



The Interpretation of Francesca

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Monday

Melissa was bleeding starving. She'd had a pig of a day: the creative not coming up with the goods, her major client telling her he just didn't get the campaign, boss in a right strop, meetings back to back...and consequently no lunch break. And now here she was meeting Francesca for what had been generously called 'dinner', but she knew full well that once again she'd give in to borderline-anorexic Fran's pressure and opt for the salad even though what she really wanted was a big fat bowl of pasta with garlic bread, dripping with oil, on the side. If only. They were at the new restaurant-come-bar that had opened near Smithfield market. An impressive, twisted metal chandelier hung above them, the lighting was low and the wine glasses ginormous. Melissa felt like she had been in a thousand restaurants like this before, each one with only the slightest variation from the next.

"Oh God, there is *nothing* on this menu that I can eat," Fran was saying, "I mean I can't eat vegetables, I can't eat carbs, I can't eat dairy. Do you think they'll just do me a grilled chicken breast on its own?"

"Sorry, what?" Melissa had been too busy reading the menu. She was so hungry it felt like her eyesight was failing – if she looked at the menu hard enough the entries became blurry and her eyes began to water.

"My new diet, have I told you about it?"

"Erm no, I don't think you have" Melissa replied, putting down the menu before her stomach forced her to take a bite out of it. She looked up and met Francesca's pale blue eyes, circled in dark eyeliner, staring intently at her from under the severe black fringe. Francesca was her best friend and yet also her biggest rival: her 'frenemy', to quote Gwyneth Paltrow. And similar to the Farringdon restaurant-bar scene, Fran seemed to have gone through a thousand different diets, each one having only the slightest modification from the previous and all being along the general theme of masochistic-levels of food restriction.

“I read that if you eat a banana for breakfast, skip lunch and eat only protein for dinner you can lose twenty pounds a week,” Francesca said, “It’s like a cross between the Atkins diet and the GI diet...I mean, I know everyone says the Atkins diet gives you cancer, but I have to get into shape for Simone’s wedding, I can’t have that bitch looking skinner than me. What are you eating anyway?”

Simone’s wedding: that lucky bitch was getting hitched in some swish country house beyond the M25 to a hot guy who was big in publishing. Melissa was sick of hearing how there was going to be fireworks ‘and everything’. Fran was going to be Simone’s bridesmaid, or maid of honour, or whatever it was appropriate to call women just past thirty in that role these days and was determined to look better than the bride whom she had known since they roomed together at their painfully liberal boarding school.

“Hmm, just a Greek Salad, I think” Melissa said, trying to sound as committed as possible. Why, why, why couldn’t she just bring herself to order what she wanted? Why did she care what Francesca thought? Would Francesca really bitch to every PR in Shoreditch that Melissa had eaten carbs? Would they really care if she did? Yes, they probably would. The people next to them had ordered garlic bread and she could smell it. She thought she might faint with hunger.

Francesca made a sort of snorting noise, presumably at the thought of both fattening Feta cheese and fattening olives being present in one dish. Then she started rooting through her new Mulberry handbag. Melissa, quietly seething with frustration, watched in silence as she pulled out her precious Blackberry and began tapping away at the keypad. Francesca seemed to have an uncanny knack for hearing her Blackberry beep in any environment – train stations, noisy bars, London streets with the traffic clattering past. It reminded Melissa of a nature programme about penguins she had once seen. The adult penguins could hear their own chick’s calls over a sea of thousands of other squawking birds. And Francesca’s Blackberry was like a chick, requiring her attention every five minutes or so.

“Oh Jesus, Clive’s emailed. The director we’d booked for the Adidas shoot tomorrow has OD’d on speedballs, what the fuck am I going to do now?” Francesca exclaimed.

“What, Jonathan Baker? Is he OK?” Melissa thought the guy was a tosser, but cute as hell and the prospect that he might be dead made her temporarily forget her hunger and the penguin thing.

“I don’t know. Probably. He’s such a junkie, I had to give him half my stash of coke just to get him on board the project. Bloody hell, I need a Bellini to deal with this...waiter...”

It turned out Jonathon Baker had died for something like five seconds however was now, thankfully, groggy but alive. They ate their meagre meals and after four more Bellinis Melissa went home, still hungry and slightly drunk. She ate cheese on toast whilst watching a programme about overweight Americans on Channel Five, and then went to bed.

Friday

They were having lunch to celebrate Francesca’s birthday at a gastro pub in Covent Garden.

“Why don’t we splash out and get oysters or something?” Melissa suggested.

“Are you crazy? Seafood is strictly forbidden on my new diet,” Fran said, appalled at Melissa’s suggestion.

“But it’s your birthday Fran, can’t you have a day off?”

“No way. I still need to lose five pounds for the wedding and the last diet didn’t work,” she declared adamantly.

Melissa groaned inwardly, and decided to change the subject: “Ok, let’s just stick with the salad, so what did you get for your birthday?”

“I got a necklace off Sandy, but it looks awfully cheap. I think she got it from Debenhams, I don’t know what she was thinking.”

“She has just lost her job because of the recession though” Melissa tried to remind her.

“Whatever,” Francesca shrugged.

Melissa thought how their mutual friend Sandy, a casualty of the banking crisis, must have really fallen on hard times if she had to buy Francesca a present from tacky old Debenhams. Francesca would probably have taken less offence if Sandy had pretended she’d simply forgotten her birthday. She wondered how her own present of a Matthew Williamson scarf had gone down. It was lying in its nest of wrapping paper on the table, looking discarded.

“So, what did Matt get you?” she asked, trying not to look at the scarf. She braced herself to hear what sickeningly fabulous present Matt, Francesca’s film-maker boyfriend, had given her.

“Well actually, you’ll never guess, but he got me a course of Freudian Analysis.”

“A what?” Melissa asked, almost choking on a piece of chorizo.

“Some analysis sessions with a Freudian shrink.”

“He thinks you need to see a shrink?” Melissa had to stop herself laughing, what was Matt thinking?

“No!” Francesca said adamantly, “it’s just for the hell of it. You know there’s so much more to it than all that fucking your mother business. It’s supposed to help you delve into the depths of your unconscious self. Haven’t you heard? Freud is so in at the moment, *everyone* is doing it. I read that Kate Moss has had a leather couch installed in her attic.”

Jesus, Melissa thought, she didn’t know Francesca had a deep unconscious self, there didn’t seem to be much beneath the surface.

“Oh really? But I thought Matt was a scientologist and didn’t believe in that stuff,” she asked.

“Hell, no, he just signed up because they were trying to get Tom Cruise to do a bit part in their latest film, but they’ve found someone else now.”

“Oh right.”

This all sounded very strange to Melissa. Most importantly it grieved her that she had not heard about this new trend before and had to hear it from Francesca. She knew her friend would note that and she resolved to keep more of an eye on the scene in future. But Freudian analysis? She had often thought Fran was a little neurotic and wondered if a few sessions with a shrink might do her some good anyway.

They drank far too much wine with their food and Melissa went back to her office and zoned out at her computer until it was time to go to the pub again.

Wednesday

They met for a few after-work drinks in a bar-come-restaurant near Old Street. Melissa had been trying to work out if she’d been in the bar before because the sculpted light fittings looked familiar when Francesca announced that she was now single.

“What happened?” Melissa gasped. She was shocked, but she had to admit that part of her, a fairly large and significant part, took some glee at hearing this

news. She wondered if Matt had perhaps dumped Fran and gone off with some young, blonde actress. She felt that Francesca had always taken Matt too much for granted and had ruthlessly curbed what she deemed to be his uncouth interests, such as beer and football.

“Well, I started having these dreams that I was standing outside my flat and I couldn’t get in, like none of the keys would work,” Francesca said, “And so I told my Freudian counsellor and he said it meant I was sexually frustrated, because like, keys and locks symbolise sex, you see? And so that was the end of Matt.”

“Just like that? But you always said you and Matt had a great sex life?”

“So I did, but my subconscious ego says otherwise, darling.” Fran said, her eyes widening as she took a suck on the straw of her Mojito.

“How did he take it?” Melissa asked, incredulously. She couldn’t believe Fran’s story. Could it really be true? Could she really have dumped the gorgeous Matt just because of a dream?

“Not well. He’s gone to Stockholm for two weeks to get over it, apparently.”

Melissa smiled to herself. Gone to Stockholm to get over it: a likely story. He’d be shackled up with some hot Swedish girl, or two, no doubt.

She excused herself to go to the toilet, where she locked herself in a cubicle and giggled. She couldn’t believe Francesca was taking this Freud stuff so seriously. But as she sat there smirking, she heard some women come in – a high pitched, whiny, transatlantic accent...fuck her if it wasn’t Cathy Zeldburg, head of the agency that everyone wanted to work at and the most respected woman in the industry. She sat dead still, and listened to what Cathy was saying to her acquaintance.

“So yeah darling, apparently my superego is at war with my id, so my analyst says.”

Superego, id? My god, thought Melissa, even Cathy Z, who she had a lot of admiration for, was in on this Freud stuff. Maybe there was something in it?

When she returned to the table, Francesca began to tell her more about her Freudian sessions. It seemed that Fran’s deep, subliminal self was a wonderful, creative and highly intelligent being who had much to give to the world, or so the analyst had told Fran. Though this seemed at odds with the self she presented to the world Melissa was intrigued to hear how the analyst had been interpreting Fran’s dreams, picking out symbols and themes.

On the tube home, head fuzzy with Mojitos, she laughed to herself again at Francesca’s decision to dump Matt, but just then an advert above the seats opposite her caught her eye:

“Let your dreams unlock your destiny” ran the ad, above a cartoon of a head with a dream bubble containing a lock, a key, an umbrella and a door. Unlocking destiny...maybe Matt had unlocked his own destiny by pushing Fran into this Freudian stuff Melissa mused. She had always suspected that he had wanted to get away from her but didn’t have the balls to actually tell her so. And now he certainly seemed to be the one who had changed his fortunes. She wondered if he was even in cahoots with Fran’s Freudian counsellor, and this made her laugh even more.

That night, as she lay in bed the symbols that Francesca had talked about swirled around her head. Later she had a strange dream about walking through a dark forest with her friend. Francesca had the map, but they were hopelessly lost. In the dream Melissa knew that if only Francesca would let her see the map she would be able to find the way out of the forest. She woke up and was unable to get back to sleep so got out of bed, pulled on her dressing gown and went to the kitchen.

When she returned to bed she turned on her laptop and googled “dreams about forests” Freud’. Wikipedia confirmed her suspicions.

She opened up a new email, and typed:

Dear Fran,

Sorry, but I don’t feel that I can be your friend anymore. Last night I dreamed we were lost in a forest and that it was your fault because you had the map. Google tells me that Freud says this means I feel trapped by our friendship and you are a controlling personality with no clear direction. My deep subconscious mind no longer wants to hang out with you, please don’t ever contact me again.

Love Mel x

She clicked ‘Send’, smiled, and sank her spoon deep into her pot of Ben and Jerry’s ice cream.