

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 details of the frightful events of the morning of October the twenty-seventh. The real story of the death of sixty-two year old Frances Blanche Cartwell, could not be divulged. The photograph would have to do.

It was a simple newsprint shot, fuzzy and gray-toned, of a woman heading to the far cusp of middle-age. On closer examination, Frances looked eerily similar to those old-time renderings of Catholic female martyrs, magical beings subsumed by a greater prize, capable of a flirtatious wink even at the hands of their executioners. Maybe it was her eyes.

But the photograph was just Frances, wasn't it? A grainy, slightly younger 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 just Frances, the woman who never left home without a cell-phone charger, a collapsible umbrella, a travel pack of Band-aids (with built-in Neosporin), and a toothbrush, also collapsible.

But somehow, Frances, the 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 stock of her shoes and prepared for

the worst. When her sister and brother ran barefoot to greet the ice cream truck, she grabbed the flip-flops stuffed behind the front door before following. She hid slippers under her bed, and stashed an extra pair of boots in the hall closet for the day when the ground began to buckle or leak. She'd seen images in National Geographic of hot plumes of lava spewing from volcanoes. 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, maybe even fall. Are you going to wear a helmet, too?”

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

In middle school, Frances proved herself 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 ar-tees-ta.”

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.

Frances’ early life held few surprises, spanning a gradual transition from cautious student to frequent maid of honor. She was a stoic friend, empathetic to the extreme, yet harmless enough to be the bridal party compromise every time. As a single professional, she grew increasingly alone as her friends delved into lives too busy and complicated for her risk-averse constitution. An early career in real estate faltered, but she found her

niche in the insurance business where she spent many years perusing data tables and offering prudent advice.

She never played the piano anymore. In fact, she rarely listened to music at all, preferring a state of constant vigilance to the dreamy hypnosis induced by a sonata. She commuted on foot as long as the weather cooperated—safer, all in all—by way of a well-traveled trail, some stretches even paved, from her home to her west-facing office (southern exposure involved too many damaging UV rays). She lived alone, although she'd once considered adopting a cat. As if toxoplasmosis and feline leukemia weren't enough, actuarial tables forced her to conclude that cat ownership was doomed to result in heartbreak. 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. For her part, Frances had no idea why the sight of Chet's hands set off a fluttering in her chest, or why she blushed when he relayed the attendance sheet from his desk to hers.

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 smelled the ink on the page and traced the curves of the letters with her finger. Her heart began to pound. She willed it to stop, but

reason wasn't enough to override the strange and compelling heat that flushed her cheeks and pulsed through her body. That evening, the weather was unusually warm and sticky, so even Frances wore shorts 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 looking at her. 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 paused 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 made nervous small talk. Chet waded into the lake as the evening sun slipped beneath the horizon. 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 lapped at the dock, immediate and languorous. It smelled fresh, so unlike the chemical and pee-ridden municipal pool she'd made a long habit of avoiding. Frances felt her pores open to its tender 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. The water swallowed her knees. She took another step. Wavelets 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 coat of emotional armor.

Afloat on this current of desire, the young lovers' lips met. Frances had a moment of serious reservation, a stomach-churning awareness of a new and ultimate risk. 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 waters justification, and her body became alive and responsive, greedy with its own surprising agenda of exploration. Careful, conservative Frances kissed Chet back with the abandon of an unpracticed sixteen-year old. She allowed his fumbling hands access to whatever he dared reach for without removing any clothing.

All might have been perfect, had Sister Mary Stephen not broken from the party for her evening rosary recitation. She wandered to the edge of the lake only to discover youthful body parts 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 rogue gust rustled up a faint fishiness and exhumed the odor of algae and drowned leaves from the water's depths. Chet's fingers around her waist weighed on her. Her damp skin bristled with goose bumps. Frances broke from Chet's embrace. A wet strand of hair clung to her nostrils, so recently flared with the effort of passion-quickenened breath, now clogged with the musky decay of things long-submerged.

Frances melted before Sister Mary Stephen's dire warnings and merciless justice. Her life's practice of separating herself from impending doom, 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, 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-screened interpretation of the unfurling of our universe informs us that if the whole process were condensed into a mere twenty-four hours, the first stroke of midnight is when things really heat up. So it was with the life of Frances. Her first hypothetical stroke rang out when she was sixty-two years old, on a fall morning.

She opened her front door to appraise the weather and retrieve the newspaper. A grayish sky warned her that an umbrella was in order for the day. She leafed through the newspaper to insure that she hadn't missed any egregious events while she slept. On the front page of the local section, boldface type alerted her to the alarming news that yet another rape had occurred, this one in a neighborhood within a few miles of her house. After some cogitation, she opened her jewel box and took out a small silver key. She reached under her bed and pulled out a gray box. She inserted the key into the box, lifted the lid, and slipped a small handgun from its velvet wrapper and buried it in the bottom of

her purse. Her hands would know where to find it, in the horrifying and unlikely event that she'd actually need it.

She applied a coating of Burts Bees balm on her lips, in anticipation of the dryness of the upcoming heating season and began her customary journey from home to office on foot, her gun and umbrella, along with a multitude of other useful items, tucked in the marsupial pouch of her purse. 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. Although quite sore, she was relieved to find it intact. She bent down and picked up the offending object, a worn-looking fountain pen, a dark droplet of ink on its tip. A gasp escaped her.

She stuffed the fountain pen into the pouch next to her umbrella, not even bothering to wipe it or insert it into the stitched tubular compartment 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 sat at her desk and polished the pen with a tissue. With her index finger, she traced 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 top line, pen slanted just so, the way the nuns had taught her. She wrote a name that she remembered from long ago. The ink was the same as it was in her school days, 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 name glistened on the paper in front of her. An avalanche of memories crashed the barrier of her brain's solid underpinnings. Forgotten

moments slipped through aged, crumbling 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, her foot began to ache. 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, the way her brain was at this moment swelling 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, and to browse the shelves for a strong pain reliever. She had no idea what sort of product would address her symptoms. The pain that had started as a mere jab was fast consuming her, spreading up her leg and into her gut, until even her head throbbed.

After wandering the drugstore aisles in desperation, Frances settled for an icepack and an eye mask. Maybe a nap would help. 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 another element of new 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. Through the dull scrim of her own pain, 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, that hopeful laying, then patiently expelling yet another layer of thick, nurturing blood. Another regret? Her ears filled with an odd buzzing sound. She wanted to go home and hide from the assault of the day.

“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 sort of curtain 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 of a 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.”

Frances completed her transaction, and waited while Ruth paid for the Midol and scribbled a note allowing permission for Frances to retrieve her daughter. Frances slipped the note and the Midol into her capacious purse, along with the umbrella and the Band-aids and everything else in her ever-expanding bag of life’s remedies. She headed for her car, still puzzled by her own sudden generosity. The pain in her gut and the

throbbing in her head abated somewhat. She drove to the high school, the public one, not the old brick building where she'd studied, with its 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. A guard in uniform admitted her through a set of glass doors. He studied the note from Carrie's mom, and then asked for her driver's license, which she dutifully produced. He nodded and sent her to the school office, where a new guard stared into space from a high-backed stool. At that moment, Frances remembered that she'd slipped her handgun into her bag before she left home early that morning. It was so uncharacteristic of her to fail to mention this essential bit of information to the guard. If it weren't for that fountain pen, she wouldn't have become so addled.

It was too late to run. Frances was about to explain, apologize even, as the guard opened her bag. She had a permit for the gun, had logged the appropriate number of practice hours. She knew how to use it, too, and how to safeguard it when not in use. And she, of all people, understood its terrible power.

It was the day, she thought. Everything about the day felt upended.

Before she could utter a word, the guard gave a perfunctory peek into her bag, and handed it back to her. He gave her a form and asked her to sign it. A woman with a frizzled pageboy took the form to another room. Within minutes, the woman returned and handed it to Frances with a photocopy of her driver's license and an official stamp in the corner. Frances debated whether to mention the gun, but she had no idea what to say, and she didn't want to cause a scene. Instead, she resolved that she would pick up Carrie and

leave the school as quickly as possible. She squared her shoulders and joined the controlled chaos of the high school hallway.

The students ignored her as they loped along the tiled floor 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? Her nervousness about the gun in her purse evaporated as she fought a rising sense of the futility of her entire existence. Why had she allowed herself to emerge from that lake and lock herself into the fortress that had become her life? 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 gleaming floor, her bag laden with its stash of too many antidotes bumping against her hip. The hallway overflowed with students. They called out to each other, laughed, and split around her as if she were a ghost. They were right, she thought. She was a ghost of what she could have been, too worn now to spin what was left of her life into anything of substance at all. At a propped open doorway, beneath a black-lettered sign that said Health Office, she stopped.

She heard the sounds first. Pops. Sharp and crisp. She didn't realize what they were until the screams began, until blood, red and oxygen-rich, pooled in a spot not ten feet away from her, 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 stood in the open doorway, hands clutching her head, her mouth opening to form a scream. He was as young and fresh-faced as his classmates, with a manic tilt to the way he held his gun. He leveled it now at Carrie.

In a flash, Frances retrieved the pocket-sized Smith and Wesson 638 Airweight revolver from her bag. Despite her sore foot, she lunged and planted herself between Carrie Delaney and her murderous classmate. While time ticked off in slow and languid nanoseconds, Frances raised and readied her pistol. She was meticulous as she centered the shooter in a delicately orchestrated frame. His halo of thick hair was at the top, his feet, in sneakers with untied shoelaces, at the bottom.

With sure fingers, she encircled the trigger and pulled it. The boy with the gun flinched. Blood soaked his pants at his left thigh, precisely where she'd aimed. He pointed his gun at Frances and fired off a stutter of shots 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,

followed by a heat, then a breezy coolness in her upper chest that spread throughout her body.

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, and the blood that now 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 had a whole houseful of pets that she buried in the garden under little crosses when they died, and a piano, where she would pound out a wild sonata, and then push back the bench, throw away her shoes and walk barefoot to the lake where she would go skinny-dipping with boys in the moonlight.

Now the blood was a torrent, warm and as soft as the water of the lake that night with Chet, the nonjudgmental lapping of small and gentle ripples of acceptance. She smelled the breeze, so fresh, its scent of promise and desire skimming the glassy lake surface. Chet had dived beneath its surface, daring her to follow. With her little remaining strength, Frances opened her palms. She invited the neutral waters to close around her.

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 health office in a hushed huddle. The Smith and Wesson 638 Airweight revolver that Frances had put to such timely use 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 the shooter's thigh first, then silencing him with subsequent shots, thereby ending his murderous reign over his classmates. Hapless Frances was merely the last of his victims. How could it be otherwise?

The handful of police and administrators who knew the truth were sworn to secrecy. It would be frightening, they 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 categorize 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, alongside but 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 about that feat 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 at least 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 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 handsome young photographer 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, 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, reminding herself that the life of an artist was not for her.

Still, if one paused over the photo of Frances amid the tragic gallery of so many eager and unlined faces, and if one then bothered to study it more closely, one could discern something remarkable, shining through the muted gray tones.

Hers was the portrait of an artist, after all.