

Conversation Pieces
Volume 51

Other Places

by
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The Rising Up

Franzy was suddenly back in school and completely unprepared for the history test.

But that wasn't why everyone was staring at her and smiling. No, *smirking*. A few had turned their heads and whispered something behind their hands to their neighbors as she entered the classroom. A woman off to the side pointed at her.

Franzy stopped and looked down at herself. It was horrible! She was only wearing a bra—a cheap, tired, gray-looking bra. She should have thrown it out years ago. But the woman had pointed at her crotch. When Franzy shifted her eyes she saw a penis sticking out—erect and out of place. She could feel the annoying jitteriness of it. She was naked and she had a penis. Taking a test was out of the question. She should never have come here.

She turned and ran. Laughter followed her.

Franzy passed a coat closet near the outside doors and found a tee shirt, pants, socks, shoes—everything she needed. She tucked the penis, which kept twitching, into the pants. It was a silly mistake, bringing it with her! She should have left it home.

It was much colder outside than she'd realized. She should have grabbed a coat. Franzy turned to go back into the school, but all the doors were locked, and it

looked deserted and decaying. She hadn't visited it in decades.

It began to snow. Her shoes were little ballet slippers, the kind she'd worn when she was eight and dreamed of dancing. She turned the corner onto a highway, where big rigs zoomed past, blasting horns that made her jump from one pile of snow to another.

The snowdrifts themselves were starting to look like huddling, looming shapes. One of them collapsed, burying Franzy in a cold white tunnel. The whiteness made an artificial light. She could see people sitting on their haunches, huddled forward, their shoulders touching the top of the snowbank. She scuttled in next to them.

"You have to be quiet," the man to her right said. "We have to discuss this. We're all trapped in this dream, trying to figure it out."

"This is a dream?" Franzy asked.

The woman to her left looked at her pityingly. "Of course it's a dream. Haven't you even tried to wake up yet?"

"No, I haven't," Franzy whispered. "How do you know it's a dream?"

Without a word, the man took a gun out of his pocket and shot her in the heart.

Franzy gasped, held her hand over her chest, saw the blood, and cried out, "Why did you do that?"

"You should have woken up or died," he said. "That's what would normally happen. And you're not dead. You're not even bleeding."

Franzy looked down at her white shirt (had it always been a white shirt?) and saw there was no blood. There was a bullet hole, though. "I don't feel any pain," she said in wonder.

“It’s a government takeover, or a corporate takeover. If you run straight ahead you’ll see the armies. We’re meeting here to find a strategy to fight them.”

“What can we do?” Franzy whispered. It all made sense, except for the conspiracy part. Government or corporate? How come they didn’t know?

“It was the Rising Up,” the woman to her left said. “You don’t remember, do you? After the death of everything we knew and loved, we rose up. We shouted no. And those on the very edges, left and right, closed in to silence us. We just don’t know if it was the politicians or the greedy capitalists; they were hand in hand, anyway. They put us all to sleep. The waking world is ruled by them, now.”

“Why can’t we wake up?” Franzy cried. It seemed so urgent! She tried to tell herself it was time to open her eyes, but nothing happened.

“They’ve locked us in,” the man to her right said. “We have to find a way to break through. We’re meeting in hidden places everywhere, assembling our army. Are you with us?”

“I am,” Franzy said. “I am.”

“Then rise up!” he said. The woman on her other side jumped up at the same time and said, “Rise up!” and rows and rows of people Franzy hadn’t seen rose up and burst through the snow banks, all of them looking very Soviet, with their fists in the air, shouting.

A line of trucks slowed down on the highway beside them, and people leaped out to join their fight. They lined up in phalanxes facing a dark line on the horizon, which zoomed at them in an unnatural way.

The enemy’s advance guard contained helmeted people, mostly men, wearing thick gray suits. They had

scarves tied over the lower half of their faces, so only their eyes showed, evil and sharp.

“Prepare your weapons!” the man to her right shouted, and everyone bent down and made snowballs.

“Snowballs?” Franzy cried, but even as she doubted it, she saw the snowballs lobbed at the enemy bursting into explosions. When she looked down, she saw piles of small bombs all around them. Her army was packing each small bomb into a snowball, so she did too.

The bombs felt light and soft, almost like beanbags. They seemed to grab the snow packed around them, forming a hard shell. *So that’s what makes them burst*, she thought.

The enemy had their own weapons, sharp ice-arrows that went through people and came out pink. *That’s blood*, she thought.

“Watch what you think,” the man to her right said.

“It isn’t blood,” the woman to her left said. “It’s paint.”

Franzy’s mind went swiftly from blood to paint, and she saw that the people who’d been stabbed were fine. The paint just made them stumble a little, perhaps adding weight. Indeed, up ahead, a man completely covered in paint fell down.

The advance guard began to run away as the army behind them came closer, no doubt afraid that they would be crushed under the wheels of their own forces.

Franzy froze with fear. The enemy soldiers were the size of buildings, coming at them like tanks, ships, buses, trucks, ready to ride over them.

They cast enormous shadows. Franzy looked down at the shadows and saw the edge of one come loose. She bent down, picked at it, and it pulled up one piece. It was connected to the advancing army.

“They’re made of paper!” she cried. The enemy soldiers began to burst and burn from the bombs her side threw, and the snow made their lower edges curl up.

“They’re paper!” the man to her right repeated, and she heard the word *paper* spread through the ranks.

“They thought they could fool us with images,” the woman to her left said. The people murmured, relieved. But it turned out that their own tanks and cars and trucks were also paper.

The man to her right looked at her with disappointment. “That isn’t right at all. Now we’ll have to march.”

As they all began to march over the monumental paper army, dirtying them underfoot, Franzy felt somewhat foolish. She had thought one thing and was frightened, but then it had all worked out

“Nothing has worked out,” the man to her right said. “You’ve given in to the diversions in the dream, that’s all. Try to remember who you are in real life. We will never wake if we get caught up in the dream.”

Franzy looked at herself, in a uniform of navy blue jeans and a jeans jacket, just like all the others. Those clothes looked more like her; maybe she was making headway.

Her bladder felt full to bursting. That might wake her up, she thought, but it didn’t. Franzy stepped over to a snowbank and pulled out her penis. It was a great relief to pee, and very convenient to have a penis. It was hard to put back in her pants, however, since it had grown a bit when she grabbed it, but she fought it back and then returned to battle.

It was spring and the snow had melted. The highway was deserted, the armies gone. Far off, the city glittered. Railroad tracks ran straight towards it, and a raised station

perched off to the side. Franzy heard the blasts of the train coming, and she ran for the station as it pulled in for a brief stop, just managing to get on before the conductor yelled, “All aboard!”

Franzy panted as she stumbled into a seat. The man to her right was, as usual, to her right. For a moment, they looked out the window as the train slowly rocked forward. Fields stretched into the distance.

“Big Ag,” he said. “That’s what it is. It’s not the government at all. They’d never be organized enough to pull it off. Big Ag can spray the crops with anything.” As he spoke, a crop duster ran across the field, releasing a plume of something that crept in through the closed windows and made them all cough.

The woman to her left said, “It’s why we’ve got to fight this together. There’s a dream machine in the city. They’ve set it so we can never truly wake up. We have to wake up.” She clutched Franzy’s arm. “Even if we all die.”

Franzy looked along the car and saw the whole compartment filled with people determined to fight and win. They all looked prepared to die.

“You can’t think of dying,” the man to her right said.

Franzy understood and stopped thinking about it. The train rushed onward, and the soldiers all started singing a World War II song, something sad but brave. Franzy wore a bias-cut dress, clinging and figure-enhancing, but her penis broke the line. It had to be adjusted. It was inconvenient, to say the least.

The man to her right raised his eyebrows at her and frowned, as the music over the public address system shifted from war to romance. He tapped the back of her hand. “We’re fighting for connection, for the freedom

to connect with each other.” His eyes became moist and his voice husky.

As he leaned closer to her, Franzy could see over his shoulder that soldiers all down the rows were leaning into each other, embracing, their hands wandering, their voices sweet. *This is why all wars are fought*, she thought, *to find out who to love*. The man to her right ran his hand over both her organs, seeming not to prefer one to the other, and she rejoiced at the new pleasure her penis gave her.

The woman to her left cried, “This is not the reason we fight! They are controlling us!” Franzy wanted to follow her body’s instincts without prejudice. How could something so insistent and natural be wrong? But the woman to her left stood up and shouted, “Tsunami!”

Every head looked out the window. They saw the bare ocean bed merely ten feet below them as the train sped round the cliff toward the city. Whales and porpoises and fishing boats struggled to find their purchase in the silt. Franzy raised her eyes from the dry seabed to a wave as tall as a skyscraper running towards them.

The soldiers began to scream.

“No!” the woman to her left cried. “Think of something else! It looks like clouds, doesn’t it? Huge clouds, maybe a thunderstorm?”

And Franzy saw that, yes, it was clouds banked up on the horizon like a wave. The dry seabed was just a low tide, coming in swiftly now. The whale splashed, waiting for the water to rise some more, and the fisherman straightened his nets.

The whale will be safe, Franzy thought with relief. Meanwhile, the whole army was straightening itself out, nodding at the person they’d been touching just a moment earlier. Not exactly sheepish, just restored.

As they headed back inland, Franzy asked, “This dream machine—where is it? What does it look like? How does it work?”

“It’s a sound,” the man on her right said. “A lulling, hypnotic sound.” And indeed Franzy could hear light beeps in the background. “The machine keeps us locked to impressions in our dreams, to sights and sounds and words that suggest other sights and sounds and words. We’re trapped by our own imaginations.”

“How do you know?” she asked.

“I put it there,” he said, a sob breaking his voice.

The train car hushed, and soldiers leaned towards him, their heads turned slightly so they could hear better.

“I made it,” he whispered. “They wanted machines to soothe the cattle at slaughter. I made a machine that kept them happy even with the hammer, the knife, the shock. And they used it.”

“Big Ag,” someone hissed.

He lifted his head. “The corporations, too, you understand. They made more money; the meat was tender and didn’t cry. The public loves stories of that kind, where they do no harm and still get fat.”

“*We* are the public,” Franzy said. “So that’s insulting.” She glanced down at her loose sweatshirt and pants, at her pudgy hand. Her penis was hidden somewhere below the belly fat, she assumed. All the soldiers looked a little overfed as well, with beer bellies and puffy second chins.

She felt a little hungry. “I haven’t eaten in days,” she said.

“In days!” the army chanted behind her.

“Or had anything to drink!” the woman to her left cried. She wore leggings, a loose shirt, and crocs.

“Can you wear crocs to war?” Franzy asked, and a shiver ran down the train car. The soldiers got thinner, sitting up straight, checking their belts or their guns.

“We’re almost there!” the man on her right called out. “Soldiers, prepare for a rapid assault on the rooftops!”

With that, the train turned into a freight elevator, packed with soldiers. Franzy stood wedged shoulder to shoulder with the man to her right and the woman to her left. They sped upwards so rapidly her ears popped. The whole car filled with popping sounds, and the soldiers laughed and shifted in amusement.

They spilled out of the freight elevator onto a huge roof, with the city’s other roofs exposed all around them. It was twilight. Lights blinked on all around the city and in the sky. A tall blue tower rose above them. Franzy felt a hum in her ears.

“This is so beautiful,” she said. “A shame to destroy it.”

The army kept coming out of the elevators, more and more of them, crowding and pushing Franzy and her companions closer to the edge of the roof. “I don’t like heights,” she said nervously.

“You’ve forgotten why you’re here,” the man to her right said, and pushed her off the roof. “Remember not to think about hitting the earth.”

At first, Franzy felt terrified, then she noticed people in windows watching her fall. She wondered what they were doing behind those windows, and her fall slowed until she could move in any direction she wanted. Flying. It wasn’t fast or particularly high. She zeroed in on a woman staring out a window. The woman opened her window and said, “You can only fly in dreams, you know?”

Ab, Franzy thought, *I’d almost forgotten I was in a dream.*

Franzy tried to fly up to the rooftop again, but it was too high. She could only fly about ten feet off the ground. She landed and went back in the freight elevator (still loading soldiers, but now not as many as before) and rode it back to the top.

The man to her right was waiting for her. “That was a trick,” she said.

“You’re refusing to remember,” he said. “It’s not because of the dream, it’s because of your shame.”

Her face flushed. What was she ashamed of?

“You have to turn off the tower.” He turned and pointed up to the very top of the shaft, where a blue light blinked and a beeping sound kept pace with it.

“I don’t know how to turn it off.”

“Yes, you do. You’re the one who built it,” he said. “I couldn’t tell you before. You weren’t ready. It’s why you’re leading this dream. You couldn’t sleep. You were tired to death. The shouts, the screams, the Rising Up kept you awake. You built a machine to make you sleep, but it had consequences. It lulled everyone.”

This struck at her heart. Franzy could remember her hands on the box, turning the dials, listening to the sounds and refining them.

“They used you, it’s true. Before they turned it all the way up, they told you it was to restore order, but in fact you wanted the relief of following orders. So you’re responsible for all this.” He swept his arms out to the soldiers on the rooftops, all of them staring at her, a vast blanket of faces.

“I’ll do it,” Franzy said. But she looked up at the aerial antenna and began to wonder why she had to do it. Her eyes swept back to the faces on the rooftops. In the distance she could see a squirming, a rippling of

the horizon. “They’re coming,” she said. “We’ll have to fight them.”

The woman to her left said, “Don’t let that thought come at you. Concentrate and destroy the box.”

“The box, the box, the box,” the soldiers chanted on every rooftop. The whole city picked it up, and the chant swelled in Franzy’s head. She turned back to the tower, which was kind of like an erector set, with lots of metal crosspieces. The tower wasn’t as high as she thought and really no harder to climb than a stepladder.

And there was the box, blinking, with a small screen showing a graph. A seagull landed next to the box and eyed her. Then another. Franzy looked up to see the sky covered with birds, all heading towards her.

“Faster!” the woman to her left called from down below.

Franzy looked at the box. Why had she been worried? There was an ON/OFF switch! She reached out to flip it off as the first bird attacked her hand.

“Ignore them!” the man to her right called. “They’re butterflies! The sky is filled with butterflies!”

Franzy looked up again, and it was true. The butterflies were in a pattern, as if aligned on a quilt or a sheet, wings quivering, antennae vibrating.

“The switch!” he called out desperately.

Franzy noticed that the sky was half night and half day, divided by a line above the horizon. “If I don’t turn it off, what will happen?” she asked. The man on her right kept changing the story. Was he making it all up?

“It’s okay, Franzy. It’s okay to turn off the switch.” His voice sounded slightly different, and she became aware of sounds breaking through from somewhere else.

The beeping grew louder. Franzy's hand rested on the switch. When she removed it, the beep continued, but quieter.

"Why can't *you* turn off the switch?" she asked. "Why does it have to be me?"

"Because you made the switch," he said. "I told you that."

"You told me a lot of things," Franzy said. The line of night and day collapsed a little. The army ranged on all the rooftops looked to her for the next move. This was a strange world, but she was at the center of it. "Why would I make the switch?"

"The switch is for you, so you can break through and go back to the world where you're awake."

She remembered the awake world. It wasn't as good as this world, with all its wonderful surprises. "This is a better world for me," she said.

"Franzy, listen," the man to her right said. His voice sounded familiar now. It belonged to someone she knew in that other world. "You're stuck in a dreamlike state. You can break out of it. All you have to do is make the decision. Pull the switch, Franzy."

Ab. She suspected this was a doctor or someone declaring himself to be a doctor. Someone who wanted her to come to his reality.

"Don't fight us," he said.

"Fight you?" she asked. "Why would I be fighting you?"

"Don't fight the dream," he corrected.

She climbed down from the antenna. All over the rooftops, people watched her. "Who are you?" she asked him. "I think you just tried to trick me."

"It isn't a trick," he said. "We're just trying to get you to wake up, to come back to the real world."

Franzy walked over to the roof and stepped off. As before, she floated down to the ground. The woman she had passed the last time, in the window, waved at her and grinned. “Don’t leave us,” she said, and then covered her mouth and winked.

Franzy took a glass elevator back to the roof. The line above the horizon shifted up and down, like a window shade. More dark, then more light.

“I like it here,” Franzy said. “I like all the possibilities.”

“Come back to the real world,” the man to her right said. He had a white coat on now. He held a clipboard with sheets of paper with her name on it.

“We’ll help you wake up,” the woman to her left said. She had a stethoscope around her neck, and surgical scrubs.

“And then what? I can change the world here,” Franzy said. With her fingertip she pushed the line between dark and light up and down. *I can do more than that*, she thought. She waved her hand and it rained without getting anything wet. That amused her. There was a different sense of things now, a feeling of change.

Franzy removed her penis. She put it back. She laughed. She couldn’t recall ever laughing so fully. She raised her hands, and all the people on all the rooftops laughed as well, a wonderful burst of joy.

“I love it here,” she said to the man to her right. “You want this dream to stop, and I don’t.”

“This is bad for you,” the woman to her left said. “You can’t really live in a dream. You can’t eat or drink or work or love. It’s all just an illusion.”

Franzy looked around at the moveable sky, at the laughing crowds. She thought about flying again, about

making up anything she liked, about the sheer audacity of dreaming.

“This is perfect,” she said. “You were wrong to try to trick me into leaving. I don’t think you’ll ever be able to trick me again.”

Her eyebrows rose as a thought occurred to her. “Take these two,” she said to the people on the rooftops. “They’re balloons, that’s all. They never had any power.”

The man to the right and the woman to the left began to inflate, their lips pursed. The people grabbed them and tied ropes to their ankles. They spun around slightly, but they couldn’t speak because their mouths were swollen shut.

“I want them to be bigger,” Franzy said. “Big enough so that I can always look up and see them, and remember that I want to be here, no matter what they send into my dreams.”

Franzy jumped with the balloons to the street and tied them to a gazebo in the center of the square. They rose to the second-floor windows, and the woman in the window leaned out and began to throw confetti. Soon everyone was throwing confetti.

The sound of beeping disappeared. Franzy raised the line on the horizon, so it was sunny and warm. There was no tomorrow or yesterday now; there was nothing but peace and pure imagination. She had won. She would always win.

The woman in the window looked down and said, “It’s always a choice here, and we choose you!” She blew Franzy a kiss, then turned and pointed to the distance. Franzy saw another army, far off, the air above them glowing pink and red with guns and fire.

“What is it?” Franzy asked. “I thought we were done.”

“They’re trying something else,” the woman said. “With them it’s always bread or circuses.” She laughed, and her window turned into a balcony. Her dress was short and glittering. She wore little boots, and a feather rose from the hair piled high on her head. Below her, a horse appeared, and she leapt on. As she rode away, she turned and called, “Now, Franzy, now!”

Clowns and acrobats and trapeze artists rushed from buildings all around. “A circus war!” they cried happily. They ran past a sideshow truck with Franzy’s image on it. Her right side wore a man’s suit and her left side wore a woman’s dress. “I am half-man, half-woman,” she thought. She could feel a beard on the man-side of her face.

Franzy filled with delirium. They would send other, wilder, smoother dreams at her, trying to win her, trying to trick her.

Carnival music blared and cannons shot out enemies with painted faces. Her heart rose up.

“To war!” she cried. “To war!”