

Frankie & Jake are Married (another novel castaway)

by Gary Percesepe

Frankie married me during my theory stage. I hadn't known her long. We were in Las Vegas at the Riviera. This was the pre-Disney version of Vegas, when it was seedy and interesting. I had an idea for a course, "The City as Text," and wanted to try it out on Frankie. I handed her an unlined journal and told her to log everything that mattered, to pay attention.

By ten o'clock that night I had fifteen pages of my journal filled with thoughts and sketches. Heading for the hotel's snack bar I saw Frankie moving against the mirrored wall of the casino, journal in hand, a blue Bic pen lying flat against her ear. She was talking to a cocktail waitress who was nearly naked. Their mouths moved together in perfect rhythm to a silent count. They looked over at me. Frankie waved, and then pointed me down with a long index finger. Minutes later, she joined me at the table.

We talked about brides that night, about tourism economies, about site-based experiential learning, about the structural arrangement of the Strip in relation to the airport, factories, schools, libraries, hospitals, universities, about how to shoot it, camera angles, lighting. She put her journal in my hands, and I read it. I studied her elegant script, amazed at the rounded quality of her observations in beautiful blue ink, loops of cursive script roped across the page. I liked the way each word gave itself over to the next: her grace. She watched me read, and there was a sharp intake of her breath when I came to a short love poem she had written. I loved the idea that she was thinking of me when I was away from her, that in my absence I had stayed with her. All night

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long I had been thinking of her, filtering all my sense impressions through her imagined eyes. She tried to wrestle the journal away from me. I held it in one hand while I read the poem, holding her off with my other arm. She bit my neck, a vamping vampire. There was a tiny chip in her front tooth, and green flecks in her irises.

At midnight we showed up as ethnographers in the Little Chapel of Flowers where a guy in cowboy hat and boots grabbed me. "Pal, we're in need," he said. "Can you witness for me and Jen?" He stuck out a meaty hand. "Sam and Jennifer from Joplin, Missouri."

I thought a wedding in Las Vegas would be so iconic and high-end tacky that I wouldn't be able to do anything with it but leave it alone. But I was surprised to find this cynicism retreat as I looked at Sam looking at Jennifer and at Frankie looking at Jennifer look at Sam. I began to feel that this was a symbol I wanted to somehow participate in rather than chart from the safety of the margins. While Sam and Jennifer from Joplin exchanged vows I shot a glance to Frankie that said something like "What the fuck, you want to?" Ten minutes later they stood up for us. The four of us went out for steaks afterwards, newlyweds.

We were both in our twenties. Getting denied tenure was as good a reason as any to leave the state, so when the Chairman of my Department told me about some lameass job in the Midwest and offered to make some calls on my behalf, I said OK. Frankie didn't want to move. Frankie wanted L.A. She was born in Studio City, in the Valley. She was an actor who had been an artists' model, and a surfer before that. It was always L.A. with her, the high trashiness of it, but the place reminded me of my many failures.

She drove me out to my new job. It was an easy move, mostly books and clothes, and my film equipment. I had the classifieds in my lap. Frankie had circled the best bets, with annotations penned in the margins: "Sucks but cheap," "Has possibilities," "Retro," "Full Cleveland." We'd been heading south on Grand for what seemed a long time when I told her to stop. We were

in front of a brick apartment building. A sign out front said, "The Fountainbleau."

"This is the possibilities one," I said.

"Take it easy. The ad didn't say anything about a fountain. The fountain has me worried."

"Do you honestly think it matters, Frankie?"

Frankie inched the car backwards. It was awkward because my stuff was piled up to the headliner, and she had to rely on her side mirrors.

We bounced hard off the curb. She stuck out her tongue and shook her head. Her hair had grown out from when I had first known her, and several light strands were loose and flying. She had a teal hair thing on her right wrist.

"What do you call that thing you put in your hair," I asked.

"It's a ponywrap. A scrunchie. Basic girlstuff."

Frankie hopped out and led the way. She wore black stretch pants and a Doors T-shirt, on which she'd written, in glamorous cursive formed by Elmer's glue and gold glitter, "Fuck Oliver Stone." She inspected the fountain in the courtyard of the apartment, which was green and a particularly bad take on Bernini. I was about to point this out when she said, "This fountain is to Bernini what Michael Bolten is to Percy Sledge."

Frankie rapped on the office door and a woman with short brown hair and green eyes answered. She wore a simple white smock. Underneath, her belly was gently swollen. She smiled at Frankie, a lovely, warm smile, and invited us in when she learned we were apartment hunting. She introduced herself as Donna Marie Parker. She discussed terms in a friendly but businesslike way, letting the machine answer the phone when it rang. She talked about the laundry room and the trash pickup, addressing me now, giving me the same smile she'd given to Frankie moments earlier, the one, it's true, I'd been waiting for. Her hands were spread and motionless on the oak kitchen table, each perfect fingernail painted aqua-green. I thought I smelled bread baking.

Donna laughed when I asked about the bread and said, "Yeah, can you believe it, I've turned into Ma Ingalls since I got pregnant. My husband, David, sells insurance." She paused a moment, closing the lease book. "He's really going to like you two," she said. "He loves art and sensitive, artistic people. When the baby is born this winter we're going to call her January. We're *positive* it's going to be a girl." She tapped her nails on the table a moment, then said, "Listen, David's out of town for a week visiting his agents in Illinois, but would you two consider joining us for dinner next Saturday night?"

It was an awkward moment. Finally, Frankie broke the silence.

"Look, Donna, you seem like a swell person. I'm sorry for the confusion. I should have mentioned, the apartment is for Jake here. We're kind of splitting up. I'm just here to help him get set up, and I've got rehearsals to get back to this weekend. It's a great offer, and I'd like to meet David, but I've got to get back." Seeing Donna's reaction, she quickly added, "I love the name January."

We decided to christen the apartment by cooking a meal, jokingly calling it The Last Supper. We sorted through boxes looking for pans and silverware, and then said the hell with it, and called out for pizza. I borrowed Donna's phone to do this. As she gestured to the beige princess phone mounted on the wall she gave me a sorrowful look that reduced me, almost, to ten years old.

The pizza delivery guy looked around at my bare rooms and said, "Nice place." We both glared at him. He took his dollar tip and beat it out of there.

"It's appropriate, I guess, for a marriage that started in Las Vegas to finish with a Snappy's Pizza," I said. "I mean, the whole experimental concept that we worked out—that I worked out, I guess I should say—seems pretty beat."

"Lighten up, Jake," Frankie said. "It happens. You're a theoretical guy in a hard-core practical world. Blame it on all that Barthes and Baudrillard. You ought to go back to making film. I've told you that a million times, Jake. Anyway, look, we played it out. It

was—I don't know—episodic. It was fun. At least most of the time. We've got swell notes on the whole thing, footnotes too, probably.”

I frowned. “OK, sorry about the footnotes part,” she said. “But Jake, you're going to have to pull it together. You'll have a good life here, I can tell.”

“Uh huh.”

“Sure. You've got Ma Ingalls, and Pa when he gets back, and there's little January to spoil when she comes along. I mean, you're set. Besides, I'm keeping track of you. Abandonment doesn't agree with me.” She sighed. “Let's face it, I've never been a third act girl, I'm better in Act One. What we need here is a new beginning, a premiere. A change of cast, a better script for Christ's sake. New scenery, better lighting, a truer audience—”

“I see your point. So what you're saying is, we're not done, right?”

“Right. But I'm saying more than that. It's not likely that we'll ever be done, because we're both real shitty at endings.”

“This doesn't feel shitty.”

“That's because it's not an ending.”

Frankie duck-walked over to where I sat on the floor, up against the bare white wall, knees drawn up to my chest, hands on shins. She rolled her body underneath my legs, and then playfully nipped the underside of my thigh. I could feel my jeans getting wet from her tongue, smelled the dampness of light sweat rising from her lemony neck hair. She reached a hand up to tickle my belly, and played with my nipples under my shirt. I told her if she didn't quit that in an hour, I was going to get pissed. She deposited the remains of her Snappy Pizza crust in my shorts, then ab libbed hunger. Later, we went out for drinks. The next day she was on Interstate 70, headed west.

