

Frankie Is Dead

(Inspired by an essay by Gina Greenlee,
"No Tears for Frankie"

New York Times magazine, June 10, 2001, p. 124)

by

Michael Bettencourt

67 Highwood Terrace #2, Weehawken NJ 07086

201-770-0550 • 347-564-9998 • michaelbettencourt@outlook.com

<http://www.m-bettencourt.com>

Copyright © by Michael Bettencourt

Offered under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike License

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>

DESCRIPTION

Gina has to suffer the bullying of Frankie because the adult world will not give her the protection she needs. She has only has one avenue left to end the torment: to wish for his unequivocal death.

CHARACTERS

- Gina, in her twenties but remembering back to when she was 10 years old.
- Frankie, played by an older actor but 12 years old in the story.
- The Adult, man or woman who plays GINA's teachers and parents.

NOTE: Ethnicity is not important.

MISCELLANEOUS

- Two armless wooden chairs, strong enough to stand on
- Suit/tie for FRANKIE
- Schoolgirl clothing for GINA
- Suitable clothing for THE ADULT
- Held by THE ADULT: Triangle, Zen bells, whistle, or any other device for making a sharp sound; even a clap of the hands would do
- Two small Tote-size umbrellas, any color
- Funeral music

NOTE: Every time THE ADULT makes the sound, there is a scene change.

* * * * *

In darkness, low soothing music, as found in a funeral parlor. Lights rise to find FRANKIE, dressed in a suit and tie, lying on the two chairs, his arms crossed across his chest or in any other attitude that signals he is dead. GINA stands close to the "casket."

GINA

Frankie. Twelve years old. Funeral parlor. Dead.

(pause)

Good.

THE ADULT makes the sound. Music out. GINA moves into another light. FRANKIE takes off his jacket and tie, rolls up his sleeves, shirt pulled out: he is now the bully. He stands just outside GINA's light, and as she speaks, he begins to circle her.

GINA

We lived in Manhattan, down among the alphabet avenues—

FRANKIE

Avenue C—for the cunt!

GINA

Poor kids simmering in the lower city—

FRANKIE

Avenue B—for the bitch!

GINA

Stewing in the shitty schoolrooms funked up to make sure we wouldn't make it out.

FRANKIE

Avenue A—for the asshole!

THE ADULT makes the sound. Scene change to the “classroom,” which is the two chairs; THE ADULT becomes the teacher, miming writing on the board with his back to the “classroom.” As GINA walks to the chair, miming clutching her schoolbooks, FRANKIE follows, groping, poking, pulling her hair, and generally harassing her. GINA tries to fend him off, but it does no good. FRANKIE can also vocalize hisses, grunts, words, etc. that the actor feels fit.

GINA

Every day—every day, in every way—

THE ADULT

Hurry up, everyone, get into your seats.

GINA

There was no territory on my map—

THE ADULT

Move it along!

GINA

That remained untouched—

THE ADULT

Move it, move it.

GINA

By his “Russian” hands and “Roman” fingers.

THE ADULT

Last warning!

GINA

(to FRANKIE, loudly)

Stop it!!

FRANKIE immediately gets innocent as the teacher looks.

THE ADULT

What are you raising your voice for? I’m waiting.

GINA

Nothing.

THE ADULT

What?

GINA

(barely audible)

Nothing.

THE ADULT

Answer me. Answer me!

Beat.

GINA

Nothing.

THE ADULT

We will have no behavior like that around here.

Beat as the actors freeze. Then THE ADULT makes the sound. The scene changes: FRANKIE and THE ADULT move upstage; GINA moves to another area. As GINA speaks, she watches the action upstage.

GINA

I knew —we all knew—Frankie had problems.

THE ADULT strikes FRANKIE in a very stylized manner: abstract, mechanical.

GINA

His father stropped him.

FRANKIE moves to the other side of THE ADULT, who repeats the beating in a mirror image.

GINA

His mother whopped him.

FRANKIE moves to be in front of THE ADULT, who strikes him again.

GINA

The whole freakin' freaked-up world took a chunk of him, every day in every way—

FRANKIE crumples to the ground.

GINA

Useless, they said.

A long howl, in genuine agony.

FRANKIE

Useless!

THE ADULT

Useless.

GINA

Can't be loved.

FRANKIE

I am alone!

THE ADULT

Get out of my sight.

GINA

Thrown away—

FRANKIE

My home is nowhere!

THE ADULT

I wish you'd never been born.

GINA

This I knew. This we all knew, all of us, down among the alphabet avenues.

FRANKIE is now cowering at the foot of THE ADULT. GINA approaches him slowly, gently.

GINA

And he jammed the bruises back into the public eye every day in every way because—well, why not? What else do you do with pain you haven't earned? You pay it back.

GINA kneels by him and puts a hand on his shoulder or his head—somewhere near his mouth. THE ADULT makes the sound. The scene change happens when FRANKIE slowly raises his head, turns, smiles at GINA, and then deliberately bites GINA's hand, clamps down on it. They both slowly stand, GINA's hand in FRANKIE's mouth. FRANKIE growls and smiles. When standing up completely, GINA slaps FRANKIE several times—again, in an abstract, choreographed way—until he lets go of the hand.

FRANKIE

You pay it back, and it don't matter who gets in the way.

THE ADULT makes the sound. Scene changes to a stairwell in the school, GINA now the schoolgirl clutching her books. She and FRANKIE stand on one chair, tight. As she moves to the next chair, FRANKIE will scrunch up right behind her on that chair. THE ADULT will take the empty chair and place it so they can make their next step.

GINA

Every day I had to stay after school for “extra curriculum” work because my parents worked until the drop-deadline of 5 o’clock. I found a note stuffed in my literature book.

FRANKIE

“I’ll get you in the stairwell.”

GINA steps to the next chair, FRANKIE behind her; THE ADULT moves the empty chair.

GINA

My foot moved like a baby’s, finding the edge of the step, up then over and down to the next—

FRANKIE

Down, down she be goin’.

GINA steps to the empty chair; FRANKIE follows.

GINA

Looking down through the railing hoping for anybody coming up to yell to—

FRANKIE

Down, down she goes.

FRANKIE pushes her, and in a very stylized way GINA throws her arms up and falls forward so that she hooks one arm with THE ADULT and rolls across his back, legs flared. As she rolls off THE ADULT’s back, THE ADULT quickly moves to a kneeling position so that GINA falls across his back, her dress up and showing her underwear. GINA does not move as FRANKIE circles her. Then he kneels in front of her, leaning into her, and laughs in a strained mocking way.

FRANKIE

Ha. Ha. Ha. Ha. Ha.

FRANKIE sits in the chair. GINA moves off THE ADULT, who stands and signals the scene change.

GINA: Oh, I told people. The responsible people.

THE ADULT hands GINA one of the umbrellas; she opens it, holds it over her head.

GINA

I needed some mercy, I needed some quality mercy.

(little voice)

Help me, help me! Because didn't "the quality of mercy droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven"— Like hell it did! I wanted mercy, and all I got was—

THE ADULT (AS THE TEACHER)

He's just got a crush on you!

GINA

And all I got was—

THE ADULT (AS THE PARENT)

Child, what were you doing to egg him on?

GINA

And all I got was—

FRANKIE

Go ahead, ass-face, tell—go on—like it's gonna do a goddamn thing—they think I'm just a kid! A kid who's got deficits!

THE ADULT takes the umbrella and puts it down, then hands GINA a second umbrella.

GINA

What "droppeth" from their mouths—just stunk up the joint!

GINA opens the second umbrella.

GINA

So I enrolled for justice—and all I got was—

THE ADULT (AS THE TEACHER)

He's just got a crush on you!

GINA

And all I got was—

THE ADULT (AS THE PARENT)

Child, what were you doing to egg him on?

GINA

And all I got was—

FRANKIE

Go ahead, ass-face, tell—

THE ADULT takes the second umbrella and puts it down. As GINA says her next line, THE ADULT takes one hand, FRANKIE the other, and they spread GINA's arms as if in a crucifix. They "nail" her hands by slapping their fist into her palm, THE ADULT on "mercy," FRANKIE on "justice."

GINA

So what happens when the adults nail the tongues of mercy and justice to the floor?

After "nailing" her hands, FRANKIE sits down; THE ADULT puts the two umbrellas and himself behind the chairs.

GINA

(arms outspread)

Ever the last syntax of the powerless—vengeance! How could I make it for Frankie to be dead? One day—

THE ADULT makes the sound. Scene changes to a coat closet—the two chairs. FRANKIE gets up and grabs GINA; THE ADULT takes the two umbrellas and puts them in front of the two chairs, like doors.

GINA

They pushed me and Frankie into the coat closet—

FRANKIE pushes the umbrellas aside and sits them both down. The umbrellas close.

GINA

—and held the door shut.

FRANKIE's assaults, which can be partially seen by the audience, become more determined and mean.

GINA

I screamed to get someone to let me out. Ahhhh! He pinched me, poked me, stuck his fingers— (screams in true agony) Ahhhh! Ahhhhh! Ahhhh!

THE ADULT throws the two umbrellas to the side, sees the situation.

THE ADULT

Go back to your seats. Frankie—

FRANKIE gives a sheepish grin.

GINA

Right in front of everyone I said
(directly to FRANKIE)
“I hate your guts, and I hope you die. Die. Die!”

THE ADULT

You don’t really mean that!

GINA

But I did.

THE ADULT

We will not allow that kind of talk in here!

Beat. THE ADULT makes the sound. FRANKIE begins dressing himself back into his suit; when done, he sits. GINA moves downstage.

GINA

I wished hard, I wished so hard that he would die. I wished, I wished, I wished, I wished until my teeth cracked—knowing it was wrong but forcing the words out—knowing Frankie had been made a bastard all his life, but still “I wish, I wish, I wish he would die.” The pain of the air through my wretched teeth making true the words, through pain nailing the world to his ass and never letting him go.

(sissing sound)

I wissssshhhh. I wisssssshhhh.

(pause)

And then it happened.

FRANKIE lay back down in the “casket.”

GINA

As usual, messing around where he shouldn't, stuck his hand to an electric cable carrying voltage higher than his own red bile, and it just boiled him away. The word of it all made my lips slide around with dark pleasure electrocuted. Eee-leck-tro-cue-ted. What a capital punishment.

Music and lights come up as at the beginning: funeral parlor.

GINA

Frankie. Twelve years old. Funeral parlor. Dead. My father thought I shouldn't go because it might give me nightmares. But I had to go—wanted to go. I needed to make sure that the creep was really dead. I needed to make sure I was as glad about his dying as I said I was.

GINA puts her hand up to his mouth: nothing. She draws it away.

GINA

And I was. I was 10 years old, and I was glad. I was very, very glad. And I still am.

Lights out, then music out