

The Book of Life: An Open Page  
By  
J.E. Clarke

FADE IN ON:

EXT. NEW JERSEY EXPRESSWAY - BUS STOP - MORNING

A sight any native would find familiar. Cars shoot down the street - Jersey rockets zooming both ways.

Across the intersection: Franchise stores dot a shopping mall. CUSTOMERS flow in and out glass doors.

On the other side: One bus stop. Two benches.

FRANCINE (30) perches on one, stuffed in corporate clothes. She studies her phone: emails galore. A gathering storm of business chores.

She glances at the bus schedule. 8:15 AM is the next stop. Then at her phone: 8:18.

Francine glares down the street. No bus in sight.

A LITTLE OLD MAN shuffles over to the other bench and sits down. A shopping bag dangles from his arm. He's short with glasses; a fragile figure in a long trench.

He pulls out a pocket watch. Squints at its tarnished face.

BEEP. Another email. Francine multi-tasks as fast as she can: 1) Peck out email replies. 2) Search the street for that damned bus. 3) Huff and snarl at the delay.

The old man watches her routine. After Francine's third round, he good naturedly laughs.

FRANCINE

You think this is funny? Our bus is five minutes late!

OLD MAN

Five minutes? That's trivial.

He shows the pocket watch to Francine.

OLD MAN

We've got all the time in the world.

Francine flashes her cell at him, annoyed.

FRANCINE

No offense, but that watch is missing a few details.

(points at her screen)  
These emails aren't trivial at all!

She buries her face in the phone. Types out more replies.

FRANCINE  
I've got a meeting to prep for. If I'm not to work by nine, my whole day's schedule gets snarled!

OLD MAN  
That's a mighty fancy gadget you're holding. But doesn't that make it *less* important if our bus is late? You can "conduct business" while you wait.

He digs in his bag, pulls out a book.

OLD MAN  
Or read. That's always enriching for one's mind.

The title of the book catches her eye: FRANCINE!

FRANCINE  
Is this a joke? Are you stalking me?

OLD MAN  
Dear, um, I mean Ma'am, what do you mean?

FRANCINE  
My name is Francine. And you know that. Obviously!

She rips the book from the old man's wrinkled hands.

FRANCINE  
Did Glen put you up to this? If he did, I'm tearing him a new one tonight!

She turns the book over: it's an exquisite work of art. Leather covers. Gold letters. She cracks it open - takes a WHIFF.

OLD MAN  
That "new book smell": it's always such a delight.

Francine flips to the first page, starts reading.

FRANCINE  
"I was born in Bethesda. My mother's name - Elizabeth." Shit. I was born there. My mom's name is Liz!

TAP TAP. High heels strike the sidewalk. An ELDERLY WOMAN primly sits down, beside the man...

...and elbows him in the ribs.

ELDERLY WOMAN

You gave the book to her? That's against the rules!

OLD MAN

I couldn't resist, Dear. This is just too fun to watch.

Francine stares. Then reads more.

FRANCINE

"I grew up in the Bronx. Diversity's Norwood's middle name. But my career kept me drowning in mid-town Manhattan, 12 hours or more at a time. Most days, lunch consisted of running to CVS for a protein bar..." Crap. This is so me!

Francine flips through pages. The book's filled with notes. Amused cynicism floods her face.

FRANCINE

Helluva lot of a work for a practical joke. Where are you hiding the cameras, Mr. and Mrs. "Alan Funt"?

She points at the old folks' clothing.

FRANCINE

In that oversized jacket? Between the buttons of that frilly dress?

ELDERLY WOMAN

Tsssk! So sarcastic in your youth. I recommend you keep reading.

(points)

The top of Page Thirty-Five. Then stop.

Francine finds the page, scans lines.

FRANCINE

"Ironically, the corporate world's where I found Glen. Resulting in a breathtaking romance. A bundle of neurosis - camouflaged behind that handsome face..."

She looks up.

FRANCINE

Glen can't be "in" on this. If someone called him neurotic, he'd explode! I know: Nina from Production's got a twisted enough sense of humor for this. And access to printers at night.

The old man GIGGLES.

OLD MAN

Nina? She's always been a hoot!

ELDERLY WOMAN

Nina would do no such thing - even in her youth. That's my book. I want it back!

The woman grabs for the cover. Francine dodges. Flipping pages, she reads more.

FRANCINE

"It was February Tenth, 2021 when I got the news. My mother had been admitted to ER with a stroke. I was at work the first two times they rang. Too busy to answer - until they gave it a third try...

Francine looks up, horrified.

FRANCINE

Mom? Whoever wrote this is sick!

ELDERLY WOMAN

(soft)

Sweetheart, please. Give the book to me. There are certain things you shouldn't read.

Francine holds the book close - forges on.

FRANCINE

"She passed away at three PM. Standard garden variety heart failure - nothing *specific* did her in. To this day, I regret the number of times I could've been with her. Sharing life's precious moments: Weekends. Nights she called because she was lonely. But no - I just never had time to spare. The *only* silver lining; that horrible day in the hospital. When I met her nurse: a gentle, unassuming man named 'Harold'. A man destined to be the love of my life.

OLD MAN

Francine, she's right. Give the book back now. I never should have let you see it. My mistake.

He places a hand on the book's pages. His fingers touch hers. Francine recoils.

FRANCINE

If this was - is - real... Why give it to me?

ELDERLY WOMAN

(glares at the old man)  
Why, indeed?

OLD MAN

Because... I wanted to help. Y- I mean, she could still have quality time with her Mom. The event's still a year away.

Francine's hand droops. Moving with surprisingly agility, the old man snatches the book!

And tosses it like a hot potato to the Elderly Woman. Who tucks the tome discretely in her purse.

Francine stares at them. What the hell?

On the horizon: the silhouette of a bus flickers and approaches; as slowly as NJ transit can allow.

FRANCINE

Give the book back. I'll read more.

ELDERLY WOMAN

No! You think one meeting delay can "snarl a schedule"? There are far worse conflicts in this world...

The old man nods sagely. Holds his tongue.

ELDERLY WOMAN

(to Francine)

One minor word to the wise. Glenn's trouble from the start. Don't bother going to Lake George. You'll be a frazzled mess, the whole trip.

FRANCINE

We're going to Lake George this weekend.

ELDERLY WOMAN

Yes, I know. That's my point.

OLD MAN

Better for you to stay at home. Play some Scrabble with Mom.

ELDERLY WOMAN

By the way, Heidegger's spelled H.E.I...

OLD MAN

You can't use names in Scrabble.

ELDERLY WOMAN

This is her mother's rules. Not yours!

The bus screeches to a stop. Doors slide open. Francine jumps up, galvanized. The old couple don't budge.

FRANCINE

You're not coming?

ELDERLY WOMAN

Heavens, no. We're heading in a different direction, entirely.

The BUS DRIVER gestures to Francine.

FRANCINE

I'm not leaving you!

OLD MAN

You have to, Francine. If you don't arrive by 9:30 AM sharp, your boss will fire you.

ELDERLY WOMAN

That stick-in-the-ass manager, Michael.

OLD MAN

Which creates a whole new set of problems.

The elderly woman waves at Francine.

ELDERLY WOMAN

Enough gabbing. Shoo!

Fishing the book from her purse, the old man holds it out to Francine.

OLD MAN

If you need any more convincing... you've always been the studious type.

The bus door nearly closes. Francine blocks the sensor with her foot. She glances from the old woman to the man. The bus driver glares, annoyed.

BUS DRIVER

Hey. Don't hold up the ride!

FRANCINE

You promise I'll meet this "Harold"?

OLD MAN

Oh yes. There's no doubt on that.

The elderly woman stands up, and pats her hand.

ELDERLY WOMAN

Relax. For you, all will be just fine.

She looks deep in Francine's eyes. Francine hands the book back; a solemn gesture of respect.

FRANCINE

I don't know why, but... I trust you. Whatever game you're playing, you *seem* decent.

ELDERLY WOMAN

Well, that's from a lifetime's worth of practice. Plenty mistakes along the way.

Francine steps into the bus.

BUS DRIVER

About frikkin' time!

FRANCINE

(to the old couple)

I'm guessing you're local? I'll see you again?

The doors slide close. Francine presses a hand against the glass, wobbles.

BUS DRIVER

That's a safety hazard. Sit down!

Distracted, Francine wanders towards a seat. From window to window, she keeps her eyes locked on the old couple, now cuddling alone on their bench.

With an unsure smile, Francine waves.

The old timers watch Francine and the bus roll away.

OLD MAN

Oh, isn't she adorable? Like a confused puppy. That face gets me every time!

The elderly woman elbows the man. He grabs his ribs.

OLD MAN

Ow! I've told you a million times... my left side's delicate!

ELDERLY WOMAN

You're *awful* at following rules, Harold.

OLD MAN

You're the one who cheats on Scrabble. Admit it, Dear. As much as you try to hide it, you're a push-over.

ELDERLY WOMAN

(snorts)

But "a confused Puppy"? That's a bridge too far.

The woman grabs his pocket watch, and checks the hour.

ELDERLY WOMAN

Is anyone watching?

It's past rush hour. The speeding cars are gone.

OLD MAN

No. The coast's clear.

ELDERLY WOMAN

Then hurry up. Someone'll see! And any mess you cause... *you* clean up!

OLD MAN

Don't fret, Francine. I'll get us home. We've got all the time in the world.

He twists the rim of the watch. The face GLOWS...

FINAL FADE OUT: