

I first met the man who would become my father when I was five years old. The place was my birth town in northern Russia. A town that distrusted outsiders. But there we all were, hosting an international hot air balloon festival, and there he was, a loud American hot air balloon pilot. As far as my biological, other father was concerned, the situation was doomed from the start.

The pilot went by the barbaric, foreign name of Frank. And from the beginning, I knew I had to keep an eye on him. When Frank and his translator, my mother, went about business, I tailed them, darting from one scouting place to another or, when no hiding place presented itself, posing as a marble statue so that I could maintain my surveillance.

But follow Frank though I did, my foresight ended there. I didn't know that my other father's violence would peak that summer. I didn't know that my mother would flee Russia with Frank when the balloon festival ended – taking me with them to a tropical Florida island at the other end of the world. I did not see my other father for seven years, and our reconstructed relationship will never be simple – but there was always the hot air balloon man known as Frank. Frank was there in the morning to make cinnamon bread, and he was there in the afternoon to teach me how to go sea-shelling. Frank was there to provide child support when my other father refused. But then the U.S. government discovered that I was illegally attending kindergarten. And they deported us for violating the terms of our tourist visa. But Frank got us back, and kept us. He was a bulwark.

Until last summer.

Frank had cancer - not for the first time. And along with the cancer, he had chemo. And it weakened him, leading him to break bone after bone.

But Frank kept going – for a while. Even with a broken ankle or a broken collarbone, Frank continued to travel and to fly and to help me earn my own pilot's license. Drifting in our red, white, and blue balloon as we practiced flight, we brushed over treetops and skimmed sunlit lakewaters, touching down on the surface just long enough to watch soft ripples spread as we lifted off again.

Then, while painting the outside of a house, Frank fell from a second floor window onto solid concrete, shattering his spine.

After the accident, I took a plane, then drove a car until I arrived at Frank's house in Kentucky, where he was supposed to be recuperating. This was my first time traveling alone to this house that had been home. I entered using a garage door code that I fumbled with for twenty minutes.

The lights inside were all turned off, and the blinds were closed, creating a darkness that stripped the building of all familiarity. Making my way room by room, calling Frank's name in each one, I received in response a consistent stillness that crept up around me until at last it ran over my head and covered me in terror.

But by then, I was almost at the very last room, the very last door, and I made myself reach through the thick air to open it.

The walls and carpet of the room were a dim, shadowy purple, and against the opposite wall stood a canopy bed with burgundy curtains. And behind the curtains lay Frank, unable to move or look up at me, whispering my name.

For the next month until returning to school, I stayed in that house doing what little I could to take care of Frank. Trying to ease the pain from his body brace, learning how to make BLTs just the way he likes them. Frank was no longer a bulwark. And for the first time, he welcomed the thought of stopping.

But instead, Frank scheduled his next hot air balloon trip. Because, I believe, he knew he had to. He had to be there in the future as he had been there in the past, for me and for my mother.

Which leaves me thinking: how can I muster that same will?

Just as it has to Frank, life will throw unpredictable things at me. I hope that some will be beautiful. But I fear that some will be painful. And when the painful things come, I hope I will be able to stay aloft despite the possibility of falling.