

## The Other Franks

Frank looked at himself in the mirror from a variety of angles, not liking any that he saw. In exasperation he threw off his old, ill-fitting tennis shirt and tried on his ancient Barcelona FC top.

“What do you think about this one?” he asked.

“You look great, honey!” Alice replied, although Frank noticed she hadn’t actually taken her eyes off her phone.

“I just don’t know whether I should go,” Frank said dejectedly, “It feels like it’s been a very long time.”

“I *love* going to my reunions, seeing all my girls. Just hanging out, partying, bitching about everyone, karaoke... I’d kill to be allowed to see them more than once a year.”

“But it’s like I was saying to you, I’m just not sure I... I mean I find myself comparing myself to them and they’re all just so much more...”

“Look, honey,” Alice said, still not taking her eyes off her phone, “they’re *not* better than you. You’re great. Just *enjoy it*.” She looked up at him and all of a sudden her face transformed into the severest of frowns. “Aren’t you going to wear a *shirt*?”

Frank sighed. “I’ve told you before, nobody wears things like shirts and ties. It’s just our tradition.” He didn’t think he looked *that* awful, standing there in the mirror in his Barcelona FC top, shorts, white socks and trainers.

Although he was anxious and apprehensive, Frank was proud of himself for going. He was resolved to tell them, finally, after all these years. It was his duty to tell them.

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Waiting for the receptionist to return at the front desk of the Waterloo Radisson hotel, Frank did momentarily feel a bit of a fool wearing what was essentially his jogging kit. He also feared he was the first to arrive. Yes, the Franks would all be punctual, but this was pushing it. The receptionist smiled at him and confirmed, “You’re with the Frank Hallowsays Close Possible Worlds party?”

“Yep.”

“Excellent, sir,” he said, checking Frank’s face against one on his screen. “You’re the first one here!” Great. “You’ll be in the Leigham Suite. Since you’re the first to arrive, I’d be grateful if you could take this correspondence and relay it to the other Frank Hallowsays?”

“Yes, of course,” Frank said, signing something. Probably just some marketing bumf, he thought, folding the letter and shoving it in his pocket. He made his way up the staircase to the Leigham Suite. As he walked he realised his hands were trembling and clammy. His mind was racing through elaborate and unnecessary things that might go wrong, as was his style.

It’d been a long time and he didn’t know what he was going to say to any of the other Franks. Maybe he didn’t have to tell them this year. Just for one more year he could let it slide.

It would’ve been much better if he’d planned his arrival for when the Franks were mid-conversation and he could just fade into the background. Technically it wasn’t too late for him to simply leg it.

But he found himself arriving at the door, and as per usual there was a technician supervising the threshold. She did an iris check on Frank, frisked him, put some details into her console, and let him enter.

The room was exactly as he'd remembered it: awash with browns and beiges, clean but soulless, a bog-standard conference room but with panels where the windows would be. If he hadn't known it since his childhood, he would've expected something grander for their special meeting point between parallel worlds.

He took a chair at the big oak table. The standard materials had been prepared for them: nametag labels, a pile of some of their favourite board games, and tumblers for soft drinks (no Frank liked hot drinks).

Frank idly fetched the letter from his pocket and unfolded it. He started off skim reading it but soon found himself gasping in shock. It was not marketing bumf. He returned to the start and read every word painfully slowly, checking he wasn't making a mistake. He read it over once again. He held his hand to his forehead and swore in whispers.

Before he had time to collect his thoughts, the door opened and two Franks entered in quick succession. He quickly shoved the letter back in his pocket. It presented to him an opportunity – an escape route, coming to him in that instant as a picture of a bright red fire exit in his mind – and he went for it. Even if there was no way back.

Frank still got a peculiar feeling in his tummy when he saw the other Franks. Seeing *his* body moving across the room, seeing *his* face making that awkward grin. They even had almost exactly the same bad haircuts. It was like looking at himself in a couple of mirrors, but where his reflections had refused to play by the rules and had taken on lives of their own.

They walked over to him, shoulders hunched over in a standard Frank stoop. He stood up and they did some semi-awkward waving to each other (the Franks were not, on the whole, fans of hugs).

"Paprika?" Frank guessed, pointing to one of them. "And... Saffron?"

"One out of two!" Paprika-Frank said, as he tore a nametag from the sheet and started to fill out his nickname.

"I always get mistaken for Saffron-Frank," said Cinnamon-Frank as he wrote his nickname and stuck it on his shirt. "If in doubt, I'm the slightly fatter one."

"And... hello..." Cinnamon-Frank started to greet Frank, jokingly drawing out the words because clearly he was failing to match his face with a Frank. Frank wrote in capital letters on his nametag: 'CORIANDER'. "Coriander-Frank! I knew it."

The Franks did not take it personally when they couldn't distinguish each other on sight. They were effectively clones, after all. Frank felt grateful for the nickname system which they'd agreed on when they'd been about 8-years-old. It had a 'herbs and spices' theme because at that age a lot of them started to cook with their mum, and she'd taught them all of these exotic words. Nobody had been allowed their favourite seasoning because otherwise they would've all been called Chilli-Powder-Frank and they would've been back to square one.

It was both easier and more important for Frank to recognise Paprika-Frank. Easier because he had a tattoo of a pangolin on his wrist, which he'd got in Thailand (he was the only Frank to have taken a gap year). More important because Paprika-Frank was the only Frank who dated men and you needed to remember to ask him about his husband instead of his girlfriend or wife.

Frank felt uncomfortable that the other two Franks were dressed slightly smarter than him – Paprika in chinos and a polo shirt, Cinnamon still in shorts but with a crisp plaid shirt. What about the tradition?

There was an awkward silence as the three Franks stood there shuffling next to each other. Frank never knew what to do for small talk at these reunions. Since they'd all just arrived from close but distinct parallel worlds, it was hard to find concrete common ground. Should he bring up the news? But the news in their worlds would be slightly – or even wildly – different. Should he ask about their families? All of the Franks had no siblings, just a mum called Caitlyn and a father called Boris, but – like the Franks themselves – the Caitlyns and Borises had all made slightly different decisions and gone down different paths.

Frank remembered that there was a running-joke of an icebreaker for this exact situation, but Cinnamon-Frank beat him to it, blurting out:

“The weather’s good, isn’t it?” and they all laughed. It was a vintage Frankism – a joke which had been going for at least 15 years, which boiled down to this: they had no knowledge about, no access to, and no real interest in the weather in each other’s close possible worlds. That was the joke.

The Franks were their own type of funny.

“So how’s your world, Paprika?” Cinnamon-Frank asked, “How’s Ryan?”

Paprika-Frank proceeded to tell them about his husband’s recent promotion and some complicated chain of events that had stopped them from moving into their new house in a better area. Frank nodded and put on the semblance of listening, but inside he was really thinking, *what if they ask me about how I’m doing? What am I going to say?*

“Paprika,” said Cinnamon-Frank, “that’s fascinating, but we won’t remember any of it.” This was a reference to how hard it was to remember biographical details of your close-possible-world selves. It made Frank feel less anxious. He had forgotten the strange warmth he sometimes felt, being in their company. To be amongst the Franks again.

“And Coriander, how are you and your wife?” Cinnamon-Frank asked Frank, “What was her name again?” Frank waited to see if Cinnamon-Frank could remember but nothing came and soon he said “Alice” at the same time as Paprika-Frank said “Annabelle.”

“Ah, Alice, yes,” Paprika-Frank said, correcting himself.

Before Frank could give them an update, the door opened and another two Franks came in. Same impish grins, same slight stoop to their gait, almost exactly the same bad hair styles.

The same awkward little waves.

“35 years!” one of the new Franks declared, going straight to writing ‘Saffron’ on his nametag. He read the nametags of the incumbent Franks. “Good evening Paprika, Cinnamon, Coriander. Don’t you love it each time September 29<sup>th</sup> rolls around?”

“I just didn’t have anything else to do tonight,” said Cinnamon-Frank. Cinnamon and Saffron were definitely the closest of all the Franks, and Frank himself had always been particularly envious of what they had. Saffron-Frank starting announcing in a BBC-4 kind of voice:

“35 years ago, Cinnamon-Frank, lest you forget, you and I were exactly the same person. Born identical Franks in our own identical worlds. But through-”

“- *subtle quantum fluctuations*-”, Cinnamon-Frank joined in.

“- through those subtle quantum fluctuations, manifesting themselves as *teeny-weeny* differences in environmental conditions and personal decisions, our paths have diverged.”

“But we’re still close,” Paprika-Frank added, hamming it up.

Then after a pause, Frank said in perfect timing, and beating the other Franks to it this time, “The weather’s good, isn’t it?”

The cross-parallel-world Frank laugh coming at you in 5-speaker-stereo was something to behold: like trapped geese honking in Morse code.

Frank had missed hearing this laugh.

“How are your metrics going, Franks?” said the fifth Frank, Mustard-Frank. “Bellies out!”

The other Franks immediately pulled up their tops to reveal their bellies, and Frank followed suit.

“Still got a bit more girth to you there, Cinnamon,” Saffron-Frank said, poking Cinnamon-Frank at his flabbiest point. Frank himself felt self-conscious as usual because he knew he was the fattest and always had been – the other Franks didn’t even mock him for it, it was that bad.

“I gave up on my other resolution,” Saffron-Frank continued. “Remember that I was trying to come across as less egocentric by getting better at remembering personal details? The dates of birthdays, the stories from people’s childhoods, the blah-blah-blah? It was no use. It’s not a Frank thing. Don’t waste your time on it.”

“I disagree,” said Paprika-Frank as they all put their bellies away, “I don’t think that’s necessarily a Frank-wide limitation. I’ve been very into mnemonics this year. Memory palaces and so on. I was able to memorise a 60 digit number.”

This elicited a couple of genuine *oohs* from the Franks, and Mustard-Frank muttered something about looking into that himself this year.

“No, no, no,” Saffron-Frank replied, “Number stuff, fine. And we don’t seem to have any problems remembering rules and regulations, probably due to our anxious over-checking sort of mentality, but we’re not good with remembering facts about *people* are we? Let’s be honest.”

“Let’s be *Frank*,” Frank said. And how they honked!

In his own world, Frank was not considered funny. In his youth he had tried so hard and had pretty much given up. He didn’t really *get* what people found funny. He hadn’t even been good at making *himself* – the other Franks – laugh. Not like the others.

But just then, he’d nailed it.

“Good one, Coriander,” Saffron-Spice said. “Look, let’s talk about our times before Allspice gets here,” Saffron-Spice said, looking theatrically around the room. This was where they shared their personal best at the 50m freestyle.

“39:12,” said Paprika-Frank.

“39:08,” said Cinnamon-Frank

“39:21,” Frank said – which was a lie, but a plausible one and one which they had no way of checking.

“What are you slow coaches up to?” joshed Saffron-Frank, “I’m not doing anything over 39 at the moment, and 37:54 is my best.”

“What’s your secret?” asked Cinnamon-Frank.

“Lose that blubber,” advised Saffron-Frank, poking his doppelganger in the belly.

“Look, it’s not my fault I put more hours into hard training in my formative years.”

“And who has done their reading?” Paprika-Frank asked, changing the topic.

Everyone said yes and so Frank said yes as well. “Thoughts?”

"I thought Holden Caulfield was such an arse that I found it a struggle to keep going," Cinnamon-Frank said.

Paprika-Frank murmured in agreement, adding, "But I found that his annoying, depressive character was necessary to bring out some of the beauty of the scenes around him." Frank worked out that they must have put *The Catcher in the Rye* on their book club this year, and he'd read this a long time ago. Without thinking, he found himself saying:

"He reminded me of Boris."

"Boris? You mean dad?" The other Franks were confused.

"Yes, dad," Frank said, instantly regretting making the contribution. "I just mean when he was younger. It's what I imagine Boris – *dad* – being like when he was a lot younger. I don't know why."

There was an appalling silence in the room. Their book club was usually very safe ground; they decided on one or two books each year that were published before they'd been born so that they knew they were all talking about exactly the same thing. Now Frank felt like he'd ruined it. He should never have come.

"That's a strange thing to say, Coriander," Saffron-Frank said.

"I'm sorry." He made it even worse by apologising for it. Why had he come back? What good did it do him to see all these people who he could have been?

Frank was very grateful for the door opening at that exact moment.

"Did anybody order a recipe featuring *Allspice*?" called Allspice-Frank as he walked over to them. Same grin, same stoop – but with a slightly cockier swagger.

"Here we go," said Saffron-Frank and Cinnamon-Frank in chorus.

Allspice was wearing jeans and a black shirt. Frank felt silly and self-conscious for being the only one still dressed in sports clothes, like a child amongst adults.

"Get your bellies out!" cried Allspice, and they did.

Soon they were comparing swimming times again, then Allspice was indirectly checking who was on the highest salary (it was him). He had always been the most competitive and abrasive of the Franks.

"Is this it then?" Allspice-Frank asked. "Just 6?"

"The dwindling Franks!" Cinnamon-Frank joked. But it was a sensitive topic. Frank remembered the days of the full state-allocated set of 12 Franks, when they were younger, before a couple of them had drifted away.

"Still," said Allspice-Frank, "6 is a good number for board games. Settlers of Catan? What expansion packs? I just need to take a slash."

As Allspice-Frank jogged off to the toilet, the other Franks made eyes at each other. Once he was out of earshot, Cinnamon-Frank said, "That Frank's a bit of a cunt, isn't he?"

Cue the honks.

Paprika-Frank said, "Before we start on the games, does anybody have anything they want to discuss?"

"Circle time!" called Saffron-Frank, mockingly. Frank had been planning to tell them at this juncture. It was a tradition that they had a time when someone could raise an upsetting situation they were facing or hard decision they had to make, and the other Franks would offer their advice. Most of them were not openly compassionate to each other, so Paprika-Frank liked to remind them of this section on the agenda. But Frank kept quiet, as he always had. He had been presented with that opportunity – that bright red fire exit – and had gone for it.

Allspice-Frank returned, drying his hands on his jeans. "So many more seats than Franks!" he bellowed, "Maybe we've got to rent a smaller venue. Right. Settlers?" They took seats and Allspice-Frank started getting out the pieces. "Oh, before we get going, the receptionist said that one of you has a notice for us all?"

They looked at each other and Frank knew that now he'd have to read it out. "That's me," he said with a dry mouth, fetching the letter from his pocket, "I just wanted to wait until everybody was here."

"What is it then?" Allspice-Frank asked, "Have we qualified for a free burger or something?"

Frank cleared his throat. He sipped some water. There was no easy way to put it. "It's Black-Pepper-Frank." Then he read from the letter. He tried to read it as slowly and respectfully as he could. *Dear all Frank Hallowsays, it is with sadness that we inform you that Frank Halloway ID 8e56b2 passed away on the evening of 14th July. He died shortly after a car accident. He was known to you here assembled as 'Black-Pepper-Frank'. With sympathy, Southwark Council Cross World Services. That's it.*

For a short while everyone was silent and still.

"Is that all we get?" Allspice-Frank asked. The wind was taken out of him. "The first of us dies, and that's all we get."

Cinnamon-Frank kicked off his chair, bolted off to one of the panelled up windows and put his head in his hands. He swore in whispers, like Frank himself had done. "Poor Frank," he said, clearly distraught, "And it was Black-Pepper-Frank. Of all of us..."

Saffron-Frank went over to console him with a clumsy pat on the shoulder. Saffron-Frank and Cinnamon-Frank were always there for each other.

Allspice-Frank tried to discreetly put the pieces of the game back in the box. But one of the tokens fell to the ground making what seemed like an awfully loud sound and he winced.

"He didn't even come here for the last 2 years," Mustard-Frank said. "Did he?"

"I'm sorry guys," Frank said. "It's so sad."

For around two minutes the Franks just shared the same space, without saying a word. It was the first time Frank could recall them ever being comfortably silent in each other's presence.

Cinnamon-Frank broke the silence. "We can't even have a proper funeral, can we? We won't see each other again for a year."

"Let's do it now then," Saffron-Frank declared. "Let's do it properly. *This* is the funeral for Black-Pepper-Frank. We knew him better than anybody else."

"*Did* we?" said Mustard-Frank. "Look, I'll go first." He stood up and everyone else took a seat. "You know me as the straight-talking Frank so I'm sorry if my eulogy isn't flowery. I hope it's OK. Do we Franks really know each other? We only see each other once a year. We spend half of that time playing Settlers or Risk. But I'm sure I'm speaking for all of you when I say I *know* you. We share the same DNA and the same awful dress sense – I love that Barcelona top on you, Coriander. We think in the same way. All of your facial expressions, right now, are exactly the same – it's actually a bit off-putting. We are all geeks and have ended up, perhaps depressingly, as accountants or actuaries. Yes, Allspice, I know you're a management consultant, but you still spend most of your life on a spreadsheet. And when we play these board games, they are suffocatingly well-balanced.

"Now, Black Pepper," Mustard-Frank continued, clearly distressed, "with Black Pepper it was *different*. He was different. I didn't feel like I knew him as well. I'm sorry to

say that. But I still loved him.” Mustard-Frank reached for more words but they didn’t come. The other Franks nodded in approval and he sat down.

Frank realised he had a tear in his eye and he brushed it away. Saffron-Frank and Cinnamon-Frank accidentally stood up at the same time. They stayed standing together. Cinnamon-Frank was crying and Saffron-Frank continued to clumsily pat his shoulder. “Look,” Cinnamon-Frank started, clearing his throat and sighing, “Black Pepper found things harder. We talked about this last year, didn’t we? I don’t know when it started to be that way, but at some point I don’t think he felt like he belonged. Not here with us; maybe not out there with everybody else. He was quieter. He always seemed to have something on his mind and…” he broke off.

Saffron-Frank took over. “What Mustard and Cinnamon are trying to say is something we all realised. Black Pepper didn’t just stop coming because he moved to Australia, like Vanilla, or because he thought he’d outgrown us all, like Bay Leaf. It seems to be a standard feature of this Frank build,” he said, waving to his body, “that we’re quite lucky, aren’t we? We’re quite stable, we’re usually happy, we can deal with the shit that life throws at us. But Black Pepper-”

“Why didn’t we try to help him more?” Cinnamon-Frank interrupted. “Huh? When we knew that he was sad – depressed, even. We *knew* he struggled to keep a job. *He* didn’t find a cosy position as a boring accountant, like the rest of us. We *knew* but we didn’t really do anything to help, did we?” There was a tone of condemnation in his voice. It soon gave way to more tears. Saffron-Frank hugged him with his whole body.

“What *can* we do?” Allspice called out. “Realistically, what can we do or what could we have done? We’re not there for one another, are we? Once a year. That’s all they give us. And let’s see,” he said, checking his watch, “we have only 85 minutes left. What were we meant to do? It’s not our fault.”

“We could’ve just listened to him,” Cinnamon-Frank said.

“He didn’t want to talk,” Allspice said quietly, trying not to upset them further. He wasn’t really all that nasty. He was still a Frank.

“We always gave him the opportunity and he could’ve talked to us,” Paprika-Frank added. “And besides, he died in a car crash. It was probably a complete accident.”

“Maybe not,” said Mustard-Frank. They glared at him. “I’m just saying, maybe not.”

“*Guys,*” Saffron-Frank interrupted, “this isn’t what people say at a funeral. This isn’t the point. The point is we loved Frank as one of us. We loved being with him here. Do you remember how we used to share stories with each other when we were younger? We all wrote bizarre sci-fi stories and we loved hearing each other’s, right? We dreamed of making it big. I mean I’d love to do it again.”

“I’m still writing them,” Mustard-Frank cut-in. “Still dreaming.”

“But Black Pepper’s stories were different,” Saffron-Frank continued, “His stories were simple. Not fantastical at all. They were just snapshots of times – moments, even – that meant something to him. A photography club in school where he felt free. A moment in a football match where he felt like he fitted in. That one about the tree he climbed in Wales.” They murmured in recognition. “I’ll never forget them. Whether we were encouraging to him or not, let’s not get into that, but they were beautiful, those times when he was happy.”

“I tried to plagiarise those stories in my world,” Mustard-Frank admitted.

“I didn’t even read them all,” said Allspice-Frank, guiltily. “And I called him *Dark Frank* and I apologise for that now.”

Saffron-Frank sat down and Paprika-Frank stood up. “He was the only one to hate our competitions, our metrics, our *bellies out!* He played the board games but he wasn’t really into them. He never won. But he came – he used to come, at least – and I think we have to assume that, you know, *this* meant something to him. He got something out of this.”

“He did,” Frank himself said, with enough resolve that Paprika-Frank sat down.

“Over to you, Coriander,” Paprika-Frank said.

Frank spoke solemnly. “I promise you that he appreciated all of us. The last time I saw Black-Pepper-Frank, we did talk a bit. He opened up to me. He told me that he had a harder time than the rest of us growing up, from about when he was 13. Things *happened*. Things happened in his life when he was about that age. He knew we hadn’t had to go through things like that and he didn’t want to burden us with it.”

Frank stopped there. There was more that he could share with them, so much more. There was only one Frank who had been through what Black-Pepper-Frank had been through. The letters he had accidentally found in his parents’ bedroom, underneath their bed, on a Saturday morning when he was 13. He’d read the letters so quickly and quietly, so very scared. He hadn’t been allowed to be in there, it’d felt so illicit, that musty smell forever associated with doing wrong.

Only one Frank had learnt the truth from those letters: that Boris was not his real father; that he had been lied to for his whole childhood. The raging arguments between little Black-Pepper-Frank and his mum about why she hadn’t told the truth. Why she’d cheated on Boris – even if it was only once. The distance that grew between Frank and his parents as he’d struggled through adolescence.

Only one Frank had tried – but failed – to find his real father.

Only one Frank who had desperately wanted to tell the other Franks every time he’d come to these reunions. Who had kept silent whilst hearing every year about their normal, well-adjusted lives.

Only one Frank who had never felt like he could fully trust people, and who knew that the same anxious checking which enabled the other Franks to excel at their jobs had led him to second-guess everyone new in his life.

There was only one Frank whose life had been so dominated by lies that, when presented with the opportunity – the bright red fire exit – he had lied about another Franks’ death to make things easier for himself.

He was that cowardly Frank.

Frank looked down at his sheet of paper, appearing to collect his thoughts. He read the horrible ending of that letter again, this time to himself and without making the crucial alteration. ‘*He was known to you here assembled as Coriander-Frank.*’ Coriander-Frank. One of the good Franks.

Black-Pepper-Frank stood there as they waited on his word – a man speaking at his own sham funeral.

He felt a duty to tell them about their parents. He had wanted to tell them for over 20 years. He knew they were each unknowingly living in the shadow of a lie.

But if he were to tell them now, what good would that bring? What good had it brought *him*? They were blissful in their ignorance. Telling them would lead them to question their own relationships. They each had a Boris, but for none of them was he actually their dad. It would bring to them all the same darkness that had hung over him since he’d been 13.

It had always seemed strange to Frank how none of them had spotted it – Boris had such a different way of thinking to him, and by extension to them all. So much more detached and pensive. But why would they ever have suspected it?

So Frank did not tell them. He just could not. Instead he continued to speak a eulogy for himself. “Black Pepper found it very hard to come to these events,” he said, talking almost in a whisper, “He found it hard to see more successful versions of himself. He couldn’t really feel proud about himself. But he loved you guys. That last time we saw him, 3 years ago, he said that quietly to me. He loved knowing that we were always somewhere.”

The other Franks continued to reminisce about him until their time was up. They mainly shared happy memories and there was a lot of laughter.

Their last discussions were about next year. Same place, same time? Paprika-Frank said he had been planning to come once every two years instead, but now it was important they were there for each other. Allspice-Frank said he would come just out of a morbid fascination to see the myriad ways in which he could die, but he quickly apologised for the bad taste. Mustard-Frank pointed out that it was getting harder to keep up to date with each other. They were diverging.

They used to be like brothers.

In the corridor on his way out, Frank was held up by Paprika-Frank. “Coriander,” he said, “I *swear* your wife’s name *was* Annabelle.” Frank just stared at him, motionless, and then put on that impish Frank grin. “It’s a funny story, Frank, I’ll tell you about it one day.” And with that he crossed the threshold, back to his own world.

On Frank’s descent on the staircase, he experienced one of those rare moments of freedom and elation. He wanted to write about it one day. He patted the nametag that was still stuck to his Barcelona top, ‘Coriander-Frank’. *Please forgive me, Coriander*, he thought.

He wondered what he’d tell Alice. It didn’t really matter because she wouldn’t understand, she didn’t care, and soon she’d be replacing him with another lodger who could actually pay full rent.

He had gone wanting to tell them everything. In the end, he had simply said goodbye.