

## Frank—A Terrapin Ridge Story

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One time, after his first wife left him and he got laid off from his job down at the factory in the city all in the same week, Frank Mills got rather despondent and went out drinking alone.

He parked his old '64 Chevy truck near the boat launch far back on the lake and drank himself within a breath or two of either passing out or spontaneous human combustion, depending on whether or not he tried to light a cigarette next.

It was at that point, on that night with a nearly full moon shining down on him from that beautiful mountain sky, country music pouring for the single, scratchy speaker on the radio that could only pick up that one station on a good day, that Frank decided to end his pain and suffering by taking his own life.

Now, Frank figured that the quickest and least painful way to go would be to shoot himself with a gun, the only problem being that he didn't have a gun with him, because he'd never owned one, nor even shot one, but in his advanced state of inebriation, he figured that was the best way to go.

He considered driving down to old Mark Hargis' place, but figured as drunk as he knew he was, he'd drive over a cliff or something and die before he could get there. Hargis, he knew, bought, sold and traded guns all over the country, apparently (sometimes) even legally.

Further reflection, which just added to his feelings of woe, made Frank realize he'd spent the last of his ready cash on the bottle of moonshine he'd just consumed in the moonshine, and so would be unable to purchase a firearm from Hargis, whom he knew would also likely be unwilling to grant credit to him, on account of his having lost his sole sources of bankable income (job and wife).

Further reflection also suggested that turning to Hargis would not be a good idea, as Hargis seemed to still hold a grudge over Frank having had an affair with his daughter Linda the year she graduated high school. "Lord, he'd as likely shoot me dead as talk to me at all," Frank mused to himself.

So, lacking a gun at the moment, or the wherewithal to get one, Frank figured next best way to go was just to start the truck and drive himself into the lake at high speed with the windows open, expecting that the weight of the truck would take him under pretty quick and that the cold of the water would force the breath out of him, making it all that much easier to drown.

He was drunk enough that his fear of open bodies of water and his inability to swim counted as positive encouragement to his growing plan: even if he changed his mind after he hit the water, he'd be unable to swim out of it because he'd never learned to

swim. He figured he'd be well out into the lake, as going downhill he could likely get the old horse up to fifty or so miles per hour or even more by the time he went in if he could hit the gears right. He figured that would be enough.

By the time he realized that the needle on the gas gauge was already well below "E," the charge in the battery was also wearing low because he'd had the radio on for several hours, and the starter was beginning to make a weary sound like it was about to expire as well, Frank regained enough of his senses to understand that the Chevy was deeply involved in the conspiracy to thwart his plans and was pretending to be out of gas.

He also became aware that his truck was located at the top of the parking lot, facing downhill, on that 150-yard incline to the boat ramp.

"Well, I'm going now," he declared aloud as he slipped the truck into neutral and managed to release the emergency brake. The truck rolled forward, picking up speed as he struggled to keep the monster pointed more or less at the boat ramp, the lack of power steering making his inebriated efforts somewhat less than effective.

"Aaay-yaaaah!" he yelled as the truck plunged headlong into the water. "Lord, don't judge me too hard," he thought to himself as he lost consciousness.

Now, you might expect that it was at this point that someone happened upon the scene, perhaps even roused by his hair-raising yell and the ensuing splash. Frank had no such luck.

Despite his intention, and the numerous holes in the floorboards of the ancient Chevy, the truck rather than immediately sinking and taking Frank with it, managed to float for some time before descending to the depths. Unconscious and unmoving, and of course unaware, the truck eventually settled to the bottom as the ripples of its entry into the lake expanded and settled out.

And that's how we found him that morning, when Big Thompson and I brought his flat boat to the launch. Just before sunrise, as we were intending to spend at least the morning engaging in some entrepreneurial activity that would result in fish for our wives to fry up for dinner. We later figured he'd been there for about five hours at that point.

What Frank didn't realize, because Frank had never been out on this or any other lake before—that fear of open water—was that this arm of the lake was nearly silted in. Anyone over five feet six could walk the half-mile to the far shore without getting their nipples wet when the power company had the lake at full pool, and the recent lack of rain meant that it was a good two-foot lower than that, anyway. Frank had missed the sign warning potential boaters of this problem.

When we arrived, shortly before dawn, Frank's truck was still sitting on the bottom where it had settled to rest, about thirty feet off shore and mostly parallel to it, water almost but not quite to the top of the wheel wells. The mud had settled, and you

could clearly see the ruts left by the Chevy. Frank, wet though he was, was still sound asleep. We could hear him snoring after we turned Big's truck off.

The fiercely cold water Frank had counted on, being late July, would have measured about 78 or maybe 80 degrees, and consequently would have only helped him relax if he hadn't already been oblivious when he made contact with it.

Not wanting to get particularly wet ourselves, we went ahead and launched Big's flatboat and parked his truck and trailer off to the side. We loaded the rest of our supplies for the day, got in, and used the trolling motor to move over next to Frank's truck. Frank was still snoring.

Big and I looked at each other.

"Frank," I said a gently as I could, without laughing.

No response, "Hey Frank!" Big said, a bit more conversational.

Frank snorted, shook his head, and groggily looked up.

"Well, hello, Big," he said, as cheerfully as he could under the circumstances, which of course he hadn't quite encompassed the full extent of yet. I'm not sure he was even aware of the hangover, or of his predicament in the lake.

"Nice morning to you, Frank," I said. "You be needing any help?"

"Why, thank you, Barn," he said, apparently becoming aware that his feet were in water up just above the ankles. Still looking at his feet, he said, "You boys got any idea how I got here? And maybe where here is, too?"

He slowly looked out the windows all around, and checked the rear-view.

"It would appear you're in your truck, about 30 inches deep in Terrapin Lake, at the Williams Point put-in," Big said. "That ring any bells with you? Sun's just rising on the other side of the ridge, if that helps."

Frank closed his eyes and was silent for a few moments. Minutes went by. I was beginning to think he'd fallen back asleep, but finally, he said, "Nothing sensible, yet."

Big said, "Well, how about you climb in the boat with us. We've got some fishing to do. That'd be better for you than sitting in your truck by yourself."

Frank allowed as that would probably be a good course of action until he could figure out what had happened, and so he clambered out the window and onto the boat. Despite his lifelong fear of open water, he did surprisingly well that day. He even managed to catch a couple of decent catfish, and was able to join us for dinner.

Anyway, this was a long way to getting around to tell about what happened later, because Frank took the miracle of his survival to heart and got a touch of the Lord once he recovered enough to piece together what had happened to him that night. Now, it was a long time before anyone laughed out loud—well at least in his presence—at his recounting of the near-death experience he'd had.

I say he got a “touch” of the Lord, because he did indeed change his ways, but not entirely to the straight and narrow. He still drank too much, and gambled and evaded taxes and the revenuers, and had truck with married women and some who weren't married, but since that morning of his conversion, figuring for himself that ending up in the lake was a sort of baptism, he did start attending church regular once a month or so if he remembered, and where before he'd never had a care or regret in the world, he since has always felt real bad later about being a sinner.