

## Mrs. Dougherty

The city's shadow swallows Central Park East's outermost trees as afternoon falls to evening. Mrs. Dougherty watches the transformation of light to dark from her window, breathing quietly, unwilling to disturb her sole company: the city's buzzy ambience.

Soon Sunday will become Monday, not that it particularly matters to her. All days now exist relatively indistinguishable from the next, except for some Fridays when her daughter calls, and some Mondays when her son calls, and some Wednesdays when she meets the girls for lunch. As leaves flicker into night, dripping season into season, time seems to pass slower than ever, and yet everything that has passed seems to have gone so quickly.

She inhales and closes her eyes. Memory has become increasingly elusive, but she persists. She imagines a time before anything else—before her grandchildren, before her children, and before Franky—back when she was just a little girl playing on the beaches of the Outer Banks. Back when the wind would whip around her, and she would run with it. Back when she could feel the sand warm her fingers, fill the space between her toes. When there was only wonder.

Now, every grain seems lost.

A honk from outside interrupts her reverie. She opens her eyes, peers down, searching the street, but only sparse cars and strangers greet her. No one to be found. She shivers. Even in August, there is never enough warmth to go around.

She crosses her arms and clutches her sweater closer to her chest. She will not let the cold bother her. No, this is to be a special Sunday.

First, she checks the two guest bedrooms. They are perfectly set; they haven't been touched

in ages. But she takes the look. Just in case. After all, it has been a long time since a guest has stayed the night.

Next, she prepares her dining room table with a rose-colored tablecloth. It lies bright under the room's harsh white light. She touches the soft fabric, then pinches it between her fingers.

Franky's nightmare cloth. Every time he saw it, he declared, "Too pink! Garish."

So she hid it. She shoved it deep into a closet—buried it so no one would witness its rich color for decades, while it grew dusty and wrinkled. Now, she strokes the back of her hand against it. How stupid she was to listen, she thinks.

Lastly, Mrs. Dougherty sits and waits. As she spends most of her days.

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"Ma, the apartment looks so drab. When did you take down dad's old paintings? Where's the one with the captain on the ship?" Tim walks over to the nearest white wall and taps it as if a painting will manifest out of the plaster. "Or that one with dad without a shirt beside that railroad next to the oncoming train? Where'd they go?"

Jessie touches her husband's shoulder, then smiles at her mother-in-law. "Don't patronize her."

Nicole plops down on the chair next to her grandmother and shrugs. "I never liked them."

Tim and Jessie shoot their daughter a grave look. Nicole returns the frown, then crosses her arms.

Time stretches as the family waits for a response. Mrs. Dougherty smiles at her granddaughter. "I never liked them either."

She turns to her son, Tim. How strange he appears. Where is the little boy that ran around their apartment in his green underwear forty years ago? The one who had begged his father to

make time for career day at school. Now his hairline is receding, his gut growing, his nose hairs bushing. In fact, on a second glance, he looks more like his father than ever.

“You two better get going already. You don’t want to be late for your show.” She winks at the thirteen-year-old with the blue-streaked hair. “We can hold down the fort.”

“You sure?” Tim looms over her. “We still have an hour.”

Jessie doesn’t hesitate. She shifts toward the door; she has already changed into her black dress and suede pumps a half an hour ago. “Come on,” she says to Tim, “your mother’s right. We don’t want to be late. And Nicole—”

Nicole refuses to look at her mother.

“You take good care of your grandmother.”

Nicole grunts.

Tim kisses the top of his mother’s head. “We won’t be too long. Enjoy yourselves. And Ma, if you want to order dinner for you and Nicole, we’ll pay for it.”

Mrs. Dougherty rolls her eyes. “Your father left behind plenty of money. You don’t need to worry about me.”

“Fine, Fine.” Tim walks toward the door as Jessie opens it, waves one final time, and steps through.

The door crashes to a close behind them.

Mrs. Dougherty and Nicole remain quiet, while the city’s faint hum sounds from outside like a sea of mechanical grasshoppers—thoraxes and chirps replaced by engines and honks.

Nicole asks, “So do you watch TV or something?”

Mrs. Dougherty laughs as much as her age allows her. A shallow hoarse chuckle. “Sometimes,” she says, “but not much. What about you? Do you watch a lot of TV?”

Nicole shifts in her seat. “Sometimes.” She glances around, but Mrs. Dougherty knows there is not much to be found in the dining room besides items and images that belong to an era beyond the girl.

“Do you want to go to the living room? Do you want to watch some TV?”

Nicole crosses her arms. “No, it’s fine.”

“Okay.”

They wait, again in silence, until Nicole asks, “Do you have any snacks, or something?”

Mrs. Dougherty smiles. “Yes.” She braces, then pushes herself off of her chair.

“Do you need help?”

Mrs. Dougherty shakes her head. After a final push and hobble, she stands hunched but stable. “I’ll be right back.”

She walks into the kitchen while Nicole calls out to her, “Grandma, what was grandpa like?”

Mrs. Dougherty reemerges with a plate of chocolate chip cookies and strawberries. After carefully laying it above the rose tablecloth and slowly taking a seat, she says, “Why do you ask?”

Nicole grabs a chocolate chip cookie and stuffs her mouth. Between her chomps, she says, “Well, I can’t remember him, and dad’s constantly talking about him. All this gooey stuff.”

“Gooey stuff?”

“Yeah, all the things he did. How great he was.”

Mrs. Dougherty leans her arms across the table and puts on a small smile. “Where should I start?”

Nicole swallows her cookie, then shrugs. “I don’t know. You tell me.”

“Ah, I see. I’ll start way back then. That’s how us old people spend our time, trying to look

all the way back.” She winks at Nicole.

“We met when we were both young in North Carolina. I was your age, and he was my brother’s friend. Did you remember my brother, your great uncle Matt?”

With half a cookie hanging out of her mouth, Nicole shakes her head.

“That’s a shame. You two would’ve got along well. He was always a rebel. A wild child. He traveled across the world, had great stories to tell. There was this one time—“

“What about Grandpa Frank?”

“Oh yes, that’s right. Well, he was Matt’s friend. I didn’t like boys too much then, but every time he came over, I still found myself staring at him. He was tall, with a nice, white smile, and a great laugh, and he was sixteen—“

“Sixteen?” Nicole’s eyes go wide. “I can’t imagine dating someone sixteen.”

Mrs. Dougherty chuckles softly and takes a strawberry for herself. “Things were different back then. Besides, that isn’t too far apart. It’s only three years.”

“But those are a big three years. Were you even in high school yet?”

“No, not yet.” She takes a small bite. The sweet taste is faint, faraway. Her teeth don’t allow for much more than a nibble at a time. “But high school is where we started getting closer. The first time we really spoke was the summer before high school. What a wonderful time. My parents decided we would take a trip to the Outer Banks, just for a day or two. And it just so happened that Matt asked if Frank wanted to come along with us, and, with his deep husky voice, he said, ‘Okay.’

“We were all in the Outer Banks, and I spent my time alone, walking the beach, playing in the sand, enjoying the wind. I loved just staring at the ocean. When I was a girl I imagined I would pilot a boat one day and sail around the world. I wanted to be a captain. Have you ever

been to the Outer Banks?”

Nicole shakes her head.

“Oh,” Mrs. Dougherty says, “that’s a shame. Your parents should take you. The city is nice, but it’s nothing like life out there.”

“Why don’t you move back then?”

“What?”

Nicole grabs another cookie. “Why don’t you move back to North Carolina? You have enough money to do it, right?”

Mrs. Dougherty stays silent, until she lets out a quiet laugh. “When you get to my age, it becomes hard to change things. Anyhow,” she says then laughs again, but louder, “no one wants to see me on the beach now. But back then? Back then I was quite the looker, believe it or not.

“So, there I was, the little girl I used to be, feeling the sand in my toes while I wandered and dreamed of sailing the ocean blue. I had walked far away from my mother and father and Matt, when I realized someone was trailing me. I turned around and there was Frank.

“I tell you—he looked so good under the sun. Tall, tan, big muscles, nice jaw. Dark, dreamy eyes.” She flutters her eyes like a peacock fanning their feathers. “I said to him, ‘Hello Frank.’

“He looked down at me and said in his deep voice, ‘One day I am going to marry you.’

“I was taken aback. ‘Marry me?’

“‘Yes,’ he said. ‘I’m going to marry you, Izzy.’”

“Then he left, and, as I watched his back, I suddenly found myself very interested in boys.”

Nicole twists her face as if her cookie has rotted and soured. “That’s weird.”

“What’s weird?”

“That he told a thirteen-year-old he was going to marry you.”

“Yes, it was a little strange.” Mrs. Dougherty laughs. “But Frank always spoke his mind and did what he wanted. Other people’s opinions were only minor inconveniences to him.”

A siren sounds from outside. Both women turn toward the window. Then it quiets. Outside, dusk is almost complete as darkness envelops the city. The sky has blackened, lit only by lights spread across streetlamps, apartments, towers, like a tapestry of weak bulbs pitched against an overwhelming black. Starless. Mrs. Dougherty stares at it, at the coming night.

“Grandma.”

“Hmm?”

“Grandpa.”

“Right. In high school we became much closer. He spent more time than ever with Matt, so more time around me too. We became more comfortable together. Always the charmer, he looked at people with all the energy in the world, with those fiery eyes. He liked it when people could see the greatness in him. He’d wrap them in his story, made them feel special too, like they were on a grand voyage, and he was leading them. We lived in Wallace—it was so small it probably isn’t even on the map anymore, but that didn’t stop Frank. He would tell anybody who would listen, ‘I’m going to leave this place. I’m going to make it big.’”

“Well,” Nicole says, “I guess he was right.”

Mrs. Dougherty pauses, taps once against the table. “I suppose so. Depending on how you look at it. Anywho,” she says as she finishes her strawberry, “we grew closer and closer, and then when I was seventeen, Frank’s ticket was called.”

“His ticket?”

“Yes.” Mrs. Dougherty nods. “We had a war going on. He was to report to training in two weeks. So we got married.”

“Wait, wait.” Nicole shakes her head. “You got married, just like that?”

“Just like that.”

“Didn’t you want to try to meet other guys? Or at least wait until he got back?”

Mrs. Dougherty rests her fingers along the deep creases of her cheek. She answers simply.

“That’s what people did back then.” Then she sighs. “Do you want to watch TV now? I can get more cookies.”

“Wait,” says Nicole, “you still haven’t told me anything about Grandpa Frank. Just how you met.”

“I guess you’re right. I don’t want to bore you.”

“Bore me? It sounds like you’re the only one getting bored.”

Mrs. Dougherty chuckles. “I’m sorry. Your father doesn’t like listening to me much. I’m not used to having such an attentive audience.”

“I get it,” Nicole says with a shrug. “Mom likes talking more than listening. And dad’s pretty good at watching football.”

“His father was also pretty good at watching football too. Well, to make a long story short, I waited for two years for him while I studied to be a teacher, and eventually he returned. What a reunion! How he hugged me, kissed me, but he was... different.”

“Different how?”

“It’s hard to say.” Mrs. Dougherty gazes at the pictures across the dining room’s walls, the collage of frozen memories. They rest watching, waiting, as vigilant invitations to reminisce, or, to occasionally, regret. Pictures of the family—Tim and his sister Stephanie, some cousins, some of Frank’s siblings—and Frank. Plenty of Frank. In one, he stands in a suit gazing out onto the city’s skyline. In another, he signs a contract. In a third, he wraps his arms around his wife. None



hang with Mrs. Dougherty alone.

“In a lot of ways, he hadn’t changed. He was still determined. Confident. Strong. But it was like... the little patience he had before the war was gone. His passion had become more of a fervor.

“After he returned, we got our own apartment and I worked as a teacher while he worked for his father’s cotton mill factory. Every day he would come home late into the evening and complain and say he wanted to leave and do something else. I would hold him and tell him to stay strong. I told him his job wasn’t that bad, that his dad was sure to give him the business, but if he wanted to, he could go to college. I’d tell him maybe he’d pick up a thing or two there.” Mrs. Dougherty shakes her head. “He never did like that idea.”

“What idea did he like?”

“Well, he wanted to make money and make it fast.” Mrs. Dougherty taps the bottom of her wrinkled chin. “It didn’t really much matter how, just as long as he was in charge. He said he needed to find something quickly. He wanted to own his own house, get our family started as fast as possible, and leave behind Wallace.”

“What did you want?”

Mrs. Dougherty turns to her granddaughter. The girl has lain her arm along the table and tucked her plump cheek above it.

“Are you tired?” Mrs. Dougherty asks. “You can take a nap, if you’d like.”

Nicole yawns, then says, “No, I’m not tired.”

“Okay.” Mrs. Dougherty smiles. “You don’t give me nearly as much trouble as you give your parents.”

“Well,” Nicole yawns again, “your stories are a lot more interesting than theirs. They’re

always just telling me to do stuff.”

“They are your parents, that is their job.”

Nicole pushes herself back up and leans into her chair. “Yeah, I get it. But they don’t need to be so *annoying* about it.”

“Fair enough. Wise beyond your years, as usual. Well, to answer your question, I don’t remember what I wanted back then. All I remember was this one night. Frank came home, furious. He said, ‘Start packing up, we’re moving.’

“I asked him, ‘Why? What happened?’

“He just kept shaking his head. ‘Dad, dad,’ he said, then he waved me away. He said we needed to leave immediately.”

Nicole wakes up some. She grabs another cookie. “What? What’d happened?”

Mrs. Dougherty opens her mouth, then hesitates. She says, “I wouldn’t find out for a long, long time. Before we left, while Frank was out, I called my brother to see if he knew what had happened, but he wouldn’t answer any of my questions. He said, ‘Just ask Frank. Just ask Frank.’ He was quite angry as well.”

“So what did you do?”

“Well, what do you think I did?” Mrs. Dougherty picks up another strawberry and starts nibbling. “I went. I left behind my job, and we traveled up the Northeast. That’s where Frank said the money was. We went to D.C, then to Philadelphia. Frank would pick up some odd jobs there and start ventures that usually failed. He tried to sell everything from umbrellas to melons.”

“What did you do?”

“Me?” Mrs. Dougherty points at herself. “I thought you wanted to know more about Frank.”

“Yeah... But now I want to know what you were doing.”

“Well,” Mrs. Dougherty says with a half-smile. “I did a lot of waiting, and I tried to meet some younger women in each of the cities and make some friends. Frank never wanted me to work. He always said he was going to handle everything.” Mrs. Dougherty winks. “And that was around the time I became pregnant with your aunt.”

“Aunt Polly?”

“That’s the one.”

“So did you guys settle down in Philadelphia?”

“We almost.”

“Almost?”

“There was one late, a late night, when Frank came home, and after some thinking, I told Frank I was tired of moving. I told him I was tired of him coming home so late, and that I wanted him to stick around for one of his jobs. Even the factory jobs had good pay back then. Enough to get a house, start a family.

“I realized immediately I shouldn’t have said anything. I had never seen him so angry. He said I didn’t understand, that he was doing all this for us, that I was being ridiculous. I got to the point of tears, which he didn’t like either. Eventually, he left.”

“Left? Where did he go?”

“I never did completely figure out, but I had my guesses. I tried to get a call through to Matt over and over deep into the early hours of the morning, but he had moved on from Wallace as well and God only knows where he was. I ended up calling Frank’s father. I asked him why his son and him had fought a couple years back, what had happened. He wouldn’t say anything much. He just clicked his tongue over the phone and said, ‘I taught that boy better.’

“I asked him what he meant, but I never did get an answer.

“The next morning Frank returned and said we would move one final time, for the last time. He had met a friend who introduced him to the markets, the bond market, and he was going to work with him in the Big Apple.

“I wanted to know where he had been, but he didn’t tell me. Next I asked how he could work on Wall Street; he didn’t have a degree. He did answer that. He said his friend said it didn’t matter, as long as he could talk to people well. The degree could come later. And it turned out he was right, in fact Frank was—”

“Wait, wait, wait.” Nicole hops out of her chair and waves her arms. “I don’t get any of this.”

“Which part?”

“All of it! Where was Grandpa Frank? What did him and his dad fight about? Why does dad hype him up so much?”

“Well... he was a great man.”

“He doesn’t sound so great to me.”

Mrs. Dougherty lets out a small chuckle, followed by a soft sigh. She taps Nicole’s chair. “Sit down, my darling. Let me finish.”

Reluctantly, Nicole plops back down, now with her arms fully crossed. She mumbles something, but Mrs. Dougherty cannot make it out. The world has been quieting itself to her for years now. She continues.

“So we went to the city, and sure enough Frank excelled at his job, just as he said he would. I asked him what he did a couple of times, but I never got the full picture. He would say, ‘Talk to people.’ That’s what he was best at—talking. He could talk someone’s ear off. He was a salesman, and that’s what did, made sales.

“The market boomed from the 50s to the 70s, then there were some troubles, but Frank

always seemed to land on his feet. He rose through his bank's ranks, working late nights, while I raised your aunt and father. He would buy me the loveliest gifts—pearls and rings and necklaces and,” Mrs. Dougherty says as she gestures around the apartment, “eventually this place too.

That's how things went.”

Nicole waits, watching her grandmother nibble her strawberry to its stem, until she realizes her grandmother has finished her tale. “That's it?”

“Yup.”

“What?” Nicole exclaims.

“What more do you want?”

“Is there a bigger story? A big vacation or something?” Nicole taps her fingers along the tablecloth. “It just seems like a little bit of an abrupt ending, that's all.”

Mrs. Dougherty shrugs. “You can ask your father for the funny stories. It's hard to remember everything now. It all happens very quickly.”

“And what about Grandpa Frank?”

“What about him?”

Nicole bites her lip, glances away, then looks back at her grandmother. “He sounds awful.”

“Hey.” Mrs. Dougherty playfully shakes her fist. “Don't say that about your grandfather.”

“But, he was never around, seems kind of mean, and it's like he just bossed you around.”

Seconds pass as eons while Nicole waits for a response, but Mrs. Dougherty says nothing. The sounds of faint cars from the city's streets fill the dining room, exhaling their rumbles into the apartment's stale air. In recent years, the world has turned slower... slower... slower for Mrs. Dougherty, and now it seems to have finally come to a stop. She looks at her granddaughter, gazes. She journeys deep into her brown eyes. She sees the dunes of the Carolina coast, the

bronze countryside in the fall. Dirt roads, the bark of lush trees. Rich hills filled with soil and life, a blossoming world in bloom. She sees the youth she has lost. She sees the girl on the beach who dreams that she will one day sail across the world as a captain.

“We were from North Carolina.” A thin smile creeps across her face. “I loved it there. During the weekends we could drive to the mountains. Frank didn’t like them much, but I loved them. And the grass... it’s so green there, and there’s so much nature. On every country road we would drive down, we would play this game where the first person to spot a group of cows would get a point. I always won.”

Mrs. Dougherty sighs, her whole body heaving in the process. She coughs once, then twice, then stills herself. “Listen Nicole. Listen closely. As a girl, I was Izzy Wilson. Then after the wedding, I became Izzy Dougherty. Then, a couple years later, Frank said, ‘Izzy sounds too childish. We’re too old for nicknames,’ so I became Isabella Dougherty. And that’s who I’ve been for fifty years. Isabella Dougherty.”

Mrs. Dougherty feels hard air bellow and roll through her worn lungs as she inhales and raises her voice, finding a hidden power, summoning a fire that she believed had long burnt out, putting her whole soul into sound.

Ignited, she says, “And I’m tired of it. I’m tired of it. My name is Izzy Wilson.”

All goes quiet. She blinks twice and snuffles once. “Do you understand Nicole?”

Nicole looks away to the floor, to her feet. “I guess so.”

Grandma Izzy leans over and holds her granddaughter by her shoulders, trying to shield her from the world, keep her there. Force her to stay that little girl forever. “Don’t allow a man to dictate your life. Stay true and hold strong. Do you understand?”

Nicole takes a moment, then looks up and gives a small nod.

“And, if we’re talking advice now, don’t get old. It’s too strange. You get older on the outside, but forget to get older on the inside, while the world stops seeing you, and a stranger begins to look back at you in the mirror. All things considered, I suggest you avoid it.”

Nicole remains still, not shying away from her grandmother’s small, frail hands. She whispers, “What about Grandpa? Do you regret it?”

She takes a deep breath, then exhales. “Do I regret not going on a boat and exploring the world? Yes, a small part of me might wonder what could have been. But on the other hand, I don’t.”

She uses her remaining fumes of energy to push herself up, climb from her chair, and stand behind Nicole. She swoops down and embraces her from above. “In the end it was all worth it. I don’t doubt that for a second.” She kisses the top of her granddaughter’s head. “After all, if things went any different, we never would’ve had you. So of course it was worth it. I love you.”