

—The Importance Of Being Frank—

At the end of this story, a Frenchman will be eaten by African driver ants.

* * *

Silvie closed the stall door behind her; she closed it timidly, with an empty expression on her face. Her hand shook. She paused for a moment, her mouth half open, her lip curled upward, and a frown on her forehead.

Then she walked over to the wash basins.

A fly buzzed between her and the mirror. She turned on the faucet, filled her cupped hands with water, and splashed it on her face. She looked at the stall's reflection in the mirror, closed her eyes, and slapped herself.

Let us slow down to take in the sights. At the exact moment Silvie's hand hits her cheek, everything seems to halt. But as we look closer, we see that the fly still flies: it now only edges through the air. Water droplets merely drift away from where skin met skin in an entirely unapplauding clap. Glittering in the light, they paint a halo slipped from its place. But let us see the girl!

Silvie is left-handed and French. She is wearing a ridiculous amount of makeup, applied with the mentality of someone painting a wall, not a picture. Silvie is fifteen years old and very beautiful, if not for the makeup. The slap-ripples now creeping across her face lend her the expression of someone stuck between a traffic accident and a kiss.

The action resumes with a clap and a splash.

Silvie shoveled more water onto her face. After a moment of hesitation, she started rubbing at her makeup with her palms, then grabbed some paper towels, wet them, and removed what she could. She looked at her paint-smearred face; next to herself, she saw the stall's reflection. She shook her head and fled the bathroom.

Which led her into an American diner in the anonymous Midwest. A waitress smoked a cigarette under the no-smoking sign;

she had an empty, happy smile on her face. Silvie felt reminded of the Buddhist monks she had seen on the Discovery Channel the night before.

There was only one customer besides Silvie's family: an old man, sitting on a corner bench, right next to the door that led to the unisex bathroom. He was reading a magazine that had naked people (mostly female) on its cover. Just as Silvie walked past him, he let out a roaring laugh, never taking his eyes off the magazine.

For your information: he was reading pornographic poetry.

Silvie hurried past a little faster and sat down on her chair after eyeing it suspiciously.

"Silvie, darling, is anything the matter?" asked her mother. She spoke fluent French, but there was a certain flatness to her accent.

Silvie said nothing and poked her toast with a fork.

This is what had happened inside her head fifteen minutes before:

I get up, excuse myself, and find the bathroom. I feel guilty; I wanted to eat less; I have to go again, and that means I've eaten too much today, because why else would I have to go so often; I have to lose weight, lose, not gain. I take stock of what I've eaten today: the toast, yes, and breakfast this morning, and, oh, two cookies in the car. I hate American food, but they've got chocolate chip cookies down to an art. Still, I shouldn't have eaten them, but Mom and Dad were not-talking in this way that meant trouble and when they do that I get all nervous and I need chocolate and I need to lose weight, lose, not gain! And then Stefane was whining that he was hungry again and we stopped here and I ate all this toast and I don't want to end up with a fat little brother; was I like that at his age? Everyone will make fun of me; Mario will make fun of me!

I open the bathroom door and take a deep breath. I remember the most perfect back in the world: so smooth and curvy in all the right ways. I remember how he pushed out of the swimming pool, how his muscles played their muscle play, and it's not like he's got a lot of them, but I think there should be some sort of book that lists the most perfect backs with pictures of them, just so Mario can be in there.

I close the stall door behind me and sit down. American toilets

are weird. I hardly know a dozen English words, but I can read everything written on these walls. I decipher "Mark wants to fuck Susan" and I wonder if Mario will ever want to fuck Silvie.

"Not as long as you are wearing that horrible makeup," says the toilet. I jump; almost soil myself; what the hell? Who was that? Calm down, it was only a...

"Yes, that would be me. Hello. Right beneath you."

"You know how to speak French?" I ask. The moment these words leave my lips, I realize how pointless that question was. Kind of like "are you awake?" One moment later, I realize I'm talking to a toilet, and I stop worrying about pointless questions.

"You wouldn't believe the things I know. Sit on me again! I won't bite, and I like the warmth of your legs. Let's chat about Mario."

I pull up my trousers, think about flushing for a moment, decide against it, and flee the stall.

Silvie gave no answer. She poked her toast and clenched her teeth. A drop of water, makeup-cyan, traced her cheekbone's curve. From her chin it fell on her toast. She pushed the plate from her.

"I am hideous!"

No one said a word.

* * *

Delphine, Silvie's mother, opened her mouth for a moment. She blinked and then closed it again. After another moment of indecision, she looked at her husband and raised her eyebrows expectantly; he looked away. Delphine sighed.

Stefane grabbed the toast from Silvie's plate.

"Hey! I wasn't done!"

"But you cried on it and then you pushed it away."

"I didn't cry!"

Delphine got up a little too abruptly. All eyes were on her.

"Excuse me," she said, "I have to use the bathroom."

Her family remained silent as she walked away. Now it was her husband's turn to sigh.

Inside the stall, she retrieved a little leather map from her simple white purse. She opened the zipper. First, she took out a

small plastic bag and ripped it open; there was an alcohol-drenched swab in it. She dropped this swab to the bathroom floor and used a lighter to set it on fire. Then she filled a tablespoon with water from a little flask. Next she opened a little paper envelope and shook some white powder out of it onto the spoon. Finally, she leaned forward and held the spoon in the flame, cooking the mixture.

"Heroin is bad for your skin," said the toilet.

Delphine raised her eyebrows and smiled.

"Heroin also doesn't cause hallucinations, especially not before you even inject it," she said.

"I'm no hallucination," answered the toilet.

"That's what they all say. How come you speak French if you're an American toilet?"

"I was fabricated in France."

Delphine looked at the ceramic bowl incredulously; she saw a little "fabriqué en France" sticker.

"And how come a place like this can afford a French toilet?"

"That is a mystery," said the toilet.

"That it is. Now if you don't mind, I have a drug-habit to please here." Delphine now spoke English.

"Matter of fact, I do mind. I worry about your undying soul."

"What, will my soul get wrinkles too?"

"Do you know that your daughter is madly in lust with an Italian boy named Mario?"

Delphine paused. A frown crept into the smile. She leaned back on the toilet, removing the spoon from the flame.

"She dreams of him day and night; in her dreams he hits her and tells her that she's worthless, because this is the only contact she can conceive of; because it is better to her than indifference. You have asked her if she finds any boy 'cute'; you asked her in this awkward mother-voice and I remember how you bit your cheek then. She said nothing, but a minute later she dropped her glass on the floor. She cut herself three times trying to clean up before you had to take over. We call this passive-aggressive behaviour, and it manifests itself in children who have found no other ways of venting their unhappiness. You vacillate between apathy and overcompensation because you have never learnt to be anything but the best at what you do. You must accept that parenting is not an exact science, not a

sport to excel at. It is in your nature not to accept failure; thus, you hide in the only private place you have left and do the only thing you've kept a secret from your family. Delphine, you must realize that as a mother, you don't need to be great; you only need to be there."

"Why the fuck is a toilet lecturing me on motherhood? Can't a girl have a decent high without moralizing furniture anymore?"

"You left 'girl' behind many years ago. And I lecture you because I can. I am a sentient toilet, and with your feculence I absorb all your worries and your secret thoughts."

"What's a feculence?"

"That which is feculent. Biological waste."

"Why didn't you just say 'crap'?"

"I happen not to like that word."

"And how come you know 'feculence'?"

"I had a professor of English on me a week ago."

"Right. So why the hell are you a sentient toilet?"

"Another mystery."

"Let me guess. You're actually a prince. If you think I'm going to kiss you..."

"The point of a mystery is not to know its answer."

"Then answer me this: why should I abandon what has comforted me so many times? I know there is happiness in this spoon, which is more than can be said about the group of people sitting out there, probably still not-talking in such a dramatically meaningful way."

Meanwhile, the mixture in the spoon had become cold and flaky.

"Because it's a bad trade-off. You gain short term pleasures at the unreasonable price of long term happiness. There is no greater accomplishment than the memory of a happy life."

For a long time, Delphine said nothing. From time to time, she closed her eyes. Finally, she cleared her throat nervously.

"Will you promise to be silent if I throw this shit away?"

"Upon my honour."

She discarded the flaky contents of the spoon and the rest from the little paper envelope into the toilet.

"There. Have a party."

"You've made a good decision."

"Oh, don't think it's because of anything you've said; it's because you said something at all. There is a certain silent agreement between me and any piece of ceramic I sit on; silent being the keyword. Despite my devious past, I'm still not quite okay with the thought of urinating on my conversational partner."

To this, the toilet remained silent. Delphine wiped, flushed, and exited. Closing the door, she noticed some graffiti and smiled. It said:

"Man, I'm so high; I swear I can hear the toilet talk to me."

As Delphine flicks the light switch, we slow down once more to have a careful look at her face. Maybe an honest emotion will betray itself. Due to our slow-down, the sound of the toilet still flushing behind her dies away like a record slowed to a standstill. The clicking of the light switch is a distant earthquake, hardly audible. As the darkness creeps across the woman's face, we see a frown invade her amused smile. But it is impossible that a frown would last for but the time it takes the photons to travel from neon lamp to floor, so we must have been mistaken.

"What?" said Delphine.

It's been years since my last hit of acid. 'Flashbacks,' they said, 'is what happens to other people.' Seems I'm other people now.

'No darling, with drugs I have no problems,' I told him. The adorable fool! He smiled and nodded and gently corrected me: 'That is good to hear, sweetheart,' he said—and how unnatural that word sounds out of his mouth—and continued, 'but the proper syntax in French is "I have no problems with drugs." Don't worry, you'll get there some day. After all, Finnish is quite unlike French. It is astonishing you speak French as well as you do!' And all the while he looked at me with those confused eyes and they said 'it is astonishing you stay with me at all', and it's not astonishing, it's atonement. Self-punishment. Social flagellation.

Inferior people shouldn't be aware of their inferiority. It makes them so repulsively humble.

I had no plans to stay with him this long. How did this happen? Years drifted by in a sort of brown haze. I will miss brown. I must eat things befitting a food poisoning soon. Yes, that will be the way to do it.

Forgive me father for I have killed. That's quite alright, my

daughter. Say five Hail Marys, marry a Frenchman, and go through cold turkey in the comfort of some shabby American motel. Praise Jesus!

And who the fuck uses semi-colons in their graffiti?

Just in case you asked yourself the same thing: it was the aforementioned professor of English.

Delphine walked out of the restroom. She saw a man reading a book with what seemed to be crude erotic drawings in it. From time to time, he laughed loudly. His teeth were ceramic-white.

* * *

When Delphine sat down at the table, she placed her hand on her husband's thigh. She hadn't done that in a while, Pierre observed; after the fight that morning it was the last thing he would have expected. He got up clumsily, excused himself, and made his way to the lavatories after pushing his chair back under the table properly.

Fifteen minutes later he sat down again with the most bewildered expression on his face.

"Darling? Is anything the matter?" Delphine asked.

"I'm still hungry!" whined Stefane. They ordered more toast for him.

"That man..." Pierre finally said to no-one in particular, looking at the old man still reading his strange book, "he looks like my father."

I am in the stall and I wait. I examine the walls around myself again. I wait for something to happen.

The stall door opens. A man comes in. This must be the father. Oh well, let's see what's on his mind. He sits down on me. I wait for the influx of emotions, thoughts, and other matters.

I feel his nervousity. It's not proper her touching me in public places like that arousing who knows what in me and after the fight this morning she's doing it to mock me, she's doing all to mock me, she's married me to mock me, or to mock France, or God, or herself, who knows. The woman is out of control! I should have stuck to a nice, proper French woman; eventually there would have been one who'd appreciate an orderly, settled man like me; I don't drink, I don't swear, I don't smoke, I don't use God's name in

vain, I...

Ah. That kind. Well, this explains the other quasi-psychoses. I'm careful to apply the label psychosis after the student of psychology two months ago; her thighs were so warm and firm, and all she thought about was what she had been studying for her exams. That was a welcome change. Most people seem to come to me to worry, to turn some irresolvable matter around in their minds while passing on highly solvable matter to me, as if they expected advice from below. Well, time to give it to this man. Let's see how long he will last.

"You need to loosen up," I say and wait for his reaction.

For some time, no reaction comes. He sits still; very still. Then he carefully parts his legs and looks down at me through them. What does he expect? A face? He looks up again and shakes his head. Ah. The doubting Thomas type. I persist.

"A father is his daughter's lighthouse in the sea of men. What he is, she will look for in all other men for the rest of her life. You're nothing. You're polite and well-mannered and friendly, and you possess all the personality of a white sheet of paper. Ruled. She is lost and has washed ashore on the island of abusive love."

"What?"

"Forgive the poetry; I'm a little high."

"Who is this?"

"Hello Pierre. I will be your toilet tonight."

"But you're speaking!"

"Thank you, Captain Obvious."

"Is this some sort of TV show?"

"You'd make an awfully bad TV show guest; we'd need to invent at least a quarrelling ex-wife who'd later turn out to be your sister. No, you don't have what it takes to be interesting to a TV audience. As a matter of fact, you've never been interesting to anyone at all. When your wife met you at your office's Christmas party, she had decided to take the most boring man she could find home with her that night. And she did. How did you end up like this, Pierre? Tell me about your childhood!"

And he does, but not with words. I see a dog he loved; I see the dog carried off to a veterinarian, to be put to sleep; I feel Pierre cry for his dog; I feel guilty, very guilty: I have lost the paper from the

mail man, the paper that said my dog could live, and daddy is yelling at me for losing that paper, and he yelled at mama before, but he didn't yell at her for losing a paper, and I don't know what he yelled at her for, he said zoophile and pervert and other big words I don't know yet, and then he came and he yelled at me and he said that now Juan would have to be put to sleep, and I don't understand what the problem is because he goes to sleep every night, and sometimes he even dreams, mum told me he dreams of chasing rabbits and he makes funny sounds when he dreams, but now daddy's taking him away and somehow I know that this putting to sleep is different. And I cry and I...

The stream of consciousness and urine goes through me and into the sewer, where they both belong. I see things Pierre did not see: I see his father apply a sledge-hammer liberally to the dog. I see him bring the dog into the veterinarian's office, speaking of a horrible accident, and crying a tear or two when the doctor tells him there is nothing they can do for the animal. I see the same animal, before the hammer episode, alone in the bedroom with Pierre's mother.

I see sausage spread.

What is wrong with French people?

"Listen, Pierre. What your father did to you was wrong; it was not your fault. You are the victim here."

Sometimes I wished I was a couch. He still doesn't answer; clearly, he's not very much at ease.

"You need to loosen up; take some risks in life; bad things will happen—so what? What kind of Frenchman are you anyway? You're more boring than a German. Go out and live a little."

Common-places, but they will have to do. That leaves the son. Let's see what I can do for him.

** * **

"I have to go too," said Stefane and left the table.

"Yes," mumbled Pierre, "you have to." He looked at his daughter, who was trying to see her reflection in a spoon.

"You know," said Pierre, "I think you're the most beautiful clown I have ever seen."

She looked at him, for a moment not sure whether to laugh or to cry. Her mother laughed first. She joined in.

A little later, Stefane returned, sat down, and pushed his plate away.

"*Ça veut dire quoi, 'eat more fibre'?*"

And so they left. Mary cleaned their table and frowned at the uneaten sandwich. When she had brought all the plates into the kitchen, she walked through the empty diner to the restroom. Inside, she looked at herself in the mirror, started washing her hands, and said to no-one in particular:

"You know, Frank, you really oughta be a bit more subtle. You go on like this, you'll end up making us all famous. And we don't want that, do we?"

* * *

The next vacation took this family to the Serengeti; there, Pierre passed out drunk and was eaten by siafu, African driver ants.