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HEROIN AND BREAD FOR FRANCES BY REBECCA GAFFRON

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My name is Frances. Frances Bean. My father died when I was very young. No one knows for sure what happened to him. They just found his body. My dad was a street kid. So was my mom. That's how she got me. She found out she was pregnant at a health clinic. She started throwing up whenever she smelled food—you know, just walking down the street. She was seventeen. I don't know how old my dad was.

My mom got scared when she found out about me. She was afraid she'd fucked me up, fried my brain and stuff. That's when she checked herself into rehab. Morning sickness with a side of withdrawal. Then she made peace with Nana and Gramps. Three months later she was back at her old high school. She's never told me why she left, but she and Gramps still don't get along so well. The only reason she went home was for me. She says she'd do anything to make sure I'm happy and safe. She says she'll never do to me what they did to her.

If I'd been a boy my name would be Kurt. Instead I'm named for his daughter, Frances Bean. I hate my name. It's a stupid fucking name; it sounds like an old lady. And it seems goofy to be named after some dead rock star's kid. But he made them believe someone else out there felt the pain. Pain that ate him up and most of them too—all those kids sharing the mattress in the club basement. Ju-Ju Bee died of AIDS. Lisa disappeared. The rest just faded out of mom's life.

Even my dad. He was in jail when mom went to rehab. She visited him once, right before I was born. He was happy that she got off the streets and was safe. He told her that he loved her and he would love the baby. He wanted her to send a picture to the jail, so that he knew what I looked like. "He thought we would be better off without him, sweetie," Mom told me when I was little. I think they both knew he'd been out there too long to ever come back. The streets were his only home.

I was three or four years old when the envelope came. It was waiting at Nana's when we arrived at Christmas. It had been used. The previous address was scratched out and Mom's name and town were written on the bottom. Inside was a dirty, smudged newspaper clipping about a body police had found in a park. Hand written along the edge of the clip was his street name, Zeppo. My picture was there too. It was tattered and faded. I think he looked at it a lot.

I was born addicted to heroin. That's why my mom has always tried to keep me away from drugs. She's really cool about it though. She's never lectured and she's never lied. She says "sure most heroin addicts used pot but most of them drank milk and ate meat too. You don't see anybody making a fuss about those habits." Then she tells me how important it is that I never even try heroin. She describes the way it consumed her life and how empty she felt.

I've never said it, but I wonder if that emptiness was the reason she started using, not an effect. She told me about the terrible pain that wracked her body while she was in rehab. I guess she thinks all these horrible images will keep me away. She shouldn't worry, I'm not interested in doing anything that requires sticking myself with a needle so I can ruin the rest

of my life. I just have way too much to lose.

It's always been just me and my mom. We lived with Nana and Gramps only when I was very little, I don't actually remember it. You probably think all her troubles were over once she got off the streets, but that's not the way it worked. It must have been a bitch to go back to her parents after she'd run away. She only stayed until she graduated from high school. In college she didn't actually have to live with them anymore, but Gramps was paying for it so she kind of had to do what he said. Mom wanted to help other street kids and I'll always be able to hear Gramps yelling the day he found out.

It was Easter break, Nana and I were coloring eggs in the kitchen. She sent me to get Mom and Gramps to help. I stood outside the study door too frightened to go in. He told my mother that it was about time she learned to take responsibility for herself and that if she'd had any sense she would never have started hanging out with those druggie kids in the first place. "They poisoned you against your own family, made you run away. It almost killed your poor mother. And now you have a child to consider. Do you know how much social workers earn? You couldn't afford to live in a flea trap. And I'll never allow my Frannie Bean to live in that kind of neighborhood. Find something else or there's no more money. And I'll take Frances."

I could hear my mother sobbing. Nana found me standing outside the door, tears streaming down my cheeks. "Come on back into the kitchen, honey," she said picking me up and hugging me. I clung to her and whispered, "Why does Gramps love me so much more than he loves Mama?" She never answered me.

Nana bugs my mom about stuff too. Twice a week, for as long as I can remember, she calls. Every single time she asks if Mom has met any nice men yet. See, my mom never got married. I can't even remember her having a boyfriend. Occasionally she goes out for dinner or dancing with some guy. Usually it's one of her friends or Nana who sets her up. I don't really know why she doesn't date more or if she's lonely. Mom doesn't volunteer information and I don't have the nerve to ask. I know she considers herself a widow, even though she and my father never really married. Maybe she just can't love anyone else, even after all these years.

Every Wednesday night Mom and I go to the local shelter. We spend the evening doing little chores and pass out loaves of bread to people who won't come in for the night. On our way Mom stops at the bakery and buys all the leftover bread from the beginning of the week. That was my favorite part when I was little because I always got a cookie or donut to eat. Mom says that bread was what she and her friends wanted most. It tasted good, lasted awhile, filled you up so at least you didn't feel hungry and you could carry it with you.

Like I said before, Gramps wanted Mom to find a job where she could earn big bucks. I think she was afraid that he really would take me away or at least buy me off. She was probably right, I love Gramps but he does some weird things. Anyway Mom became an interior decorator. She specializes in antiques and historically correct decor. She redid the houses and offices of all my grandparents' friends. Once she'd saved enough money Mom bought a pretty little house for us. She turned two of the rooms into her office so that she could be close to me, even when she was working. Over the years we've landscaped the yard into lots of little gardens. It's a special place for both of us, it's home.

People have started asking me what I'm gonna do when I finish school. I guess that's like the only thing adults can think of to talk to teenagers about. But honestly it's been on my mind too. See, I don't know how I'm going to leave my mother. She hasn't said anything but I think the idea of me going really bothers her. Sometimes I can hear her crying at night. I haven't heard her cry like that for years. She used to weep in her sleep every night. I don't even think she knew she was crying.

I think I want to become a psychologist. Then mom and I could open our own shelter. See, I don't care about money. It's not that I'm naive and think money's not important—it's just that unless I do something really stupid I will always have enough money. I'm Gramps' sole heir. That means I get everything—the real estate, the shares and all the cash. I'm not certain how much it is, but I bet it's enough to start a shelter.

It's kind of funny, but at school I'm just another kid. Sure, I don't have a dad, but it's not like I'm the only one. No one would ever believe me if I told them that I was a heroin addict, or

that my mom was a street kid. The strangest thing about me is my name. All the kids made fun of it when I was little. They called me Grandma Frances.

My name. Frances. Frances Bean. Named for a dead rock star's daughter who was named for a lobotomized want-to-be starlet. A permanent reminder that society doesn't care. You know what's really funny? She doesn't even call me Frances. She calls me Frannie, just like everyone else. I hate my name. It's a stupid fucking name. But it may be her only mistake. And I sure do love my mother.

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