

Frankie

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*“In five years AI will be smarter than we are.
I don't know what to do about this.” — Elon Musk*

1: If Wrecks Can Happen

Julia Mason glanced out the front window and saw Raymond arm in arm with a pretty young woman. Definitely not herself. Julia looked down at her running shoes. Yep, there she was, standing in her own living room, minding her own sweet business. So the question is, who's the dame hanging on my dear husband? *Watch it, honey.*

Julia straightened her posture, smoothed the blouse festooned with flamingoes, squared her dark skirt, and resolved to be sensible and under control. Her ovaries were upset about something. She knew that all too well. No one else had to know.

Julia checked her watch, 7:10. A righteous time for Raymond to be home. They would have a gourmet dinner, shrimp Francesca, and enjoy a much-ballyhooed flick on the 42-inch screen, which would probably lead to secondary explosions. That was the script before what's-her-face showed up. Funny, Raymond hadn't called about setting an extra place. Maybe she wouldn't be staying long. Good! She and Raymond seemed, as they moved close to the front door, *much too cozy.*

Raymond, even at 38, was always the perpetual grad student, tall, skinny and grinny, with a shock of dark hair. He reacted as if the new babe had whispered a witty anecdote. His long nose made him look like a French aristocrat but a kindly one, not haughty. And this woman, what was she? She held herself stiffly, like someone

recovering from an injury. Perhaps she was a formal, old-fashioned person from a rich Boston family. Julia could work with that. Perhaps she was a trampy airline stewardess from Queens. *No way, Rosé*. Point is, she was a good-looking femme with a hot figure. Possibly she was a new professor. In that case, she would be both pretty and smart, not an easy person for the university wives to welcome.

Julia retreated tensely to the center of the living room. She heard voices outside. *There*, the key in the lock, the door opening. Raymond pushed through, ushering the visitor along.

Julia moved to greet them. Raymond smiled at her, playful, mischievous, as if this was a festive occasion. The woman shifted her gaze to Julia and stared openly. Julia watched them quizzically as she moved to shake hands with the unexpected guest.

“Frankie, this is Julia...Julia, meet Frankie.”

Julia murmured, “Frankie...?”

“You know....”

They shook hands. Was there something odd about Frankie’s skin? Julia gasped. She felt vast relief and as well a strange inexplicable terror. “You mean...?”

Raymond grinned at her. “I told you. Everything’s going great.” He wore a check shirt. He liked them because he could see mathematics in the designs. This one featured shades of burgundy, and under his blue blazer looked quite spiffy. “I wanted you to see for yourself.”

“Well,” Julia stammered, “that’s amazing. *Impressive!* What can I say to it?”

“*Her*,” Raymond quickly corrected. “Say anything you want. That’s how she learns.”

“Oh my,” Julia smiled. *She?* “I’m at a loss for words. You know that *never* happens.”

“That’s right, Frankie. My wife is an excellent writer. Very smart. You can trust anything she says.”

“Raymond? Should we sit down? Is Frankie joining us for dinner?” Julia found the awkwardness fascinating. What were the protocols for talking in front of this...thing?

“Yes, by all means Frankie can join us. You understand, she doesn’t eat a lot. Etcetera.” Raymond seemed to think that was amusing. “Frankie, let me help with your coat.”

Julia watched the tan raincoat slide off the woman’s athletic shoulders. Her medium blue blouse, buttoned to the neck, had long sleeves. Perhaps the arms were not perfected. She wore dark slacks, perhaps for the same reason. Anyway, Frankie had a good figure. What was it, foam rubber? Silicone? The nipples, Julia couldn’t help asking, are they anatomically correct?

“Sweet Ray,” Julia exclaimed with a chatter of nerves, “you know what I think we need? Some fine old port to celebrate the lovely progress of your work.”

Julia moved quickly to the counter exhibiting their few celebratory beverages. In particular, a tawny port 20 years old and quite the gourmet delight. Julia fumbled with the glasses and filling them. She was intent on watching her husband interact with Frankie.

Frankie remained near-motionless, completely comfortable with herself, to judge by her expression. Raymond was the animated one. He circled about her, an artist enjoying his newest work. Raymond had created this thing with the soft smile and nice butt. From what? Blueprints and chips with a billion transistors. Thinking *billion* made Julia toss down a slug of port. We have met the future and it's no longer speaking to us.

Raymond and Frankie stood closer than if they were business associates. They probably worked together all day in the lab a foot apart. But now, out in the world, it was an off-note. Julia joked to herself, *Raymond, you horny devil, behave.*

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Raymond and Julia Mason lived in a row of attached apartments, two story, five or six rooms, faculty housing provided by the University. There was grass in front and narrow sidewalks. The streets curved slightly, with trees stuck about. A contrived bucolic feeling, but people in the neighborhood were proud to be there as it was newly constructed. The kitchen opened into the dining room and the dining room was connected via an archway to the living room. The spaces flowed together. Julia, who had the aesthetic genes, filled their home with strong colors and local art. Her husband after all was a math prodigy and one was always surprised they could do anything else.

Julia brought two plates from the kitchen. She sat across from Frankie, with Raymond on her right. Judging by Frankie's dreamy expression, she did not need anything or want anything. Julia wondered, had she ever felt that way?

Julia told her husband, “Your mother called today. She bragged she did the Cryptoquip in three minutes. She got her brains from you, *right*? I think she would be intrigued to hear about our dinner guest.”

“Oh, she knows. I sent her a picture of Frankie last week.”

“Really?” Julia concentrated on cutting up a beautiful shrimp. She stared across the table at Frankie’s, uh, beautiful bosom. “Look... Does....she know what we’re talking about?”

“Ask her.”

Julia was begging for help. Instead Raymond tossed her in the pool. “Okay, Frankie. What have you learned this week?”

“I learned traffic signals and road signs.”

Julia found the answer stunning “Really? *Why* do you need to know that?”

“I need to know all the things that people typically know.” The voice was soothing and well modulated. “I think that is a good plan.”

“Why, yes, I suppose it is.”

The visitor said, “Dr. Mason tried—“

“You know, Frankie, I prefer you call me Raymond.”

“Yes, Raymond. Last week Raymond identified information, for example, geographical names that I should know.” Frankie stared as if she had years to sit there and nothing to think about.

Julia felt the steady gaze as a burden. She tapped her knife on the table. Frankie's blue eyes darted at the noise. She analyzed it for three seconds, before looking away.

Raymond announced: "You see, Julia, a large database is trivial. On the other hand, common knowledge is a deep problem. Frankie can probably tell you how many moons Jupiter has and their weight. TMI...Can you, Frankie?"

"Jupiter has more than fifty moons. Ganymede has a mass of 1.48 times 10 to the 23rd kilos—"

"Excellent. *Frankie please*, never tell anyone that again." Raymond guffawed as if that was *very* funny. "People will be intimidated. Frankie needs to know only what most educated people know. Why? Because Frankie is not a nerd. She is like most people."

Julia choked on *like most people* and sipped more port, savoring its woody taste. She savored the shrimp, a large fresh succulent shrimp. She sliced at the salad, arugula lettuce with sliced tomatoes from a nearby market. It was a glorious medley of tastes and textures. The port warmed some of her circuits, disrupted others. Everything was perfect and one might say charming. But the world seemed to be exploding like that mushroom cloud they put in political cartoons. *Kablowie!*

Julia wanted to jump up and hug her husband, sit on his lap and slide her tongue in his ear, but it would feel funny. Why? This thing wasn't real, not really real. And even if it was, why should it – okay, *she*— dictate what they did? Julia stared sharply at the other woman. Strange phrase.

Frankie listened to Raymond, her eyes focused relentlessly on each word. What was Frankie seeing? Julia peered into Frankie's electric-blue eyes. What was in there? Julia remembered talking to her dolls, exploring their eyes. Why, they could talk all afternoon. Her dolls were very smart and often said funny things. Well, that's how it seemed when she was seven.

Frankie's hair was long, a dark brown. Everything was so realistic. She had a smooth, rather pretty face. Little tremors now and then moved over it. She tilted her head slightly one way, then the other. Was all this randomly generated? Never mind, it worked. Young women wore a lot of makeup these days. Frankie was ready for them. She was probably born with perfect makeup. Raymond always talked about the algorithms. *Tweaking the algorithms*. Julia had almost forgotten that whatever her husband was building had to have an exterior. Raymond once bragged, "I'm making new people." Julia remembered the tone of voice exactly, the pride. "In some ways they will be *superior*."

Raymond reached out with his right hand and lightly touched Frankie's arm. It was a fleeting gesture, as if Frankie would appreciate this encouragement, this intimacy. Julia had a terrible feeling. She heard a choir singing far off.

Julia leaned forward. "So, Frankie? What have you learned tonight?"

"I believe you told a joke. Jokes are the hardest part." Frankie stared absently.

"What joke?"

"*That never happens*. You meant that it does happen. Or it does not happen. I do not know."

Raymond beamed at this whole exchange. “We are very good at irony and ambiguity. Describing these mathematically is horribly difficult.” He sighed at length.

Frankie watched Julia for a long time. “Raymond is a good teacher. I am learning a lot. Are you learning a lot?”

“I’m trying!”

After a long pause, Frankie asked, “Raymond? Is trying to learn a lot the same as learning a lot?”

“Smart comment,” Raymond observed cheerfully.

Frankie persisted, “What is the answer?”

“There is probably a 70% overlap.”

Frankie seemed to reflect on that. “Is that precise?”

Okay,” Raymond said. “People have a lot of goals or plans. Typically they will reach some goals and not others. Julia acknowledged that reality.”

Raymond stroked his wife’s arm. “Logic is easy. The tough part is loose logic.” He smiled handsomely. “That’s my epitaph.”

They moved back to the living room. Raymond guided his protégé toward a wing chair near the front window. His hand pressed lightly on her back. “Here is a good seat.” He cupped his hand on Frankie’s shoulder, for several seconds. *Why*, Julia thought, don’t you just feel her up? Don’t mind me.

Julia and Raymond sat on the sofa to Frankie's right. Julia was in the middle; perhaps Raymond arranged them so he wouldn't be next to Frankie. A conciliatory gesture? Julia tried to be positive but she saw the way he touched her. It was possessive, a bit erotic. Oh yes, it came back to Julia like a bullet train screaming by. That was one of the main reasons for making these gizmos. A new generation of sex toys. *Ohhh*, that made Julia shake all over. No, that wasn't the phrase. Companions, that's it, erotic companions. Oh, of course, you wouldn't want the babes knowing more than the customers. Common knowledge is the right amount.

Julia guessed she was being petty and judgmental. Still she regarded the sexy intruder with bubbling suspicion. This know-it-all contraption with rubber tits...

Julia wanted to be a good hostess, smiling in a silly eager way. That might fool Frankie but Raymond, after eight years of marriage, seemed to know exactly how his wife felt. He took it with surprising grace. Perhaps lots of people had the same misgivings.

"You know, Julia," Raymond stared with broad affection at his wife, "Frankie will make us rich." His eyebrows jumped up. "You should be more appreciative." Raymond smiled happily. "There's the AS conference next week. I'm optimistic."

"Conference?"

"The big hitters will be there. They'll probably bring soccer players, maybe even gladiators. And police, French maids, and pet animals, all the things I don't take too

seriously. The field is moving along a wide front, so even I never know what I'll see next. What matters is that Frankie is the bright star. We'll have more investors."

Raymond seemed exhilarated by all this wild unfolding novelty. Julia already knew she was not. The planet had seven billion people. Why spend a million dollars making another one? She was quite bifurcated, happy in some regions, filled with dread in other parts of her soul.

"*More appreciative?*" Julia meditated on the words. "*Ahh*. You know what my uncle says. The universe has one rule, if something can go wrong, it will. He thought that was funny." Julia took another sip of port, and realized she was halfway-drunk. *Sip, sip, sip*. Her face was hot. She was probably blushing from thinking about large humanoid sex toys. She spoke more slowly than normal. "What do you think?...What does Frankie...think?"

"There is never an automatic requirement that anything go wrong," Raymond stated flatly. "I'm sure Frankie knows this."

Frankie said, "There is never a requirement that anything go wrong. I do not see a mistake."

"Exactly." Raymond announced. He seemed entertained by his wife's anxieties. "I have redundant protocols to make sure there are no problems." He stood triumphantly and marched to the kitchen for more ice cream.

Julia wanted to jump up and shout: "Oh, there's an automatic rule that everything goes *right*? No, of course not!" Strangely, she didn't want to disillusion Frankie. Poor

dear. She's had a rough day learning about Jupiter's moons. The problem was that Raymond and his brainy pals wouldn't be happy until they made something that was the same as us, and then better. Better was sary unexplored territory, like the Atlantic Ocean in 1450. Julia sensed danger everywhere. Or her overactive body did. Feelings and hot flashes shot back and forth. But there Raymond was with a big goofy expression on his face. Like a happy teenager in 1950, discussing the new carburetor on his Ford dragster. Raymond was a math whiz but his spirit was that kid in 1950.

Julia glowered at the interloper. *Oh no*, was she going to sit in that chair all night, like the old lady in *Psycho*? Julia guessed that she, on the next floor hardly ten feet away, would have trouble sleeping. *No, no*; take Frankie back to her genius garage and lock her up! Julia could not stop the thought: it's a violation to bring the floozy in here. You don't do that, Raymond.

Sure, *he* was happy. He had his two favorite women in the whole world.

Then Julia saw the obvious. Frankie was modeled after her, although her own hair was not so dark. Perhaps this homage was intended as a compliment. Julia had a different thought entirely. Every year she'd be older. But Frankie would remain the perfect younger version forever.

Julia glanced toward the kitchen to make sure Raymond was still there, then she glowered at the other woman. She pressed her hands on her breasts, and whispered: "See, you fake? A real woman." Julia laughed scornfully: "Frankie, *dear*. Why don't *you* take a hike?"

Raymond bounded back like the large sheepdog he sometimes resembled. He had downed a glass or two himself. He walked with a looser gait.

Raymond stood in the center of the living room. “Julia! Don’t worry so much. We’re in a new era. We must be brave pioneers. *Of course*, there will be challenges. That’s how you make progress. But whatever you think of, there’s an answer.”

Julia saw that Frankie sat as straight as a chair. Julia herself was slumping to the right. She straightened her ragdoll posture and said, “You say Frankie is valuable. What if the house...burns down? What if robbers...pick this house, pure chance, and take away your golden goose?”

Julia looked apprehensively at the front window, at the dark night outside. Well, how valuable was Frankie? Julia imagined big guys in ski masks smashing through the front window.

Raymond chuckled. “No-no-no. I have safeguards. You must know passwords....” His expression became aggressive, for him. “Robbers? I’d like to see them try. You know what I have up there?” He turned and ran towards the stairs.

Julia felt herself fading. It had been a long day. Up before seven. No, she didn’t know what he had up there. *What?*

Julia glanced harshly to her left at Frankie, sitting complacently in the middle of all this anarchy, as Julia saw it. “Frankie, *please*. Go to Hell.”

She turned back toward the stairs. Her husband had raced to a shiny black cabinet at the top. Now he was starting down.

She slumped over to her right. She felt her face flatten on the slipcover.

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Raymond ran. Enthusiastic, grinning. He held a .32 revolver in his right hand. He glanced downward across the living room at Frankie, a beautiful technological vision! His eyes slid to his left and saw his wife lying on her side, her eyes closed. A second beautiful vision! Was she actually passed out? That happened every year or two. He should have monitored what she drank.

These days, he was always a little giddy himself. The work had moved so fast. Ten years ago he had not dared to dream of a Frankie. No, he had dreamed but he assumed that's all it was. Even in college he had visualized the machines he would some day make. He was always so eager and confident on the surface. But he knew there would be many years and endless defeats

Dr. Mason's one athletic adventure every day...skipping successfully down these steps without touching anything. He was disoriented by looking at his wife, his beautiful wife. He needed to touch something. His right hand reached for the railing. He realized the pistol was an obstacle. For a second he couldn't solve the problem. His right foot went too far in front of him. Instead of hitting a step, it descended through air. "This can't be the plan," he joked as he cart-wheeled forward. There was a side table against the wall of floor-to-ceiling books. The table was sturdily built of dark wood. His torso rotated 90 degrees. His head crashed against the corner of the table.

