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2500 words

## **Remembering Fran**

by Matias Travieso-Diaz

*The living owe it to those who no longer can speak to tell their story for them.*  
Czesław Miłosz, The Issa Valley

Everyone dies twice. The first death occurs on a given day and time, and may be recorded for posterity in a variety of official and unofficial records. The second death creeps upon us by stages, slowly or fast, and is completed when no memories of the deceased are left among anyone living. This second death is more insidious for, once it occurs, it is as if the person had never existed. It is terrible to die, but perhaps it is even worse to disappear without a trace of one's passage on this earth.

I write this short essay on the occasion of the unveiling of the memorial monument to my beloved wife Fran on her grave, a year after her death. I was assisted in this endeavor by our daughter Nastya, whose recollections of her mother added depth to my narrative. We hope that our words will help postpone the inevitable second death of our favorite person.

### **1. Fran's Main Traits**

#### **Kindness.**

If there is one word that can summarize Fran's personal traits is kindness, because it envelopes most others, which derive from it directly or indirectly. Her kindness manifested itself in her love for her family, her pets, her friends, and even total strangers. One of my favorite

memories of Fran occurred during our first visit to the Russian orphanage where our future adoptive daughter lived. At the orphanage, in addition to seeing Nastya (who we had met the previous summer) we were introduced to half a dozen other girls of more or less the same age as Nastya. Fran immediately fell in love with the girls, and remarked to me: "I wish we could take them all with us." She really meant it, and I believe she would have returned to Virginia with six or seven new daughters to add to our family had this been possible.

And then there was that cold winter night, when we were walking out of a restaurant and ran into a large stray dog, dirty and shivering. Fran called out to the animal and said: "Come here, you poor thing. Are you lost?" The dog immediately groveled at her feet and she picked the dog and read the tag: "Jenny – (a man's name) -- USAFB, Thurso." We took the dog, a beautiful springer spaniel, to our home and nursed it back to health for several days while Fran kept making inquiries trying to locate the owner, which we finally were able to do thanks to the Red Cross. As it turned out, the owner was an airman that had been stationed at a US air force base in Thurso, Scotland, the northernmost town in Great Britain. The owner and Jenny were traveling back to his home in Michigan when Jenny was stolen from his car at a shopping mall in Philadelphia, but Jenny somehow managed to escape from her captors and found her way to us. It was lucky for Jenny to have met Fran, although our hearts were broken when we had to put her on a plane to reunite her with her owner.

Fran would chide me frequently for various things, but never as vigorously as when I failed to fill the bird feeder on cold mornings. Never mind that it was freezing out there, she would castigate me with words like: "These little birds can't find grubs in the middle of the winter and depend on us for survival through the spring. How can you be so cruel?" Etc. etc.

The job she had when I met her was Child Protective Services Coordinator for Alexandria. That job, and others that preceded it, gave her the opportunity to apply her kindness to the service of many at risk children. She would later move on into a private practice as a psychotherapist, where she put her kindness to work for the benefit of many clients of all ages.

**Forthrightness.**

Everyone who knew Fran can testify to the fact that Fran was honest to a fault and always spoke her mind. She was also very articulate, so she got her point across, sometimes too well.

It is not that she was blunt or lacking in diplomatic skills. Her honesty, however, got her into trouble sometimes with people who could not handle the truth. This happened, for instance, when a young couple, friends of ours, were having dinner at our place and had with them their firstborn, a boy about two years in age. While we talked and dined, Fran was observing the boy and remarked to the mother: “Your boy does not make eye contact with people, but gets along well with our dog. You should have him seen by a psychotherapist that specializes in children, for he shows signs of autism.” The mother got angry with Fran and cut us off. The boy was not treated until, years later, he exhibited behavioral disorders that confirmed Fran’s assessment.

**Generosity.**

Fran’s kindness was reflected in her generosity. In addition to her frequent gifts to the members of her family and mine, she gave often to charitable, artistic, and human rights organizations. Suffice it say that, a year after her death, we get nearly two dozen pieces of mail every week addressed to her from groups she used to support, asking for further donations.

**Creativity.**

Fran was skilled in many ways, all of which reflected her creativity. She was a gourmet cook, who would always prepare delicious meals for us, whether old standby dishes like a veal

roast or new and exotic ones (like paella or arroz con pollo, which she learned to make after we met). Her holiday creations, particularly the Thanksgiving dinner, were always spectacular. Even the macaroons and cherry bars she baked for Passover were a delight.

Her manual skills were also remarkable. She taught herself beading and at the turn of several years made scores of necklaces and pendants that were much admired. She sold a few through galleries and consignment shops, and gave many away to family and friends. After her cancer operation, she began painting and drawing and her work was showing promise.

On all things, she had unfailing good taste. She made all the important decisions in the building and furnishing of our home and left behind a beautifully furnished house that, according to a real estate agent that saw it last week, will sell very well whenever we put it on the market. She had done the same thing with the beach house we built in Bethany Beach, which we and our family and friends got to enjoy for a dozen years until we had to sell upon my retirement.

#### **Intellectual Curiosity and Love for Beauty.**

Fran was smart and always on top of what was happening in the world. An avid reader, she would go through the Sunday Times cover to cover and did not miss the evening shows on CNN and MSNBC. She read several magazines (her favorite was The New Yorker) and all kinds of fiction, although in the last year of her life she switched to audiobooks because holding and reading a book became increasingly difficult.

She had an amazing collection of professional books relating to her psychoanalytic practice. Those books fill three large bookcases, and we are still trying to find some person or organizations to whom we can donate them.

## **2. Likes and Dislikes**

### **In Politics.**

Luckily, Fran and I had almost identical political views, both liberal Democrats, she perhaps a touch more liberal than I. We donated to the Democratic candidates for the White House and Congress, and even though we did not do fundraising or engaged in other political activities, we attended a few local party events and always had a sign on our yard come election time (we had a 1984 Mondale – Ferraro sign for many years in our garage until we finally got rid of it when Bill Clinton ran for office). Trump’s victory in 2016 was a severe blow, but we and America managed to live through his presidency.

Our last vacation together, in October 2019, was a short outing to Cape May, New Jersey, where we first met. The most memorable part of that trip was watching in our hotel room the House impeachment hearings in which witness after witness denounced Trump’s illegal activities at home and abroad. It was the last political event we watched together.

### **In Food.**

We ate out often, most of the time in the company of some other couple. We both loved Italian, French and Spanish, but tried and enjoyed every kind of cuisine except Nepalese (which she hated). Our favorite dining place was a little French restaurant named La Bastille, located just at the edge of Old Town Alexandria. We would go to La Bastille at least once a month, particularly to their theme dinners pairing a special menu with samples of some types of French wine. (Our all-time favorite was a Burgundy night several years back.) Another special dinner was in New York in 2017 at a small French restaurant on the East Side, Le Bateau Ivre, where we got to eat next table to the owners. We also had fabulous meals during our first trip to Italy,

particularly an al fresco evening dinner in Florence in which we were serenaded by strolling violinists as we feasted on osso buco, chianti and Fran's favorite dessert, tartuffo.

In short, we ate well, at home and outside, and I could write a book about our dining experiences. But more than the great food, what was memorable about those dinners was spending time together, by ourselves or in the company of cherished friends and family.

### **In the Arts.**

The first thing that drew Fran and I to each other was a love of beauty in all its forms. Our initial out of town trip together was to Wilmington, Delaware to watch her brother Michael perform the lead role in Donizetti's L'Elisir d'Amore, an excellent outing that confirmed our love for opera (our favorite was Puccini's La Boheme). Besides opera, our love for the arts extended to classical music (we had season tickets to the National Symphony of Washington, D.C. for the better part of thirty years, which we shared with two other couples), ballet, theater (again, we had season tickets to the Signature Theater in Alexandria) and, last but not least, the movies, although we stopped going out to the theaters in 2020 because of the pandemic. We were frequent visitors to the museums in the Washington area, and she had a monthly girl outing to a different museum or art gallery with a friend of hers.

### **In Travel.**

We loved to travel. Fran and I went to most destinations in both coasts of the United States and Canada, but had special predilections for two places: Vermont, which we visited regularly, and the Southwest – Arizona and New Mexico, and most particularly Santa Fe, which we discovered by accident in November 1982 when a snow storm diverted us south, away from our intended California target. We returned to Santa Fe time and again and agreed that we would

have moved there except that it was too far from both our families in the New York area and Florida.

Abroad, we had a great vacation together in 1985, when we traveled to Paris and down to the French Riviera, across to Italy, and back home through Switzerland. We went to London a few years later, and back to Italy in 2014 to the wedding of Fran's niece Eve. We were planning another trip to Italy but the pandemic, and then Fran's illness, prevented us from ever taking another major trip again.

### **On Entertainment.**

Our main type of entertainment was, as discussed earlier, artistic. I did not watch much TV apart from the news. Fran liked to watch romantic shows for which I had little or no appetite. The last series we watched together was several seasons of *The Crown*, but she prevailed on me to watch most of an interminable Turkish romantic comedy, from which she expanded to other similar Turkish series. She was still watching those series on her laptop after her cancer operation and were the main form of entertainment for her in the last months of her life.

## **3. Flaws**

### **Vanity.**

Fran was not perfect, but was pretty good all around. Her flaws were few and, truth be told, quite tolerable. Her most prominent flaw, in my estimation, was vanity. She was always a beautiful woman, but with the passage of time it took her more time and effort to remain so. She continued to worry about her appearance until the very last days of her life. When chemotherapy resulted in the loss of her lovely hair, she acquired a couple of very good wigs that helped preserve her good looks until the very end.

She had an almost inexhaustible wardrobe, with dresses, outfits, coats, shoes, purses, and the like filling four large closets around our house. We are still trying to get rid of much of the stuff, some of it with the store tags on it.

**Competitiveness.**

Fran was very competitive and liked to win at whatever game she played. She liked gambling, and one of my favorite memories is that of the time we found ourselves staying at the Bally's hotel in Las Vegas, where she managed to win several hundred dollars playing nickel slot machines. That was a triumph that was never duplicated, though her occasions for gambling were few, other than buying lottery tickets at the supermarket.

Playing with Nastya and me, she was always ready to win, not happy to lose. She would invariably beat me at playing gin, but did not like it when Nastya or I beat her at Scrabble. But she always came back to the table for more.

**Acquisitiveness.**

She loved buying beautiful things. Up to the last few years of her life, one of her favorite pastimes was to go antiquing, both around our home in Alexandria and throughout Virginia, Maryland, West Virginia and even Pennsylvania (plus during our trips to Vermont). Our house is full of fine antiques, including glassware, silverware, furniture, paintings, rugs, and other collectibles. Looking for nice antiques was one of the targets of virtually every trip we took.

She redecorated the main living areas of our home several times over the years. She had a favorite decorator, Diane Shields, who led (or accompanied) her on so many ventures that I promised Diane that I would claim her as a dependent in my tax returns. I never got the point of some of the changes (why recover the sofas or change the curtains because she got tired of teal?). But she was having fun and I did not mind.



In short, her flaws were few, her virtues many. I loved Fran more than anything in the world and not a day goes by without my thinking about her, and missing her. And it will be that way for as long as I breathe.

END