

## Portrait of an Artist, After All

Her obituary was terse, a few lines underneath a photo. No spouse or children. No compelling history to make the reader regret not having cozied up to her when the opportunity existed. And, especially, no mention of the frightful events of the morning of October the twenty-seventh. The story of the death of sixty-two year old Frances Blanche Cartwell, could not be divulged. The photograph would have to do.

It was just clear enough, that photo, to catch the beatific resignation in her eyes, mystical and disquieting at once, like one of those female Catholic martyrs whose eyes threatened a flirtatious wink even at the hands of her executioner.

But the photograph was just Frances, wasn't it? A younger, grainy version of a sixty-something insurance lady, a woman who read about a single case of Bolivian pork-borne tapeworms and swore off pork forever. It was Frances, the woman with two cell phone chargers and almost no need for a phone at all, who never left home without a collapsible umbrella, a travel pack of band-aids and Neosporin, and a toothbrush, also collapsible.

Frances, poster person for staying out of harm's way, died the morning of October twenty-seventh in a tragic school shooting. It was not a predictable event. If it were, it seems she would have avoided it. It seems that way.

When she was eight years old, Frances learned that in some irresponsible infancy, planet Earth had wrapped itself around a roiling molten ball that still burned within, a sort of stickless evil tootsie-pop. She went home and took inventory of her shoes. As her sister and brother ran barefoot to greet the ice cream truck, she grabbed the flip-flops stuffed behind the front door. She hid slippers under her bed, and an extra pair of boots

in the hall closet for the day when the ground began to buckle or leak. She'd seen images of spewing volcanoes in National Geographic. The path from core to crust was breachable.

“Good Lord,” her mother said, when she figured out the reason for Frances’ sudden shoe fetish. “Comets and birds and all sorts of things race across the sky. Are you going to wear a helmet, too?”

“She’s just sensitive,” said her father.

In middle school, Frances proved a gifted piano student. She perched on the bench, feet square, and laid down each note with a deliberate poignancy. “She’s not just sensitive,” Mr. Ossini, declared, his teacherly voice fraught with emotion along with a few extraneous vowels. “She is quite possibly an artist.”

At her earliest opportunity, Frances went to the library and checked out books on artists. Unlike the biographies of steadfast war heroes or congenital angels like Florence Nightingale and Clara Barton, artists seemed a frightful lot--penniless, temperamental, and in one memorable case, earless. The prospect terrified her. She quit her piano lessons the next month.

No one was surprised when Frances went from cautious student to frequent maid of honor (she was a good friend, empathetic to the extreme, yet harmless enough to be the bridal party compromise every time) to single professional. Her early career in real estate faltered, but she found her niche in the insurance business and spent many years perusing data tables, offering advice. She commuted on foot—safer, all in all—traversing the sidewalk from her tasteful garden apartment to her west-facing office and back. She lived alone--didn’t even harbor a cat. As if toxoplasmosis and feline leukemia weren’t

enough, actuarial tables forced her to conclude that cat ownership was doomed. Frances took pains to minimize all serious interfaces with the stickier points of life. That is, anything involving risk to body or soul.

Her life did have one chance to take a different tack. When she was sixteen, she sat next to Chet Chambers in homeroom. Chet adored Frances, for reasons that no one, least of all Frances, understood. She was cute and shapely, but her habit of wearing an overcoat and socks at the slightest chill, and the way she toted her books in a padded case had already taken her out of the high school dating network.

Chet's note was simple, scrawled in a liquid blue-black stream, splotchy with nerves and desire. He stuffed the folded missive into Frances' locker between classes. "Hope to see you at the class party at the lake tonight. Chet."

When Frances found the note, she couldn't explain the pounding of her heart. The weather was unusually warm and sticky, so even Frances wore shorts and went sleeveless to the party. She had to wipe her palms more than once on the yellow napkin beside her plate of egg salad and carrot sticks. She didn't know if it was the heat or Chet's note that made her palms sweat.

At the party, she looked up from her seat at the picnic table and caught Chet's eyes. He sidled up to her and asked if she'd like to walk down to the dock. Her heart began to pound the way it had when she'd read his note. She only waited a moment before she shoved aside her plate and nodded yes. The two ambled down the trail to the water's edge. They skipped stones and talked. Chet waded into the lake as dusk fell. Frances hesitated a second, left her sandals on the shore, and followed him. The gaiety of the school party echoed from some hundreds of yards away. The murmur of the lake

lapping at the dock was immediate and languorous. It smelled fresh, so unlike the stench of the turquoise-painted falsehood of the municipal pool. Frances felt her pores open to its lulling magic.

Chet dove under the water in his jean shorts and t-shirt. Frances waited for him to surface. He swam out a ways and she took a few steps farther into the lake. It lapped around her knees. She took another step. The water threatened the edges of her shorts. Chet popped up next to her with a wet, noisy spray. She screamed, but didn't run. He pushed her, playfully, and splashed until her blouse clung to her in spots. When Chet's arms circled her waist, and his head bent close to hers, Frances was transported on an unfamiliar tide of emotion. It may have been the same tide that transports all adolescents, but then again, it may have been stronger, wilder. In truth, it must have been so, to overpower Frances' already substantial emotional armor.

Afloat on this current of desire, the young lovers' lips met. Frances had a moment of serious reservation. By way of justification, she decided that the lake existed on its own plane, a surreal, nonjudgmental Switzerland, exempt from the carefully plotted rules of her earthbound life. There was the glow of a rising moon, the sheen on the liquid surface that turned suddenly glassy, the caress of waterlogged breezes. Her brain bought the neutral water justification, and her body became alive and responsive, greedy with a surprise agenda of utter satiation. Careful, conservative Frances kissed Chet back with the abandon of an unpracticed sixteen-year old. She allowed his fumbling teenage hands full access to whatever he could reach without removing any clothing.

All might have been perfect, had Sister Mary Stephen not broken from the party to wander to the edge of the lake for her evening rosary recitation, only to discover

youthful body parts free and flagrant, absorbed in uncharted activities. Frances looked up from the forgiving waters of her liquid Switzerland straight into the nun's unforgiving eyes, dark points in a face gone as white as the wimple that haloed it. A lake breeze rustled up, loosing a faint whiff of fishiness, teasing the scent of algae and drowned leaves from its depths. Chet's fingers around her waist weighed on her. Her damp skin rippled with goose bumps. Frances pushed from Chet's embrace. A wet strand of hair clung to her nostrils, still flared with the effort of passion-quickenened breath, now clogged with the lake's musky decay.

Unaccustomed as she was to romance of any sort, Frances melted before Sister Mary Stephen's justice. Her life's practice of separating herself from impending calamity, even if that required losing something dear—piano lessons, for instance—kicked in without hesitation. Chet transferred that next year to public school, and Frances donned yet more layers of clothing, prophylactic accessories, and unbendable rules. In the end, the promise of those few moments of aquatic bliss weren't enough to redirect the path of Frances' life. She picked her way carefully through the next many decades, toiling at her insurance tables, falling asleep in her bedroom under the softly glowing LED displays of her security system, smoke detector, and carbon monoxide monitor.

Any Imax interpretation of the unfurling of our universe informs us that if the whole process were condensed into a mere twenty-four hours, the very stroke of midnight is when things really heat up. So it was with Frances. Her hypothetical stroke of midnight rang out on a cloudy fall morning in suburban Virginia. She began her customary journey from her garden apartment to her office, umbrella tucked in the marsupial pouch of her purse, lips coated with Burt's bees balm in anticipation of the

dryness of the upcoming heating season. Halfway there, her sensible T-strap flats stumbled over something, jamming her left foot. A sharp pain came and went. She lifted her foot and inspected it, relieved to find everything intact. She bent down and picked up the offending object, a worn-looking fountain pen. A gasp escaped her.

She stuffed the fountain pen into the pouch next to her umbrella, not even bothering to insert it into the stitched tubular compartments meant for such things. At her office, she didn't perform her usual fifteen neck circles while her decaf brewed and her computer awakened. Instead, she took the silver cap from the tip of the fountain pen and examined the italicized v-shape of its delicate point, the cetacean breathing-hole at its center. She smoothed the ruled tablet by her computer and poised her right hand above the third line, pen slanted just so, the way the nuns had taught her. She wrote her name. The ink was the same, blue-black, like blood on its oxygen-depleted return path from the body's hinterlands.

Her computer awash in new emails, the smell of brewing decaf heavy in the air, she sat and gripped the pen. The ink glistened on the paper in front of her. An avalanche of memories crashed her brain's solid underpinnings. Forgotten moments slipped through crumbled defenses. A film clouded her vision. The pen fell from her hands.

Once, long ago, there had been a note.

The memory of those few moments of watery bliss with Chet hijacked her body. Remnants of that giddy passion surged through her half-spent veins and seized what was left of her heart, quickening its beat with a futile longing. How had she tucked away that night at the lake so callously, so obediently? How had she failed to understand that one such night was worth more than forty careful years of opening cans of soup, after

checking to be sure they hadn't swelled from botulism, and heating them on the stove to avoid exposure to the unknown havoc of microwaves? As if to reinforce the pain of her staggering epiphany, a spot at the bridge of her foot began to ache, though she thought she'd only jammed it when she'd first tripped on the fountain pen. She took off her shoe and sock. Sure enough, a bruise had started. She imagined that more capillaries would leak, that her foot would bloat with the trauma of what had happened, with what she now understood.

She locked up her office and limped back home. She got into her car and drove to the drugstore for an icepack. By this time, the pain had spread so that her head began to ache. She stood in line at the counter, doubling forward, shifting from one foot to the other. Ruth Delaney, a longtime insurance customer, joined the line in back of her.

"Well, Frances, how are you?" she asked.

Frances always answered this question with the news that she was very well. Despite the mutiny in her body and soul, she did the same today, fearful to add a new element to a day that had suffered from too many already.

Ruth had a vial of Midol in her hand, for her daughter, she said. The school had called to tell her that Carrie had fainted in gym class again. "Menstrual cramps," Ruth added in a whisper. Frances began to remember how that felt, even though her own reproductive system had long since given up on creating any sort of seasonal conditions, any intention of laying, then patiently expelling yet another hopeful layer of thick, nurturing blood. Another regret? Dizziness made her ears buzz. She wanted to go home and hide from the assault of today.

“They told me to come get her, but I can’t,” Ruth said. “She’ll just have to lie there in the nurse’s office until I’m off work. They have a cot there, and a curtain sort of thing in front of it. I told her I’d grab some Midol when I could, and bring it home.”

Although she scarcely knew the girl, Frances pictured Carrie Delaney, prostrate on a cot behind some shower curtain-like screen in a school nurse’s office. “I’ll get her for you,” she said. She was too surprised by her own words to notice Ruth’s open mouth. “I’ll drop her off at your house.”

Ruth paid for the Midol, gave it to Frances along with a note allowing permission for Frances to retrieve her daughter. Frances slipped the note and the pills into her capacious purse, along with the umbrella and the band-aids and who knows what all in her ever-expanding bag of life’s remedies and headed for her car, still puzzled by her own sudden generosity. She drove to the high school, the public one, not the old brick building where she had studied, with the protective cross and the nuns clinking with yards and yards of rosary beads worn smooth from so many indiscretions witnessed or committed.

She arrived at the school amid a flurry of changing classes, buzzed in through a set of glass doors by a guard in uniform who studied her note and asked for her driver’s license. He sent her to the school office, where a new guard opened her bag, glanced inside, and had her fill out a form. A woman with a frizzled pageboy took it, then returned it to Frances with a photocopy of her license and an official stamp in its corner.

The students ignored the whole process. They loped along the hallways with armloads of books, calling out to each other, some studying crumpled pages of notes on their way into class. Frances had forgotten how lovely children were at that age, how



bright their eyes, how endearingly awkward stretched limbs and scrawny arms could be on a freshman boy, how perfectly Adonis-like they became at the end of their high school careers, when mass and muscle finally took hold. She marveled at the girls with their shiny hair and their long eyelashes. Was she ever that way? How had she allowed herself to emerge from that lake into the fortress that became her life so long ago? It had started before that, though. It had started before she knew enough to try to stop it.

That's when she understood why she'd come for Carrie. It was an apology to her own younger self for her fears, her naïve harshness, her failure to save herself back when there was still time. She followed the directions to the nurse's office, her sore foot slapping flatly on the white-tiled hallway. So much of her life was already behind her that the students failed to notice her at all. Too old to be teacher, parent, or any significant or even insignificant cog in their lives, she trod among them as unseen as a ghost. They were right. She was a ghost of what she could have been, too thin and worn now to spin what was left of her life into anything of substance at all.

She heard the sounds first. Pops it seemed. Sharp and crisp pops. She didn't know what they were until the screams began, until blood, red and oxygen-rich, pooled in a spot not ten feet from her in the hallway underneath the head of a perfect and handsome young man. His arms stretched beside him in a useless, open embrace. One after the other, they fell, laughter still in their throats, history notes still crammed in their brains, dresses for homecomings and proms yet unworn in their closets. Young, precious lives exploded and fell around her.

She saw him, clear as could be, as he approached the entrance of the nurse's office. Carrie had jumped from the cot and stood now, in the doorway, hands framing

her face, her mouth opening to form a scream. He was as young and fresh-faced as his classmates, with a manic lilt to the way he held his gun. He leveled it now at Carrie.

When she first realized the nature of the odd pops, Frances had managed to remember and retrieve a pocket-sized Smith and Wesson 638 Airweight revolver that lived in a pouch at the bottom of her ample bag. She'd acquired it last year when reports of a rapist who preyed on single women filled the newspapers. The sentry guards had failed to discover it when she passed through their gates, and it hadn't occurred to her to declare its presence, along with the toothbrush and the Midol and the umbrella and the other disaster remedies in her possession.

Although she kept it loaded, it had been a while since she'd shot it. She wasn't sure if she remembered how, despite the shooting lessons and range practice she'd been careful to get under her belt at the time. She forgot all about her foot. She lunged and planted herself between Carrie Delaney and her murderous classmate. Trembling, Frances encircled the trigger and pulled it. The boy with the gun flinched. A gush of blood soaked his pants at his left thigh. He pointed his gun at Frances and fired off his own shot as he sank to the floor. Uniformed guards appeared and filled the hallway. Frances heard more pops and felt someone remove her revolver from her hand. A sensation of leaking overtook her, a coolness in her upper chest that spread throughout her body. She stumbled backward.

Then, hands grabbed her, nurse hands, Carrie's hands, other hands, and laid her on the cot behind the screen in the nurse's office. She lay there and thought, what if she were sixteen again, and the blood that poured from her was her own hopeful menstrual blood, and that she was waiting for her mother, or perhaps her mother's friend to pick her

up and take her home, where she would throw away her shoes and walk barefoot and go skinny-dipping with boys in the moonlight, and have a whole houseful of pets, and bury them with little crosses in her garden when they died. The blood was a torrent now, warm, soft like the water of the lake that night with Chet, welcoming and without judgment. The breeze was still fresh, its scent of promise and desire skimming the glassy lake surface. Frances opened her palms in complete surrender. She let the neutral waters close around her. She smiled as she drew her last breath.

Emergency vehicles converged on the scene. Investigators measured and cordoned off hallways while they reconstructed the day's events. A cluster of anxious authorities closeted themselves in the nurses' office in a hushed huddle. Frances' Smith and Wesson 638 Airweight revolver was spirited away. A fleet of disaster counselors descended on the shaken eyewitnesses to extract their stories. The students were sure, then unsure of what they'd seen. The counselors helped shape their tearful accounts, edging out all impressions that Frances was anything but victim. Before they were discharged into the arms of ashen-faced parents, the eyewitnesses agreed that a security guard had stepped between Carrie and the shooter, perforating his thigh and thereby ending his murderous reign over his classmates. Hapless Frances was merely the last of his victims. How could it be otherwise?

The few who knew the truth were sworn to secrecy. It would be frightening, this handful of police and administrators determined, that an armed adult had penetrated school security. A student gone berserk was understandable. In this age of violence and uncertainty, it happened, again and again. But a security breach was intolerable. Better to frame Frances as yet another victim, vulnerable despite her life of preparation, than to

cause new fretting in the community. The gaps in security would be addressed under a cloak of silence. The huddled group swore this to be so, on the fresh blood of the slain.

And so, Frances' photo appeared in the obituaries the next morning, outclassed by the shockingly glam smiles of two prom queens, a square-jawed track star, the Indian grocer's daughter, the math-a-lete who had led the school to three national championships (although no one cared until after his death), and the handsome son of an orthodontist. The shooter, pronounced dead later that day in the hospital, had a separate gallery of photos, starting with his smiling toddlerhood, through a pimply but otherwise unremarkable adolescence, to a recent spectral moodiness, rife with clues visible only in hindsight.

Some news accounts gave Frances fleeting mention, spinning her as the sole consolation in the whole terrible ordeal, someone old enough to have forged and followed a life's path, struck down on a simple errand of mercy. Timid as it was, hers was still a life lived, more than the fallen students would ever know. Ironic that it was spent preparing for the worst, some whispered.

And yet, there was that photo, marvelous in its nuance. Whoever had found it pressed in Frances' missal couldn't have known the story behind it. The photo had been shot on a Sunday afternoon. The usual church organist hadn't shown, and Frances had been coaxed into playing for Mass. After a tenuous start, her fingers remembered Mr. Ossini's admonitions, and glided over the keys, squeezing permutations of salvation into the souls of stunned parishioners with an urgency not known since the church was built. Afterwards, a young photographer, handsome and eager, had snapped her photo and sent it to her through the church office. She'd always meant to drop him a line, thank him,

maybe more, but for too many reasons to list, she hadn't. She thought that perhaps the church would ask her to return, but the regular organist was back the next week with her pudgy fingers and prosaic delivery. Frances had ended up breathing a sigh of relief. The life of an artist was not for her.

Still, if one paused at all over her photo amid the tragedy of so many unlined faces, and if one then bothered to make closer study, there it was, a portrait of an artist, after all.