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The Search for Frank Butler

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Foreword

I was inspired in this piece by John McPhee's *The Search for Marvin Gardens*. I had read this piece previously, but something about it resonated with me more this time around. I liked how he created stories within a real-life game that we all know. When I originally came up with the idea, I was planning to have Frankie be a young Frank Butler. Having her be his daughter instead, allowed for more inspiration to come from McPhee's piece. I thought it would be a much better way to include more of the town, plus some information about social circulation as well. I wasn't sure of how to end our story: Should she find her father? Or should her search continue on after the end of the story? But I liked the idea of leaving it on a cliffhanger of she found him, but is unsure if it's actually him.

The Search for Frank Butler

By Liz Marion

"Hello, can I help you?"

The voice startled Frankie as she was looking up at the sign above the doorway to the shoe repair shop.

"Oh hello! Sorry, I was lost in thought, I suppose", Frankie responded, shyly. She wasn't usually shy and allowed her thoughts to form questions almost immediately, but she wasn't expecting anyone to be at the shop this time of morning.

"Ah, I see", the shop keep responded. "Well, I can leave you to wonder, or you're welcome to come inside and sit a spell." The bell at the top of the door jingled as the shop keep opened the door further, welcoming Frankie inside.

Frankie smiled, "Yeah, that would be great actually."

She took his invitation and moved inside the shop, taking everything in as she saw it. It was a small, humble shop. She imagined it flourishing with life not that long ago. She knew it was a funeral home before it became a shoe repair shop, and Frankie couldn't help but wonder if it was difficult to move into somewhere that held so much sadness within it. The inside of the building was small, just as the outside had implied. The faded brick outside was replicated on the inside, implying that the shop had been home to several other businesses previously. She could tell the building was old, though, she didn't know exactly how old the structure was.

The shop keep held his arms open as if to take it all in. "Welcome to Ferrell Shoe Repairer's! We used to be Kearney and Ferrell a few short years ago, but... Well, that story's a bit unfortunate. Anyway, I'm Mr. Ferrell and I own this shop."

His face seemed to sadden as he mentioned the past shop, she assumed he owned with someone close to him, but he moved past it so quickly, she figured it was best not to

ask about that. It was a warm spring day as she began wandering through the streets of Lincolnville. Frankie had lived around the corner to some of the most historic buildings in Lincolnville for quite some time but had never ventured out to explore them. She had always heard about the history enveloped in those brick walls. The idea of a structure being built centuries ago and holding so much history, quite literally being in her backyard, was fascinating. She wished it were cooler today. She imagined how the cool breeze would feel against her face as she wandered the streets, her nostrils filling with the scent of oak as leaves brushed by her feet. She imagined the signs above the doors swaying with that same breeze, inviting people in. She left her small apartment at seven that morning and began her walk towards the businesses of Lincolnville. She paused when she reached the shoe repair shop located at 93 Washington Street. Frankie wondered what businesses this space held a home for previously. She assumed it wasn't always shoe repair, but as she looked around at the faded, brick structure, she tried to imagine the businesses that flourished there previously.

He seemed to notice her taking in all the sights the humble building had to offer as he said, "You know, this building is one of the oldest on the block. I've tried my best to keep her looking as good as she did back then, but, well, you know."

Frankie smiled. She admired Mr. Ferrell's modesty, but she quite liked the antique-like look the building held. It added to the ambiance of the place.

"I quite like the look of it. When was this building constructed?"

"Well," Mr. Ferrell began, "We aren't exactly sure of her dates. But she was built sometime between '65 and '85."

He paused as the bell at the door jingled, "Ah Mr. Brown. What can I do for you today?"

"Shoooot, how did you know it was me?"

Mr. Ferrell smiled, "I'd know those beat up Oxford's anywhere."

"You know me, Ferrell. Just another repair on the ol' Oxford's here. The front's come apart again and my toes get cold with all these puddles 'round here."

Just as Mr. Ferrell really began to tell her about the history of the place, a man walked in with an old pair of leather Oxford's. She only knew the shoe because that's the only kind her father would wear. He wore his Oxford's until the soles were scuffed and the leather was falling apart, then he brought them to a place like this. His favorite day was when he got to visit the shoe repair shop in our small town back home. Frankie never quite understood why, but maybe she'd understand as the man brought in his own pair of Oxford's.

Mr. Ferrell nodded and took the shoes Mr. Brown handed him. He looked at Frankie, "Care to see how we repair a fine pair of Oxford's like these... What did you say your name was, dear?"

"Oh! Sorry, my name is Frankie." She said as she stuck her hand out towards Mr. Ferrell.

Mr. Ferrell's eyes grew wide as she said her name, "Well, I'll be! You must be Frank's daughter!"

"Shooooot, you're ol' Frank's kid?" Mr. Brown's eyes were just as wide

Frankie smiled; it had been quite some time since so many people had recognized her, but she also hadn't traveled much into Lincolnville since she moved there.

"How do you know my father?"

"Well, he's only been getting his shoes fixed here for years! Yeah, I used to see him almost every week, course I reckon he hasn't been around as much recently since the some of the shops have closed."

Mr. Ferrell was beaming as he talked about my father. I knew he was known around town, but I had no idea how well-known he was!

Mr. Brown chimed in, "Yeah I've been seeing ol' Ferrell 'round here for years and I always came on Tuesdays because I knew your ol' man would be here." He paused a moment and put his hand on his forehead, "My, my, my, Frank's daughter! I never thought I'd get to meet you, but he talked a lot about you, believe you me."

Frankie smiled again. Of course, she hadn't seen her father in a few years since she moved away for work, but she was back now and hoped he was still around.

"Can I ask, have you heard from him recently? Or about him?"

"Well," Mr. Ferrell took a long pause before continuing, "We ain't seen him in quite some time now. We hear he's around, of course, but he ain't been in here for a while. I reckon he found a new shop to repair his shoes."

Mr. Ferrell was frowning by the end of it. She was wondering why her father hadn't been around recently and where he was when Mr. Brown began.

"Yeah, I ain't seen him 'round these shops for some time. Course, I only come up here on Tuesdays for ol' Ferrell here. I heard though; he was over at the cleaners not too long ago if you feel like takin' a walk down there."

"Course... You're welcome to sit a spell and hear about your father, if you like."

Mr. Ferrell had a welcoming smile on his face. She could tell it had been some time since he was able to talk about her father and Frankie was curious about what he'd been up to.

Frankie looked at her watch, it still wasn't even 8am. She nodded, "Yeah! I've got some time today. I'd love to hear about him."

She moved over and sat, criss-cross applesauce like a school girl, in one of the seats in the waiting area, excitedly waiting for Mr. Ferrell to begin.

"Well, I reckon I'll begin with when I met him. I met him 'bout 8 or 9 years ago, right?"

He looked to Mr. Brown for confirmation and Mr. Brown nodded.

“He had just opened his market down the street. We all loved the Palace, ain’t that right, Mr. brown?”

Mr. Brown was nodding excitedly this time, “Oh yeah! The Palace was the place to be! They had everything ya needed in one place. Course ol’ Frank kept raising the prices of everything and eventually, lotsa people had to stop going. They still went to socialize of course, but the groceries, oh no no we got those down the street.”

Frankie was saddened to hear everyone had gone elsewhere for their groceries, but it made sense given the economy. She was glad they still stayed around to socialize though. Maybe she would find one of the socializers at the cleaners when she went to visit today.

Mr. Ferrell seemed to notice her saddened expression as he began to reassure her.

“Now, don’t you worry, dear. He still did alright. Course, he did better before, but with the shops going the way they were, he had to do something to stay afloat.”

Frankie nodded, understandingly.

Mr. Ferrell continued, “Lack of business wasn’t the reason he closed either. Everyone ‘round here loved ol’ Frank and tried to support him and his shop any time they could. Hell, we all do that for each other. I get people in here that don’t even wear Oxford’s or leather shoes that need repairing, but they still bring in their friends and they bring their shoes. That’s the type of town this is. It’s a damn shame so many shops have had to close.”

Mr. Brown cut in, “Aw hell, I’m the only one in here once a week now. But I can’t keep a pair of shoes longer than a week before a new hole comes in.”

Mr. Ferrell laughed, “Yeah, I been seeing Mr. Brown here more than anyone. Even when the day comes I have to close my own shop, I’m sure he’ll come find me to repair those same raggedy Oxford’s.”

“These are my lucky Oxfords, Ferrell. You’ll be repairing this till I die with them.”

The smile never left Mr. Ferrell’s face the whole time he was talking. Frankie could tell everyone around here loved each other. She wished she could’ve seen the town a few years ago when her father was around and more shops were open, but she was glad Mr. Ferrell was still around.

“Now, like I said, ol’ Frank didn’t close his shop because of a lack of customers. Even when we didn’t have anything, we’d all round up a few cents and support him anyway we could. And he did the same for us. But the day finally came; ol’ Frank decided this wasn’t the place for him anymore and closed the Palace. He still stuck around and visited everyone. I still repaired his shoes quite some time after, but I reckon he found somewhere better suited for him.”

Frankie was relieved to hear that everyone still loved her father and tried to support him. This town seemed like a happy place, full of good people.

“How long has it been since he’s been around here?” Frankie asked.

Mr. Ferrell scratched his head, “Oh... It’s been a few months, hasn’t it?”

“Yeah, I been coming every Tuesday and I ain’t seen him on a Tuesday in 4 or 5 months now, I reckon.” Mr. Brown chimed in.

Frankie paused before responding. Why did her father leave? And why hadn't he come back if everyone here had such a good relationship with him? Frankie loved mysteries and this seemed like a mystery she would love to solve.

"Well, after I visit the cleaners over on Atlantic, I can come back and fill you both in, if you'd like."

Mr. Ferrell smiled, “Well, that would be great. I’m sure I’ll be working on these ol’ Oxford’s for some time. Maybe you can find ol’ Frank too and tell him we miss seeing him round town.”

Frankie said bye to both the men and opened the door to the shop, the bell jingling on her way out. She began to wander down the street towards the Cleaners. It saddened her to see the shops she passed not doing well, or some of them even closed.

A little while later, the shop came into view: Atlantic Cleaners. She looked inside, but didn’t see anyone. Why would they send her here if the shop was closed? She tried the door and pushed it open. A bell jingling once again, just as in Mr. Ferrell’s shop. She looked around, but it was a typical Cleaners, like many she had seen before.

A short, stout man walked out from the backroom and stood behind the counter. He gave her a quizzical look, perhaps because she didn’t have any clothes with her to be cleaned.

“Can I help you?”

“Yeah, hi, my name is Frankie. I was just over at Mr. Ferrell’s shoe repair and he said you might be able to tell me about my father?”

The man almost looked annoyed, like she was wasting his time. Frankie began to think coming here was the wrong idea.

“Who’s your father?”

“Frank Butler”

The man’s eyes widened, just as Mr. Ferrell and Mr. Brown’s had, and a smile spread across the man’s face.

“Well, I’ll be. You’re Frank’s kid! How is he? What’s he doing now?”

All the man's questions worried Frankie that maybe he didn't know anything about her father. Maybe he hadn't been by in a long time? But why would Mr. Ferrell send her here?

"Well..." Frankie began, "I actually haven't seen him for some time. I just moved back to Lincolnville after being away for a few months and he's just gone. I just spoke with Mr. Ferrell and Mr. Brown and they said you were the last one to see him, so you might know where he is, or at least where he was headed."

The man frowned, "I might have been last to see him, but that was still some time ago. Probably a month or so. I know he was heading to the grocery over on Bernard when he left here, but I'm not sure where he was heading after that."

Frankie sighed. She was hoping she would have learned more, but her father seemed to work fast and not be around much. Maybe the grocer would know more. Or they would just send her further on this wild goose chase to find him. But it still didn't hurt to try. She was still hoping the man at the Cleaners would know more.

"Can you tell me more about him? If you have the time." She was hoping, even if she couldn't find him, she could at least learn more about him.

"Well, sure! You can just call me Tim. Yeah; I been cleaning things for Frank for quite some time now. I had people come in just to see him. I didn't mind though; it gave me a lot of business. Since he left, it's been harder to bring people in. It was always a social thing 'round here. You go where the people are."

Frankie nodded, "I just came from Mr. Ferrell's, like I said. There was a Mr. Brown in there that said he always came to get his shoes fixed on Tuesdays because that's when my father would be there. I guess he was more popular around the town than I thought."

"Oh, yeah!" Tim smiled, "I know Mr. Brown. I see him around from time to time, but he usually only comes to town to get his Oxford's repaired since Frank stopped coming around. The town just ain't been the same since."

Why would he leave?

Frankie thanked Tim for his time and made her way out of the Cleaners, the bell jingling again when she left.

She was slightly discouraged when she didn't get any answers from the Cleaners, but it only added to the mystery of why her father left the town and where he went. As Tim suggested, Frankie headed towards Bernard Avenue to see if the Grocery store held any other clues. She was glad she took the whole day off to explore; although she was originally hoping it wouldn't take that long.

Frankie rounded the corner onto Bernard Avenue and the grocery store came into view. Given how far she was from Ferrell's Shoe Repair, she wasn't sure if she'd make it back there to fill Mr. Ferrell in on what she found out.

As she entered the grocery store, she wasn't accompanied by the familiar jingle from the door, but instead, a quiet song was playing. It was strange though; the grocer was surprisingly busy considering how desolate the other shops were. The grocery was quite humble as she looked around. Two check-out lanes stood at the front of the shop and behind them, were several rows of shelves stocked with necessities. It was quite small, but still provided everything one would need in a town such as Lincolnvillle. She imagined this place in its hey-day. Families wandering the aisles, friends meeting to catch up, cashiers socializing with customers.

As she was getting lost in her thoughts, she noticed one of the cashiers was finished bagging groceries for their customer. She was a small, older woman with a red apron.

Frankie wandered up to the cashier and said "Hello".

The lady looked up and gave her a warm, welcoming smile.

"Well, hey. What can I do for ya?"

"I was actually wondering if there was anyone around that could answer questions for me about my father", Frankie replied.

"Well, that depends", the woman responded, "Who are we talkin' about?"

"Frank Butler."

The woman's facial expression became all too familiar when Frankie said her father's name. Apparently, she knew him too.

"Oh, I knew him. He used to own the Palace down the street. Oh, yeah. When he raised his prices, people still went to socialize because they loved Mr. Butler, but we got the majority of his business here. And after he closed his store, it was a damn shame, for sure, but business started boomin' over here so we didn't complain."

Frankie couldn't tell if the woman liked her father or not. She only seemed pleased that he had finally closed his store and she got more business here.

"My husband," the woman continued, "He opened this grocery when ol' Mr. Butler started raising his prices. Figured we should jump on the opportunity while we had it. Everyone sure was sad when he finally shut the doors, but we didn't mind. No ill will towards him or anything but," The woman paused again as if she was contemplating if she should finish her thought. She continued still, "The business we started gettin'. We wished he would've closed sooner."

Frankie didn't really like the woman saying she wished her father would have closed his store sooner. She said she didn't have any ill will towards him, but Frankie found that hard to believe when she followed it with that. She wasn't sure this woman would be of help to her at all.

"Well, anyway," Frankie tried to sidestep the awkwardness that filled the space between them, "You wouldn't happen to know where he was last or where he was headed, would you?"

The woman shook her head, "No, he didn't much like me or my husband. Probably because he knew we wanted him to close his shop. Last I heard, he was making the Cleaners over there his last stop before he headed out. No idea where to, but I knew he was leavin'."

Frankie sighed in defeat; this was her last hope for finding him. She thanked the woman for her time anyway and headed out of the grocer. She looked again at her watch, 9:52. It was still early, hopefully she would have time to tell Mr. Ferrell what she learned. Or rather, did not learn.

She began her walk back towards Washington Street, thinking about the events that had occurred that day. She thought it was odd she had only run into men on her journey, other than the bitter old woman at the grocery store. She wasn't even the owner; her husband was and that is why she was there. Why weren't there any female-owned businesses here? When Frankie was in college, they talked about feminist rhetorical studies and how our abilities as women have been increasing. If this was true, why were there still no women in these businesses?

Frankie was baffled by this, but perhaps social circulation hadn't reached Lincolnville yet. Or maybe no one was there to start it. Frankie could, but her first priority was finding her father.

She looked back up at the faded sign of Ferrell's Shoe Repair, the bell a comforting jingle of familiarity as she entered.

"Well, look who it is!" Mr. Ferrell exclaimed with a smile.

Mr. Brown chimed in with his trademark, "Shoooot!" Before continuing, "We knew you'd be back! Where's ol' Frank gone now?"

Frankie gave a discouraging sigh, "Well... I'm not sure. Tim at the Cleaners didn't know anything, so he sent me to the grocery down the street. I almost wish he hadn't."

"Oh, you ran into ol' Peggy, didn't ya?" Mr. Brown said with a chuckle.

"Ain't she a delight?" Mr. Ferrell chimed in.

"Oh, she was something. She didn't really like my father, did she?"

"Well," Mr. Ferrell began, "It's not that she didn't like ol' Frank, we all did, she just wanted him out of the grocery business. Her and ol' man Mercury put all they had into that store and the competition he presented was fierce."

"She's always been a bitter ol' bag," Mr. Brown added. "We don't much care for her either, but now ol' Mercury owns the only grocery left, so we stay civilized with 'em."

Mr. Ferrell nodded in agreement. "Did you find anything else out?"

“No,” Frankie sighed dejectedly, “Just the same stuff about him and The Palace, but nothing about where he is or where he was headed. But it was still nice to learn about him.”

Mr. Ferrell nodded, understandingly, before the bell made its familiar jingle.

“Shoooooot,” Mr. Brown said again.

Mr. Ferrell’s eyes went wide, “Well, I’ll be.”

“Dad?”