

JAY ALLISON: This is: TWO YEARS WITH FRANZ, written by Bianca Giaever and produced by Bianca and me Jay Allison for the public radio website, Transom.org.

INTRODUCTION

FRANZ: Alright, it's 1:59 I see.

FRANZ: Oh hell, it's night, no one's listening.

FRANZ: I AM SO SCARED SOMETIMES.

FRANZ: I myself being one of countless insane people in my country. Where it is almost the norm to be insane.

FRANZ: You cannot paraphrase a snowstorm.

FRANZ: What rhymes with rhyme? I'm losing my mind.

Of all the people in my life in the past two years, I sometimes feel closest to Franz Wright.

He doesn't know who I am though.

He died in 2015. He's a poet. A Pulitzer Prize winner. And I encountered him through 546 audio tapes he made as he was dying.

FRANZ: I got the headphones on and everything, I feel like a real recording artist. And I'm in the mood.

He had cancer... and because of nerve damage he couldn't always hold a pen.

So he dictated his poetry onto a little Sony digital recorder his wife bought him...burning the front of it with the tip of his cigarette.

FRANZ: We should have little cameras of me all the time. Like a reality show for the poet Franz Wright.

FRANZ: It's not a tape recorder is it there's no tape. What is it?

FRANZ: This isn't on that's good we sound stupid.

[[jazz music]]

Franz's recorder stayed on for hours, it picked up jazz music...

[[jazz music]]

Screaming at his cat..

FRANZ: Thank you, ASSHOLE!

Conversations with his wife...

Franz: Night burial Beth! Night burial! There's a name for a book! He kept the most lugubrious for last. [[Beth laughs.]] There, I got your laugh on tape!

And of course, there is always his poetry.

Franz: The only animal that cries. That takes off its clothes and reports to its mirror. The one and only animal that brushes its own teeth. Somewhere. The only animal that smokes a cigarette. That lies down and flies backward in time. Rises and walks to a

book. And looks up a word. Heard the phone ringing downstairs and decided to answer no more.

Like most people, I had never heard of Franz Wright. But in the poetry world he's well known. For two things. One -- his work.

Alice Quinn: You feel a kind of lightning that you can practically see, in the gaps between phrases.

Michael Dickman: Struck, like a tree by lightning

Don Share: It's like I almost have to duck!

Don Share: You see that video of the two girls who eat the spiciest pepper on the planet and they just freak out? It's like that.

Deb Garrison: It's a little like love at first sight, when you read a poem and realize it's a voice that will haunt you forever. It's just genius.

That was, in order, former New Yorker poetry editor Alice Quinn, poet Michael Dickman, editor of Poetry Magazine Don Share, and Franz Wright's book editor Deborah Garrison.

They told me there was another thing Franz Wright was known for in the poetry world. Insanity.

Don Share: There's a violence in his expressiveness.

Sophie Cabot Black: F is for Franz, F is for fight, F is for Fuck You.

Michael Dickman: You're a fucking liar, you're a rat, you don't know anything about fucking poetry and like -

Alice Quinn: You know if I catch up with you I'll shoot you or something crazy.

Don Share: Dear Editor, the blank form rejection was a nice but predictable touch coming from vengeful petty, reactionary, and aesthetically moribund freaks like yourselves. ENJOY YOUR MONEY!

Michael Dickman: And he would send it, he would copy like 100 people.

Don Share: At one point Franz commented that I was a maggot who lived my life behind a computer. And for a second I thought - should my feelings be hurt? That's pretty awful. And then I realized he was right.

Franz: I'm gonna kick everyone's ass. Isn't that nice? Don't you wish you had a little voice like that?

BIANCA LISTENS

I listened to Franz's voice, at random, for hours. Hours everyday, for years. When I started listening, I was 26 years old.

I lived with my boyfriend, in a small room, in a house with seven roommates. And I didn't know where that relationship was going.

I spent days alone at my desk, three feet from my bed in Brooklyn, trying to make my own work. But all alone, it was hard to do stuff.

Going into my late twenties... I felt anxious, for unknown reasons. Every decision felt permanent. So much so, that I didn't make any. Wishes and fears blurred together, landing in a place of total paralysis.

I didn't know how to make sense of the random dread that came over me.

I wanted to know how Franz, whose mental illnesses and anxieties were so much worse than my own, was able to overcome them. And become so productive.

The tapes filled a void in my life, one that I didn't even realize was there. I had forgotten how good it felt to be obsessed with something.

THE APARTMENT

Franz Wright entered my life through my friend, who had Franz as a teacher. He introduced me to Franz's wife. Her name is Elizabeth Oehlkers Wright, known as Beth. It was a year after Franz had died, at the age of 62.

When I met her, she was moving out of their apartment, in Waltham, Massachusetts... because she could no longer afford to live there.

My friend thought their home should be documented before Beth left. So he called me, because I've made films and documentaries.

Beth opened the door. She was only 49... and living alone now... they never had any kids.

There's a line from a poem Franz wrote about her: "Eyes so sad and infinitely kind." She spoke very slowly, in a voice so low and trembly I had to lean in to hear her.

BETH: We can just go downstairs.

BIANCA: Yeah, let's start at the beginning.

As I entered the apartment, I suppressed a gasp:

MICHAEL DICKMAN: There's stuff everywhere, it's like really good place if you're a cat. As a person it's a little bit difficult to get around.

DON SHARE: The first time I went into that place I thought they'd been burgled.

DEB GARRISON: And the desk with the scraps and the apartment. I mean he literally lived in language.

All over the apartment walls, in shaky handwriting, Franz had written poetry. "English as a second loneliness," said one wall. He wrote poetry on the fridge. On a coffee filter above the sink it said: "Those dishes are going to be sorry, when I finally get my hands on them."

This is an email Franz wrote to his friend Don Share:

Don Share: He said we live a simple life of silence here. He's talking about his life with Beth. Silence and sadness of gloominess. We'd like to keep it that way if it's all the same to you. Is there a law that says you have to be happy now?

There was evidence of happiness in the apartment. I read the love letters Beth wrote to Franz, scotch taped above the toilet.

BETH: F Dear - I left earlier. I hope you feel rested when you wake. I woke up feeling very lucky that we're here and to be in that place -

In watercolor, Franz responded: “The luck is all mine.”

Beat.

On my first visit to the house, Beth gave me a tour that lasted three hours. On my second visit, she showed me photos on Franz’s computer. That’s when I saw the digital files from his voice recorder. I asked her if I could have them, and just like that, she dropped hundreds of audio files of Franz onto my hard drive... without any idea what was on them.

I know why she trusted me. But I was touched that she did.

I had just been given the dying words of a brilliant poet. My hopes were so high for the tapes, I was almost afraid to start listening.

ADVICE

I should tell you, this whole looking for advice thing was not new to me. When I was seven, I would approach strangers and ask them “What’s the best piece of advice you’ve ever heard?” I recorded their responses in a lined notebook.

When I got older, I asked for advice in my films. When my heart was broken, I talked to my college advisor.

GREGG: I want you to relish these emotions, however painful they are. i think we do a disjustice when we say well just get over it - Buck up, Bianca! Buck up.

I made a whole film out of that. And then I asked a six year old for advice on my anxiety.

ASA: The Scared is scared of things you like.

And I made a film out of that too.

Now I was looking for the ultimate advice... from a person who'd actually died. I imagined it as a third act, in a coming of age trilogy.

THE TAPES

I took Franz's tapes to Vermont. I sat alone in a white room, and put on my headphones.

[[Sound of groaning]]

This is the noise Franz Wright makes when he's sounding out poems in his head.

I have hours of it.

[[More groaning]]

Franz recorded for 2 to 10 hours per day - almost everyday - for four years. Beth gave me two years of the tapes, to start with.

His recordings were all from inside his apartment, with the exception of one tape —

[[Sound of cars.]]

Where I heard him try to cross the street. And fail.

FRANZ: Just can't do it, can't cross the street.

Honestly, it was boring, a lot of time...

[[FRANZ: groaning.]]

I listened a lot on double speed...

Franz on double speed.

And just when I started to space out - it was like he would catch me and wake me up again.

FRANZ: Anyone who smirks at any of this is a dead pig with no soul!!!

CRAZY TAPES

I heard him go to the bathroom while writing poems... and fall asleep while writing poems.

I knew this was a famous poet, but sometimes it sounded more like someone on an acid trip...

FRANZ: Mark is getting ready to smoke a spider.

Or a crazy person on the subway...

FRANZ: It seems like everywhere I look is a Rorschach test now. That's one of the things you don't tell your psychiatrist. Also that you see your dead cats walking around the house at night. And your friends sitting next to you while you're typing. You never fucking tell your psychiatrist that.

In the background of these tapes, there was always his mental illness. His depression, his hallucinations, his mania...

FRANZ: It's a silvery thing coming up your back. You could associate about everything you look at.

LANGUAGE

You can hear how he loves words. It's like he was tasting them.

FRANZ: Eerie lake eerie. What a wonderful name, Lake Eerie.

Sometimes just his definition of a word could be beautiful. Language he said, was...

FRANZ: The magical ability to communicate... through the air, across the room, in the direction of the face of someone that you love.

He told me about the first day a human spoke:

FRANZ: Strange homosapien christless sad cold shivering coughing nitwits. 13 million years it took to get a couple words out but - the system, it must have come like a black lightning flash and blinded you with awe.

BIANCA'S OBSESSION

I kept listening, and I kept listening. I told my friends about the tapes. And then eventually, so much time passed that I stopped telling them. And they stopped asking.

When I came across a good tape, I would always play it for my boyfriend. Sometimes, at night before bed, we would read Franz's poems out loud to each other. Franz, and the tapes, they became part of our relationship...

my boyfriend was the only person with enough context to understand what the tapes meant to me. What Franz meant to me.

The more I listened, the more I wanted to find out everything I could about Franz Wright. Who was this guy, cooped up in his apartment, whispering into his tape recorder, feeding on words?

WHO IS THIS GUY? / FRANZ'S BIO - FAMILY

FRANZ: Who names their child Franz, and throws him to the boys of American grade schools?

If you're into poetry, you've probably heard of Franz's father, James Wright. He was famous for this line:

JAMES WRIGHT: I lean back as the evening darkens and comes on. The chicken hawk floats over, looking for home. I have wasted my life.

I have wasted my life.

Franz's father was an alcoholic, who left the family when Franz was 8. After that, Franz's stepfather abused him. Franz started to suffer symptoms of mental illness when he was in school, hearing voices in geometry class.

Like his dad, he began writing poetry. According to Franz, this was his father's reaction to the first poem he wrote, at age 14:

Franz: He wrote back immediately and said I'll be damned you're a poet welcome to hell.

I'll be damned. You're a poet. Welcome to hell.

When Franz was in college, his dad won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry. Eight years later he died suddenly from throat cancer. Franz was haunted by his dad's death until the end of his life... I know this, because he often talked about his father in the tapes.

Almost 30 years after his father won it, Franz was also awarded the Pulitzer Prize. To this day, they are still the only parent / child to both win a Pulitzer Prize.

Here's Franz, in an interview right after he found out:

FRANZ: I cried. It was a stunning shock to me, it was the last thing I expected when I woke up on Monday morning a couple weeks ago. And I wished very much that he could be around to celebrate with me.

**Since you left me at eight I have always been lonely
star-far from the person right next to me, but
closer to me than my bones you
you are there**

Alice Quinn: Even in his last book of poems he's still addressing his father. He felt that gulf and that abandonment terribly.

FRANZ'S BIO - TROUBLE

After his father's death, Franz drank even more, and did a ton of drugs... Opiates, cocaine, amphetamines, benzodiazepines, lsd, and marijuana.

Then, had a number of mental breakdowns. He was institutionalized, six times. This was during his forties, before he was with his wife Beth.

Then he gave up on hospitals... Spent most of his time in bed. For months, he didn't leave the house. Even walking to the liquor store was terrifying.

First, he stopped writing. Then, he stopped speaking. Completely.

In a poem, he wrote: "I looked like suicide returning an overdue book at the library."

The only place he found solace was in the back of Catholic churches... sitting in the pew.

In an interview, he said he bought a book about how to kill himself. He said he tried jumping off the Tobin bridge in Boston, electrocuting himself in the bathtub, hanging himself, tying a garbage bag over his head, and overdosing with opiates and alcohol. Somehow, miraculously, all of his attempts failed.

FRANZ: And before I forget, I would like to be the first to congratulate everyone who has not committed suicide up until now. Camouflaged and lightless congregation, the world will never know your names, will never know of its debt to you or what you suffered. With what uncomplaining anguish you sacrificed, the one thing all hold most dear, have in common - the sense of being completely different from anybody else.

When I went to visit Alice Quinn, the New Yorker poetry editor, she pulled out an envelope that she said had been sitting on her desk for 27 years. Franz sent it to her before she had ever published him in the magazine.

Alice Quinn: The letter that I found yesterday Bianca, It's just on a little piece of paper in red ink, it's not signed, it's a little note that says pray for me.

Franz's sincerity was profound. And his claim to suffering was very justified.

**Franz: Do you have any children? No, lucky for them.
Bad things happen when you get hands, dolphin.**

Can you tell us a little bit about your upbringing? There is no down or up in space or in the womb.

If they'd have stabbed me to death on the day i was born it would have been an act of mercy.

MUSIC

BETH AND FRANZ

As I was learning more about Franz, I was becoming closer to Beth. I'd gone through her stuff. I'd heard her in the tapes. I'd even read her love notes.

But there was still a mystery about her.

What did she see in *this* person: this depressed alcoholic, who couldn't even get to the liquor store?

Marrying Franz must have been a supreme act of faith. Since moving in with my boyfriend I'd been thinking about this all the time... How had she known?

I finally got up the courage to ask Beth this question... in her living room, surrounded by piles of Franz's stuff, as the sun was setting in Waltham.

She told me this story. She had been his student, at Emerson College, in a class called translating German poetry and prose. This was before his psychotic break, when he was still teaching and functioning.

Beth was tan, with long blond hair. She grew up in Rhode Island. At a local farm, she took care of goats.

In class Franz noticed that she sat bolt upright with freakish attention, her eyes never leaving him. And on the last day of class...

Beth: He asked me if I wanted to go get a Pepsi.

The whole time I was sort of trembling.

I just - I couldn't - the whole time I kept thinking like I wanted to - to just leap on him.

On one freezing winter day, Beth lost the key to her apartment. She didn't know where to go, and she knocked on Franz's door...

Beth: I sat in the attic room while he worked and I didn't talk to him, and it was snowing, and I totally fell in love with it you know it was just so beautiful.

And then she said something that surprised even her:

Beth: I said I wish we were married.

He looked at her, this 21 year old STUDENT, who had just blurted out "I wish we were married."

Beth: And then - he disappeared.

He disappeared from Beth's life. They didn't speak for six years. That's when his period of decline began... when Franz had that psychotic break.

FRANZ: She said I wish we were married. And I laughed. God forgive me. But what i meant was, I don't want to put you through what is going to happen to me in the next couple decades and it did.

Beth went off to do a fellowship in Germany. She was studying German poetry and prose... the same subject she had taken from Franz.

After many years, Franz drafted a letter and sent it to Beth's parents house.

By the time Beth told me about this letter in her apartment, the sun had set and we were sitting in complete darkness. I asked her if she had the letter, she said she didn't... she thought it might be in his archives. I was dying to see it - the words he would write after years of silence.

BEAT

THE LETTER

Months later, I went to visit Franz's archives at Boston University with my boyfriend. A man wheeled out a cart of boxes, and handed me giant white gloves that kept falling off my hands. It looked like these boxes had never been opened. There were photographs scotched taped together, and I had to peel them apart. In one of the boxes my boyfriend noticed a letter, and I recognized it immediately. My heart raced. And I stood up to read it.

Dear Beth,

I lost the miraculous opportunity of your love -- I'm quite certain that when I die I will see you before me saying you wished we were

married. Or perhaps knowing you was given to me so that, at the last moment, I can silently say the word “Yes”, and take your hand, and change my whole life. I even lost, again and again, the chance to simply tell you how much I love you.

I have been extremely sick. This is the first thing I have typed in over a year. It is impossible to imagine, but maybe someday I will get a chance to talk to you and tell you what has happened to me. Not that I think it would surprise you. Everyday I see the unbearable beauty and sanity of your eyes, which know everything about me.

Please let me know if this reached you. I will not intrude on your life in any way. But I miss you so much.

Franz

Beth: I just cried for like a week because then I allowed myself to think about him for the first time seriously.

They got in touch... she remembers his voice on the phone in a whisper. They made plans to meet in Boston, and Beth saw him first. She walked up behind him, and right as she put her hand on his shoulder the church bell rang.

REDEMPTION

They were in love, even though Franz was not well. Franz was too afraid to go into the therapist. So Beth sat with him in burger king, across the street from his therapist’s office, everyday for weeks. And eventually, he did go in. And things got a lot better.

FRANZ: My writing just came back, it came back, in a way it had never been there to begin with.

BETH: Everyday he'd have a new poem and I'd think, oh my god! They were more ecstatic, brighter and I was thrilled and he just kept doing them over and over.

FRANZ: If only I could tell someone, the humiliation I go through when I think of my past can only be described as grace.

We are created by being destroyed.

By now, I wasn't just infatuated with Franz... I was absorbed in a great love story. If I were in Beth's position now, I knew my therapist, my friends, would all advise me **not** to try saving an addict / crazy person. And yet... this was the most romantic story I had ever encountered.

The story of Beth and Franz seemed to say: love is finding someone you would leap into hell for. Or who would leap into hell for you.

Not that it was all perfect... in the tapes I heard them fight.

Franz: Uh - I can't live with you like this.

But they did stay together for 17 years... up until the day Franz died.

In the midst of the hundreds of hours of tapes - I heard him talk about this moment of reuniting with Beth to no one in particular. I saw in the timestamp that was the middle of the night. He just said it, to the air, not knowing if anyone would ever hear it.

FRANZ: Virtually every other person i thought of as my friend was running in the opposite direction from me. She walked right into the hell that I was and lead me back to life. And, she risked - consciously - marrying a psychologically a cripple. And taking

care of him for the rest of her life. And 11 years later, I think maybe she's finally taught me the meaning of love and the love of life.

BIANCA: Of love and the love of life.

BETH'S GRIEF

If I being honest, I was obsessed not only with their love, but the loss of it. Beth's grief after he was gone.

Franz was a voice and a memory, but Beth was right in front of me, packing her life into boxes.

As I spent time with her clearing out their house, I imagined, I even hoped, that I would feel a grief like that one day.

Whenever I started a new relationship, I always had this morbid thought: What if this lasts forever, and then he dies? I always imagined inheriting my partner's belongings... and what it would be like to sort through his clothes... Even dreading the day his smell fully left his shirts.

I felt like I was Beth's student, always knowing that one day this could happen to me. When I looked through their stuff, I let myself imagine that it was my partner's stuff, after decades together.

I touched Franz's dirty yellow typewriter, which he had re-painted himself when he needed a change. I admired photos of their radiator they had displayed around the radiator, because he and Beth loved the different shades of light that fell in that corner of their apartment.

Beth: Everything is sort of radiating our life. And that's been mainly painful...so.

Even a year after his death, during my visit, Beth was still finding new notes from him all around the apartment. She showed them to me.

"Please keep me contemporary when we're alone together and (when with others don't act like a nutcase - use past tense.)" When she found a new note from him, she would read and re-read it, carry it around in her pocket, and then fall asleep holding it.

And by listening to Beth, I felt useful. Like I was unburdening her of being the only person who knew what these objects meant.

In the tapes, I found a conversation between her and Franz... back before Beth had experienced this grief, and Franz was trying to prepare her.

FRANZ (talking to Beth): I've had my share of this death business the other way so I think that's why I got so freaked out for you for your sake. But I don't so much anymore because I think we've had time for you to get stronger. That doesn't mean it'll be pleasant but I don't think it'll be as bad as it once would've, do you? Because we talk about it, we live it, and that means that when it happens you'll have already had practice. And you gotta do that or the shock will fucking kill you. It'll make you catatonic or something. And no it won't bc you're not given to that. You'll be fine but it'll just hurt a lot for a loooong time. It will always hurt, but more and more it will hurt when you wish it to. That's what I had with my dad. Now I don't think about him in that way - It doesn't kill me everytime I think about him, I enjoy thinking about him now. It takes awhile, and I wasn't married to the fucker either.

MUSIC BEAT/TAPE CLICK

FRANZ (FIND MY BODY DEAD): I remember now. If you should find my body dead when you come home please let your own poor body have its say of tears. But keep in mind my body is not me and I am not dead. Your body weeping is not you. And there's no time here where I am. You'll be here in a moment with me hand in hand I will know the touch of your hand as we fly across the world. As we sleep listening to the rain forever.

YOU TALKING TO ME?

A year after receiving the tapes, my normal life would resume for periods of time... but then I'd fall back into Franz land.

He was deep in my psyche. And when he talks about anxiety - that nagging kind, that haunts you for no reason - it was like he was describing my own experience... my own therapy sessions:

**Franz: Why am I afraid to go grocery shopping?
I suppose there is a pill for that, but why?**

I couldn't say exactly when this happened — what hour of the tapes, or what month of the first year – but I kind of thought Franz was speaking to me.

FRANZ: Just between me and you. Which is strange, since you're not here.

Whenever he said “you” like this - I'd freeze... turn and look at the computer.

Franz: The next time you hit that high yellow note of pure fear, just hold it. Stay there.

I don't know if it was MY OWN narcissism... or insanity... but I *wanted* him to be talking to me.

Franz: Because you'd better go inside yourself and find a place you like.

I felt like Franz knew what I was doing.

Franz: Oh, this will be difficult to listen to.

WOULD HE LOVE ME?

The tapes *were* difficult to listen to, for many reasons. I heard him confront some of the darkest moments of his life, like the way he was abused as a child. In one poem he wrote:

“My dad beat me for my edification and further improvement. And later, that other stranger took over, somewhat more expertly, which both learned from their fathers. Some heavily armed monkeys from Plato's cave to Darwin's. So that's how it's done here, I thought. And may my hand wither, may it forget how to write, if I ever strike a child.”

It occurred to me that overcoming a cycle of abuse, and addiction, was one of the most meaningful things you could do in your life.

FRANZ: I mean I stood up! I'd been crying. And I stood up! And I did right here! I will turn this black, deplorable thing, whatever it is, into fuel, into energy, to make something good.

I know he alienated people, was difficult - even cantankerous - but you could feel how he wanted to be loved.

And I did love him. I really loved Franz.

The question that stuck with me was: would he have loved me too?

There's a crazy rant I found that Franz posted on Facebook. I felt like it had been written just for me.

I had been considering grad school... and this post was in response to an invitation to "like" the page of an MFA program where he had given a reading. Franz wrote:

"In response to your invitation, insinuating I would "like" your writing program you have to be shitting me - have I not made it clear that MFA programs have turned poetry into an occupation, and a joke - have weakened American poetry, have desecrated it into artifact instead of result of a soul's progress in solitary devotion. You have turned it into one more subject at a university or college or private scam operation like yours. a real writer has always sought solitude, not group therapy... Those writing programs have lowered the bar so far down anyone can trip over it and get a degree & consider themselves A MASTER OF THE ART OF POETRY at 24. Think of the state of your soul and just cut it out. You can still choose."

I think I didn't apply to grad schools, because of this rant.

I was trying to take Franz's advice, and just get to work. I kept thinking of his poem, "Spell." He says that some fish for words from shore...

Franz: Some fish for words from shore, while others, lacking in such contemplative tact, like to go wading in right up to their chins through a torrent of bone freezing diamond knife raised.

I wanted to be in the bone freezing diamond, not the scared person huddling on the shore.

But honestly, I like security and structure. And I'd been worrying about money since I was around 7.

Franz worked up until four days before he died; I can barely go an hour without a snack.

I wondered if I could absorb Franz's intensity, his purity, if I listened enough... Through my ears, through his voice.

I often forgot that he had cancer... that I was listening to him dying.

Franz: How does one go about dying? The earth is filled with people who have never died.

LONG MUSIC BREAK.....

FRANZ BEGINS TO DIE

FRANZ: We are at least trying to tackle the big D... (lighter flick)

That's him lighting a cigarette...

FRANZ: Looks like a big pregnant death

I listened as the seasons changed... over a year passed by, and his body grew weaker...

FRANZ: I weigh 148 pounds, that's very interesting.

FRANZ: I look like a cross between Mick Jagger and Jesus Christ. Mick Jagger and Jesus Christ!

In the tapes you don't always hear how sick he is. In the last six months of his life he was living with brain tumors that gave him double vision. And still, he was writing. He forced himself to stay awake writing into the night... One time Beth found him slumped over the CD player, because he had fallen asleep while changing the music.

Here's his friend Don Share again, editor of Poetry Magazine:

DON SHARE: When Franz was in chemo, he was smoking like crazy when I saw him. I was like, you sure you want to do that? He said, I don't even have five years to live who the fuck cares.

Don Share: But you know after he had brain surgery, the first thing it seems that Franz did was - he reached his hand his hand out and someone put a Dunkin Donuts coffee cup in his hand. First thing he did post brain surgery was try to write a poem.

FRANZ: I'm being bombarded by ideas and images for poems gotta limit those to the bone man because I really feel I can't take much more of this physically.

Don Share: I mean his best work, in my view, happened when a death sentence was hanging over his head.

FRANZ: I want to enter death w eyes wide open. I want to be there. Most people would rather be in a coma.

In one note to Beth, which she found after he died, he wrote: “Not to be morbid, but think! My life has been so filled with anguish now, death (selfishly) will be such a blessing for me.”

FRANZ: I’m done with the fucking nitwits, that deride and malign me. While I wait for my funeral to pass I will do what I’ve always done. With a difference. I won’t in any way attempt to fit in to this society as it now exists. A society for morons - by the morons, for the morons, and fuck them. I got important things to do and very little time.

In the final months of his life, Franz was still working on his last book. Beth knew that he was staying alive to finish it, and that when the book was done he would die.

He kept revising and revising the poems. Finally it was clear that he was finished.

FRANZ: The book is done it’s simply strewn all over the house... It’s all here. The book is here.

He submitted the manuscript... and lost his recorder somewhere in the house. But he never stopped working. He would often shout out poetry, always preceded by: “Beth, write this down.”

Several times in the months before he died he told Beth, I’ve never loved life more. And it keeps getting worse.

He worked at night, and slept during parts of the day. Randomly, he would wake up, and tell Beth that they needed to go out. Their outings were to buy records, to buy donuts, and to buy a cat tower on Massachusetts no tax day for his cat Robert.

It was 2015, a winter when blizzards pummeled the area. As he was dying, the world turned white outside.

FRANZ: Oh Beth, damnit. I just feel so calm for once. And uh, I will get through. And I *will* be with you, we could arrange to meet somewhere. You could come and talk to me. I'll be there. I'll be there. For you. I will be you. And uh, that's the loveliest thing of all. The loveliest thing in the world. I will be you. My god.

Previews of one of his last books arrived in the mail. He used the last of his strength to sign 100 copies.

He looked out the window at the storm, and he said "Beth, write this down. There used to be a real world. Fuck, you could walk there."

He entered a deep sleep. His cat Robert, whose temperament had always been similar to Franz's, spent the entire time curled on Franz's feet, keeping them warm.

Beth put her face close to his, holding his arm to feel his pulse. She told me that she breathed in sync with him. When she changed her breathing pattern, he would change his to match.

Beth thought, what would I regret not telling him? And then she said:

BETH: You were right about everything.

You were right about everything. Not just all the arguments...

BETH: The way he focused on one thing in his life.

The way he spent his time... the hours of work, everyday, that I saw in the timestamps. And I thought - what an incredible thing to hear before you die.

Someone validating all of your choices, and exonerating you from every argument...

BETH: I was holding his head and I talked to him and then I watched him breathe three or four more breaths and that was it and then he just stopped breathing. And that connection that I felt with him, it didn't change at all.

Franz died. His body stayed in the house for the next few days. His friends and colleagues came over, some visiting the apartment for the first time. It was a mix of local neighbors, from his AA group, and poets... they left *him* notes around the house.

In the room where he had died Beth turned on a toy turtle light that she had bought, that projected stars all over the ceiling.

Because Beth had arranged for a green funeral, Franz's friends carried his body out, and put him in their minivan... reciting poetry as they did so to ease their nerves. They said it was the exact kind of creepy and funny departure Franz would have loved.

Finally, Beth was left alone in their apartment... the way I found her the day we met. She spent much of the next few months alone there, in the company of Franz's writing, stacks of his papers, and the objects they had owned.

BETH: It was like apartment was speaking to me. Memories - you know things that he said, things that he would say...

Beth couldn't go back into the room where Franz had died, so Franz's half brother Andy bought fresh paint for the room and said "the healing starts now." Beth painted a rectangle on the wall that was Sunburst Yellow, the color of Franz's typewriter.

BETH AFTER

The next time I visited Beth, she was staying at an Episcopal monastery. She looked physically stronger. Even her voice sounded louder. She was learning to cook again, and we made enchiladas together.

Then she moved into a tiny house in Maine, and I lost touch with her for about a year. It was so isolated, that if any neighbors came to visit, she'd hear their footsteps approaching in the snow.

When I finally called her again, I admitted how deeply I had gone into Franz's tapes... and I found out that she had spent the year listening to them too.

After two years alone with Franz's voice, I finally had someone to talk about it with.

I was worried that my obsession with her dead husband's tapes would freak her out, but instead, she found it comforting. We both felt like the tapes had been speaking to us, in the present.

Finally, I stopped listening.

TAPES END

There's an interview I heard with Franz, where he talks about a poem called "Why is the Winterlight." He wrote it while he walking around Fayetteville Arkansas, in a bad state...

Franz: At some point it occurred me that i could solve this anxiety i felt by walking around town and looking at other people and imagine what they might be suffering, what affliction they might be going through, and in that way i forgot about my own.

This image, of Franz wandering around the streets... trying to imagine other people's pain... it reminded me of myself encountering Franz.

He was *my* stranger.

Franz: And I also was reminded that a certain degree of suffering is really the norm. It's not some secret punishment or doom that I had been condemned to it was sort of the normal condition.

I had gone as deeply into imagining his suffering as I possibly knew how. If he wasn't afraid, maybe I didn't have to be.

Franz: Empty me of the bitterness and disappointment of being nothing but myself.

Empty me of the bitterness and disappointment of being nothing but myself.

BOYFRIEND

The summer I started listening to the tapes, I moved in with my boyfriend. I had never lived with another person before. We designed a little custom table to fit between the bed and the radiator, and made a special soap dish that hung from the ceiling in our shower. We squeezed our books together on the shelves, and the books we both owned were doubled up like good omens.

A few months ago, when I stopped listening to the tapes, we broke up, and he moved out.

We cherry picked my books back out of the shelf, and carried my stuff to my new place. He took a drill and fixed my dresser, hung my pictures, then he looked around, and smiled, and said "It feels like you."

I helped pack up his car. Outside, some construction workers watched the world's longest hug. "I love you," he said out the window as he was driving away. I ran after him, kind of in a joking way, but it didn't really feel like a joke.

It was like listening to the tapes bracketed our lives together.

Right before he left, I assembled all my favorite clips, and he recorded piano along with them. That's the piano you're hearing now, and that you've heard throughout this story.

LESSONS

From Franz there was certainly no easy comfort, no neatly packaged advice. I kept remembering the words he had scratched violently into his wall: "Which is worse, the pain of discipline or the pain of remorse?"

I came across a letter he had written to a discouraged student, who was terrified that her work was no good:

"Do you want me to say something soothing and comforting?" he wrote. "You are attempting the impossible, you are making an impossible gamble and potentially threatening your sanity and very life if you get into art FOR REAL, and there is no thing I can say or do to make that naked fact easier to deal with, sorry."

At the end he added: "When you write something of value you will know it - you will feel it in your body, you won't give a fuck about what anybody else thinks."

I got what he was saying. I'd come close to feeling that a couple of times, both when making something, and in a relationship.

Beat.

I spent two years with Franz, and these tapes seemed to say: you can lose your sanity. You can lose everything. But you can gain it back again.

Franz explained to me that the opposite of fear is a poem.

FRANZ: It's fucking proof that somebody was not afraid for a little while. Bc you cannot entertain inspiration in a state of fear.

Most people I have known live relatively peacefully, but are afraid to die. Franz lived through unimaginable fear, but he was ready for death. Or as Beth had said, he was right about everything.

In a poem, Franz wrote, "And I know who I am, I'll be a voice coming from nowhere, inside - be glad for me."

I came across this tape, one of the last from him. Another prayer, spoken in the middle of the night.

FRANZ: Thank you for this strange, darkly glamorous life in which I was allowed everyday to anguish over this strange art.

To anguish over this strange art

FRANZ: And to experience something that I can only compare to this sensation of being in love.

Something I can only compare to this sensation of being in love.

FRANZ: I mean it. Think about itttt.

CREDITS:

Two Years with Franz was written by Bianca Giaever

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