

Frankie

(so set 'em up, Joe)

I hear Frankie's voice reciting a Sinatra lyric when I'm doing yoga or trying to meditate sometimes. I'll be in a balance posture, my gaze resting on a lovely but dying oak in my tiny backyard. Thinking I really need to call someone about that, then hearing Old Blue Eyes in a kid's young and at the same time mature voice. Or when I'm trying, for example, simply to concentrate on the movement of my breath, Frankie will barge into the garage of my mind, jostling my aluminum garbage cans against one another, a bit of a racket but I usually smile at the distraction.

I'll hear him say, in his little five-year-old's voice (although he's much older than that now), giving me advice like a three-foot sage: "A lady doesn't wander all over the room, and blow on some other guy's dice." That one, I know, is from *Guys and Dolls*, but he can get quite obscure, too, believe me. The advice, as always, is generally right on, often despite my best efforts at rationalization or changing the subject. I still had a chance with my old Guy (his name, seriously, my old boyfriend's), according to Frankie. If he's to be believed, Frankie heard Guy ask, the "cha" meaning me: "Ain'tcha Ever Coming Back?" And then "Can't ya see the difference it makes?"¹ See what I mean about

¹ Lines from "Aintcha Ever Coming Back?" I looked it up, having never heard of it. Makes me wonder how Guy came across it. Perhaps he had help.

obscure? But so it seems that even with a little, shall I say *dalliance*, I haven't altogether blown it with this Guy, a kind fellow, a dog-lover, would be a great dad, all that. So why not hurry back to his open arms (that's got to be in an Old Blue Eyes song, doesn't it)? What's my problem? Well I'll try to get back to that. But for now I haven't even told you how I met Frankie.

A not-yet-cold, steady rain was falling on a lovely and sad afternoon in autumn, onto the little park there between Hill St. and Vickers, I can never retrieve the name, but the one with the small community garden spots that locals sign up to plant. Their not-quite-bumper crops still looked quite beautiful and seemed to be fairly equitably shared among the planter-tenders and the homeless passersby who truly needed the tomato and no one much minded. I was just walking my big terrier mutt, Doc, when I encountered the little exchange, but I've also heard the mother of the twins, Frankie and Rosa, tell this story on the street at the annual block party—bring a covered dish—and her version is quite wonderful but no doubt different from mine.

I was crying, I remember, about a loss I recall but won't go into here for we all have them. I think I was playing Zeppelin in my head, "Fool in the Rain," that wonderful '80s tempo—slow to upbeat, and back; but for the weather could've been "Layla." You know what I mean. But I felt sure the tears wouldn't be seen for the rain. Still, doesn't someone always see?

The boy came toddling up to me in his little yellow raincoat with the hood up. I remembered these, the rubberized veneer waterproof but oh-so-air-proof, stifling. My glasses seemed to steam up out of empathy. He peered up at me, his little head cocked to

the side, slightly inquisitive, the way my dog sometimes does. With soft brown eyes he seemed to understand my pain—I know how that sounds; isn't he *three*, you say—and he asks me a question.

Wha, wha, what's your favorite song by, by Frank Sinatra? This final word, the last name, comes out a little blurred, like a cross between smurf and that Indonesian island, Sumatra.

I could see in the background, down the little path, his mother and tiny sister—I didn't find out for months that they were fraternal twins—holding matching, purple-flowered umbrellas. My dog and Frankie were then sniffing one another, nose to nose, their heads at exactly the same level. He hadn't forgotten his question, of course. I had been distracted by my sad thoughts, and I was given pause by his question.

"Hmm," I considered, buying time. "What's yours?"

"I axe you first."

"Okay, well. *My Way*," was the first that came to mind. No longer crying but still in foggy sadness, I was relieved to think of any title. I later thought Frankie might've appreciated this answer himself, being three and no doubt fond of doing things in his own manner, no matter others' opinions or wishes. "What's yours?"

"*You Make Me Feel So Young*," he said matter-of-factly, enunciating this beautifully. I couldn't help but laugh at the little man standing the height of my Airedale.

I remember he asked me why I'd been crying, and I believe I said something about loss. About losing something I cared about. And Frankie said "C'mon, let's look for it. I'll help you." If I hadn't already (when he gave his favorite song), I think I fell in love with him at that moment. I thought: he's funny, and kind – a combination which

seemed at that moment to me to be the earth's rarest gems. But he didn't wait for my enthrallment.

Instead Frankie stumbled off the path and into the thin wet woods, looking left and right and behind trees, peering from around his yellow hood, as if around a corner. Not at all visibly concerned he didn't know what we were looking for, perhaps confident he'd know it when he saw it. Which, sadly, he didn't, because I had lost a young man, a boyfriend who would most certainly not be in these particular woods on this rainy fall afternoon.

But I was grateful for Frankie's help, for the diversion he provided, and I told his soggy mother as much when she hustled up with Frankie's sister and asked if I was bothered by the intrusion. I would get to know Frankie's mother—and his father who was the big Sinatra fan and played his music almost constantly on vinyl records—over the intervening years, at awkward, over-smiling block parties where the conversations tended toward catty, about those neighbors who weren't in attendance. Didn't someone wise warn, to never say anything about anyone not present that you wouldn't say with him or her standing in front of you?

At any rate, fast-forward a few years, and Frankie's eight. Still speaking in Sinatra often, still in that way I wasn't sure how much he understood of what he was saying (like "You Make Me Feel So Young"). He told me once he'd stand at the Little League plate and plead, before striking out, for "Luck [to] Be a Lady," of course understanding fortune but not many of the layers of "lady." Although probably knowing, from Frank's lyrics, how a real lady should act, and even perhaps how she rarely does. Or one day ten-year-

old Frankie confided in me that school was acceptable, but he felt certain that “The Best is Yet to Come,” and I’m sure he was right.

At eleven Frankie was—I have heard from the thoughtful kid himself, as well as his mother—doing well enough in school, was bright by teachers’ standards, but had few friends. Even aforementioned teachers had sounded light alarms, had added notes to the backsides of his homework, about his shyness or possible depression. “I can be ridin’ high in April but shot down in May,” he told me once when I was babysitting for him and his sister. “That’s life,” he’d said matter of factly. I sometimes felt flattered that he seemed to understand that I understood something about being a different sort of kid. I realize now that I had a kind of crush on Frankie, not the romantic sort of course, but I never let on, just tried to encourage that which he had that was so quirky and wonderful (and impossible for his peers to appreciate, or so I thought).

I was with another guy then, another *character* is what I told my girlfriends. I was twenty-four, working at a “boutique” (a vintage clothing store) and waiting tables at night, had grad school plans but hadn’t pulled any triggers yet. I was suffering angst for this, and also the facts that: not my generation, but my actual personal self, lacked some kind of *drive* or something the like of which had led the Allies over the Nazis and the people over the Berlin Wall (or to knock it down even). The miniature romantic Frankie was ready, again, to help me find what was missing, at least that’s how I see it now.

So Frankie’s folks are at some dinner party and I was sitting with Frankie, reminding him of that rainy day when he was three and he asked me about my favorite Old Blue Eyes song. Frankie didn’t laugh, in fact never did when his favorite song was revealed. But I did. Then he looked at my face as it reverted quickly back to sadness,

regarding what *the character* and I didn't have or couldn't share. Frankie looked deeply at me, saying "Poor puzzled moon, he wore a frown." He later admitted this was a line from "A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square," a Sinatra love song I'd never heard. But I thought about how wonderful and different was Frankie, unlike anyone I'd ever come across. I thought how he was probably destined for disappointment in love, since it was lottery-odds that he'd ever find a match. And I thought that I was luckier, ironically, to be more average, dull even, because I would more easily find an acceptable mate, given the odds. But that was before I met Holly.

I'm not one of those match-makers, believe me, but this situation seemed such a natural I thought I'd have to at least get the two of them together. Even if it went all terribly wrong, the dialogue would be priceless, I thought. Part of me thought, too, that they'd have found each other anyway—that such things might just be meant—in which case all I'd be doing was acting as a kind of conduit that, once the two young people were joined, would be completely unnecessary. Like an extension cord once the refrigerator is rolled up right in front of the power outlet.

So again fast-forward a couple more years, just last year now. Frankie is thirteen, in the sixth grade. Holly, same age, moved with her family to our Pennsylvania town from Kansas as I recall, a place I pictured like Dorothy Gale's home in the movie. She moved in a few doors down from my little house, which happens to be on the line between school districts, so if I had kids, twins say, then the one in the kitchen when the sign-ups were held would go to Eastwoods, while the one in the laundry room would have to go to Westwoods. Probably not really, but I quickly realized that Holly and Frankie would go to different middle schools, that they wouldn't meet in class.

I remember the moving van with Missouri plates pulled up to the little cape cod house in our Philly suburb. I remember thinking of the faraway, farm-filled Midwest, and how different was the world this family was moving into. I pictured them in overalls and straw hats, coming to the door with a thin strand of hay or wheat bobbing in their mouths when they spoke. But it turned out Holly and her parents were quite ordinary, the father a businessman who would take the commuter train into Philly each weekday, the mother a sales rep of some kind who would work from home.

I took Doc, and we trotted out to meet them by the van. As we approached, I glimpsed a cat that was probably theirs, probably a Kansas cat (whatever that might mean), dart into the open front door and up the stairs. I shook hands with Mrs. and Mr., but the daughter was busy with what from her expression was an important box, carrying it into the house. A Curious George stuffed monkey fell from the top of the box and I leapt over to pick it up, fearing Doc would get there first. The girl, thirteen I would find, stopped while I placed George back on the top of the box still less than securely. She gave me a little half-smile that lit her pale face, her numerous freckles like stars orbiting the bright green planets of her eyes. I hoped she wasn't embarrassed to be a teen still with a stuffed animal.

“Whoever you are,” Holly said to me, “I have always depended on the kindness of strangers.” And then she continued on into the house and up the central stairs, presumably to her bedroom.

When she came back for another box, her parents introduced us.

Holly's eyes grew hopeful when she heard my name. “Is that L-a-r-a, like Julie Christie in Dr.Zhivago?”

“Why yes,” I told her, introducing her to my dog, giving her his full name, which was of course Yuri Zhivago.

““Wouldn’t it have been lovely if we’d met before?”” Holly then asked me, testing me.

““Before we did?”” I answered Zhivago’s part, smiling at her. ““Yes.””

And in her earnestness, I thought of Frankie then.

A couple of weeks later, I arranged for the two to meet. As I said, I’m not at all the matchmaker type, but this just seemed inevitable. And I wanted to be there. So after school hours one Tuesday, Doc and I stopped by his house to see if he wanted to tour the neighborhood with us.

““Let’s take an old-fashioned walk,”” he told me. ““I’m just bursting with talk. What a tale could be told if we went for an old-fashioned walk.””

I’d never heard this one, but of course I was certain of the singer. Doc was ecstatic he was joining us, and so the three of us bounded, not unlike Dorothy, the Tin Man, and Toto, down Hill Street, past the park where I had first met Frankie. He didn’t always speak in lyrics, of course, and on our tour he as usual lately asked me about the men, or lack thereof, in my life. Frankie seemed particularly concerned when I told him the guy I’d been seeing, Guy—whose name rhymed with Frankie’s hero from *Guys and Dolls*, Sky Masterson—well, I said, we were “taking a break.” Frankie stumbled over a place on the sidewalk where old oak roots had cracked and raised the pavement like a geology diagram of continental shift.

“Here I slip again,” he told me, recovering his balance. “About to take that trip again. I got that grip again, taking a chance on love.”

“So you’re saying I should find another “Guy,” or let myself fall for “Sky?” I asked him, liking my own lyrical quality. But then I remembered my own mission. “Say,” I told Frankie in a cadence and tone I was certain sounded like it was a line full of intrigue from an old movie, “there’s someone I’d like you to meet.” We crossed the street and headed up Wells into the adjoining neighborhood where Holly and her family lived.

I knocked on Holly’s door, just as I had Frankie’s twenty minutes before. I had a plan what to say but it turned out that I didn’t need it. Holly opened the door. The cat I’d seen on moving day—*their* cat, I now affirmed—after the briefest of Doc-ward glances, darted up the carpeted stairs.

“Oh, hi!” she said, a *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* line I didn’t even know, one she may not have consciously used, either, although I have my doubts. (I’ve watched it since and her delivery—full of ambiguity, a kind of cheerful sadness, was perfect.)

She looked over her shoulder then, and back at us, and in a way that was—importantly to me—certifiably *not* the look or delivery of a bratty child-actor, reciting: “He’s all right! Aren’t you, cat? Poor slob! Poor slob without a name! The way I see it I haven’t got the right to give him one. We don’t belong to each other. We just took up one day by the river. I don’t want to own anything until I find a place where me and my things go together. I’m not sure where that is, but I know what it is like ...”

Frankie, already smitten, couldn’t help finishing for her. “It’s like Tiffany’s.”

Holly, probably already smitten herself, seemed to be trying not to smile. I interrupted, Doc tugging toward the stairs the nameless cat had ascended, with introductions. “Frankie, this is Holly.”

“Golightly,” he finished, extending his hand.

She didn’t correct him, but I knew her surname was Bush, poor thing. Not that it mattered.

So some months later, I took the two of them to a roller skating party at their school. A retro activity that was retro even when my own middle school gym used to host them. Not as serious as a dance, these parties were held in daylight, on a Saturday afternoon. I’d loved them. And of course, even in my day, a lot went on after dark, too. But today, my young friends had met up beforehand, so I found them both up at the Bush’s tidy cape cod in the Westwood neighborhood. They piled into my rusty Toyota pickup almost before I’d stopped, leaving me plenty of room as they enjoyed crowding into one another on the bench seat. They’re part puppies, wanting as we all do to roll and romp and nuzzle each other; and so scarily near adults, with that, *our* world of not only sex but a place where individuality, different-ness, creativity are seldom rewarded. Again I fear for them. But here they are, jostling on the seat beside me, giggling because in the entry-jostle, Holly’s hand came very close to my right breast. Of course not as funny later, even awkward then, but hysterical at thirteen.

Their laughter settled down. We had a fifteen-minute ride to the school gym. A stunning fall day, predictions of rain were seventy-two hours off. I was broken up with Guy, but for the moment at least, occupied by my two young charges.

“Fasten your seatbelts,” Holly deadpanned, “We’re in for a bumpy night!”
Thin kids, they clipped in together on the passenger side.

Guy and I have had a bumpy relationship, I thought, but we both loved Bette Davis. And, I remembered, he did say some things, at exactly the right times. And exactly the right things. Once he told me to “shut my pie-hole,” which cracked me up. What are we, Moe and Curly, I asked him. But my laughter ended up getting us out of a difficult situation (that I’d gotten us into) involving a couple of *characters* (of a different sort, no relation to what I earlier described Guy as) who either wanted to sell us drugs or were pissed at the tip we’d left on the restaurant bar. “You’re doing great,” Guy said. “Let’s add a lunge to take this gentle stretch just a little bit deeper,” quoting from a yoga tape we’d been doing together. Say no more.

“Spring was never waiting for us, girl,” Frankie added, a bit of a non sequiter I’d have called him on if Holly hadn’t been present, but a line even I recognized from “MacArthur Park.” And then, as if understanding his obscurity, added, “it ran one step ahead as we followed in the’ *skate party*,” he said, and she giggled. As I was trying to recall the word “dance.”

“Come skate with me, let’s skate, let’s skate away,” Frankie continued messing with lyrics while Holly laughed again. I could tell she was thinking hard.

“The von Trapp family children don’t play. They *skate*” she countered. I recalled that “march” was what those kids did before Maria came along.

“But for the good old reliable Nathan, oh it’s only just a short walk to the oldest established permanent floating skate rink in New Yawk”

“No, I don’t think I will kiss you, although you need kissing badly. That’s what’s wrong with you. You should be kissed – and often – and by someone who knows how, *to skate!*”

“My baby don’t care for shows, my baby don’t care for clothes, my baby just cares for skates ...”

“Take me to the *skating rink*. Let me look at the moors once more with you, my darling. Once more.”

“Those fingers in my hair, that sly, come hither stare, that strips my conscience bare – it’s skate-craft!” Frankie added smoothly, not quite singing it.

“You skated for her, Sam. You can skate for me! If she can stand it, I can! Skate!” Holly said emphatically.

And then another smooth, almost song of Frankie’s: “There may be trouble ahead. But while there’s music and moonlight and love and romance, let’s face the music and skate!”

“Years from now, when you talk about this skating party, and you will,” Holly spoke, tender and sad, “be kind.”

“You can go to extremes, with impossible schemes, you can laugh while your skates fall apart at the seams, ah,” he skipped to the end, “if you are a-mong the ska-ters young at heart.”

At which time we were pulling into the school bus lane outside the gymnasium, Holly thanking me and Frankie telling me they’d call when the party was over. And with that, the two jostling puppies were out of the truck running across the leaf-covered grass toward the double doors, leaving me with a few hours to kill. Time I’ve used to scribble

in my journal, to start writing what you're reading here. Some piece that doesn't have an ending just yet.

The two with all the words of love, all the romance of Bogart and Bacall. Plenty of drama, onscreen and off, too; at school, at home, in their minds. But for Frankie Young Blue Eyes and Holly Go-fifty-years-later-lightly, the sadness that underpins adult relationships is not theirs yet, I think, although I'd never have told them so (and of course they'd never believed me if I'd tried to warn them). But, you know, I can't say that.

One could even argue, I suppose, that their heartbreaks are sharper, their sadnesses deeper. Like the little three-year-old Frankie breaking a favorite Tonka truck or as upset as I when I'd "lost something," and so earnest and serious helping me look. And hasn't it been little Frankie who has always advised me on love issues, ever in his Sinatra lines? Most lately that a person in my particular spot needed to "pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and start all over again." And if he had his way, I suppose that "new start" would be with old Guy, Frankie's vision of Sky Masterson.

This the same Guy who was leaving town, had told me in our breakup that he was moving into the city, New York, to pursue his own dreams. "If he can make it there," Frankie would've said, "he's gonna make it any-where." He might even have then raised an eyebrow to me and suggested, "It's up to you, new start, new start" (or today, probably, "new *skate*" whatever that might mean).

Of course I'd like to make Frankie happy, but I don't feel somehow I'd make Guy happy. I'd like to pick up the phone and tell my young friend to start spreading the news, that I was leaving today, but that just wouldn't be right. Partly, simply that as I said, I'm an '80s girl, so maybe a quote from Marshall Crenshaw's "rockin' around in n.y.c"

would be more apt. But I won't, or as Bono might say, I still haven't found what I'm looking for, I guess. And since Frankie won't be a man until I'm too much older—Sinatra, too, sang “Mrs. Robinson,” remember—and besides, he's found a partner in Miss Golightly anyway. I'll keep looking. Sometimes I think I can feel it coming in the air (perhaps even tonight).

So I give up scribbling and look across at the junior high's woodsy campus, breathing the changing leaves, seeing one tall oak that has not a one left hanging, and I remember my poor dying tree in the backyard. Thinking I'll have to call someone about that, as the double doors of the school open and the two, Frankie and Holly, bust out holding hands. My heart gets a pang, the thought *I loved him first* darts past me, quickly followed by a sad chuckle: *Hey, I even introduced you two!* Rain begins to pelt the windshield just as they climb aboard.

They're hopelessly cute on the ride home, but I can't tell you what they so cleverly said because I had passed into a bit of a funk, a kind of self-pitying awareness of the ironies of human life, very self-indulgent and silly. I drop them both back at Holly's, where the still-nameless Kansas cat waits in the wan, late-afternoon sun that chased the thunderstorm. Cat on the front steps casts wary glances at my pickup for sight or smell of Doc. I cut the engine and sit back, as with gracious thank-yous the kids unbuckle themselves and bound toward the house. The movie version might cut this scene with computer-aided, aged photos of the two—here's Frankie and Holly bounding toward the family home at 13, then 18, then she in a wedding dress maybe; followed by the two of them running with kids of their own; and lastly as old grandparents even. It's a TV ad for insurance, that's what I'm seeing.

But I smile and wave as I gently pull away, and maybe they turn back to see it or maybe not. Maybe he does, maybe she's the one. I'm tired—I scratched in my journal the entire time they skated. It's Sunday and my love doesn't love me. And the one guy who does love me I can't quite love all the way back. I'm so fortunate, with job and roof overhead, with friends and family, with so much that I feel guilty for my blues. But as I just journaled that line about lucky for shelter, I remember the tree, the dying oak that could at any moment crash through my living space. I go, with now a wine in hand, to the computer where I access all of the local arborists and tree surgeons and the like. I settle on "Forever Green," a company started by a fellow by the name of Green. Since it's just 1997, everybody doesn't have a website. I dial up Green, now a Saturday evening around eight, and get his machine.

"Thanks for calling Forever Green. Want to know your business. I'll find your message in a bottle. Will call you back before you go-go, won't leave you hangin like a yo-yo."

I have to laugh. If I'd placed a personal ad looking for a man into '80s music, I might have been hooked up with this Green. I always loved Sting and The Police, but Wham!/? Still, undaunted, I leave my name and number, address where he can find the tree I need taken down.

You never know, he could be my age. He might just pull up in a late-model pickup like mine, with "I'll Melt With You," on cassette, blasting from little box speakers. He could be my Frankie.