

## Franny & Jay (1960)

FRANNY:

I spent lot of time with Isadora in those days. I thought she was the most beautiful showgirl in the world. When Isadora put on her drag it was like watching a transformation. She'd get up on a stage and start to sing – none of that lip sync stuff, Isadora sang with her own voice – and you'd swear she was a real woman.

After a while she was earning good money as an entertainer. There was enough call for her specialty act that she could hire me to take care of all her wonderful dresses and to help with the makeup and such. Sweet Mother, didn't we have a blast in those days! We traveled all over the country. It made me so proud to be with Isadora, to know that I had something to do with making the world a prettier place, ya know?

Times were hard then. We didn't know how bad things was till we went on the road and had to go to places like Chicago and little towns like Nashville. Jesus Christ, Boston looked like the Promised Land when you put it next to them.

And that's when I met him. It was in Chicago – we used to play there a lot. Whenever we hit the city we'd always go to the Inner Circle on Sunday afternoon. It was the little bar down a half flight of stairs stuck way outta the way on the North Side.

Isadora would play one of the big drag bars near the Loop on a Saturday night. We'd sleep in and then, round two or three in the afternoon, we'd get up and go uptown. Sunday was the day, ya see. Any other time you went into that place it would be dead as a bar could

be, but Sunday afternoon the Inner Circle would fill up. There'd be me and Isadora in our finest drag, and bikers, and hustlers and any kind of queer in the world there was was at that bar on Sunday afternoon. I swear to God it was the biggest gay party in North America.

I used to like it 'cause it was so clean and nice a place. It wasn't one of them sewers you had to spend time at – all smelling of piss and stale beer with no signs out front and windows painted black so no one had to look in and see us standing there. And it wasn't like where Isadora would play where there'd be all these tourists gawking at you. That bar was the first place that I ever went to that made you feel like a human being. It was magnificent to sit there at a table and be able to talk during the afternoon, to see the boys loving one another and the whole group of us having such a great time.

But this one afternoon when Isadora and I went to the Inner Circle we had to stop short at the corner of Lincoln and West Armitage, just about where that bar was. We had to stop 'cause there was this sight that terrified even us.

To this day I don't know why it happened. I suppose someone didn't pay off somebody or something. But that entire block of West Armitage was lined with police cars. On both sides. They just sat there without any sirens going, but they had those blue lights swiveling on top of 'em. It looked so horrible, those moving lights turning round and round and not making any noise at all.

There was cops standing outside each one of the cars. They had billy clubs in their hands, just waiting for one of us to make a move. There was a crowd that started to build up. But we were a pretty pitiful group. Not one of us – not even those big, mean bikers – was going to be stupid enough to walk down that block.

Mind you, there wasn't ever a doubt what they was doing. They was closing down the Inner Circle. They didn't want that queer bar to mess up the neighborhood anymore, I guess. And we knew we were going to give in. Or at least we thought we was. I was so sad to think that the only place in the whole goddamn country where you

could sit and drink a decent drink and not feel like you was one of the scum of the earth was going to pass away.

Then I saw him. He was standing over to the side a little bit, across the street from me. He had on these clean-cut clothes. He wasn't no Harvard boy, but he looked good and respectable.

Well, he might have looked like a college boy, but I swear to God you could tell there was something going on there. The fists on his arms was clenched tight as a construction worker's. He was shaking, just shaking with anger at those cops standing between him and that bar.

JAY:

I had just come from my parents in Glencoe. They'd given me a hard time and I just wanted to get away. The doctors had taught me that much ... to leave when something was too stressful. I had a hard time with stress. I got sick and had to spend some time in a hospital. I wasn't insane or something, but I got sick and had to have medical attention.

That's what my mother called it: medical attention. She didn't want anyone to think there was anything wrong with her son. So I didn't have a breakdown. She said I got *sick*. My father never called it anything at all.

The hospital wasn't bad. They gave me medicine so I didn't get upset as much as I did before. They talked to me a lot. I talked to a shrink; I talked to my therapy group; I talked to my recreation group. But they were just words, words, words. If I ever said anything to anyone that really meant anything, they'd shut up as tight as my mother and father.

The people in the hospital always used to say, "Trust us, Jay, we're here to help you. You have to trust us to get better." But whenever I wanted to talk about being queer, they'd become steely cold. They'd close down on me and leave me alone with my words, leave me alone with my shame for ever speaking them.

God, I was so scared. I used to have these horrible dreams with demons coming to devour me. I could hardly sleep from the fear of those things. All the doctors did was increase my medication.

I finally decided I had to get out of there. I learned quickly enough how to do it. All you had to do to be “better” was to make believe nothing was wrong with you. They’d never really know the difference if you didn’t tell them.

So I stopped trusting my shrink and didn’t mention thinking about men anymore. I started spending a lot of time with this one girl so they’d think I was normal and while I still had my nightmares, I didn’t tell anyone about them. I kept them to myself.

I got to go home. I had learned some things. Like walking away from stress and not revealing all the things that were on my mind. I controlled everything so I wouldn’t bother anybody.

But they took away my medication when I went back to Glencoe. If you’re not sick, you don’t need medicine, they said.

Without my pills I had to see too much. All my senses were open. I didn’t have any filters left to keep things out. Things like the silence whenever I walked into a room. The way people would look at me. The sad expression on my mother’s face. The hurt looks my father gave me when he didn’t think I was looking back at him. The way my classmates would avoid me in the hallways at school.

They were so silent because I was strange. They were frightened that I’d go crazy on them if they talked about anything real or important. They were scared I was going to be berserk on them and start saying crazy things.

So they kept quiet. They just looked and smiled.

If they had yelled at me or cursed me or given me some argument or called me queer or *anything*, it would have been better than the feeling of shame that came over me when everyone was so quiet. If I was so confused when nobody said anything to me, then it must’ve been all inside my head, I used to think. It must’ve been my fault. It must’ve because I was sick.

I started to feel as though I wasn't any good. Like it wasn't worthwhile living. I spent every week sitting in my room and smoking dope, waiting for Sunday when I could go to the Inner Circle and be with people who made me feel better. I could sit and listen to them laugh. I could always find a man who'd hold me in his arms and let me touch him. No one would touch me except for the men at the Inner Circle. The rest of them were all so frightened because I had been sick. They knew what was really wrong. But they would never talk about it and they would never hold me when I was frightened. It was as though they thought they'd catch it from me or something.

They all thought that they could just sit quietly in the house with me and wait it out. They never said so, but I knew they were praying I'd just pass through this phase and stop being queer. It was just a *transition*. I was just going to go through it. Hell, no one was going to help me until I was finished with my *transition*.

When I walked to the head of the block and saw all those police cars, I suddenly felt as though the whole world made sense. For the first time in years there was some reason, some force, some thing standing there that made me understand. I had something to fight against for the first time.

There were police cars. There were policemen. Finally someone had the guts to tell me to go to hell instead of playing all the games and making me more confused with silence. They were real demons, not the imaginary ones. They were daring me to do something with a directness that challenged me, instead of all those whispers and sly looks that people always used to use. Franny was right when he told me I was shaking. I was shaking with this determination that I had never even known existed within me. It was as though I was a locomotive building up steam ... getting ready for the big push. Here it was. This was my chance to say no to somebody. You won't do it to me anymore.

My body just moved up West Armitage on its own power. I could feel every muscle in me – tight as metal. I stared right in the eyes of

each and every one of those cops as I walked by them. I almost wished they'd have tried something. I wish they had laid a hand on me!

FRANNY:

Isadora and me just couldn't believe that this kid was walking in the middle of all those cops. This little college kid. She said to me, "Well, girl, you goin' to let that child walk up there all alone?" And next thing I knew, there went the most beautiful drag in America, proud as a peacock, walking up the street behind that young guy. Isadora nearly fooled those cops for a while. I mean, Isadora's drag's so good it'd fool almost anybody. But that girl couldn't hold it in. She walked fast enough to catch up with the boy and took his arm. She kissed him on the cheek and laughed out loud. Then the two of them walked down the stairs into the Inner Circle with big grins on their faces.

One by one the rest of us followed. Oh, good God alive, we were a parade. It was like the end of something. Just like when I had that pink angora sweater. There are just times when you gotta walk by and hold your head up and keep on going. If you do it, you won't ever have to look back. But you have to keep that head up, goddamn it.

ISADORA:

Y'all gotta understand this: Franny was the ugliest bitch I ever did lay my eyes on. That queen could put on makeup and all, and her hair could be styled by the best of 'em, but she could only look less ugly when she was finished. Not pretty, just less *ugly*.

I supposed that's why she and that boy got together. Franny didn't have much sex life. There weren't many men back then that'd care about personality or that stuff. They just wanted a pretty piece. That Franny was never gonna be.

But when she walked into that bar that day and found us sittin' at a table, she come over and sat down and I knew there was trouble comin' right then. There was a look about Jay. His eyes had this emptiness all around and there was this funny way they had, jumpin' up

an' down, and movin' around. I knew there was just too much sadness in him. Franny didn't see it though.

You gotta understand this too: Franny thought she could make the world pretty if she just had enough time to throw enough rhinestones and glitter. She saw this boy and it was goin' to be easy, she thought. She'd just pretty things up for him and everythin' would be fine.

She adopted him that very day. Might as well have had papers drawn up at the Cook County Courthouse. He was part of our tourin' group next thing I knew. I shoulda said somethin'. I shoulda stopped it. But Franny had someone to love for the first time in her life. I couldn't take that away from her. I didn't have the guts. But I knew ... I knew there are some people the hate's got to too strong. Some people who ain't gonna be saved no matter how much rhinestones and glitter there is in the world. That boy Jay was one of 'em.

FRANNY:

Oh, I tried! Mother of God, how I tried. I thought that anyone who'd be so strong he could walk up that line of police cars in a place like Chicago just had to be strong enough to make it.

I had such plans for him and me. I was going to give him all the things he needed to be happy. We went back to Boston after we finished touring with Isadora. I had a few pennies set aside and I figured he could go to Boston State or somewhere and finish school. And then he'd make a fine lawyer or even a doctor.

I was living in Somerville then, near Sullivan Square. We got him a room at the Cambridge Y so he could have his own place. He'd come over to my house and I'd cook him meals and get him to laugh and we'd talk and talk about everything in the world. He was so delicate. Not like me, I mean he wasn't nelly or anything. He was just so delicate, like something you had to put your arms around and protect.

That strength of his, though, it'd come out sometimes. He was

going to these meetings all the time. He'd come back and he'd be all hot and bothered and angry about the world and he'd give me these lectures about politics. They were the best times, when he was pissed off at somebody that'd be doing something like those Chicago cops.

But ... when he wasn't mad, he'd start to brood. I'd get worried then. Those eyes of his'd get funny-looking and weird. He'd sit in the corner and just frown. "Go on out," I'd say and give him a couple bucks. "Find yourself a man tonight," I'd tell him. I'd do anything to change him outta that dark mood.

Sometimes it'd help if we walked. We walked all over Cambridge and Somerville that summer. The nights'd be lovely, least that's how I remember them. Soft summer nights, the two of us walking down Mass. Ave. together.

But then there was this one night. He'd already started to take drugs. I never said anything about it to him. It broke my heart to see it happen.

He'd even steal from me. He could've had it all. Jesus, if it'd really helped, he could've had it all. But drugs?

Sometimes they musta made him feel better. Somehow. There'd be times when he'd be all smiles and laughing again. But, it seemed as if each time he stopped laughing the moods got worse and worse. And that one night they were the most terrible they had ever been.

He'd taken to starting to cry for no reason. I'd find him sitting in my apartment and he'd just be weeping his little boy heart out. He'd done it that night.

When I walked him to the Y near Central Square, I had this horrible feeling. It was the most horrible feeling I've ever known. All I could do was to look at him and tell him just one thing: "I love you more than I love my own life." I already knew it wasn't enough.

The next morning he wouldn't answer his phone. That wasn't like him. I called every half hour to wake him up. After noon, I knew. I called the manager of the Y and all I said to him was: "There's a dead boy in Room 365." I sat there in my living room, my body just

cold feeling and I waited. Then I called back and found out the truth. My Jay was dead. My strong little man Jay was dead by his own hand and it felt as if my whole world had collapsed down on top of me.

ISADORA:

I found Franny a couple days later. She wouldn't answer the phone and she kept missin' shows down at the club I was playin'. I knew somethin' bad must be up.

I went over to her place and knocked on the door. There wasn't no answer, but the door weren't locked either. So I went up in. There was sittin' the most miserable-lookin' queen that God ever thought up.

She was in the livin' room. Pale as a Canadian ghost. Lookin' at pictures of Jay and just sort of starin', mumblin' 'bout razor blades and sleepin' pills. I got the news outta her. I wasn't surprised. But I was worried 'bout Franny. Worried that the same thing was happenin' to her, the same slippin' away outta life.

The one thing I do know is that you gotta stay pissed at the world. Ya gotta stay mad at the people that are pullin' all the shit on you. If you give up, you gone. Franny thought it was her fault. That she had fallen down on that boy. The idea! That Franny didn't love that boy enough!

I knew I hadta get her going. Like when someone's freezin' to death in the cold, you gotta keep him movin' before the blood stops. It's the same thing with hurt. Ya gotta keep the circulation goin' or the hurt'll take over.

So I went down the street to Morrissey's Funeral Parlor on Broadway. Those micks hadn't never seen anything quite like me before. But they know the color of good money. I was headlinin' those days, besides, any queen with a butt as high as mine could always pull in a few more bucks on the side with the old johns that hung 'round the shows. I had plenty to give that boy his funeral. I got my shyster lawyer to do the legal things and I even called Jay's

folks when I figured out where they were.

Next day I got Franny together. It didn't seem right to go the funeral home in drag, so I just touched us up a little and dressed us in our street clothes. We walked down to Broadway to the home and went into the chapel.

No one else showed up. It was just the two of us. The place seemed so empty. I had bought some flowers, but they didn't help – made it worse, in fact. There was this cute Irish priest that Morrissey's had got to come an' say the words.

I couldn't understand some things. They kept the casket closed. Wished I had known they planned to do that. Franny and me would have wanted it open. Fuck tradition. We wanted to see the boy off proper.

The worst part came at the end. I had a big Cadillac hired to take the body to the cemetery. The young priest stopped us and whispered some things into Franny's ear. I didn't hear it, but there was this look come over Franny. A look of such contempt!

FRANNY:

He told me that a suicide couldn't be buried in consecrated ground.

ISADORA:

I found out all 'bout that when we got to the buryin' place. The digger told me that's where they put people ain't baptized or ain't Christian or is suicides. There was this corner with a separate fence. That's where they put Jay, outta the way. All the other stones were just little markers. I got one for Jay that was bigger than almost all them put together. But it was still like he was being shamed once more – all over again – even in his ending.

FRANNY:

All the time we sat in the funeral home chapel I was thinking about my sister's boy, Frank.

He died in Korea, in the war. I remember that funeral and it wasn't like Jay's. There was crowds of people at Frank's funeral at St. Patrick's. They had soldiers in uniform with their guns pointed in the air when you walked in. My sister wailed all through the ceremony; her husband sobbed; all the friends that gathered cried. They made this *noise*. That's the way it should be – should be noise when someone dies. *Loud* noise!

And then we all went out and got drunk enough that the father started to damn God for stealing Frank away from him when he was so young. I was thinking about all that while Isadora and me sat in that quiet, quiet chapel and listened to that idiot of a priest say the words as quickly as he could so he could get out of there fast enough to get in his eighteen holes of golf. But when he told me that about the consecrated ground, I began to burn inside. It was like he lit coals in my heart. I was so pissed off that I thought I was going to sock him.

ISADORA:

I thought Franny'd be that kind of basket case she had been. I was still workin' at bringin' her outta it. So, after we put Jay in the ground, I stopped at a package store and got us a bottle of Chivas. There's nothin' like good Scotch to help a body through a crisis.

Well, we got back to Franny's place, all silent like, and I poured us a drink. Franny took that one, and another and another and the queen was just flyin' high. Next thing I know I'm chasing her up the stairs to the roof of that building she lived in.

Oh, God Almighty, what a show I got to see that night. There was this *mad* queen standin' on the roof of this triple decker in Somerville, Massachusetts and she's standing there with her little fists up in the air like she was punchin' the sky, screaming out loud; she was just yellin' her lungs out.

FRANNY:

If there is a goddamned God up there, I want to tell you something! You are a goddamned fool and I've had enough of your meanness.

ISADORA:

There was tears runnin' down Franny's cheeks. The little bita mascara I put on for her that day was streamin' down. That queen was too far gone to even know it. She had somethin' to tell God and, by Jesus, she was goin' to say it.

FRANNY:

I want you to take your consecrated ground and I want you to shove it where daylight never goes. My Jay's too good to spend eternity with the likes of you that made him so miserable. You take your cemeteries and you take your priests and don't you ever bother with me again. You are a mean old bastard. You got one too many of my children already and you ain't gonna have any more of them. I am not going to let you take any more of them!

ISADORA:

You ain't seen life if you ain't seen a queen howlin' out her soul and tellin' God to take a flying leap in Somerville, Massachusetts. I want you to know that I was screamin' and yellin' right along with Franny by the time she was done. I was tellin' off God like he was a two-bit pimp tryin' to get into my money. We just screamed ourselves out that night.

It was right to do that. That Jay was Franny's child as sure as if she had brought him into the world herself. The parents sure as hell didn't want that boy. I called those granite-assed sons of bitches in Illinois and told 'em about Jay and they just said to me: You bury him, we don't want him back here. Can you imagine a mother not wantin' to bury her own son? If you can, then you can imagine that that Jay had become Franny's own flesh and blood.

Finally, we was just tired out and collapsed on the roof. I put my arms around Franny and she let rip, the sobs heaved in her chest and the cries of a mother mournin' her baby went out in the air over that godforsaken city. I just held on and held on. In my own way I knew that Franny's cryin' meant she was goin' to make it. Those yellins at God were goin' to be her salvation.

Hate has to be shoved away. I know that. Ya gotta fight hate off with anger. If there is a God, and he's Jesus's father, then he has a dumbassed son, that's all I got to say about that turnin' the other cheek shit. Maybe sometimes. But this life is too hard to do that more'n once or twice. There's too much hate to ignore. And the only way to handle it is to scream and yell and fight dirty.

'Cause if you don't, then the hate's goin' to go inside you like a cancer and spread in your own soul an' take away whatever it is that makes you wanta live.

That's what happened to Franny's boy child. He lost that fightin' spirit we saw in Chicago and he let the hate get under his skin. You either send that hate right back out there where it belongs – to crackers or dumbassed micks or stupid cops or whoever – or else it's gonna get to you.

It's gonna kill you.

FRANNY:

I became hard after I lost Jay. I sure as hell was gonna do what I could to make sure there weren't no more Jays in this world.

I was going to go out there and I was going to start acting like it was a matter of life and death that those boys got treated like human beings. They *were* human beings, goddamn it, and I wouldn't let no one tell me otherwise. Specially not my own kind.