

THIS WAS ALL

### This Was All

Frances booked herself a hair appointment every Saturday afternoon. Her hair didn't grow particularly fast, and she didn't have very much of it, but every Saturday she perched on the chair being pumped up to eye level as her hairdresser trimmed off a miniscule amount. The girls at the hair salon watched through the window, drumming their long nails on the counter, as she moved slowly back to her car while rain pooled in the folds of her clear waterproof bonnet.

"I'm barely going to have any hair to cut if she keeps this up," Darlene would say, tight-lipped and shaking her head. "Poor soul. Guess she needs the company."

"You don't suppose she has any kids looking after her, do you?" the receptionist, Katie, would ask as she booked Frances in for the same slot the following week.

"God only knows, Katie. If she does, I doubt she sees them other than Christmas. Breaks my heart, I can only imagine Mom not having anyone around."

Frances didn't have any kids, or a husband for that matter. She had been adamant that this was the life she wanted to live; she travelled, owned dogs and cats and even goats at one point. Loneliness is a personality trait, she thought, and one she didn't possess, thanks be to God.

But then one day on the Discovery Channel she watched a program about death clean-up services. She originally thought it would be about crime scenes, but the man being interviewed said more than half his cases involved people who'd died in their rooms and rotted away, getting eaten by maggots before anyone realized they were even dead.

That was when she got the idea for the weekly hair appointments. If Darlene started expecting to see her every week, she'd definitely notice if a week went by with no sign from her. They had her phone number too, and they could find her address in the phonebook if they were

THIS WAS ALL

really starting to worry. At any rate, they'd find her before the maggots set in. She never told Darlene about this plan, but felt confident that she'd play her role when the time came.

This had been less of a concern when Mary was still around. She'd lived across the road from Frances for 28 years. Frances had moved into the house after she retired and Mary had lived there her whole life, but her kids had all grown up and gone. Once Mary's husband died, it was only the two of them. They started eating supper together and playing cards in the evening. Mary had one of those automatic card shufflers that was louder than a snowplough scraping by in the dead of night, but both their hands were arthritic so it was a blessing.

They'd go to church every Sunday, too. Frances had a little Toyota Yaris, a 2005 model but it was still running like new. They didn't go far anyway, just over the hill. Mary would always click her tongue at how empty the pews were, only a speckling of people with various shades of grey peaking through their hair. When the priest would open his arms and ask the little children to come towards him for Sunday school, only one or two would trickle out into the aisle, nervously glancing at each other and speed-walking like little toy soldiers to the altar. Frances wasn't as religious as Mary. Maybe it was in the name. But Mary had never had a license and wouldn't be able to get there without Frances, so rain or shine she'd pick Mary up at 9:30 am.

Frances called her the virgin Mary because she was so prim and proper. "Frances!" she'd gasp anytime the J-word crossed Frances' lips. "That's awful bad of you."

Frances would pat her hand reassuringly. "I've said worse than that, Mary. And I haven't been struck down dead yet!"

## THIS WAS ALL

They'd often joke with each other about death. They'd watched so many people go that it wasn't scary anymore. Sometimes Mary wished she could hurry up and die so she didn't have to pay her heat bill anymore.

As they got a bit older, Mary started to decline noticeably faster than Frances.

"I feel like I'm hanging out with my daughter," she wheezed, as Frances hooked into her arm and walked her to the car. The arthritis in her knees had gotten considerably worse and sometimes she could barely bend them enough to take a few steps. Frances suggested a wheelchair, but Mary said she was having none of it.

Once the winter came, the distance between their houses seemed to multiply as ice coated their steps and snow blew up against their doors. There would be weeks where neither of them could make the trek and they'd sit on the phone chatting and playing Solitaire.

"Probably should have had you move in here for the winter," Frances said one evening, looking out her front window to see if Mary had turned on her outside lights.

"Nah, I'd be pretty sick of you by now," Mary joked. "Winter will be over soon, please God."

Winter slipped away with the longer days of April, but one spring Mary's mind seemed to slip with it. Frances would try to stop over every day and putter around the house, keeping an eye out for stove burners left on and food going rotten.

She could tell Mary was frightened. Or maybe just embarrassed. Frances tried to be gentle about it, but sometimes she couldn't handle it. It was like taking care of a toddler sometimes, reminding her to eat in the mornings, brush her teeth, wash her clothes. Frances' memory wasn't

THIS WAS ALL

so good either. Nowhere near what Mary's was like, but she was starting to forget recipes, names, the channel numbers of her favourite shows. She figured she'd be dead before it became a real issue though. Seemed to be drifting away pretty idly, like one of those floats on the lazy river in Florida. Bobbing along, moving so slowly that you wouldn't notice it had disappeared around the bend until it was already gone.

After one particularly long winter, Frances started getting awful pains in her lower stomach and found driving more and more difficult. Mary was distraught over missing so much church.

"How are they gonna afford to keep heating the place?" she asked, watching mass on television and making the sign of the cross.

Their visits became less frequent as their bodies slowed down, and as a result their phone bills got higher. The space between their house, which once seemed like a hop, skip, and a jump, became an impossible distance on days with bad weather. They'd always call though, never missed a day. Frances found it hard to believe that anything outside them existed. This was all, they were all.

Mary's kids must have noticed something was up. They all showed up at her house one morning, had taken a cab out from the city airport. Her son, always checking the time. Her daughters, their hair ironed straight and heeled boots that clicked on the steps. Frances found it hard to believe that they'd taken days off work to fly here. Mary seemed equally as surprised.

THIS WAS ALL

“They’re driving me mad, Frances,” Mary whispered over the phone one evening. “I can’t even go to the bathroom without them peeking in the door.”

“They’ll be gone soon enough, my dear. Wait it out.”

Much to Frances’ and Mary’s mutual dismay, the children announced in an unsolicited show of caretaking that they would not be going back to the mainland without her.

“At least until summer, Mom.”

“We can’t afford to have someone come in and take care of you.”

“We’re worried sick with you down here.”

“Think how much fun you’ll have with the grandkids all around! You haven’t seen them in a few years!”

They packed her bags and didn’t even ask which underwear or socks she liked. Just shoved handfuls into a suitcase. They probably would have put Mary into a suitcase if they had their way. Zip it up and roll her away.

They stopped into Frances’ house on their way back into town. The journey was going to be a long one for Mary, with the cab ride and then the long flight.

“Make sure you get her to rest. Her knees get real bad if she doesn’t put them up,” Frances warned them.

They shot each other a look. *Yeah, sure. Like we don’t know how to take care of our mom.*

“Well, I guess I’ll see you in the spring,” Mary folded into Frances’ arms. Frances loved her familiar weight.

THIS WAS ALL

“Yes, girl. Keep in touch. Safe travels.”

Frances stood at the window at the top of the stairs and watched the cab until it disappeared over the hill, into the fog.

“You have reached Mary at 709-837-2425. I’m not home right now but if you leave your name, number and a message, I’ll call you back when I get a chance.”

“Mary. I’m losing it. Realized your son Danny isn’t listed in the phone book and I can’t remember your daughters’ last names now that they’re married. I haven’t got a clue how to get in touch with you. I’m real lonely down here. The weather’s been the absolute shits. I’m after getting my hair done, all trimmed up and such. Was thinking about getting some colour put in it but it’s a small fortune. Anyways, I’ll keep looking for that number. God love ya.”

“You have reached Mary at 709-837-2425. I’m not home right now but if you leave your name, number and a message, I’ll call you back when I get a chance.”

“Jesus, Mary. I wish you’d give me a call. You’re after forgetting my number though, I’d just about bet on that. That’s why these new phones with their built-in memory are no good. Can’t remember anyone’s number to save my life now, because I only got to select your name and it dials you on its own. Your old number, at least. Wish your girls didn’t change their last names. What a racket. Bonnie down the road is after passing away, God rest her soul. Pneumonia I think it was. I couldn’t get over to the funeral though cause it was raining something fierce. I sent her daughter flowers though, and put your name on the card. Hope I’ll hear from you soon.”

THIS WAS ALL

“You have reached Mary at 709-837-2425. I’m not home right now but if you leave your name, number and a message, I’ll call you back when I get a chance.”

“Well now, Mary. If you told me last year that we’d ever go two months without speaking to each other I would have said you were crazy. I feel like I’m going crazy here without you. Sometimes I go a full week without talking to anyone. I’ve been going to the hairdresser every Saturday. They must make awful fun of me when I’m gone, but I love the company. Just to have a chat with someone for a half hour. My hairdresser’s named Darlene. You might have met her before. She’s got two young kids, not even in school yet and she’s always showing me videos on her phone of them playing around. You’d get a kick out of it. Anyway, I imagine you’ll be home within another two months so hopefully there’s an end to this misery. God love.”

“You have reached Mary at 709-837-2425. I’m not home right now but if you leave your name, number and a message, I’ll call you back when I get a chance.”

“The snow’s after melting here now, Mary, so I’d say it’s only a matter of time before I see the cab winding down over the road. Every time a car goes by I don’t recognize, I perk right up like a dog, hoping it’s you. It’s a good thing the snow’s gone. You would have had some trouble getting into your house. I’d say the drifts were up past the door in the worst of it. Hope you haven’t got any leaks or anything. I would have went over there to check but I’m not sure what I’ve done with the spare key you gave me and I’m half nervous I’d take a fall. I’m even worried driving to my hair appointments now. There’s some fast drivers out on that road. Can’t wait to see you.”

“The mailbox you are trying to reach is full. Please try again later.”

THIS WAS ALL

“The mailbox you are trying to reach is full. Please try again later.”

“The mailbox you are trying to reach is full. Please try again later.”

“The mailbox you are trying to reach is full. Please try again later.”

Frances was in the bathroom when the cab pulled into Mary’s driveway. After all those months of waiting, she missed the one moment she had been counting down to. It was probably for the best. The two figures that got out of the car were tall and young, their backs straight and purposeful.

They were there to clean up what they could. The furniture and stuff could wait until summer, when they all came down. But they agreed it would be best to go through her personal things now, see what jewelry the girls might like to save. What photo albums they’d like to bring home. Throw out any food that was left in her cupboards.

“Jeez, Danny,” his sister pointed. “Look at all the voicemail messages mom got.”

The machine blinked steadily. *100 UNHEARD MESSAGES*. The red light glowing in the corner of the room, casting shadows on the cold walls.

Danny picked up the phone and pressed \* to listen to them.

“Please enter the password,” ordered the gentle robot voice.

“Do you have any idea what the password could be?”

His sister shrugged and he hung up the phone.

*ERASE ALL?* the red letters asked.