

Seeing Through Mist – November 1945 – by Sara Lewis

The day my brother came home from the war was the best and worst day of my life. It was the best because he was finally home, he was finally safe. It was the worst because my dream ended. A soldier named Frank came home, but my brother Frank did not.

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I sat at the kitchen table, staring across the room at the unmoving lump that was my brother. I remembered what an energetic yet caring person Frank used to be and sighed. My brother had been very near to an explosion and now he was what the doctors called 'out of reach.'

"Amy!" my sister, Janet, cried as she entered. "You're supposed to be reading to him."

"These things aren't poems," I complained, glaring at Bedtime Poems for Little Ones.

Janet was impatient. "I have to go now. You are not to leave this kitchen until I return. Do you understand?" I nodded glumly.

I sighed loudly for Janet's benefit and then dragged my chair across the floor. I put my head in my hands and watched Frank.

Touching a small cut on Frank's forehead, I whispered, "Frankenstein," remembering how he used to hate it when I called him that – and how many times I'd ended up in the dung heap as a result!

To my surprise, Frank's eyes flew open and he said loudly, "Amy! Don't call me that! I'll throw you in the manure pile!"

Before I could get over my surprise enough to respond, Frank looked around and said, "Where am I? How did I get here?"

I controlled myself and managed to whisper, "You're home Frank."

He looked even more confused. "What happened?"

You were in an explosion."

The rest of few days passed in a cloud for me. Frank was rushed off to the hospital for appointments with fancy doctors. Janet and Mama rushed around, fussing. I felt numb. Finally, it ended. Frank was released with reports that he wasn't 'permanently damaged' by the explosion.

The first night Frank was home again, Mama and Janet decided that somebody should sleep downstairs with him. I, for some reason, was elected.

I sat down on my makeshift bed and swung my legs up. Frank was already asleep. I watched him for a long time, and then drifted off to sleep. All of a sudden I found myself sitting up straight and being dragged out of bed by my brother. Fighting back, I pushed Frank down on the bed.

"What was that all about?" I sputtered angrily.

"Can't you see?" Frank, with panic in his voice, pushed me backwards so hard that I landed on the floor with my legs in the air.

"Go!" he shouted. "Come on! We'll all be killed!"

I righted myself, jumped up, and pounced on my brother. He awoke with a start. As I was preparing to start my tirade, I happened to look into his eyes. My anger washed out of me. Frank no longer looked like Frank. He just looked so deflated – so sad and helpless.

"Amy?" said Frank. "I'm really sorry. I was dreaming about it and, well, I guess I started acting it out," he tried to smile but ended up sighing.

It was then that the idea, or rather the truth, planted itself in my head. My brother Frank wasn't the Frank that had come home. This Frank was a soldier, and that soldier was filled with nightmarish memories.

The next morning, I still was trying unsuccessfully to keep last night's idea out of my head. While I sat in a corner mulling it all over, Mama and Janet fell into a trap.

I watched as my mother and sister bustled around, trying to keep Frank occupied. Frank put up with it for exactly an hour. Then, he beat Janet at checkers, put the board away, and stalked out the door, into the misty day outside. There was a long pause as Frank ignored Mama and Janet's calls. I went glumly upstairs to my room, where I watched Frank's small shape move across the rocks toward the ocean, losing itself in the mist.

The next week passed exactly like that day. Frank endured us as long as he could, and then he went outside and spent the long hours of the afternoon and evening alone on the beach, with only the fog for company.

One day, almost a month later, I followed him. The mist was thick that day; I could barely make out Frank's figure a couple of feet ahead of me.

If Frank knew I was following him, he didn't show it. He walked for a long time, and soon the shadow of our house completely disappeared. I was beginning to think that we were both hopelessly lost when my brother suddenly sat down on a cliff overlooking the sea.

"I ruined everything, didn't I?" said Frank, his head turned to the sky. I was about to answer when I realized he wasn't talking to me.

My brother stayed in that position, his eyes facing the sky, listening. Then he said, "But I did, Jack, I did ruin everything. You'd be alive if it weren't for me. I did a better job of killing you than the Nazis."

There was another pause and then Frank burst out, "It's not all right! I ruined your life – I practically killed you – and how am I supposed to live knowing that I killed my best friend? If it weren't for you I'd have died twice – once for deserting and then in the explosion. You kept me from deserting, and you saved me in the explosion."

Once again there was a pause and then Frank continued, "No, you would have survived if it weren't for me. You came into the fire to save me, when you could have escaped. And then when you tripped, I didn't stop to help you! I killed you, Jack, I did! You saved my life twice –and then I went and killed you!"

I could stand no more. "Frank!" I shouted.

Frank jumped up and peered through the mist. "Amy, what are you doing here? Can't you give me a little privacy?"

I said the first thing that entered my head. "Have you really been coming out here all along to talk to a dead person?"

Frank sagged again. "He died because of me. I guess you know why." He sat down and groaned slightly.

I paused, searching for a true but comforting answer. Frank continued, "I was sick of war, Amy. I almost deserted. It was Jack who kept me going. The Canadians would have shot me if it weren't for Jack. And then in the explosion," Frank stopped and buried his head in his hands.

"What about the explosion?" my voice came out sharply.

"I was dazed after the first blast, and Amy, you really don't need to know the rest."

"Do you really think I'm going to fall for that?"

"No. So while I was lying there stunned, Jack came and rescued me, before the fire got to me. I was starting to recover my senses, but when Jack fell, I was so scared that I just ran and left him there. He didn't get out in time."

I sat down beside him. "Frank," I told him. "How is it going to help Jack any if the boy he died for spends all his life miserable? Jack saved you so you could live your life. You're not helping anybody, certainly not Jack, by doing this."

Frank was silent.

"Listen to me," I continued. "Frank, Jack died for you. He wanted you to live your life. You're not obeying his last wish."

"You're right Amy," he said, but his voice was still cracked with sadness. "He gave up his life for me. How I am supposed to honour his memory?"

"You can do what Jack would have done," I said. It was strange, but somehow I just knew what Jack would want Frank to do with his life.

"Help the others," I told him.

"How?" he sounded helpless.

"You could be a doctor, Frank, and work with the others who are haunted by the war."

For the first time since he came home, Frank's eyes lit up. "I suppose I could. That sounds like something Jack would do. But do you really think I could be their Jack?"

I nodded, and even though it might have been my imagination, I thought the mist cleared just a little in that moment.

Postscript

Frank went on to work with veterans for nearly sixty years. But despite his busy career, Frank still left plenty of room in his heart for Jack.

Every once in a while, when he's home, on a cold misty day, Frank goes out to the ocean, sits on the cliffs, and talks to Jack. He stays there all day sometimes. And I watch him, and I think about the boy who left and the soldier who came back. I think about how torn with guilt and grief he was when he first arrived – and how the real Frank shone through all that misery, like the sun pierced the mist on that day long ago.