

HORROR ANTHOLOGY

IV

**FEATURING
STORIES BY**

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Horror Anthology 2017
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THOMAS M. MALAFARINA
© Status Quo, One Sunny Suburban Saturday, Ally's Cat

JIM GOFORTH
© Strange Old Brew

D. F. HOLLAND
© After Death

CHRISTINA ENGELA
© Homecoming, Midnight Station

TABITHA BAUMANDER
© Trucker, The Good Mrs. Kats

CONTENTS

Foreword

About Thomas Malafarina

About Jim Goforth

About D. F. Holland

About Christina Engela

About Tabitha Baumander

1. Status Quo
2. One Sunny Suburban Saturday Afternoon
3. Aly's Cat
4. Strange Old Brew
5. After Death
6. Homecoming
7. Midnight Station
8. Trucker
9. The Good Mrs. Kats

STATUS QUO



BY THOMAS MALAFARINA

*“He who rejects change is the architect of decay. The only human institution, which rejects progress is the cemetery.”
- Harold Wilson*

“God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” Reinhold Niebuhr also known as the “Serenity Prayer”

*“The man who looks for security, even in the mind, is like a man who would chop off his limbs in order to have artificial ones which will give him no pain or trouble.” -
Henry Miller*

*F*or some, change is a natural part of life; something to be expected and to be embraced with the anticipation of whatever new and potentially exciting events might follow. For others, change is something to be hated, feared, distrusted and looked upon as something to be avoided whenever possible.

Frank Delveccio was one of the latter types of people. In all of his forty-nine years of life, Frank had despised change in any of the many forms it might take, from the simplest alteration of his daily routine to the major life-changing events everyone must face from time to time. Frank did everything within his power to keep his life running as smoothly as possible with little variation to his daily routine.

Five days a week, he woke at precisely 5:45 am and went into the bathroom to complete his daily ritual of emptying his bladder, brushing his teeth and showering, always in that order. After dressing in blue work pants and a grey work shirt (he had a sufficient supply of each), he would walk down stairs to the kitchen and put a pot of water on the stove to boil for his morning tea. After eating a bowl of corn flakes, never oatmeal or any other type of cereal, he would drink the last of his tea. By 6:25AM, he would be in the first floor powder room sitting comfortably and reading the morning newspaper while enjoying his regular-as-clockwork morning constitutional.

By 6:35AM, he was out the door and in his car heading for his job as a machinist for a local manufacturing firm about five to ten minutes outside of the coal region town of Ashton, Pennsylvania. Although he didn't clock in until 7:00, he liked to be on site between 6:45 and 6:50 to prepare his various activities for the day. Frank hated to be rushed, and arriving an extra ten minutes early allowed him to maintain that comfortable rhythm of life he required so intently.

If someone, familiar with Frank's actual job function were to describe it as boring, they would be quite correct, both descriptively as well as literally. Frank worked for

Technofacture International Corporation as a setup-operator of a semi-automatic machine called a Bore-O-Matic double end boring machine; hence the literal reason why his job was boring.

The descriptive reason why his job was boring was equally simple. For the past thirty-plus years, Frank had performed the exact same operation on the exact same type of part, at the exact same workstation, on the exact same machine between twenty and thirty times per hour, eight to ten hours per day, and every single day since starting on the job shortly after his eighteenth birthday.

The very suggestion of such tedium might make another person run from the factory, screaming in terror while ripping out his own hair by the roots; but not Frank. For him, it was one of the most perfect jobs ever known to man. Once he had picked up the initial techniques of operating the machine as a young man he immediately began honing his skills in order to make the job as mindless and stress-free as possible.

His responsibility was to take stainless steel tubes about two inches in diameter and about eighteen inches long from a parts feeding conveyor, place them into the Bore-O-Matic machine and simultaneously counter-bore two precision holes in the ends of the tubing. As soon as the boring process was completed he was required to inspect the diameters for size and surface finish requirements. Then if all of the dimensions were to specification, he would place the finished parts onto the completed products conveyor where they would then be transported to the next subsequent

workstation for the appropriate next operation in the manufacturing process.

Back in those early days the company had its hourly unionized employees on an incentive plan, also known as “piece work”; meaning the more parts Frank produced, the more money he could make. About ten years ago the company switched to a straight hourly pay rate with no incentive and Frank’s job only got easier. Since he could make 100% of the required rate without breaking a sweat, his already excellent job became a perfect job.

Frank’s co-workers knew about his quirks concerning change. His nickname on the shop floor was “S-Q” which stood for “Status Quo.” The name was derived from the reply Frank would often give to typical greeting. For example, if someone would walk by Frank and ask, “Hey Frank, how’s it going?” he would smile, and extend his right palm out flat and rotate it slowly a few degrees clockwise then counterclockwise and reply “Status Quo, baby, Status Quo.” This was Frank’s way of saying things were going smoothly and according to plan, no hassles, no muss, no fuss.

Neither did Frank like experiencing change in his personal life. Shortly after starting at the factory, he married his high school sweetheart, Janet, who was the first and only girl he ever dated. Within a year, he purchased a small but sturdy row home along the main street of Ashton, near the top end of the town a few miles from the plant. It made perfect sense to Frank as he didn’t ever plan to leave his job until retirement. He also knew he’d be faithful to Janet for as long as they lived and never do anything to endanger his marriage. That sort of thing was inviting chaos into a perfect

situation. Now, almost thirty years later he was still married to Janet and they were still living in the same row home; status quo, baby, status quo.

During the time his kids were growing, Frank's company was very busy and he was often asked to work ten hours a day, work Saturdays and occasionally Sundays. The pay was great, as was the never-ending need for more money, so Janet never complained.

As a result, Frank was away from home most of the time the kids were growing. When he finally came home at night, after stopping by his favorite local bar for a beer or two, he would eat dinner with minimal conversation, then go into the living room and watch the news on television, followed by his favorite network programs and eventually he would fall asleep in his recliner. Janet would put the kids to bed then wake him so they could retire as well. The next day he would awaken once again, and complete the exact same routine he had done the previous day; status quo, baby, status quo.

Before he knew it, the kids were grown and out of the house, leaving just himself and Janet in what he once considered a small house, but lately had seemed much too big for just the two of them. However, since he still spent so much time at work, this new change did little to affect his daily routine. Yes, as far as Frank Delveccio was concerned, he would be happy to spend the next sixteen years, with life going just as it had been until the day he turned sixty-five and retired. In fact, to prepare for the changes which retirement would bring, Frank planed on easing into the

retirement mode of operation by slowing down a little bit more each year.

But sometimes life has a different plan in store for us and it doesn't bother to warn us or ask us for our opinions regarding such changes. Nor does it care what consequences its actions may have on us; it just simply lets things happen. That's exactly what occurred a few weeks after Frank's forty-ninth birthday.

Frank had arrived as usual at his job by 6:50 on Monday morning and immediately went to his workstation at the Bore-O-Matic machine, only to find a chain secured tightly around the machine with a maintenance lockout tag affixed to it, preventing anyone from putting power to the machine.

At first, Frank thought his machine had been temporarily shut down for routine maintenance. On the rare occasions when this happened, he dealt with the minor disruption by going to an adjacent identical machine to perform his duties. But there was something about the way the chain hung around his machine which gave Frank a strange sensation in the pit of his stomach, as if the locked machine was an omen or sorts; as sign that his perfect unchanging world might be about to experience a terrible upheaval.

He slowly raised his head and looked around the rest of the department and was shocked to see, all of the boring machines in the area had the same type of lock-out chain on them. The entire department was shut down. Since Frank, was the first man to arrive in the department that morning he immediately headed to the supervisor's office to find out what was happening.

He knocked on the door of his boss, Clifford Johnstone's office. When he heard Cliff's voice inviting him to come in that is exactly what he did.

"Cliff!" Frank said a bit louder and with a bit more panic in his voice than he meant to, "What the hell is goin' on back in the Bore-O-Matic area? Every damn machine has a lockout chain on it. They can't all be down for repair at the same time. What's goin' on?"

"Yes... Frank, you're absolutely right," the supervisor said cautiously, dreading the news he was going to have to pass on; he understood how Frank was about change. "Unfortunately, there ain't nothin' wrong with the machines so they ain't down for maintenance, either. Sit down here for a minute and let me try to explain."

Frank looked at Johnstone as if he did not comprehend what the man was saying, then sat in Cliff's guest chair never taking his apprehensive eyes off of him. "I don't like the way this is looking Cliff." Frank said, "I have a sneaking suspicion you are about to deliver some really bad news."

* * *

CLIFF SAID, "Actually, Frank, that is exactly what I have to do... you see... the boys upstairs have decided to make a change." Frank knew by "boys upstairs" Cliff was talking about the management of the facility; those stuffed white-shirted pencil-neck bean counters; the ones he felt not only couldn't find their way around the shop floor, but also probably couldn't even find their way down to the shop floor in the first place.

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