

FINDING NEW ROSES

By Jeff Dunne

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CHARACTERS

- RONALD An older man, jovial and quiet, and a community theater level actor with a little experience.
- MADELINE An older woman, kind but easily spooked into a veneer of reservedness. Also a moderately-experienced actor at the community theater level.
- FRANKIE A community theater director who has come to appreciate that retirement is the perfect time to let loose and jump into all the things he was always too conformant to try in his youth.
- LESLIE Male or female, an assistant director with far too few lines to be constrained by a playwright's expectations for his/her personality.

SETTING

Any kind of area where people are waiting to audition for a show.

(Ronald and Madeline are sitting in chairs against the wall. They're waiting for their turn to audition. They're reading sides, mumbling to themselves as they try to work through the lines. Suddenly Madeline turns to Ronald, remembering something.)

MADELINE

Oh, Ron, I meant to tell you. You know Peter, right?

RONALD

The guy who was in Othello with us?

MADELINE

(Nodding...)

The other day we all went into the city – Sheila, Annie, Jacob, and Peter. We were in Stoney's Grill, and suddenly Peter starts singing, but not just any old song. He's singing the lyrics from Rent, but to the music of Hamilton! Everyone in the restaurant goes dead quiet and—

(She goes silent as Frankie enters. He is wearing a dress, and the others look at him for a moment, and then shift their eyes back to their scripts. Frankie moves to the chair between the others.)

FRANKIE

(A deep voice.)

May I?

(Ronald and Madeline look up, still stunned speechless.)

Sit. Can I sit here?

(Ronald and Madeline are not hostile, just confused.)

Ce siège est-il occupé?

(Still nothing.)

Sprichst du Deutsch? *(Pause.)* Flooben der bendee der squat-dee-squate, bork bork bork?

RONALD

(Finally shaking out of it...)

What? Yeah. No. It's fine. Go ahead.

FRANKIE

Yeah, Swedish usually does it.

(He sits. Turns to Madeline.)

So, what part are you going for? *(Beat.)* Urbee-durbee actee—

MADELINE

Catherine. I-I-I'm auditioning for Catherine.

FRANKIE

No kidding. *(Turns to Ronald.)* Awkward.

RONALD

So what about you? What part...

(Frankie tilts down Ronald's script to see what he's up for.)

FRANKIE

Timothy.

RONALD

Oh.

FRANKIE

(After a beat...)

Nah, I'm just messing with you. I'm up for Catherine. *(To Madeline...)* May the best woman win.

*(Madeline just stares at him, not sure what to say.
Frankie turns back to Ronald.)*

But I might ask them if I can also read for Timothy. I always wanted to play a farmer.

RONALD

He's a banker.

FRANKIE

Is there really that big a difference? I mean, green's green, right? Am I right?

RONALD

Whatever.

FRANKIE

I'm *messing* with you, Timmy. Come on, lighten up. Don't be like Cathy here. (*He turns back to her, and sees that she is looking at his outfit.*) Hey hey, my eyes are up here, missy!

(Her eyes shoot up to his face, and then to her script, where she tries to merge with the pages physically. There's a long, uncomfortable pause, then...)

Hey, I'm just messing with you too. It's a nice dress, though, isn't it? Say, where'd you get that blouse? It's gorgeous.

MADELINE

(Hesitantly...)

Marshall's.

FRANKIE

No kidding. I can never find anything I like there, but that's really pretty.

MADELINE

Uh, thanks.

FRANKIE

And you did your nails to match it, didn't you?

(Madeline nods. Frankie looks at Ronald's hands.)

Timmy here could do with a little polish. Even a clear coat or—

RONALD

Okay, stop. Just stop. What's your game?

FRANKIE

Racquetball.

RONALD

I mean, you...

FRANKIE

I... what?

RONALD

I don't know what to make of you. Are you gay? A transvestite? Just some neurotic nutcase that can't stop talking?

FRANKIE

Why do I have to be any of those things?

RONALD

I mean, I'd expect this from a kid, but you, you've got to be like, what? Sixty-five?

FRANKIE

Sixty-eight. And a half. And why do I have to fit into one of your little categories?

RONALD

My what?

FRANKIE

Why is it so important for you to box in what you're seeing? To label it. Do you really need to stick me in a cage before you can have a conversation with me?

MADELINE

(Condescending...)

Maybe some of us don't want to get trapped in a conversation with some crazy deviant.

FRANKIE

(Seemingly shocked and hurt...)

Wow. Deviant. *(Then suddenly happy...)* Nailed it!

(He goes for a fist bump, but Madeline just stares at him.)

Look, not-really-Catherine, can you honestly tell me that you'd rather live a life without deviants?

MADELINE

Absolutely.

FRANKIE

Really? Just hanging out with normal people doing normal things. Nothing unusual or unexpected?

(Madeline shrugs.)

When I came over, you were talking about somebody breaking into song in the middle of the restaurant. Now I've been to my fair share of restaurants, and I assure you, that's not typical. Waaay outside the norm. But *that's* the story you were telling. Why? Because we *like* deviation. We *need* deviation.

(Ronald and Madeline just look at him.)

Come on, you two. You're actors. If anyone knows what I'm talking about, it should be you! Let go of the safety net!

RONALD

I'm not holding onto a safety net.

FRANKIE

Timmy, Timmy! You're wrapped up so tight in that net you might as well be a manatee!

(The others give him an aghast look.)

Okay, sorry. That might have been a little insensitive. But seriously, my friends, you need to cut loose! *(At Ronald...)* You're what, eighty?

RONALD

(Indignant.)

Fifty seven!

FRANKIE

(To Madeline...)

And you, I don't even want to guess what Cleopatra said when you turned sixteen.

MADELINE

Excus—

FRANKIE

(Shaking their shoulders.)

Lighten up! Do something reckless – get a tattoo, go skinny-dipping, have dinner after five pm! Look, this is your time! *(Seeing they are not going to say anything...)* Alright... *(Looks expectantly at Madeline.)*

MADELINE

Madeline.

FRANKIE

Madeline. Alright, Madeline. What do you do for a living? (*Waits, then...*) Come on! What do you do? Are you a spy or something that you can't tell me?

MADELINE

No...

FRANKIE

Are you some kind of high-class dominatrix and you don't—

MADELINE

No!

(Frankie stares at her, waiting. She finally gives in.)

I'm an account manager at investment firm.

FRANKIE

Okay. Okay. Good. And are you telling me that after all this time managing accounts that you think someone is going to suddenly think less of you if you break out of that shell and do something a little different? A little crazy?

MADELINE

Maybe I just don't want to.

FRANKIE

Of course you do! You're at an audition, for God's sake. You can't tell me there isn't a little girl buried under all that propriety dying to break out and fall into a swamp while catching frogs. When was the last time you got wet with your clothes on?

MADELINE

I beg your pardon!

FRANKIE

You heard me. When was it?

MADELINE

I don't know.

FRANKIE

I bet it wasn't in the last thirty years.

(Madeline thinks about this, a wistfulness coming to her.)

Why not? Honestly, what have you got to lose? Surely there's something you've always wanted to do. Something outrageous! *(Turning to Ronald...)* What about you, Farmer Timmy?

RONALD

It's okay. I'm good.

FRANKIE

No you're not. You're just shy. That's okay, but don't let it chain you down, my boy. *(Takes a mental step back.)* You know why I'm wearing this dress?

RONALD

I honestly can't begin to imagine.

FRANKIE

My entire life, I always just took it for granted that women wear dresses and men don't. My whole life. Sitting in meetings in some sweltering board room, us men in our suits, the women in dresses. And I'd think, "that's not fair – those dresses have to be way cooler". And what did I do about it? Nothing, of course. Just waited until I could finally get out to my car and loosen my tie. Whee. So this morning, I'm thinking back on my life, and the things I would never do, and for whatever reason, I remember those stupid board meetings. And you know what I said?

(Ronald just shakes his head.)

I said, "Frankie, my boy, how do you know that dresses are actually cooler than suits? Maybe your thighs would stick together or something. Maybe there really isn't any airflow." And you know what I said next?

(Ronald shakes his head again.)

I said, "well, I guess it's just something you're never going to know." And then I realized – why the hell not? What do I care what some random stranger thinks? I've got a lifetime of social security paid in, and nearly a million bucks in a 401. I'm not going back to any board rooms, and even if I did, I still don't give a damn. So you know what I did?

(Ronald shakes his head yet again.)

FRANKIE (CONT)

I went out, bought this dress, put it on, went out into the city... got my nails done... *(Conspiratorially...)* That was a total impulse thing, mind you. I figured, as long as I'm taking a stroll on that side of the fence, you know, might as well smell all the new roses while I'm over there.

(There's a pause, and Frankie looks back and forth between Ronald and Madeline.)

And you know what? You know what happens when you do something different than you're used to?

MADELINE

(Just over the edge of enchanted...)

What?

FRANKIE

Different things happen! All day long. I've talked to people I never would have talked to if I was wearing a suit! A woman bought me a drink, for God's sake. That didn't happen to me in thirty years! A strange guy with a limp offered to paint me into a cityscape, and a little girl on the bus shared her M&Ms with me. Has a stranger shared her M&Ms with you, Timmy?

RONALD

Ronald.

FRANKIE

Right. Good. Ronald. Ronald! Fine name. A little reminiscent of a clown, but still a solid name. So let's change it up. How about Gunther. Gunther the Lemon Squeezer.

RONALD

I don't think—

FRANKIE

Gunther, buddy! You're at an audition! Be different! Be unexpected! Squeeze your lemons like it's nobody's business. Come on! Let's hear it.

(Frankie grabs the script out of his hands, stands up, and reads in a falsetto voice.)

Excuse me, Mr. Waltman, I'd like to take out a *(read in a very seductive voice...)* loan.

RONALD

(Laughing a little, not quite ready to meet him.)

I... I... what?

(Frankie pulls Ronald to his feet.)

FRANKIE

I need a loan, Mr. Waltman. I *need* it. And I need you to give it to me! Give it to me, Timmy, give it to me hard!

RONALD

That's not the line.

FRANKIE

A big loan! I want it! I need it! Plough me like a grape, Farmer Timmy!

RONALD

I—

(Suddenly Frankie grabs Ronald in an embrace.)

FRANKIE

What's it gonna be, Mr. Waltman?

RONALD

(Suddenly rising to the challenge...)

I'll give you a loan! With interest!

(Ronald kisses Frankie, who backs up suddenly.)

FRANKIE

Whoa, Gunther! Buddy! Personal boundaries! Just because I'm wearing a dress you think you can take whatever you want!? Not cool, Gunther. Not cool.

RONALD

(Suddenly incredibly embarrassed...)

I'm sorry! I just, I don't know what I was—

FRANKIE

Hey, hey. Bring it in here.

(Frankie embraces him briefly, a man-to-man hug with the characteristic single slap on the back.)

It's okay. You're new to this. Cutting loose is one thing, but try to keep your lips to yourself, okay? Unless of course you're a fan of pepper spray and lonely nights in jail.

(There's another awkward pause, Then...)

You stallion, you.

(He turns to Madeline.)

Now how about you, sexy? Let's see what your packing.

(Frankie throws Ronald's script over his shoulder and grabs Madeline's. He reads from it, with a fake western accent...)

I'm sorry, Ms. Thompson, getting a loan ain't that easy. Not from this here bank.

(He pulls her to her feet.)

Unless you got some mighty big collateral hidden in that bosom o' yours, Ms. Thompson.

MADELINE

But I haven't got anything to offer, Mister...

(She stops, as Frankie has made a big show of yawning in boredom and started to turn away. Then just as he's facing away...)

That's Mistress Kate to you, Timmy.

(In surprise, Frankie turns back just as Madeline walks up to him, puts her hands on his shoulders and pushes him down to kneel in front of her.)

MADELINE (CONT)

Don't tell me you've forgotten last night's lessons.

(Frankie goes to his knees, and just stares at her. He's been outdone, and can't think of a word to say.)

Cat got your tongue, my pet?

(There's a pause, and then Madeline's propriety returns and she's clearly embarrassed even though everyone is laughing in good humor.)

RONALD

Mistress Kate? That's... that's...

FRANKIE

(Recovering...)

That's fantastic!

MADELINE

I bet you'd do even better.

FRANKIE

I don't know, that was pretty inspired.

MADELINE

You're the one who came up with it!

FRANKIE

Nahh!

(After the laughter settles...)

RONALD

So you never told us what part you're auditioning for.

(Leslie enters with an armful of resumes/headshots, and walks over as s/he says...)

LESLIE

Frank, we need to get the auditions started— *(Suddenly noticing that he's wearing a dress.)* This is new. *(Shaking it off, and handing Frankie the materials.)* Anyway, we've got more actors lined up in the hall, and I'm not staying here until midnight again. I've got a date at ten, and if you think—

(Leslie starts to lead Frankie off.)

FRANKIE

Alright, alright.

(Just before he exits, Frankie looks back at the surprised Ronald and Madeline.)

Nothing worse than thinking you've got the whole world figured out, you know what I mean?

(He winks at them, then he and Leslie exit. Lights out.)