

The Book of Life: An Open Page
By
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FADE IN ON:

EXT. NEW JERSEY EXPRESSWAY - BUS STOP - MORNING

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

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

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

FRANCINE (30) perches on one, stuffed into 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. Then at her phone: it's 8:18.

Francine glares down the street. No bus in sight. She HUFFS in annoyance.

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, and a trench.

He pulls out a pocket watch. Squints as he reads its tarnished face.

BEEP. Another email. Francine goes into multi-task overdrive: 1) Peck out email replies. 2) Search the street for that bus. 3) Make annoyed sounds again.

The old man watches her routine. After Francine's third iteration, he SNORTS and LAUGHS.

FRANCINE

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

OLD MAN

Five minutes? No big deal.

He shows the pocket watch to Francine.

OLD MAN

We've got all the time in the world.

Francine pouts. She flashes her cell at him.

FRANCINE

Who needs that? I've got this.
(points at her screen)
See? Too many emails.

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

FRANCINE

I've got a meeting to prep for. Have to
be at work by nine.

OLD MAN

Yes, very fancy. But doesn't that make it
less important if the 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 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. You must know that.
Obviously!

She rips the book out of his hand.

FRANCINE

Did Glen put you up to this? I'll have
his ass!

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

OLD MAN

That "new book smell". Isn't it neat?

Francine flips to the first page, and 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. She elbows the old man in the ribs. Francine looks up. Blinks in shock.

ELDERLY WOMAN

You gave that to her? It's against the rules.

OLD MAN

I couldn't resist. This is fun to watch.

Francine gapes. She reads more.

FRANCINE

"I grew up in the Bronx. Diversity is Norwood's middle name. At least, until my career sang its siren song. Leading me to mid-town for awhile." Yep - that's me!

Francine shuffles through pages. The book is FILLED. A cynical expression crawls across her face.

FRANCINE

Shit-loads of work for one joke. Where are you hiding the cameras, Mr. and Mrs. "Alan Funt"?

She points at the old folk's clothing.

FRANCINE

In your jacket? Between the buttons of your dress?

ELDERLY WOMAN

So sarcastic in your youth. I'm not surprised you act this way. Keep reading.
(points)
Go to Page Thirty-Five. Then stop.

Francine finds the page, scans the lines.

FRANCINE

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

She looks up.

FRANCINE

Glen can't be "in" on this. He can't take insults. No way! Nina from Production's got to be the culprit.

She's got a twisted sense of humor. And access to printers at night.

The old man GIGGLES.

OLD MAN

Nina? She's a hoot. Yes, she is.

ELDERLY WOMAN

Nina would do no such thing, even in her youth. That's my book. Give it to me!

The woman grabs for the cover. Francine snatches it away. She flips pages, reads again.

FRANCINE

"It was February Tenth, 2017 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 made a third try."

Francine looks up, horrified.

FRANCINE

Mom? Whoever wrote this is sick!

ELDERLY WOMAN

(soft)

Sweetheart, just give it back. There are certain things you shouldn't read.

Francine holds the book close - keeps going.

FRANCINE

"She passed away at three PM. Basic 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 - but no dice. Weekends. Nights she called because she was lonely. But no - I never had time to chat. 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, give the book back. I shouldn't 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)

Yes. Why, indeed?

OLD MAN

Because - I thought it instructional. Y-
I mean, she could still have quality time
with her Mom. It's still a year away.

Francine's hand droops. The old man moves lightning
quick; snatches the book.

He tosses it like a hot potato to the Elderly Woman. Who
tucks the book into her purse. Francine stares at both of
them. Stupefied.

On the horizon: the silhouette of a bus flickers. It's
approaching. Slowly.

FRANCINE

Give the book back. I'll read more.

ELDERLY WOMAN

No! That would mess things up. Horribly.

The old man nods. Doesn't volunteer a word.

ELDERLY WOMAN

(to Francine)

A word to the wise. Glenn is trouble from
the start. Don't bothering going to Lake
George. You'll be miserable, the whole
trip.

FRANCINE

We were planning to. This weekend.

ELDERLY WOMAN

Yes, Dearie. I know.

OLD MAN

Better to stay at home. Play some
Scrabble with your Mom.

The bus SCREECHES to a stop. The doors open. Francine
jumps to her feet. Neither of the old folks move.

FRANCINE

You're not coming?

ELDERLY WOMAN
Heavens, no. We're heading a different direction.

The BUS DRIVER gestures to Francine.

FRANCINE
I'm not leaving you!

OLD MAN
You have to. Otherwise, your boss will fire you for missing the meeting.

ELDERLY WOMAN
(mutters)
That stick-in-the-ass manager. Michael.

OLD MAN
Which creates problems - different ways.

The elderly woman waves at Francine.

ELDERLY WOMAN
Shoo!

But the old man rescues the book from her purse, and holds it out to Francine.

OLD MAN
If you need any more information...
you've always been the studious type.

The bus door nearly closes. Francine blocks the sensor with her foot. She looks from the old woman, to the man. Back again. The bus driver GRUMBLES, annoyed.

BUS DRIVER
Hey!

FRANCINE
You promise I'll meet this "Harold"?

OLD MAN
Oh yes. Definitely.

The elderly woman stands up, and pats her hand.

ELDERLY WOMAN
Relax. Everything will be fine.

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

FRANCINE

Okay. I trust you. You look like a decent lady.

ELDERLY WOMAN

It's a lifetime's worth of practice. Lots of mistakes along the way.

Francine steps into the bus.

BUS DRIVER

Finally!

The doors slide closed. Francine waits at the door and wobbles. The bus pulls away. She stares through the glass at the old folks, and waves.

FRANCINE

See you again - someday?

The old couple cuddles together on the bench, watch Francine dwindle away. The elderly woman elbows the man.

ELDERLY WOMAN

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

OLD MAN

You've got a soft spot in that heart of yours. Watch out: it's squishy.

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 is clear.

ELDERLY WOMAN

Then hurry up. Before someone sees!

OLD MAN

Don't fret, Francine. We'll get home safe. In due time.

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

FINAL FADE OUT: