

The Way the Galaxie Ends

HIS GIRLFRIEND gets mad at him one night because, she says, he will never grow up, and she orders him out of her apartment even though it is late and cold, and Frank, not a native to this winter-gripped place, hates the cold. Feeling himself to be a victim in this, Frank puts on his sweater and his big coat and his wool cap, and he goes to his car—a '73 Ford Galaxie—gets it started, waits for it to warm up so that the heater will work, and then drives off, taking a quick look to see if his girlfriend's light has gone off yet, because if it has that would mean one thing and if it hasn't that would mean another. The light is still on as he drives away, but now he isn't sure if this means something good, or if it means something bad.

Frank decides to take the short cut back to his house, down the steep road through the Nature Park which in the summer is cool and pretty, with a creek and ferns and pines, but now, in January, is covered in snow and the road is nothing but ice. As soon as he starts down the road he realizes this had been a bad decision, as he begins to skid, and skids until he comes to the place where the road curves to the left and he slides straight into the bank on the right and the engine stops. He tries for a few minutes to back the car up and straighten the wheels but can't.

It is bitter cold, probably zero or below, as Frank stands there trying to decide what to do. He could walk back to his girlfriend's apartment, but she would only get mad at him again and probably not let him in anyway. He starts walking towards home through the Nature Park. He is thinking of a certain open, sunny hill in California, but ice-covered branches on the maple and birch trees keep breaking off and crashing down on the road around him, so that he must walk in the center of the road to avoid the exploding bits of ice and wood. There is no moon and sometimes he steps on patches of ice that he can't see, and then he thrashes about, his legs sliding in different directions and his arms up in the air, but only once does he fall.

It is 4:30 by the time he finally gets to his house and without turning up the heat he goes directly to bed. But not long after dawn the policeman who lives across the street in the house that always has bikes and puppies in the front yard wakes Frank up

to ask about the car they found in the Nature Park.

Frank considers a lie but doesn't have the energy for it, and can't even imagine what he would lie about anyway, so he explains everything while he makes a cup of coffee, which he doesn't feel like drinking, since he would just as soon go back to sleep. He has the feeling, though, that he is not going to get the chance, what with the problems with his girlfriend and getting his car towed out of the Nature Park. The cop wants to know why he drove down that road in the first place, since it has been a toboggan run for the kids for the last two months now, and Frank tells the story of his girlfriend kicking him out of her place, and they both laugh at that, because they are two men who know how that sort of thing goes. The cop says he will call the police in town and let them know that it's okay about the car, and he gives Frank some solid advice, says that he should call his girlfriend and see if she is still mad at him, and Frank does.

She says it was stupid for him to drive down that road, and he knows that this is true but she didn't have to say so. Really, she is a pain in the ass sometimes.

He calls a towing service to meet him at the Methodist Church building which is at the top of the road he shouldn't have driven down, and naturally there are stalled cars and minor accidents all over town. It will be one or two in the afternoon before anyone can get to him, which is okay with him, since that will give him time to have a good breakfast and time for his girlfriend to come over and drive him down to the church.

She shows up after eleven, and she doesn't want a cup of cocoa that he was nice enough to offer, but says she wants him to return the books he has borrowed. He gets the books for her and then she gives him a ride to the church, even though it is only a little after noon and he knows the truck probably won't get there until two.

He spends the time while he waits sitting on the steps of the church, out of the wind, where the sun is shining strong, and even though he is cold to the bone it still feels good to have the sun on his face. He is very tired and if it was ten or fifteen degrees warmer he could fall asleep. He leans against the railing of the steps and closes his eyes and thinks about his brother living in Texas, where

it is probably warm enough to sleep on a lawn right that minute.

The tow truck appears and Frank can tell that the driver thinks he is an idiot to have driven down that icy road. To get the Galaxie out they have to block the tow truck in the church parking lot at the top of the road, run a cable down the road about 75 yards, hook the cable to the frame and, while the driver complains about bad drivers, slowly winch the Galaxie up the hill. The whole operation takes about two hours before the Galaxie is in the parking lot and Frank can get it running again. Before he leaves, the tow truck driver points out that the front tie-rod on Frank's car is bent and will have to be replaced.

Frank rushes off to his bank then, the car rattling rhythmically on the road, and takes out enough money to last him for the rest of the month, until his next paycheck from teaching three sections of Introductory Economics at the University comes. He gets the short teller with the black hair and black eyebrows and the really nice mouth, and this is the only good thing that has happened so far that day. The day has already slipped away by the time he leaves the bank; only the sunset is left, that good color lighting up the tops of the steeples on the Common. He watches the light, which looks so warm, for a few minutes, and then he hears his name called and it is a friend, someone who is not from New England either, and the two of them go up the street to Barselotti's for a few drinks. Frank sips from a glass of beer and a bourbon, and then has the bartender pour out a water glass full of Metaxa for him and he sips from that for awhile. Soon it is ten o'clock, his friend long since gone somewhere else, and Frank drives carefully home, never taking the Galaxie out of low. He builds a fire in the fireplace and sits down by it, intending to think about things.

Everything is a hassle, Frank thinks, too much trouble. In his sleepiness it is the one thing he can focus on. Hassles, hassles. *Hassle*. The word booms and echoes in his brain, and when it finally dies away he realizes that hassles are what make up his world. Everything is a hassle, everything is too much trouble. His girlfriend, the car, building a

fire, turning up the thermostat—they are all too much.

He can't believe how tiring that thought is. Sitting there in front of the fire it crashes down on him: all the hassles are sucking him dry, draining the life out of him. But what is he to do?

Action. You fight fatigue with action, he decides, and suddenly he is awake, energized. Do battle with the hassles and drive them off. He packs some old clothes that he doesn't want anymore into a suitcase, pulls the broken vacuum cleaner from the closet, gathers up all the newspapers and bottles that are lying around, and then turns the thermostat in the house up to 80 degrees. He goes out to the street and tosses the suitcase and vacuum and other things into the Galaxie and drives out to the Quabbin Reservoir, along the road that would eventually take him to Boston if that was where he wanted to go. He stops at a place on the road where the lake is directly below, at the end of a steep slope. He turns the car around so that it is facing off the road and he puts it in gear and hops out. Obediently the Galaxie heads over the edge of the road; as the rear fender of the car passes him he kicks it. The Galaxie doesn't tumble or twist, just goes faster and faster down the slope and into the lake, breaking through the ice on the edge so that most of the car, except for the trunk, is in the water.

He watches the trunk sticking out of the ice and listens to the sound of the ice cracking all along the edge of the lake, sending its message to the far reaches of the universe, and already he can feel the difference. So ends the Galaxie, he thinks. His walk back to his house is almost as long as the walk he made the night before, and the similarity causes him to compare the circumstances of each walk. He has now rid himself of many things, his girlfriend, he supposes, included, but he doesn't mind. He feels himself to be a great hero, having won a great victory. He even whistles a few tunes on his way. He plans to leave the heat up as high in the house as he pleases and sleep through every bit of the next day. Sometime soon he will go to Texas, sometime before they come to ask about the car.

—MICHAEL BURKE

