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Francis, Never Frank, and His Ten Lives
by Catherine Kapples

There are sixty-six direct descendants of Francis Coleman Sartor dispersed across the continental United States, who knowingly or unknowingly uphold his legacy despite not having him for very long or not having him at all. But there are pieces of Francis, never Frank, in all of us. And as his children, Chip, Fred, Patrick, Tommy, S.J., Cole, Hill, Diane and I, have passed our Francisisms, our use of “hit the head,” our strong dislike of Brussel sprouts, our love of turbulence and flips and the Tower of Terror, our stories about the ghosts that tap on the walls and make the Spanish moss sway in the trees, to the grandchildren and great-grandchildren he never met and never will.

We live in twenty-seven states; more of us live in Georgia than any other state, but no one lives in the Dakotas or Alaska or Montana or Kansas or Kentucky. Several of us live in the states that were part of the thirteen original colonies, but some of us live in states that joined the union most recently in the twentieth century: Oklahoma, New Mexico, Arizona, Hawaii. Several of us live on streets and boulevards and lanes named after historical figures: Cervantes, Washington, Eisenhower, Sequoyah, Sam Houston, de Soto, Andrew Pickens, Stephen Mallory. Most of us live less than an hour drive from the shore.

Several of us have his light blue eyes so our mother used to lather zinc oxide underneath them in two straight lines, like football players’ eye black grease, to prevent the sun from reflecting off of our pale eyes onto our paler skin and giving our under eyes and cheeks even more freckles. Several of us have his thick blonde hair that has become increasingly browner and grayer, as we have gotten older. Several of us have his patience. Several of us have his tidy handwriting and by the fourth grade could replicate his signature perfectly on all of our tests and quizzes that were below a B- and required a parent’s signature.

But one of us died.

Only one of Francis’ nine kids still lives in Florida, in the state that he grew up in and returned to after his first year of college, after World War II, after his last year of college, after becoming a Blue Angel, for his sister Susie Bell’s debutante ball, for his cousin Bobby’s wedding on the beach, for his grandfather’s funeral, to serve in Mary Alice’s royal court in the Mardi Gras parade, to build a home for his high school sweetheart and their expanding family on the inlet in Pensacola Bay. In the “upside of Florida,” where his family lived for four generations of Sartors in the city of five flags, with each flag representing the different times the Spanish Empire, French Empire, British Empire, United States of America, and briefly the Confederate States of America held control, and where Francis taught his children how to swim, which jellyfish were the stinging kind and which were the non-stinging kind, how to bait a crab trap without pinching your fingers on the wires, and how to use nail clippers and hot water to remove wood splinters from your toes and palms.

Of his nine children, my brothers and sisters and I, one of us is battling colon cancer; one of us is a retired U.S. Navy Lieutenant Commander and a former Blue Angels flyer; one of us has five grandkids; one of us is a former professional windsurfer who has won a Professional Windsurfers Association Excellence Award and now lives in Maui; one of us is allergic to raw carrots; one of us dyes her graying head a honey blonde hue; one of us buys and sells rural real estate in Wyoming and Colorado; one of us believes in Bigfoot; one of us is writing a screenplay about the annual Newport Folk Festival; one of us has died.
One of us worked as a primatologist for thirteen years with Jane Goodall in Kenya; one of us walked our sister down the aisle; one of us had stage three melanoma, but caught it before it progressed to stage four; one of us fell in love with a boy from Sydney who pumped gas at the Shoreline Marina and taught six and seven year olds how to sail a Sunfish; one of us is addicted to painkillers; one of us decided to go by his middle name in college, so now more people call him Huck than Coleman; one of us cut his face the first time he shaved; one of us failed Algebra I in ninth grade and had to repeat it; one of us married the girl who used to sell the most Girl Scout cookies on all of Cervantes Street; one of us has died.

One of us revoked her lifetime membership to the Daughters of the American Revolution that her grandmother had given her a lifetime membership to; one of us is dyslexic; one of us got married under a tent on the beach of Little Dix’s Bay; one of us had a crush on his sixth-grade English teacher, Ms. Bateman; one of us wrestled all four years at Ole Miss; one of us makes peach cobbler every Christmas; one of us is looking for her third husband on FarmersOnly.com; one of us went to law school for a semester before dropping out; one of us doesn’t eat red meat or lobster or anything with cream; one of us has died.

One of us has two kids even though she wanted more because her youngest was born six weeks early and almost died from Neonatal infections four times before she was a month old; one of us has nine fake teeth; one of us dated a girl named Wheeler from Birmingham who had three last names in her full name and a twin brother named Wagner; one of us runs four miles every morning before having a glass of orange juice and a bowl of grits and sausage; one of us has a long scar above his left eyebrow from his brother’s pitching wedge; one of us is afraid of flying in small planes and won’t fly in anything smaller than a twin-engine turboprop; one of us has high-blood pressure; one of us got fired from his job at the Buggy Works when it was bought out by Chevy; one of us can’t see reds or greens after he had an infection in his brain and was in a coma for four days; one of us is a Louisiana state representative; one of us has died.

All of us miss Francis—Dad, Pops, Daddio—who told us stories about catching small snapper fish and putting them in the piles of clothes on his sisters’ bedroom floors and hiding quarters in the mouth of the mounted blue marlin that hung above the fireplace in his parents’ family room when he was a boy. Probably as an adult Francis preferred the salt of the bay and the soft sway of the waves to chlorine of the pool and the bounce of the diving board, as I do now. Probably, on a morning of constant rain, he went through the stacks of paper underneath his bed and flipped through his school notes until he reached his pile of report cards, but he knew that his satisfactory in spelling and in social studies and his unsatisfactory in arithmetic in eighth-grade, would not be his legacy.

His legacy is serving as a Captain in the U.S. Navy and a left wing Blue Angel, having more than nine lives in successfully flying Hornet jets and landing and taking off on runways of less than a thousand feet on an aircraft carrier in World War II, ejections, engine flameouts, and mid-air collisions during Blue Angels’ practices, Chip’s expulsion from high school, Pat’s teenage years of angst, S.J.’s immune disease, five kids under the age of eight with chicken pox one June, but not surviving cancer, since, tragically, unbelievably, one of us has died.

One of us has died, but his spirit lives on in 27 states, in the city of 5 flags, in his 9 children, Chip, Fred, Patrick, Thomas, S.J., Cole, Hill, Diane, and me, Frances with an e. [IM]