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Everybody's Mrs. Fahrenheit

Abstract

The last time they'd seen each other Buddy Frazier Jr. and Paul Runyon were digging thumbtacks and plywood splinters from one another's tormented skin, the aftermath of their EXPLOSION!!! OF LOVE: BLACK HAWK STREET FIGHT thirteen years ago. "Black Hawk," because that was where the show had taken place. "Love," because they had been feuding over Babe the Blue Fox...

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Everybody's Mrs. Fahrenheit

Fiction by Dan Mancilla

The last time they'd seen each other Buddy Frazier Jr. and Paul Runyon were digging thumbtacks and plywood splinters from one another's tormented skin, the aftermath of their EXPLOSION!!! OF LOVE: BLACK HAWK STREET FIGHT thirteen years ago. "Black Hawk," because that was where the show had taken place. "Love," because they had been feuding over Babe the Blue Fox.

Now the massive wrestlers, a decade past their prime, wearing suits instead of trunks, looked like junk refrigerators on the curb as they huddled in a corner of Zampillo's Funeral Parlor. "What kind of spread they putting out afterwards?" asked Buddy Frazier Jr.

"Cheese platter. Fruit tray," said Paul Runyon.

Buddy sighed, ran a hand through his thinning bleached-blond hair. "That little gal was stingy with her heart. Figures her sendoff would be stingy." The wake was for Babe the Blue Fox. The beautiful valet had died alone and unglamorously, slipping on wet bathroom tile, knocking herself unconscious, and drowning in tepid bathwater. And the great regret for the mourners, at least for Buddy, was Babe's closed casket. Three weeks passed before her body was discovered. Nature had rendered the undertaker's arts useless; Zampillo couldn't restore Babe to that state of perfection, that uncommon beauty which made boys tremble and grown men weep. And Buddy and everyone else were robbed a final glimpse of that beauty, forever left to wonder what incarnation of Babe the Blue Fox now slept inches from them inside that aqua blue casket.

Paul produced a flask from his coat pocket and offered a taste to Buddy. “Thank you, my brother,” said Buddy. “Mortality has a way of putting a powerful thirst on a man.” Paul nodded in agreement and took a pull for himself.

The wrestlers turned their attention to a television near Babe’s casket. “Damn, son. You packed on the pounds since then,” said Buddy. A video of THE EXPLOSION OF LOVE!!! played. That match was the high point for Babe, for all three of them really. Smilin Joe Spiceland was conducting his pre-match interviews and talking to Paul Runyon. The little announcer held a big microphone up to the bearded lumberjack.

“Let me tell you somethin’, Smilin Joe. That low down, no good, ex-partner of mine better pack his bags. Because tonight, right here in Black Hawk, this EXPLOSION OF LOVE!!! STREETFIGHT is gonna be a ‘loser quits’ match!”

“Loser quits?”

“That’s right, Smilin’ Joe. Loser quits being in love with my wife AND—woo yeah—quits the Continental Wrestling Alliance. Forever. A dull ax ain’t gonna keep Paul Runyon from clearing out the forest. I can see the trees just fine! Don’t you forget that. Woo yeah!”

“Uh, trees? What are you talking about, Paul? Do you mean Babe The Blue Fox, your wife, and how she was caught dancing the Texas Two Step of Love with your former partner and best friend, Buddy Frazier Jr.?”

With a heavy heart Paul Runyon replied, *“Woo-yeah.”*

Paul patted his stomach then gut shot Buddy. “You ain’t exactly skinny ten years on either,” he said.

“But I never had your physique. You know I’m a powerlifter. Not no bodybuilder. This apple shines on the inside, brother.” During the EXPLOSION OF LOVE!!! days Buddy would hit the gym with a bucket of fried chicken and a case of beer and finish off both in the course of a workout in which he’d bench press, squat, and deadlift the weight of a small car. “I’m a lunch pail man through and through. Like this old boy,” Buddy said and pointed to Zampillo. The undertaker was a doughy man in short sleeves. He wore a clip-on tie and a cheap gold watch. A faded-green tattoo of an eagle decorated his forearm. Though there were few in attendance, Buddy counted eight, Zampillo busied himself, hustling from one mourner to the next, offering

condolences, running back to his office and barking orders to Inez, his lazy-eyed assistant, then back out on the floor to re-arrange floral sprays.

“Mr. Undertaker,” Buddy called to Zampillo. “Can’t you get that AC to crank out a little more juice?” Buddy unfolded a pocket square—pink like the ring attire he was famous for wearing—and dabbed sweat from his razor-scarred forehead. “I know heat. I’m a Texan. But this, sir, is some kind of unnatural hotbox.”

Zampillo’s building was more than a hundred years old, like most in this part of Black Hawk and offered no central air conditioning. Zampillo made due with a shabby window unit to provide minor relief from the heat. There was a light breeze outside, but doors and windows remained closed. The funeral parlor was only one block downwind of the LaSalle Ironworks and its perpetual sulfuric stench. “Even if it didn’t stink, I wouldn’t chance opening the windows with us being right on the river,” Zampillo told the wrestlers. It was the end of summer of an odd-numbered year. In this part of Black Hawk, so close to the Fox River, that meant the return of cicadas, a blight of them swarming in clouds thick as smokestack plumes wafting from the ironworks. An open window or door would invite disaster.

“Just get you a flyswatter,” said Buddy “Ain’t that right?” he said and elbowed Paul a little too hard in the side.

“You’ve never seen a Black Hawk cicada infestation,” Zampillo said. “My grandfather used to tell me stories of August wakes with windows open, how cicadas burrowed into the departed to lay eggs.” Zampillo lowered his voice to a confidential tone. “Thought it was bullshit until I took over the family business and saw the little buggers crawling out of graves filled two years before.” Zampillo pointed to the window. “Listen,” he said.

Buddy heard it now, the steady metronome of bug after bug kamikazeing into the windows.

Buddy wanted to ask Zampillo the location of the nearest tavern to see about a quick cold one before the funeral procession carried Babe down the street to St. Al’s, but the undertaker had hustled away, offering condolences to a huge man in a black suit wearing a black wrestling mask. It was, of course, the great luchador, El Gaucho.

Though she’d been married to both men (common law), neither Buddy Frazier Jr. nor Paul Runyon had any final respects to pay Babe the Blue Fox. She’d left Paul for Buddy back when the two men were tag-team partners then left Buddy a few years

after the EXPLOSION OF LOVE!!! The wrestlers had only come out of respect for El Gaucho, her third and final husband—also a wrestler, also common law, also estranged. As her last and, by default, current husband, El Gaucho was burdened with making the arraignments. A burden because Babe the Blue Fox estranged herself from family and friends more swiftly and permanently than she had from her husbands. A burden because El Gaucho was tasked to speak honestly but somehow lovingly about her (he was a babyface, a hero, after all) when it would have been much easier to play the heel like Buddy and cut a scathing promo on Babe. A burden because she'd left no money or written instructions for her final rest. El Gaucho requested that Babe's casket match the iconic blue dresses she wore at ringside, so Zampillo sent a 20 Gauge Yankee Silver model over to Chicago Street Auto Body where a powder coat was mixed and applied to achieve the desired effect.

Buddy appreciated the effort. The casket's color was the only thing El Gaucho had gotten right about Babe's funeral. She wore an aqua blue dress, not because of her gimmick or ring name, but because it reminded her of a distant childhood summer spent on the shores of the Little Traverse Bay in Petoskey, Michigan. Babe was quick to tell this to strangers and lovers alike. She'd often remark on it to Smilin Joe Spiceland during her interviews when she'd appear in a glamorous new gown.

After they'd moved in together Babe took Buddy "Up North" as she called the vast wilderness of Northern Michigan, to Petoskey for a long weekend at a bed and breakfast. Buddy always thought of this as their common law honeymoon. She'd taken Paul to Petoskey as well when she first hooked up with him years earlier, though she wouldn't tell Buddy if she and Paul stayed at the same place.

The bed and breakfast was only yards from the bay. Babe and Buddy spent most of their time in the water, bodies entwined under the surface as the occasional kayaker lost in thought or the pontoon boat of partiers sailed past them.

It was in the bay, as she approached her petite mort, that Babe whispered into Buddy's ear those wishes upon her actual death. *Flight. Yes. Trebuchet. Don't stop. Water. Oh god. Blue*, came the words in gasps and convulsions. When they were both spent, floating blissfully in the water, Babe clarified her wishes. She was to be launched by trebuchet over the Little Traverse Bay where her casket would fly through the Northern heavens before plunging into those placid and idyllic waters of her youth. And it sounded reasonable and right to Buddy floating there in the pristine bay with the most beautiful woman he'd ever known whispering dreams to him.

Maybe she never shared this with El Gaucho. Or maybe she did but the great luchador discounted it as pure fantasy. Perhaps he simply didn't care. In any case, Buddy wasn't consulted about the arraignments. He doubted Paul was either. And why would they be? Buddy and Paul were insignificant next to El Gaucho, jobbers in the grand scheme of things compared to the great champion. In the end, El Gaucho chose to burry her in Black Hawk, in the side by side plot at San Giovanni cemetery he'd purchased in a fit of love and existential angst when he and Babe first hooked up.

"Ain't no way you'd get me to share eternal rest with my ex," Buddy said.

"Our ex," said Paul who took another swig from his flask then handed it to Buddy.

"Shall I kill it?" Buddy asked. He emptied the flask before Paul could answer then wiped his lips with the pink pocket square. "Only reason that big hoss is being so gracious about her is that he won," he told Paul. "Gaucho's the last one to plant his flag, if you will."

Paul shook his head no. "Babe was the winner. Man-eater-upper."

"All-around eater-upper," said Buddy.

Paul bowed his head in agreement and let out a quiet, "Woo yeah."

On the television Buddy Frasier Jr. and Paul Runyon had already made their entrances to the ring. Each combatant stared the other down from his corner. Then the house lights dimmed and a lone spotlight shone down on a golf cart decorated like a parade float where Babe the Blue Fox stood, stoic and glamorous in a satin gown the color of the Little Traverse Bay in late June. She didn't smile, didn't wave to the fans like the beauty queen she could have been. She looked her destiny head on.

Story-line heartbreak transcended the squared circle and bore down on the wrestlers in real life. First Paul, then Buddy. Babe left him for the professor of an anthropology class she was taking at Black Hawk Community College during a period of self-improvement which involved swearing off wrestlers. "I'm tired of you guys shitting all over yourselves where you eat," she'd often tell the boys in the back who asked her out during that period. Then she was with a veterinarian for a time, a handsome and kind-hearted woman fifteen years her senior. (Some of the boys ribbed her about a fox seeing a veterinarian.) That relationship didn't last. "Dogs and cats are dogs and cats," was the only reason Babe ever gave for that failed experiment.

The wrestlers watched El Gaucho and the undertaker embrace with the familiarity of good friends. This was El Gaucho's old neighborhood, or so they guessed; the luchador was billed as hailing from Parts Unknown on arena marquee and in wrestling programs throughout the Rustbelt.

"Must attend to my vitals," Buddy said. "Where's the head around here?"

Paul pointed down a hallway leading to the back of the building.

Zampillo's funeral parlor was a small one with only two showrooms. The second room was no longer used for viewings. Zampillo treated it as a staging ground, a workshop to put final touches on the departed—a little blush on the cheeks, some hairspray to tame flyways, a carefully placed memento or crucifix in the departed's hands.

Buddy made a wrong turn on his way to the head and found himself in this room. Muted light shone through a grimy window overlooking the river. There was a blue parlor set in desperate need of reupholstery between two caskets—one open, one closed. An old man in a powder blue suit that had come and gone out of fashion several times lay in the open casket. A rosary coiled around his clasped hands. He cradled a bottle of very good Scotch in the crook of his arm.

On the closed casket was a miniature Christmas village decorated with lights and cotton snow. There was Santa Claus and a crèche with Mary and Joseph and Jesus in his bed of hay. A shepherd with a lamb slung over his shoulders as if he were about to deliver a Samoan drop or some other devastating wrestling move stood behind the Holy Family. There were the three wise men—of which, one had fallen over. Buddy reached out a shaky hand, contemplated for some time whether or not to right him. A Christmas village and Jesus manger in August, on a coffin had to be some kind of powerful bad luck. Unnatural at the very least.

As far as ill-fortune was concerned, there were days when Buddy wished he'd never met Babe the Blue Fox for that first drink. It was nearly a year before the EXPLOSION OF LOVE!!! Paul had broken his leg. He and Buddy were forced to vacate their newly won tag team championship. While Paul was laid up at home, Buddy asked Babe to meet him after a show so they could discuss business. She was the one to float the idea. It would explain the broken leg and give them a reason to split up the tag team. Paul Runyon would show up on crutches at the next television taping and tell Smilin Joe Spiceland that Babe and Buddy conspired to get rid of him by cutting the break lines on his car because the two were in love.

The feud, which drew big money and put all three of them over, was to culminate with the EXPLOSION OF LOVE!!! The loser was going to quit the CWA. The winner would get the honor of Babe's hand and, in all likelihood, shoot up to be the number one contender for the championship.

Buddy could have lived with that loss. Could have moved on to a new territory, perhaps said goodbye and good riddance to Babe right then and there had he known she was already done with him. He was sure Paul could have done the same. But that power to decide the outcome for themselves had been ripped away with more force than one of Paul Runyon's Bark Peeler piledrivers.

Buddy picked up the toppled Magi and studied him. The wise man wore a robe like a wrestler. His beard resembled Paul Runyon's.

After the EXPLOSION OF LOVE!!! Paul returned to the locker room and quietly shaved his beard, his head, his eyebrows. He hadn't taken a razor to his face since that day. There had been no period of mourning following that match for Buddy. He was on to the next show. Babe talked him into working as many matches as possible, hinted at the prospect of a "real" wedding if they had enough money. She whispered her magic words: *Nest egg, wedding, family* between gasps and convulsions. So night after night Buddy wrestled. In 10,000 seat arenas and 100 chair VFW halls. In Black Hawk, in Marquette, in Peoria, and in a hundred other cities across the Rustbelt with the hope of making things official, making things permanent with Babe.

But even if he weren't busy with work, chasing a dream, there wouldn't have been a mourning period following the EXPLOSION OF LOVE!!! since Buddy had no idea that he'd already lost her. That realization, like a bruise, was only to take shape well after the body blow.

He turned from the Christmas scene and reached out a shaky hand into the open casket. Removed the dead man's bottle. Unnatural, but it was a damn fine bottle of Scotch. He sat down on a faded blue sofa older than the dead man's suit, drank, and stared out the window, watching the polluted river flow by, brown and lifeless.

By the time Buddy stumbled back to the wake his cheeks were as pink as his pocket square, his tie loosened and collar open. He joined Paul and El Gaucho and Monsignor Kinski who was going to say a few prayers at the undertaker's before they carried Babe to the funeral mass at St. Alphonsus. The Monsignor pointed in the

direction of the church down the street. “Would you fellas believe that this hulk used to serve as an altar boy for me when I was pastor at St. Al’s?”

“Everyone’s Goldbricker. Forever the altar boy, huh. Get that, padre? El Gaucho. Everyone’s Goldbricker. E.G.?”

Buddy elbowed El Gaucho and patted him on the shoulder.

“You Catholics are a bunch of wet-eyed, sentimental drunks about these funerals and your parades. Gimme a hellfire preacher. Gimme a hanging judge and a shotgun. Forget this commiserating.”

“Don’t listen to this guy, Monsignor. He’s a Baptist,” El Gaucho said.

“Padre, you ever hear of the storied championship reign of Buddy Frazier Jr.? Or the great champion, Paul Runyon?” Buddy asked then answered his own question. “You never heard about that on account of this glorious bastard, this big champion alter boy of the world. He done usurped me and Paul.” Buddy stumbled to the television. Turned up the volume. “Just keep watching.”

THE EXPLOSION OF LOVE!!! was nearing its finale. Paul Runyon lay face down in a bed of thumbtacks, his back a bloody pincushion. Buddy Frazier Jr. slumped in a corner of the ring with a coil of barbed wire tangled around his head. Blood tinted his bleached-blond hair the same shade of pink as his trunks. The only one not outwardly broken was Babe, who stood ringside and looked on in horror. Buddy was the first one to stagger to his feet. He untangled himself from the barbed wire and began setting up a folding banquet table in the middle of the ring. Babe pleaded “no” when Buddy scooped up the lifeless Paul Runyon and dumped him on the table.

Paul tapped the television screen. It sounded like the cicadas flying into the windows. “I never remember this part,” he said. “I was legit knocked out.”

And the thing of it was, Buddy never remembered this moment or the moments to follow either. He’d watched the match hundreds, if not thousands of times, had memorized each frame, especially the finish, yet he had no recollection of participating. It was as if each viewing further removed Buddy from the real thing. He spent countless hours watching that match, searching for the moment, the frame, the shot when it all slipped away from him.

Zampillo checked his watch. There were only a few minutes before they were to carry Babe down the street to St. Al's, and El Gaucho had requested some time to say a few words before they did. The undertaker pointed apologetically to the television. Buddy saluted him and lowered the volume to a whisper as the few mourners gathered around Babe's casket.

Monsignor Kinski offered up some prayers for the departed, and then the great luchador spoke. "She was no ringrat. She was a classy lady." El Gaucho dropped his masked head. "Sometimes a hard lady."

Paul concurred with a somber "Woo yeah."

"Sometimes?" Buddy whispered a little too loudly to Paul.

"But this is a shoot," said El Gaucho. "Even though Babe was a hard lady to love, I did love her. And so did Paul and Buddy and lots of others. I won't speak for those guys, but I was never sure if she loved me back. But that's ok. She was a pretty lady. On the outside. And more importantly, she was good at her job. Made everyone in the audience feel something. Whether they burned for her with lust or boiled over with hate, face or heel, when she put on that blue dress and walked to the ring she was everybody's Mrs. Fahrenheit." El Gaucho paused, pumped a fist over his heart, then pointed to Buddy and Paul. "You boys know what I'm talking about."

Buddy Frazier Jr. turned from El Gaucho, from Paul, from Babe. He returned to the fateful match and began shadowboxing the television, throwing imaginary haymakers at himself. He touched a finger to Babe. "I shouldda seen this coming, girl."

The EXPLOSION OF LOVE!!! reached its crescendo. With Paul Runyon on the table, incapacitated, resting almost peacefully, Buddy Frazier Jr. climbed the ropes and sized up his former best friend for a Texas-sized leg drop that would crash Paul Runyon through the table, secure a victory, and win the hand of Babe. But now Babe was in the ring. Finally taking a side, coming to Paul Runyon's aid. She climbed on the table. Stood over Paul to shield him from Buddy. Pleaded with Buddy not to finish Paul.

And Buddy Frazier Jr. leapt.

A single second, long as a freight train, snaked by. Droplets of Paul's blood dripped off the table and splattered on the mat. Babe the Blue Fox raised her hands to soften the impending blow. Her fingernails were painted the same color as her dress. The crowd roared. Flash photography strobed like chain lightning as a black streak flew

into the ring. It was El Gaucho jumping higher than any man possibly could. Not only jumping the ropes, but leapfrogging Buddy and Paul in the pecking order.

El Gaucho cleared the third rope easily and soared even higher to clothesline Buddy in mid-air, to save Babe the Blue Fox, to resign Paul and Buddy to heartbreak and obscurity.

And now Buddy Frazier Jr. looked upon Babe's casket and began to "Energize" just as he'd done years ago in the ring when he'd make a comeback. Wagged a finger at El Gaucho. "This is not the thing! You may be champion in the ring, but you weren't never the champion of that dirty old gal's heart. Don't you stand up there and talk about class. She put one over on you and me. Especially Paul. It weren't right. I never got to tell her that."

Buddy smacked his hand on Babe's casket as he spoke. Paul put a hand on Buddy's shoulder. "Go easy, big man. This is not the time."

Buddy knocked Paul's arm down. "Not the time? Not the time? This is not the thing! That little gal done wrong. She done you wrong, Paul. Done me wrong. Done Gaucho Wrong. By turn we done each other wrong."

"Get your mouth shut, Buddy. Show respect," said El Gaucho.

"Be cool, man" said Paul.

"Cool? It's a furnace of hellfire in this damn city," Buddy said. "Do not attempt to regulate my temperature! Either one of you." And he kicked over the television. The last image it showed was Paul Runyon unconscious on the table, Buddy Frazier Jr. knocked out cold on the mat, and El Gaucho pointing to the sky and carrying off Babe on his shoulder.

There were gasps and cries. Zampillo, the Monsignor, and the few mourners moved away from Babe's casket. The undertaker called for calm. Monsignor Kinski appealed to a higher power.

Paul tried to subdue Buddy once more, but Buddy kicked out Paul's bad leg and Paul Runyon went down. El Gaucho charged Buddy then stopped when Buddy picked up one end of the casket, where Babe's feet, those delicate and precious treasures would have been resting, those little toenails surely painted the same color blue as her dress.

“No, by God! It is not the thing. I ain't sending out her like this. No honesty! No honor! None of us.”

Buddy lifted the casket higher and this time he felt her weight shift like sandbags in the bed of a pickup.

“Damn that little gal. Damn you Paul for breaking that leg in the first place. Damn these bugs. Damn it all.” And now Buddy Frazier Jr. jerked the casket over his head and took all the weight on his shoulders like he was going to deliver an airplane spin. With all of Babe the Blue Fox's weight bearing down on him, he staggered to the doors, screaming, cursing, damning her, damning himself. He rammed his way through the doors. Leaned into the onslaught of cicadas, bore them like a man walking headlong into a hailstorm. The rumbling hum of one hundred thousand cicada mating shrieks drown out his ranting and cursing and all the pain it entailed. He staggered to the river and with all of his might launched Babe the Blue Fox skyward, higher than any trebuchet could, over the dead-brown current, spiriting her away into those placid blue waters of memory.

Dan Mancilla lives in Kalamazoo, Michigan. He has a Ph.D. in Creative Writing from Western Michigan University. His fiction has appeared in such publications as *Barrelhouse*, *BULL: Men's Fiction Fiction*, *The Chicago Tribune*, *Longform Fiction*, *The Malahat Review*, *Monkeybicycle*, and *Slice* among others. “Everybody's Mrs. Fahrenheit” is a story from his book-length manuscript, *All the Proud Fathers*. You can read more about Dan and his work at danmancilla.com.