older, disabled man. Not someone who would verbally harass a person simply trying to cool off after a long run. The long, gray, wizardly beard and the salt and pepper hair that swept his shoulders were unusual for a man his age but didn't make him look prone to violent outbursts. In a word, he looked harmless. Unkempt a bit, but harmless.

I don't know how long I stared at him as I stood in front of the coffee shop door, but it was long enough to draw his ire.

"What are you lookin' at, ya' cunt?" he spat.

Aghast at the man's blatant use of an easy way with such a word, I grabbed the door handle and swung it wide, air conditioning like tiny pinpricks against my sweaty skin as I rushed inside the coffee shop. As the door swung shut behind me, I could hear the man in the wheelchair chuckling lowly to himself.

Though I was never what I would consider faint of heart, having a strange man who had never met me before call me awful names had shaken me to my core. Worse than that, I couldn't rightfully call him names back, could I? A man with half of each leg missing who was using a motorized wheelchair meant that I had to play by a different set of rules.

Right?

On such a hot day, my favorite coffee shop was virtually a ghost town. Standing there, just inside the front door, letting the cold air soothe my skin, I realized that two employees were seated at a table nearby, taking a break. Only two of the employees were actually behind the counter taking orders and preparing them. Having been a regular patron of the coffee shop for a few years, the two employees at the table recognized me, greeted me with nods and smiles, which I returned. When I approached the counter to place my order, those two employees repeated the gestures of goodwill.

"What can I fix you up with?" the cashier asked brightly, her visor riding high on her forehead so that her eyes were clearly visible.

"Uh," I glanced over my shoulder, as though concerned the man from outside had followed me, "just an iced coffee."

The cashier began pushing buttons.

I glanced over my shoulder nervously again, surprised at how shaken the encounter with the man had made me.

"And a blueberry scone, please," I added hastily.

"And a blueberry scone," the cashier parroted. "Great choices. Anything else?"

Another glance over my shoulder.

Never in my life had I thought I would find myself in a situation where I was concerned about a man in a wheelchair chasing me down to scream obscenities at me while I ordered coffee.

The man in the wheelchair wasn't the first person to ever call me a name—even one so vile—but—

"Did he scream at you?" The cashier's voice brought me back to reality. "He does that sometimes."

I turned to look at the cashier, unsure if she had said what I thought she had said or if I had imagined it.

"The guy in the wheelchair?" She rolled her eyes with mirth. "He sometimes screams at people. He's harmless. I don't think he has anything else to do. Homeless, ya' know?"

"Oh."

"Yeah." She shrugged. "Don't worry about him. All he does is insult people. He won't hurt you."

"Okay."

So, I paid for my drink and snack, no longer concerned about the man in the wheelchair, though still perplexed. After I paid, I considered finding a table to sit and enjoy my coffee and scone, as I would on a normal visit, but the man's insult had changed my plans. That word reverberated in my ears—leaving it the only thing I could concentrate on. If I sat down in the coffee shop, I'd hear the word on an endless loop and become increasingly concerned that he would enter the shop to repeat himself. Maybe he would wheel right up to my table and call me names in front of the coffee shop staff.

How would I defend myself in public against such a person?

I couldn't scream back insults at a disabled person. I'd have to do my best to ignore any insults. However, if he got angry at me ignoring him, he might actually get violent—no matter what the cashier had said about him being harmless. I couldn't physically fight a man in a wheelchair. The staff would get to witness my humiliation at being called a vile name repeatedly as I sat in my chair and cooked in a stew of unacceptable options. If I did anything to defend myself, whose side would they take? Would they expect me to just take the insults since the man was disabled? Would they get mad and defend him if I screamed back at him?

With my drink and a small paper satchel in hand, I headed for the exit, determined to enjoy my coffee and scone at home. At my own kitchen table. With the doors locked. Where a man in a motorized wheelchair couldn't roll right in and start calling me names.

A sharp inhale of breath at the door, and I pushed my way out, determined to breeze past the man, ignoring anything he said or did.

"*Cunt!*" the man barked at me.

It hurt more the second time, which surprised me.

Maybe because I knew it was coming but had no rebuttal or defense.

Instead of looking at the man, I bolted, my feet carrying me quickly away as the man's laughter faded in the distance I created between myself and the coffee shop.

When I got home, I made sure the front and back doors were locked, then sat at the kitchen table to sip my coffee and pick at my scone. They tasted like nothing. No enjoyment could be had after such an unnerving event. My dog laid at my feet, droopy eyes looking up at me, wondering if he had done something wrong. I was in no mood to play or give pats.

As soon as my husband walked in the back door at six-thirty, I relayed the story of the guy at the coffee shop to him. His reaction—which was to laugh uproariously—was not what I had expected or wanted. He obviously didn't understand the predicament I had found myself in, and he certainly didn't grasp my humiliation at finding myself in such a situation. We didn't speak much as we made dinner, my mood dour, nor did we talk much while or after we ate. When we crawled into bed, I still gave him a kiss, but we stayed on separate sides of the bed.

No friskiness transpired, which was a rarity in our house.

Summer fizzled into autumn, hazy heat rising from the pavement was replaced by crunchy leaves falling to the dying grass. The man in the motorized wheelchair called me a “cunt” no less than seventeen times during those months. I'd go to the coffee shop and cringe when I'd see him sitting by the front door in his wheelchair. When I'd stop by to get a coffee, and he was nowhere in sight, I would say a silent “thank you” to whoever was above, blessing me that day.

As the temperatures dropped to a pleasant, if chilly range, I assumed that I would see the man and his wheelchair less often. Sitting outside of a coffee shop on a warm day was one thing, but to do the same when a decent jacket was required was another.

In mid-October, with the shop windows and houses decorated in oranges, blacks, purples, and greens, I became hopeful that I wouldn't see the man again for many months. Not until the buds started to show on the trees and the grass began to sway brightly in the early spring breeze.

A trip to the coffee shop one afternoon destroyed all of my hope. So hopeful was I that I wouldn't have to deal with the man for at least a few months, I wasn't paying attention as I rounded the corner of the shop, headed for the front door. My hand was reaching into my back pocket for my wallet, and I was unbuttoning my coat with the other. Sitting down in the shop to enjoy my near future purchases was the plan, and I intended to be ready as soon as I stepped through the front door into the heated building.

“Cunt!”

I jumped, my wallet falling from my fingers and onto the sidewalk as the gravelly voice accosted me.

The man in the wheelchair was sitting near the front door, holding a cup of coffee, a shit-eating grin on his face as he stared viciously at me. Belligerently, I growled under my breath and knelt to snatch my wallet off of the pavement. Glaring at the man as I stomped over to the front door, he merely chuckled and sipped his coffee as I swung the door open violently.

Ordering my coffee and a scone was an aggressive event for the first time in my life. My blood was boiling and pounding in my ears. I had let myself get lulled into a false sense of security, certain that I would not have to worry about

the man in the wheelchair for at least the rest of Autumn and Winter, and he had surprised me. He had verbally accosted me once again, and I was humiliated at how I had been so shocked that I dropped my wallet. The man had watched me bend over to retrieve it and then chuckled mockingly at me as I stormed into the coffee shop. He had seen how affected I was by his behavior.

When I left the coffee shop, steam was practically coming out of my ears as I clenched my hand around my coffee and clutched the little white paper bag in the other. The man in the wheelchair was still there, obviously waiting for one last parting shot. As I stepped through the door and felt it swing shut behind me, for a split second, I thought that maybe he decided enough fun had been had for the day. He'd see no reason to scream at me again. Maybe he would wait until my next visit—if I was unfortunate enough to see him again—to call me the disgusting name.

"Cunt!" The man screamed suddenly.

Fortunately, though I was not happy about it, I was prepared for his scream. I didn't drop my drink or my bag, nor did I jump in surprise or terror. Unlike other times, the man didn't wait for a reaction. He immediately began chuckling to himself as I froze in place, my fingers digging into the side of my cup, threatening to crush it.

Before I could stop myself, my feet discovered they had a mind of their own, and I was spinning to face the man. My hands were shaking, and I was trembling as I squeezed my cup and glared at him. He was looking down, his coffee cup on its way to his lips when he noticed that I had turned to face him. The cup stopped halfway to his mouth, and his eyes turned up to meet mine as I snarled angrily down at him.

"No! You're the cunt!" I growled.

My whole body shook, and my fingers continued to threaten to pierce the side of my cup as the man and I stared into each other's eyes. Without looking into a mirror, I knew that my face was red, my eyes were slits, and my mouth was turned up in disgust. The man stared passively at me for a few moments, his eyes never leaving mine.

"Fair enough," he finally said.

His cup finished its journey to his lips, and he took a sip.

My whole body seemed to forget how to function.

The man lowered his cup and looked away, his eyes taking in the scenery, no longer concerned with me.

Probably looking for another victim. I thought to myself.

Robotically, I shifted on my feet again, turning away from the man, suddenly ashamed of myself for what I had just said. The man paid me no mind as I jerkily walked away, my fingers loosening their vice grip on the cup.

That night, I tossed and turned in bed.

My husband threatened to banish me to the guest room if I didn't settle down, so I finally fell into a hazy-like sleep. In the morning, I felt as though I had been beaten half to death.

Homeless men with half of their legs missing had a right to be surly and rude; I did not. My fitful sleep had nothing to do with ingesting too much caffeine

or some health disorder. My conscience was telling me what I knew the moment the words had exited my mouth. There had been no need for me to shout at the homeless man in the motorized wheelchair.

He was rude, but he was still a person.

After my husband went to work that morning—I made sure to kiss him and tell him “I love you” beforehand—I found my feet sliding into my sneakers and my hands stuffing my keys and wallet into my pockets. Guided by my conscience, my feet carried me to the coffee shop automatically. I had just had a cup of coffee with my husband at breakfast, so my journey was not about caffeine.

As I walked, I found myself hoping that I would not see the man in the motorized wheelchair sitting by the front door. Then I could tell myself that at least I tried, but he hadn’t been there, so I could drop the whole thing. Surely, my inner self would wipe away the guilt if I could at least say that I tried to talk to the man and apologize?

My heart sank when I rounded the corner of the coffee shop to find the man in position for the day. He already had a cup of coffee, which he was sipping on as his eyes scanned the scene before him. Sunk so low that it felt like it was in my groin, my stomach tried to make me change my mind. Something higher up in my chest wouldn’t let me, though, and I shuffled toward the man.

“Hey,” the man’s head turned, and he looked at me blandly as I approached, “I, uh, yesterday...”

The brilliance of the man’s crystal-clear gray eyes unnerved me, threatening to make me run away, never to return. So what if I never had coffee from my favorite coffee shop again? I could forget apologizing to the man, turn around, and never return. He didn’t know where I lived. The people in the shop didn’t care if I apologized or not. No one had witnessed the interaction between the man and me the day before. I could...walk away.

“Yeah?” he grumbled.

“I wanted to apologize.” The words fell from my mouth.

He just stared.

“I was rude,” I said. “I’m sorry for being rude.”

For a moment longer, the man stared into my eyes. His gray eyes bore into mine, and I found myself shifting from foot to foot, wondering what name he would call me this time. Whatever it was, I would let him say it, and then I would go home.

“Well,” He raised his coffee to his lips, “all right then.”

He didn’t call me a “cunt.” He didn’t call me anything. He didn’t even specifically say he accepted my apology. Coffee was all that mattered to him as his eyes turned from mine, and he went back to surveying the rest of the world around him. So, I walked home. A little lighter; a lot less guilty.

For a few weeks, I continued my routine of stopping at the coffee shop when I was in the neighborhood. Either I had been on a run, or I was running errands, but I would stop and get a coffee and a scone. Sometimes a muffin. The man was almost always there in his motorized wheelchair, his eyes surveying everything around him but ignoring me as I passed.

After the first few times of being ignored, I started saying “hello” to the man as I passed through the front door. He never responded, but his eyes would dart to the side to appraise me. Those days that passed, where he barely acknowledged my existence, were more nerve-wracking than those when he would scream “*Cunt!*” at me. I began to wonder what he might be plotting as revenge for how curt I had been with him. Even though I had apologized, it was obvious that he was still upset. He was just waiting for the perfect time to get me back for how rude I had let myself be.

Then, one unseasonably warm day in early November, I passed by the man on my way into the coffee shop. His jacket was laid over his lap, and he was sipping his coffee like always. That was the day I decided that I would no longer say “hello” to him. My mind was made up that I would walk right past him, get my coffee, and then leave without acknowledging that I had seen him. My hand was on the door handle when the man decided to change my plan for me.

“Lost my legs in the war,” he said simply, his eyes still straight ahead. “That’s why I’m in the wheelchair.”

For several breathless seconds, I stood there, gazing blankly into the coffee shop, my hand hanging loosely from the metal bar door handle.

“Which war?” I asked finally, not moving.

“Well,” he chuckled, “I’m old, but it wasn’t the damn Civil War.”

I smiled to myself, finally letting my head turn to look over at him.

“Vietnam?” I asked.

“Yeah.” He nodded, though he still didn’t look up at me. “That’s the one. Happened just a few months before the damn war ended. Blown clean off. Wasn’t nothing to amputate even. Lucky I lived, I guess.”

“That has to be rough.”

“Can’t dance like I used to.” He shrugged and brought the coffee to his lips. “But I save a shit load of money on shoes.”

A laugh erupted from my mouth, which I quickly tried to cover with my free hand. The man just grinned and turned his head up to look at me. He gave me a wink—a sign that we were now in a secret brotherhood of his making.

“Do you want a scone?” I found myself asking.

“What kind they got?” He craned his neck to look over his shoulder. “They only had blueberry earlier. Hate that shit.”

“I always get blueberry.” I shrugged. “But I can get you a different kind if they have others.”

“Anything but blueberry.” He nodded.

I motioned with a flick of my head. “Come on then.”

“Nah.” He waved me off. “I ain’t goin’ in there. I like it outside.”

“Oh.”

After a moment of consideration, he nodded at one of the tables at the edge of the patio.

“I’ll wait for you over there.”

My eyes flicked to the table. “All right.”

The humming of his motorized wheelchair reached my ears as I entered the coffee shop. As I ordered a coffee for myself—and two chocolate chip scones—

I watched the man sitting at the table through the window. He sipped his coffee and stared at nothing, waiting for me to return.

Once I made my way outside, I didn't just hand the man his small white paper bag with his scone in it. I eased into the seat across from him and slid the bag across the table to him. Urgently, he lifted the bag and ripped open the top, making sure I hadn't brought him a blueberry scone.

"That'll do," he said, then placed the bag back on the table in front of himself.

He went back to sipping his coffee, and I tentatively sipped mine, my eyes anywhere but on him. For several minutes we sat there and drank coffee, keeping company with each other but keeping our thoughts to ourselves.

"Lost my baby daughter in a car crash a year after the war," he said finally. "Wife got pregnant pretty quickly after I got back—don't need legs to make that happen—then three months after she gave birth, they were in a car wreck. Wife survived. My baby daughter didn't. Marriage didn't last long after that. Probably my fault."

Wide eyes were all I could manage as I held my coffee cup halfway to my mouth, aghast at the revelation of such personal information.

"Legs ain't that big of a loss, really." He shrugged; sipped his coffee. "When you think about all the other things you can lose."

That sat in the air between us as I stared at him and he sipped his coffee.

"I'm not homeless." He insisted. "I just like coming here. Gets me out of the house."

"Okay."

That was all I could manage.

"Name's Frank." His eyes finally met mine again, and he reached a massive hand across the table to me.

Tentatively, I reached out and took his.

"Daniel." I returned.

"Nice to meet you, Daniel," he said.

"It's nice to meet you, Frank."

He nodded. For the next several minutes, we sat there, in silence, drinking our coffee. Both of us finally opened our bags and ravenously ate our chocolate chip scones, exchanging glances every now and then. We went back to drinking our coffee afterward. Once the last sip of my coffee was gone, I sighed and shook the empty cup at him.

"I guess I should go home, Frank."

"Yeah," he said into the air, "I suppose I should get home, too. Gotta feed the cat."

As I stood from the table, a thought filled my mind.

"Frank," I frowned to myself, "why did you scream—why'd you call me names?"

"I do it to everybody." He waved me off, his thumb reaching for the knob on the arm of his wheelchair that would move him forward.

"But...*why*?" I couldn't help but chuckle. "It's kind of mean. And it makes you seem crazy. Or dangerous."

He craned his neck so he could look up at me. The sun was high in the sky, forcing a squint to his eyes.

"It's better to be crazy and dangerous than invisible. If you're invisible, you're nobody. If you're crazy and dangerous, you're somebody."

There was nothing I could say to that.

"I'm here most days," he said as he nudged the knob on his wheelchair, slowly rolling away from the table. "I'll buy the goodies next time."

"All right."

I stood at the side of the table, holding my trash as Frank's chair spun, and he wheeled away from me. I don't know how long I stood there, watching him disappear down the sidewalk, headed home to feed his cat.

Meeting Frank at the coffee shop became semi-routine. I'd show up, he'd be sitting by the front door, and maybe he'd give me some money to buy us a treat to go with our coffees. Or it would be my turn to buy. We'd sit outside at a table and talk. Or not talk. He'd tell me about his cat and his daily routine. He'd talk about the war. He confessed he wasn't a religious man but found comfort in spirituality and the occasional glass of whiskey. I told him about my husband eventually, once it was clear he wasn't homophobic, and about my dog. I confessed that I had once been religious but suddenly found that I didn't appreciate God's country club or its members.

Sometimes Frank would indicate that he was in no mood to be bothered. I'd go into the coffee shop, and order a coffee and scone for myself, then sit inside and watch him through the window, hoping he would change his mind, look inside, and indicate that I should join him. I'd watch him scream "*Cunt!*" at other people as they walked into the coffee shop, scaring new people. Every time it was difficult not to laugh. Once I knew the secret of why Frank screamed at people, it was no longer startling. It was funny. If not a bit sad. On those days, when he felt like screaming at other people, he never looked through the window and gestured for me to join him outside.

Even Frank needed his alone time to practice his work.

And I enjoyed watching him work.

A few days before Christmas, there was snow on the ground, and the temperature had dipped precipitously. I managed to convince Frank to sit inside the coffee shop for once. We could be warm and enjoy our treats by the window where we could still watch people and the falling snow outside. He was reluctant, but he followed me inside and claimed a table for us while I ordered a coffee and two scones for us. The coffee shop staff eyed him warily as they went about filling the order I gave them.

"Do you have Christmas plans, Frank?" I asked when I sat down across from him that day.

"Nah," he said, accepting his white paper bag from me, "it's usually just me and the cat. Tuna and T.V. dinners."

"Would you," I started to speak, "I mean, if you like, you could—"

"It's tradition." Frank cut me off. "Jasper and I like to snuggle and watch some of the boob tube and eat our feast. We love our tradition."

I nodded. Frank wouldn't hear an invitation, let alone accept one. So, for a while that day, we sat at the window and watched people carefully trod through the snow outside. The staff would look over every so often to make sure that Frank was behaving. Frank and I sipped our coffee and exchanged a few words here and there, but mostly enjoyed the easy, quiet company.

When my coffee was almost gone, Frank sighed.

"I guess maybe sitting inside is better," he said.

I nodded.

"The patio is nice in Spring and Fall," I agreed, "but you really should get out of the heat and cold. At least for a little bit."

"Well," he said, "I like to be seen. I don't get seen a lot."

Fair enough. I thought to myself.

The coffee shop was closed on Christmas Day, but I made sure to go by on Christmas Eve so that I could take Frank a Christmas card. Inside, I nestled a gift card to the coffee shop. Frank had admitted during our visits together that he usually only got a large black coffee, which was cheap, so I made sure the card was good enough for the next twenty large black coffees he ordered.

Between Christmas and New Year's Day, I didn't have time to go to the coffee shop, but Frank and I caught up after the holidays. Having not seen me in over a week, he had plenty to talk about, but mostly Jasper, his cat. The last two months of winter passed, and Frank and I spent plenty of days sitting in the coffee shop together, enjoying our coffee and talks. Sometimes we enjoyed silence. Either way, we always had someone with whom to enjoy our coffee breaks.

The first day of Spring, when I went to the coffee shop, was the first time I didn't see Frank waiting by the front door. I checked around the outside of the coffee shop and even inside, wondering if maybe he was waiting with his coffee at our table by the window. But he never showed. So, I got my coffee and scone to go. I ate at the kitchen table, sad that I didn't get to see Frank. He had become as much of my routine as my husband, my dog, my runs—he was one of those things I looked forward to each day.

A few months went by, and Frank still hadn't shown up at the coffee shop. I began to wonder if maybe he had been put into an assisted living facility. Maybe some family he never talked about came and got him to come live with them? Maybe he got tired of coffee? Maybe he got tired of me? It was possible that, since I was no longer any fun to scream "*Cunt!*" at, that he was tired of putting up with me, after all.

When early summer came, one weekend, my husband went to the shop to get us each an iced coffee to enjoy while we sat on the deck reading our books. Upon returning home, he informed me that the coffee shop staff asked him to tell me that Frank had passed away. One of them had seen a news article about a man found dead in his home. After a few days of his neighbor not seeing Frank come or go, he had gone over to check on him.

He had been dead for a week.

The neighbor had taken Jasper in as a pet.

At first, I was relieved to know what had happened. To finally have an explanation as to why Frank had stopped showing up at the coffee shop. In fact, I was almost amused, thinking about Frank in the afterlife, shouting "*Cunt!*" at anyone who didn't acknowledge him.

Maybe Frank had his legs back?

Maybe he was getting to see his baby daughter again?

Hopefully, the scones they served wherever he was weren't blueberry.

So...

Who cries over a homeless man who screams at everyone who walks by him?

I do. Maybe I'm the only person who ever saw him. But he was seen. He was somebody.

His name was Frank.