

The Problem of Frank Shepard

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/1099595) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/1099595>.

Rating:	General Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	Gen
Fandom:	Merrily We Roll Along - Sondheim/Furth
Characters:	Franklin Shepard , Charley Kringas , Mary Flynn
Additional Tags:	Writing about writing , Yuletide , Friendship
Language:	English
Collections:	Yuletide 2013
Stats:	Published: 2013-12-24 Words: 1,685 Chapters: 1/1

The Problem of Frank Shepard

by [raedbard](#)

Summary

The play that won Charley Kringas the Pulitzer was meant to be an exercise in cathartic release. But it hasn't really worked out that way.

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

It's when Charley's shrink takes one look at his face and starts to begin sessions with questions like "So what's he done this time?" that Charley decides he needs some other way of dealing with, as Epicurus probably wouldn't have put it: The Problem of Frank Shepard.

And it's up to him to record things, and in the process of recording have some clue what the hell is going wrong with a person's life, even if he has no idea how to fix it; he's the writer, after all, isn't he? What earthly (or unearthly — he blames that fucking satellite, and the ensuing spirit of 'adventure') reason could there be for him numbing his ass all those hours in front of his typewriter if he can't make those smudged hieroglyphs count for something? That was the point of the game, in the beginning: tallying up things you thought *counted* and making them into songs and stories and one acts. Later on, you worried about whether anyone was paying attention beside the three of them and their little circle of self-referential light.

Voice of Charley's shrink: Now, come on, Charles —

Charley: The jerk is completely incapable of calling me Charley. I've only asked him, oh I don't know, two or three thousand times.

Dr Jerk: You're a very successful man, both in terms of your career and your personal life —

Charley: Yeah, because I pay you five hundred dollars a time to tell me how successful I am.

Dr Jerk: Do you think you have a problem with success?

Charley: It's at this point, in case you were wondering, that I starting both laughing fit to bust my guts and crying my fucking eyes out. Wasn't that always the way?

*

"But you have read it, right? Or seen, I don't know, it was playing at the ... well, everywhere."

"Thanks, Mary."

"Sorry. But, c'mon, you must have seen it."

"Mary, I've been so busy, you know — you wouldn't believe the latest thing that they've sent through for the contract —"

"He won the *Pulitzer*, Frank."

"And I won the People's Choice. Or, well, I guess *Leaving Delilah* did."

"And we all fall on our knees at the knowledge." Pause. "I guess you couldn't stand it."

"No, no. Mary, no. I've just been really busy. You wouldn't believe how exhausting sitting in on casting sessions is. You just feel so sorry for the, you know?"

"It's not like he wrote it out of the spirit of revenge, Frank."

"Yeah, I'm sure he wrote it as completely well-intentioned character assassination."

"You know what? Where do you keep your whiskey?"

*

He never really expected to win the goddamn Pulitzer.

Not that it made that much difference.

Evelyn says it's the play she's been living with all her married life. And Charley thinks she's only half-joking. No, scratch that, she's definitely not joking. So, he says, at least you don't have to hear me talking about it anymore. At least I'm not performing the last scene of Act 3 before bed every night now? And she smiles, because she's his wife and she thinks it's in the contract he made her sign that she is supposed to show the appropriate wifely expression at times of acute stress, but he sees how thin the smile has gotten.

And, while the letter from Mary was lovely, and made him feel a lot less guilty —

Dr Jerk: We've discussed the destructive power of guilt, Charles.

— he'd have felt a lot better if it hadn't included a paragraph on the Doings of Frank, right at the end, just when he thought he might get away with forgetting that the guy existed at all.

*

"Did you see it?"

Pause.

"Okay, okay. No need to give me that look."

"Opening night in New York. Oh, Frank, you know ... no. I don't know. It was ... really great."

"How much they pay you for those incisive comments, Mary?"

"Oh fuck you. There comes a point in the night — and in the whiskey bottle — where one is allowed to be temporarily lost for words."

"And that has nothing to do with sparing my feelings?"

"Look, I can go and get the review I wrote for the *Times* if you like. I believe I packed my scrapbook of important pronouncements and proclamations in my other handbag."

"You know, I can take it, Mary. I'm a big boy now."

*

He thought it might be genuinely *cathartic*, in the old-fashioned way, and leave him feeling washed out and maybe a little hollow, even, but ... free.

Because, Jesus Christ, it's been like a little stone on his heart, in his belly, every year (every day sometimes): every tiny sidestep to the right which Frank made, back when it was still possible for him to look to the side, look out of the car window and enjoy the view and not worry about the destination. Every small decision or offhand remark. And Charley would like to be the kind of person who doesn't squirrel those things away into a little file to brood on later, but he is, and it's what's made him the man he is today.

So maybe writing the damn thing was meant to help. And maybe it didn't. Maybe he just had a few more things to add to that first and only television appearance. And then a few more things. And then a few middle-of-the-night sweat-prickling-the-back-of-his-neck realisations that he couldn't bear to tell Evelyn. And then some characters sugges—yeah, okay, maybe he didn't need a great deal of help working out the characters. And the metaphor dropped in his lap. The metaphor was there all along. And then he started writing, and he has this rule about finishing what you start.

But having finished the thing, sent it off, had it accepted, sat through casting, tweaked the stuff he had any kind of control over, vomited through opening night ... right through to the phonecall from 709 Pulitzer Hall, Broadway, the pay off failed to get paid. He is in cathartic deficit. And it stinks.

Dr Jerk: Aristotle discusses — as I'm sure you know, Charles —

Charley: But let me not miss this excellent opportunity to show just how much attention I didn't pay in school the first time around —

Dr Jerk: — the power of *catharsis*, an Ancient Greek term meaning 'purification' in his work, *Poetics* and there has been a great deal of scholarly argument about the *real* meaning of the term —

Charley: I zone out at this point. I won't mind if you do as well.

There's an irony — somewhere — in the sheer number of TV interviews he did after he won the prize. And he wore a brown suit and sneakers to each and every one of them.

*

"Do you ever think about those days?"

"When we were broke and no one paid any attention to us?"

"Says the guy that got a big-time producer to come to the revue he organised — nay, masterminded —"

Laughs shouldn't sound so sad, but tonight they appear to be defying expectation.

"Yeah, you were a producer even then."

Shoulder bumps to shoulder. A little buzz of warmth from one to the other. And the little voice, not quite dead of alcohol poisoning says: Careful there, Mary Flynn.

"Yeah, I guess."

"Anyhow."

"Anyhow."

"It's about hope. I think. I thought. At the time. We had it back then. And maybe we were stupid, I don't know."

"I'm pretty sure you weren't."

"Ha. You don't know the half of it."

"The musician guy really wasn't that bad, Mary. We all have exes we'd rather, well, bleach out our eyes and cut out our tongues than mention again, so I guess I'll stop."

"Yeah, I guess so."

"So, hope?"

"Yeah. And ... oh, look, Frank —"

The telephone rings.

"Hang on, just let me get this. Hold that thought!" Pause. "Franklin Shepard ... Yeah. ... Yes. ... Oh for cryin—I thought I made that completely clear last week. Yes. ... Yes! ... Well, what did you *think*. ... Oh Jesus. Okay. ... Okay. ... I'll be right there."

*

Charley —

I read your new play. (I think all my notes to you start this way. I'm not sure if that's a bad thing or not!)

You gotta stop doing this to me, okay? I mean, seriously. I cried! I passed the manuscript on to Mary, since she'll probably be more use than me. But, wow. WOW.

One more thing: I was thinking. Well, I was dreaming, really. One day you have to write something about us. About the way we are now. About hope. I mean, I know it's awful and maybe this isn't the best time to mention it (though you know I think those guys were idiots to turn you down), but you're the only guy I trust to tell this story. I guess maybe you'll know what I mean when we're successful and respected and the names on everyone's lips. And rich, I guess. Rich would be nice.

See ya later.

— Frank

P.S. Mary says she'll have our heads if we don't see her this Sunday, so we're drafted. Unless you want to be lobotomised before your rightful time.

If he didn't think it would get him arrested, Charley would try and get to the top of their old apartment, tonight — what better time than right now, right at the bottom, from which point the ride can only improve, right? — with that letter in his pocket. It's folded up in eighths, in the left-side drawer of his desk and he never looks at it, because it hurts. And these days he isn't sure why it hurts, and he doesn't care to find out.

But the night he got the call from the Pulitzer people he thought about the apartment roof and the little crack in the wall and whether it's true that things you let go of come back to you, if they loved you at all. And then he thought about all the reasons why he doesn't do things like this, because he gave up caring and hoping and dreaming and moping.

But maybe, maybe. Maybe he remembers the way back.

End Notes

For blackeyedgirl in 2013's Yuletide. Also for taking me to see this in the first place. (Ha, anonymity!)

Apologies for how no one actually gets around to saving anyone, or indeed resolve anything much. But the ending is meant to be, well, hopeful. :)

Had I had more time the lure of actually writing the play would have been harder to resist ...

<3

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!