

Romancing The Wife

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Romancing the Wife

Frank Feydeau's wife picks up the phone on the thirteenth ring.

“Betty, my darling, were you asleep?”

“No, not at three o’clock in the afternoon.” He is thrilled to hear her voice.

“What time is it in Turin?” Betty Feydeau asks as she yawns.

“Here in Italy it's just turned ten at night. What were you doing that kept you from answering?”

“Oh nothing, Frank. Just, sorta, reading. Why are you calling?”

Any excuse is the true answer. Instead he says, “I’ve got a meeting with the boss first thing tomorrow. I wanted to pick your brains about it.”

“I thought you were the boss.”

“The big boss. Angelopoulos. He’s back from Madagascar and he wants to know what my plans are.”

“Just tell him you want to get posted back to New Orleans, Frank. Reassure him that you’re not after his job.”

“Of course I don’t want his job, my love. You know what I want. All I want is to get back home to you. And to advance romance in the world.”

“Yeah, you’re a real devotee, Frank. Work before all. *Arbeit macht Frank.*”

“Betty, that’s not fair.” Frank’s mouth feels dry; he knows his face is showing pain and is glad the video is off. “You know that New Orleans is my number one priority, *you’re* my number one priority.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. I’ll believe that when you actually move back home, Frankie. Listen, you want some advice?”

“Yes!”

“Say as little as possible to Angelopoulos. Let him do the talking. Find out what the guy wants and offer it to him on condition he lets you come back here. Got it?”

“Look, Betty, I don’t think it’s going to be quite that simple.”

“That’s my advice. You do that, I’ll talk to the real big boss man here, put in a lot of good words for you. Sends his regards, by the way.”

“You’ve been spending time with Di Vieto?”

“Grass widows have to talk to someone, you know. Look, I gotta go.”

“Go where? Betty, wait!”

Feydeau thumbs the dialling tone into silence, replaces the receiver and stares at it, wondering how on earth his wife thinks she has acquired so much influence on Antonio Di Vieto, the Chair of United Nation.

The next morning, Frank steps gingerly between two suitcases in the doorway of the office that belongs to Andreas Angelopoulos, the Chief Coordinator of the United Nation International Romance Office. It is unusual for the door to be open, because Angelopoulos is so often away.

“Frank, thanks for coming in. So early, too.” Frank glances at his watch: it is barely half past eight. “I really need to talk to you before I go.”

“Go? Where?”

“Hong Kong, eventually. There’s a workshop on Feng Shui as Aids in Romantic Performance that should be very interesting. Very relevant to our mission, I thought.”

“Yes, absolutely, but it’s not for another six weeks, is it?”

“Something like that. So I thought I’d do a little tour of our offices in South-East Asia on the way. Lift them up with words of appreciation and encouragement from their Chief Coordinator.”

“When will you be back?”

“What a question, Frank. I don’t know. You understand how one thing leads to another, and I always like to follow up interesting leads for the Office, indeed for United Nation as a whole.”

“But –”

“And I know I can count on my Vice Coordinator to keep things ship-shape, as you have done so very well in the months since you arrived.”

“But –”

“Would you mind giving me a hand with the cases? I’ve got a taxi downstairs waiting to take me to the airport.”

“No, Andreas, listen to me. I love it here, but my wife refuses to move from New Orleans. I’ve got to get back there.”

“So take a holiday. I give you a holiday. Two weeks, three. Go to New Orleans, romance your wife. Persuade her to come here.”

“I’ve tried. It didn’t work. I need a transfer.”

“Without you here, Frank, how can I be sure we will win the contract to host the Romantic Congress of Film? I know for a fact that Bombay, er, Mumbai, is putting together a very competitive package.”

“Unbeatable, I would say. Unless you stay here and do your job, for once.”

“Frank, don’t be so angry. I do my job, in my own way. Look how Romance is blossoming in the world. Eh, Frank?”

Angelopoulos wraps a hand around one of the suitcase handles and gestures at the other one. Frank hesitates, then picks it up. Together, they carry the cases to the lift.

On the ground floor, Frank takes the one he is carrying to the door and loosens his grip. The suitcase drops to the carpeted floor, wobbles and falls on to its side. Angelopoulos tuts. Frank stares at him.

“You do know I have options, don’t you Andreas?”

“I’m sure you do, Frank. We all do.”

“It’s funny. My wife seems to have become pals with Di Vieto. I wonder if he’s seen the details of your endless trips, and your spending when you’re on them.”

“Of course he has, Frank. I send him the details myself. Everything is quite transparent.”

Angelopoulos motions to a young man standing outside the building. He comes through the automatic door, hefts the two suitcases and takes them outside to the waiting taxi. As he puts them in the boot, Angelopoulos turns to Frank.

“You’re my rock, Frank. I know you won’t let me down.”

“They tell me I’m more like a volcano, Andreas.”

He goes back inside before the taxi moves away, and takes the stairs to his office, two at a time.

In the middle of the morning, Angelopoulos phones him from the airport.

“Frank, I’ve been thinking. Maybe you are right. Maybe I should spend more time here in Turin.”

“I think you should, Andreas.”

“Uniro needs its Chief Coordinator at the centre of things more often. Which means we’ll need you less.”

“That’s right, Chief.”

“So maybe I can recommend you for a transfer to United Nation headquarters in New Orleans.”

“Are you serious?”

“I’m always serious. There is one small condition, though, which is that you win us the contract to run the Romantic Congress of Film.”

“Deal. You’re a wise man, Andreas.”

“You know how my heart is set on it. You’ve got five weeks.”

Feydeau's wife picks up on the seventeenth ring. He gives her the good news.

“Five weeks? Only five? He’s got to be joking!”

“He isn’t.”

“You’d better get your finger out, Frankie boy.”

Vice Coordinating the United Nation International Romance Office is usually a matter of keeping things on an even keel and making sure that people see the organisation as a force for good. Its intrusion into Frank’s private life, coupled with the sensation that he might have a rival for his wife’s affections, revives Frank’s competitive spirit and prods him into action.

First, Frank decides to dip into the local artistic scene, reasoning that an association with a major romantic film would boost Uniro's credentials.

In preparation, he calls Bazuky Kotrvats, the young Armenian secretary in the Department of Extra-Curricular Activities, to his office.

“Bazuky, I have a couple of tickets to the Teatro Carignano tomorrow evening. If you're free, I'd appreciate your company.”

“Oh, Frank, you know I’ll do anything for you, especially since you got me that contract so I can’t be sent packing from one day to the next. I’ll even waste an evening at the theatre when we could be doing something far more interesting.”

Frank perceives a degree of calculation in her adoring gaze.

“Actually, Bazuky, it was Lancia Avenida who gave you the contract. The Chief of Human Resources Mobilisation.”

“Personal Relations, we call it now, Frank. You insisted on the change, remember? That woman has never liked me, I can’t think why. I’ll bet you leaned on her, Frank.”

“I wouldn’t touch Lancia wi— Anyway...”

Anyway, the next evening Frank and Bazuky go to see *Cereane!*, an experimental play in Piedmontese dialect, starring two local actors, Sonny Superga and Eva Bergoglio, and directed by Martino Martello, who runs the small theatre when he is not involved in the film projects that have earned him an international reputation. After the performance, Frank and Bazuky go backstage to talk to him. Frank has made sure Martino knows they are coming. The director greets them warmly, though he barely glances at Bazuky.

“Martino, I'm sure, like everyone in this city, you've heard a lot about the United Nation International Romance Office and its mission to spread romance in the world.”

“Sure. But how does that involve me? I'm just a simple man of the theatre.”

“And the cinema, which is more to the point. You see, Uniro is willing, in principle, to contribute towards helping to sponsor a film that will embody its values, and we'd love you to collaborate as both scriptwriter and director, with maximum artistic freedom of course.”

“That goes without saying.”

“It does indeed, Martino! We even have a provisional title ready: *Trouble-Free Love*. What do you think of that?”

“That sounds familiar. Look, I'm very busy but I'll think about it and let you know within a week. Is that OK?”

“Yes, that's great! Damned good play, by the way. Even me and my lovely companion could feel its dramatic force, despite the language barrier.”

As they leave, the film director finally turns his attention to Bazuky.

“Good luck with your acting career.”

Her smile falters, briefly.

Frank drives Bazuky home. When they arrive outside her anonymous block of recently built flats on the edge of Turin's city centre, Bazuky seems reluctant to leave the car.

“Do you think he'll take the bait?” Frank asks her. Bazuky pulls a face.

“Who knows, with men?”

Frank smiles. “I think I'd trust your judgement of men. Men other than myself, I mean.”

“Oh, Frank, would you really? Well, for what it's worth, I feel Martino is a man of his word. If he comes on board, I think his film will do Uniro proud.”

“Hmm. That's good to know. Luckily, for getting the Congress, his word is worth more now than his film.”

“Please, Frank, don't turn cynical on me. Not you. Besides, there are much more important people than Martino you have to get on board.”

“Who?”

“The staff, first and foremost. Us lot. You know, you really can't expect us to devote ourselves to some Congress if we're never sure of our jobs because we're only on short-term contracts.”

“Bazuky, with the best will in the world, I can't put everyone on long-term contracts. It's just too costly. The auditors would never stand for it.”

“Who said everyone? Just a few of us to start with.”

“Bazuky, you know I can't.”

Frank wonders why Bazuky does not say goodnight as she gets out and slams his car door.

Myfanwy Dylan has a distracted look as she settles her lanky frame into a low swivel chair in Frank Feydeau's office.

“Sorry I’m late,” she mutters, before raising her voice. “My stupid secretary failed to let me know about this meeting. I only found out when I read my e-mail myself.”

Frank spots an opportunity to get the Chief of Financial on his side.

“Let me have a word with her. What’s her extension number?”

“Oh, she isn’t in the office. I had to send her home.”

“Good Heavens! Isn’t that overdoing it a bit?”

“Not *her* home, I’m not sure she could find it. *My* home. Feed the cats.”

“Ah. I see. But, er, couldn’t your partner or whatever feed the cats?”

“No, he’s away. And my housekeeper’s too busy. Don’t look at me like that. She’s doing the household accounts. Whatever. I’m here now, isn’t it, so what do you want?”

“Right. Let’s get down to business. I want to give the staff an incentive to put everything they’ve got into our bid to host the Romantic Congress of Film.”

“Easy. Let them know their jobs depend on it. Sack a few if we don’t get it. Or even sack them right away.”

“I was thinking of offering a few long-term contracts.”

“We can’t do that. The auditors — Bloody hell, this chair’s uncomfortable!” Myfanwy shifts her position. “Made in China, I expect.”

“No actually, I happen to know it came from your own dear Blighty.”

Myfanwy fixes Frank with eyes of steel. “I’m not *English*. I’m *Welsh*.”

Frank’s throat feels very dry in the ensuing silence. He tries to swallow, coughs. Finally, he forces his words out.

“Yes, of course. Sorry. In any case, I’ve got a better idea. What do you think of this: a bonus for everybody?”

“Right across the board? The same for everyone?”

“Yes.”

“The Permanent Staff won’t like it. It makes the Temporary Staff’s work seem as valuable as theirs.”

“In this case, it probably is.”

“That’s not the point. You need to give the top earners a bigger bonus. The Temporary Staff will say it’s unfair, but they’re used to that.” She wriggles again.

“Myfanwy, let’s just change places. This chair *was* made in China. It’s much more comfortable.”

They change places. Myfanwy settles into the chair behind Frank’s desk and looks down at him.

“Yes, that’s better.”

“OK, Myfanwy, what if we offer a bonus that’s higher for the Permanent Staff in absolute terms but higher for the Temporary Staff in proportional terms? What I want you to tell me is how much we can offer.”

Myfanwy looks at Frank thoughtfully for a few seconds, then names some generous figures. Frank’s mouth feels moist again.

“Can we afford that?”

Myfanwy nods.

“Aren’t we in the red?”

Myfanwy laughs. “We’re always in the red – officially. I make sure of that. Donors are more forthcoming when they think we’ll disappear if they don’t cough up.”

Frank wonders why Myfanwy has not told him this before. He wishes he were not so new to the job. Myfanwy is still talking. Frank tunes back in.

“... only way is to get the politicians involved.”

“Well, we’re bidding in conjunction with Turin City Council, and the Piedmont Regional Government always gives us good backing. They understand the mutual benefits.”

“Yes, but frankly, Frank, for something as big as this you’ve got to go national. Excuse me.”

She pulls a phone from a pocket in her grey power suit and answers it. A look of horror infuses her delicate, thin face. She springs from the chair.

“Look, I’ve got to go. One of my cats is vomiting.”

As she strides past Frank, she adds: “Financial says yes.”

Turin’s autumn sky is leaden. Sparse drops of rain mix with the dust to tone down the light that leaks from the energy-saving streetlamps. Frank has to submit his United Nation credentials for scrutiny before a muscular gentleman in an Armani suit lets him into the NonPlus Club.

The Minister is easy to spot. His bulk is barely contained by his shiny suit, even though he has opened his jacket to give his stomach freer rein to expand over the green T-shirt enclosing it and thus to make it easier to read the party name emblazoned on it: *Italiani Sopra*.

A gilt mirror covers the wall behind the Minister; on either side of him sits a young woman with Slavic features, clad in green from hair streaks to toenail varnish. As Frank approaches their table, one of them uncrosses her legs and Frank notices that the colour-coding includes underwear. The Minister raises bleary eyes which turn sharp as they fix on Frank. Frank extends a hand.

“I’m Frank Feydeau of the United Nation International Romance Office. I hope you’re expecting me.”

The Minister gently pushes away the woman who is leaning on him; reflexively, he licks his fingertips before pushing a hand through the curly rug of his hair and reaching forward to grip Frank’s hand. Frank fights back his revulsion at the sensation of saliva on his wrist and croaks “Good evening.”

“Bondí.”

“OK, if you prefer to speak the local dialect, Bondí”

“My *name* is Bondí. Giacomo Bondí.”

The Minister does not ask Frank to sit. Frank sits anyway. The Minister continues.

“I understand you want the Government’s backing for your bleeding-heart organisation’s bid to host a festival of films about ... romance.”

His companions take up the invitation to snigger. Bondí sniffs. “Why would we do that?”

“Our main rivals are Bombay, so look on it as Turin versus Bombay.”

The Minister takes the hand of the woman on his right and runs it slowly down his T-shirt.

“OK, look on it as Italy versus India.”

Bondí sniffs again. “That’s no contest. Were it to be Italy versus the rest of the world, maybe it will interest me.”

“Well, yes, that’s exactly what it is. Italy versus the rest of the world!”

“Then maybe we shall consider. I can do a lot for you, you are aware. How much ... it depends on you. Here is my details.”

Bondí produces a business card from a thick wallet, pushes it across the table and turns his attention to the woman on his right. The woman on his left brings her knees back together, raises her left leg and hooks it over Bondí’s tummy, trapping the other woman’s hand. Frank gets up and leaves. On his way out, he examines Bondí’s card: on the back are two sets of figures he recognises as bank account numbers.

As he steps outside, a curtain of drizzle refreshes Frank’s face. The industrial city’s air smells sweet.

It is not easy for Frank to contact the top people in the Partito Anti Partiti, the coalition partners of Italiani Sopra, because they do not have a physical headquarters. Instead, they use a Russian-designed app called PAPmobile, though which Frank discovers that they have scheduled a “meet-in” for his local park in Turin to celebrate the governing coalition’s re-election.

Despite his double-checking, the “meet-in” looks as though it is over when Frank arrives at the Valentino Park’s extensive greenery beside the mud-coloured river that is flowing fast with recent rain and detritus from upriver. People are milling around a stage set near the century-old “medieval village”, discussing how to dismantle the set. Meanwhile, a political speech in a harsh woman’s voice is being re-run through loudspeakers on the stage. Although the voice grates on Frank’s ears, he is impressed by the clear sound quality. He realises that the voice is talking about sunny spells and temperatures.

“That’s Savona,” says a woman who passes in front of Frank carrying a plank in her tattooed arms, “You’ve missed her. She came early.” Frank picks up the reference to Savona Hola, a former radio presenter who first gained renown by pioneering local weather reporting as social satire before founding the PAP and becoming its *éminence grise* after its first electoral success put it into the Parliament from which she was debarred due to her manslaughter conviction for having failed to predict a tsunami off the coast of Liguria that killed a dozen people.

“That’s a shame. Actually it’s the Secretary of State for Television, Internet and Culture that I’m after.”

“Seppe Di Pioggia?”

“That’s the name I was given. He’s your official leader isn’t he?”

“Look, mate, we don’t have none of that leader shit. Everybody in the PAP has an equal voice. You can tell me what you want.”

“Well, it’s like this — ”

A man in a track suit interrupts Frank.

“No need to talk to *her*. Tell *me*!”

Frank feels cold water on his face as an old lady shakes a dripping umbrella in his face.

“I’ve got just as much say as those whipper-snappers! Tell *me* what you want!” She jabs him in the chest. Behind her looms a group of middle-aged men in black leggings and T-shirts that proclaim “PAP6Tu” with armbands that read “Stuart”. They surround Frank and the three *Papisti* as these vie for Frank’s attention by pushing and pulling him.

Frank decides enough is enough. He breaks free of the three man-handlers, dodges between two of the Stuarts and runs towards the nearest exit. A minute later, he stops to catch his breath, turns, and sees he is being pursued at a distance. The recorded voice falls silent. Frank shouts at his lack-lustre chasers, “Tell your leaders the Romance Office came to court them.” At the word “leaders”, they pick up their pace before stopping to harangue each other. Frank jogs out of the Park and across the tram tracks, hoping his car is still where he left it.

Frank lies in his bathtub. The ache from his bruises is eased by the heat of the soapy water and smoothed away by the caresses of his wife’s delicate hands. One hand circles the purple patch amid his chest hair; the other comforts his forehead. Both hands slide tenderly up into his hair. Frank relaxes in bliss, but Betty’s grip tightens and forces his head below the waterline. He struggles to no avail, gasps for breath and chokes on the repulsive taste that fills his mouth; his ears ring. As he leaps to his feet, Frank awakes from his reverie and realises that his phone is squawking in the next room. He hastens out of the bath, sticks his feet into slippers and grabs a towel with which he dries his hands as he goes to answer the phone.

There is no-one at the other end, but Frank sees he has two messages. The first is from the Chair of the Functionaries Union Committee at Uniro:

The FUC take your bonuses. English saying you the dog's bollocks. We gotcha back.

Frank is unsure of the precise meaning of this, but decides to take it has a sign of staff commitment. The second message is from Savona Hola. It is less concise. By the time Frank comes to the end of it, he is shivering. The gist is that the PAP understands the importance of holding the Congress in Italy, and is grateful to Frank for his efforts, but the grassroots would see any government money being channelled to an international organisation as a return to the old politics of privilege feeding privilege, or they would if that was how she explained it to them, which she would, because that was what it was, so best forget the whole thing.

Frank sighs, wraps the towel around himself and walks carefully back to his bath, but its water is now even colder than his skin.

Frank stares through the front window of the underground train. Its movement is fast but smooth. He wonders where the driver is, then remembers that it is driverless, or rather computer-driven. Frank hopes it is less prone to crashes than the computer in his office. A heavy hand falls on his shoulder. Frank turns to see the smiling face of Granko Höness, Uniro's Chief Synergies Officer. Granko gives Frank one of his idiosyncratic handshakes.

“Granko, I thought you were lying low in Turkey!”

“Yes, I am. Now you see me, now you don't! It's hard to keep away from Turin totally. Know what I mean?”

“I don't, actually. But don't worry, once we've proved your financial innocence, you'll be welcomed back with open arms. It's just that for the moment ...”

“I won’t outstay my welcome. I’m just here researching my new project, *New Innovations in Transnational Interventions around Love Bombing*. Snappy title, huh? How are you getting on in this city?”

“Desperately trying to get away, as it happens, back to New Orleans. My wife won’t join me here. Turns out that to get away, I have to make sure Uniro wins the right to hold the Romantic Congress of Film. It’s a question of drumming up support. Lots of it, and fast.”

“Hmmm. In these matters, you know, quality counts more than quantity. You could try my Lodge.”

Granko pulls a pen and notepad from a pocket in his hunter’s waistcoat, scrawls an address on a page, tears it out and hands it to Frank. “This is my stop.” By the time Frank has deciphered his handwriting, Granko has gone.

With the help of his phone, Frank finds the address easily enough. It is in a narrow street just off one of the loggias that flank Turin’s broadest square. Its magnificent views of the river, and across it, are, as ever, being steadfastly ignored by the city’s pavement-café glitterati. One of the metal nameplates adorning the intercom reads “Great Western Wine Lodge”. Frank presses the bell next to it and is immediately buzzed in to an old-style atrium. An engraved sign guides him up two flights of a marble staircase, at the top of which a well-dressed, portly man with a flushed face greets him with a bear hug. Frank steps back to free himself, raises both hands in front of him, palms outwards, then waves them in front of his belly as though trying to cut it open.

The portly man looks at him with concern. “Are you trying to tell me something?” he asks in Italian. “Are you a member?”

Frank hesitates.

“Do you want to join the Lodge?”

Frank nods.

“OK, come in. I am Alberto.”

Alberto ushers Frank inside and through an anteroom into a small meeting room occupied by a round table with a lazy susan at its centre. He excuses himself for a moment, to return with a pen and a form comprising several pages.

“Application form,” he explains as he sets it in front of Frank and hands him the pen. “I’ll leave you to it.”

Frank leafs through the form. The first page requests personal details. The last item asks who recommended him. Every question in between concerns the applicant’s knowledge of, and tastes in, wine.

Frank pushes open the door to his flat after a hard day helping to design a Romantic Congress of Film that Bombay or anyone else would be hard pressed to match for sheer loveliness. He notices something unusual on the floor: a letter. It appears to have been delivered by hand. The envelope bears his own name, written with careful penmanship, and the stamp of Bondí’s Ministry. Frank dumps his briefcase, checks his phone, which holds no new messages, picks up the unsealed envelope and opens it. He pulls out another of the Minister’s cards. On this one is written, *I wait. One more day.*

Frank tears it up.

Loneliness weighs on his shoulders as Frank sits himself in front of his computer and turns it on. He goes straight to his e-mail. There is nothing from Betty, but there is a message from Martino Martello. Frank clicks it open.

Sorry. No can do. I am a realistic. Trouble-Free Love is not. Try Comencini. Good luck. Martino.

Frank gets up from his swivel chair and plunges toward the kitchen. He is rummaging through his wine rack there when he hears the phone ringing in the

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