

WHAT FRANCIS SAW

Francis looked into the marbled dove grey of the sink and let his eyes rest on the yolky tobacco stains he had left, just beginning to realize the power in their minuteness. Alice had let those stains get comfortable, treating them as guests of her husband while they shined under the drop lights of the vanity. She cleaned around them with care, her elbow a ninety-degree angle as she meticulously scrubbed the basin. Often, she would mist up when she looked at the sink, but a quick twist of the shower knob would envelop her in steam enough to compensate for this momentary slip. When she did this, Francis would apologetically gesture a goodbye, and slip unnoticed out of the master bath. There was no use trying to comfort a woman whose sanity rested on preserving a stain; a wife who must have thought Francis himself a stain, and who could not be rescued from her own hysteria. These were the things he thought about as he saw Alice close the door to the master bath, sliding silently down the tile as the shower ran.

He looked out from the second floor to the kitchen, and wondered if the girls knew how their mother was struggling. On top of his concern for his wife, he knew that her behavior had an effect on his girls. His daughters, the imprints he left in the world, were just as delicate as the yellowed spittle, but nothing could preserve them. The world, he knew, was not a sink. They would break wrists riding bikes over rocky embankments, twist ankles tripping on woodpiles, scratch up their arms hiding in briar. He saw all of this, and could imagine himself catching them just before it happened, but the premonition slipped from his mind as he gripped the railing. He had been shown what suffering would look like for his children by the universe; there was to be no denying it, these things were ordained, divine. Knowing this, he made it his mission to accompany the girls as far as he could, and try to teach them how to take care of themselves. The futility of this mission, the great anxiety of any parent, did not escape him.

Marie, the youngest, was better off for her lack of years. She had an integrity that clung close to her, a dirty security blanket. For this, Francis was thankful. She was a keen observer, a watcher, cautious. And so, Marie would grow up naive to the majority of the world's danger, shying away from the unfamiliar. Eventually, he knew, this would make her angry, and she would carry a sense of injustice due to the world's inability to deliver

the innocuousness it promised. She would process those feelings somewhere in her late twenties, forgive herself, make peace with the unreliability of life, and settle into a quiet success—repeating the process her parents began by building a family. Francis saw all of this in Marie as he watched her sleep soundly, late at night when the world was the most unreliable. She was the meek, and would thus inherit. In fact, she would do well enough on her own that Francis would not need to intervene—only support, quietly, and from a respectful distance.

The problem, Francis knew, would lie with Caroline. Caroline was a fire that refused to be extinguished. It was Caroline who, at age eight, shocked her father by asking if she could use the dictionary to learn what curse words meant. Where had she even heard “fuck” at that age? And why was he so irrationally angry that she had? Caroline. Caroline, Caroline, Caroline. She was terribly clever and sought attention over all else, which Francis knew meant she wouldn’t be popular at all with the sort of people that could rein in her intensity. It was for this reason that Francis knew it would fall to him to keep a sharp eye on her acidity. So, he started immediately. He knew that she would sit at her nightlight reading long after her mother had cajoled her into her room for the evening, and Francis would sit vigil at the foot of her bed, trying to convince his eldest to behave.

He sighed, “I’ve told you a thousand times, and I know your mother has, too. You’re going to hurt your eyes smashing yourself up under that nightlight, little girl. There’s a reason we want you in bed by ten. You’re a terror to wake, you know that? You’re still going to have to get up at seven for Mass, and don’t you think for a second you’ll be in bed a minute after.” She peered over her shoulder, looking past him into the dark bedroom, but returned to her reading, unmoved. The same passivity came when he tried to wake her in the morning, and again the following evening.

The one thing he knew, without question, was his daughter had once revered him with a steadfastness rivaling her impunity. Caroline was a challenge, and had the stubbornness of a mule, a stubbornness that she no doubt inherited from her father. Yet, he was the one who could reason with her. When she was very young, somewhere between looking at grasshoppers and looking up cusses, she would sit still on a rocking horse her father carved out of elm, and read to him from whatever she had picked up at the moment. Mostly, it was terrible young-adult fiction relying heavily on repetition and bodily humor. He didn’t agree with it, but at least it kept her reading. They could spend entire afternoons without direct conversation, the only exchanges being her recitations and his chuckling. She had

stated in her matter-of-fact voice one day:

“Did you know they don’t have recess for animals?” Her eyes drifting from Captain Underpants down to the rocking horse.

“What?” He turned to face his daughter, more than a little concerned for what would come next.

“Recess. For. Animals. We were at the zoo and they said they stay in cages all day!” She sat up straighter, and added “and they make them eat broccoli.”

Francis debated which point to concede to his daughter. “That’s tough, about the recess,” he paused “but I bet they enjoy the broccoli.” “Impossible!” His daughter shook her head, aghast, and went back to the book.

These subjects that suited a child, her books, were worlds away from his work in the financial sector—but somehow her tone was the same as a CEO. She was a child in size but an adult in sensibility. He didn’t have to say much to keep her interested, and she didn’t have to do much to please him endlessly.

But that evening, under the nightlight, Caroline said nothing, even as her father grew short-tempered and his voice strained. She kept her back to him, slowly turning pages under the incandescence. The deliberation in her movements, the hunched shoulders, told him she was somewhere else, the fire in her still burning, refusing to yield to the dark.

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Things change so rapidly with little girls. When they were young, Caroline grew like a weed in all directions and Marie remained oddly cherubic. Every day they looked just a little bit different, and Francis would joke that Alice was playing a practical joke, switching children out as he slept. The girls’ relationship to one another shifted as well; they had stints as confidants, as bitter enemies, and occasionally as partners in crime. Even as a brother to seven sisters himself, Francis did not understand how quickly the two could oscillate from one role to another. Francis was somehow always caught off guard by his daughters, and always struggling to keep up with who they were becoming. It was as if he had an extra full-time job, tracking their growth and development almost clinically in order to know how best to handle each. He remembered the Bambi incident vividly.

He had fixed breakfast, fried eggs and crispy bacon, to soften the blow of an early morning. At the stove, he cursed a bit too loudly as he burned his wrist with grease, and as he turned to the faucet to ease the sting, he heard quick footsteps.

“Dad,” Marie whispered, peeking her head into the kitchen, “Caroline’s crying about the deer again.” Marie reached her hand out to him, and he took it as she toddled over, leading him from his bacon and eggs into the foyer, where the glass of the front window was fogged with the imprint of a nose. He could hear quiet sniffing.

There was Caroline, collapsed on the other side of the entry way, tears streaming. Marie dropped her father’s hand and went to Caroline, patting her back.

“It’s okay. There’s always a friend in the forest.” She tapped on Caroline’s shoulder like her mother would, and Francis surveyed the scene. It was morning, but not quite light out, and somehow both girls were awake. Mornings typically started later and required many, many wake up visits from Alice and Francis. Yet there they were, awake in the predawn, carrying on about a cartoon. In footie pajamas, his eldest laid against her little sister, shuddering.

“It’s—not” she hiccupped, “it’s—it’s not fair!” Caroline looked at her father and cried harder. He knew it was bigger than the deer, but he didn’t have the words. Things tended to ebb and flow faster than he could respond to them. Sometimes, he didn’t understand the girls at all.

Francis recalled a distinct period lasting three weeks where both Marie and Caroline slept in their parents’ bed every night. The two daughters would curl up on either side of their mother in silence, and the three of them would edge Francis out, to the point that he stopped coming upstairs and instead slept on a couch in the living room. Marie was seven, and would sleep soundly against the wall. Caroline was nine, and would lie with her back to her mother and sister, facing the door, often with her eyes open, awake until the early daylight hours. When Francis awoke in the morning, the girls would be home from school, parked in front of the television, and Alice would move slowly around the house, picking things up and moving them around laboriously, until retiring back into her bedroom early in the evening. It was maddening. Nothing was getting done, the house was mostly in shambles, and the women seemed oblivious to the fact that they were living in suspended animation. It continued dragging on like this until one morning Francis awoke to his sister Eileen sitting at

the kitchen table, pleading with Alice to send the girls with her for a weekend, and take time to get herself back into a routine.

Eileen was clearing the kitchen table matter of factly, sweeping old periodicals and coupons into the trash can. Francis had no idea what Eileen was doing there, but he was more than thankful to have someone else intervening for his wife, who had of course been unresponsive to his questions.

“It can be so hard to keep up with. I know. It always is.” She gave a once over to the floor, noticing the crumbs. “Let the girls stay by me, just while you catch up.”

Francis sighed and leaned against the cabinets, waiting for his wife to respond. When she didn’t, he tried to interject. “What’s the harm in one weekend?”

Alice was unmoved. She sat at the kitchen table, her gaze fixed in the distance. She didn’t seem to notice Eileen’s expectant gaze upon her.

“Well, I’ll take that as a yes. We’ll be at the house; it will be good for them to be with their cousins. Give you a little peace.” Eileen gave the kitchen one more weary look, gathered up the girls, and headed out.

“She means well,” Francis told his wife, still leaning against the cabinets. “The girls could use the structure, and I know you hate disorder. We can make a plan, do one thing at a time.”

She didn’t seem to notice. Alice stayed at the table, unspeaking, eyes vacant, for the rest of the evening.

The girls stayed with Eileen almost a month, and Alice slowly got her stamina back. It didn’t really make a difference, though; she lapsed back into her cycle upon the girls return to their home. Things passed that way, glacially, and Francis knew this was one part of their lives he could not intervene in. Later that year, Caroline began sleeping in her own bed again, while Alice and Marie stayed in the master bedroom. Caroline was less and less herself; answering in monosyllables, she was more likely found lying on a couch than fighting her mother. Francis never caught her reading, by nightlight or otherwise. He knew his eldest, saw the light fading from her once wild eyes, and saw her receding into herself; perhaps most tragically, though, was Francis’ knowledge that this was a beginning. It was, unfortunately, all a part of the fate that Caroline had been assigned. While Alice and Marie would grow closer, grow stronger, Caroline would fall victim to her own complacency. These, he knew, would be her most lonely days; they would set the stage for the most dangerous times ahead,

and the best he could do was try to reason with her.

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Francis sat next to Caroline in the back of a prowler and let hot tears stream down his front as his daughter fixed her eyes on the windows, stony and unmoved. She had fallen in with the fast crowd, and was paying the price weekend after weekend, no matter how he railed at her as she returned at midnight, then two, then six if at all. On this night, under the blue and red lights that permeated her surroundings, she was silhouetted in the same manner she had been around the nightlight, haloed even. She sat in the car, still stoic, but for the first time in seven years, addressed her father.

“I bet you think I’m a real shit for all of this. Listen, I know how bad I look right now, and I’m sorry. I can’t undo anything, but I can say I never wanted to disappoint you, dad. Anyways it’s not as if you’re here to do something about it.”

She took a heavy, staggered breath, choking on the same tears that her father shed invisibly. “Everything fell apart after you died. You and I both know that, and it’s not as if me staying in that house every night with those people is going to make me better. I have to be strong for myself. No one is looking out for me, nobody at home wants me to succeed, and I think it’s going to be that way as long as I keep passing my classes and working. Bare minimum shit, that’s what they want from me. All I am is a placeholder. I remind them too much of you, and I never asked for that.”

She heaved, startling her father with her emotion. “I never thought I could feel so much at once. I sit at home and feel you everywhere and nowhere, all the time. You left us all and I’m trying to clean it up and it just isn’t working. I miss you, and I hate you for leaving me.” She sighed, and looked out towards the fluorescence. “And then when I hate you, I hate me.”

Francis absorbed it all, knowing that it wouldn’t be enough. This was the pain in the back of his throat, the sickness in his stomach when he had first learned he was not well, coming to fruition. Grief was a size all of its own, and he knew it filled the car his daughter was in, the home he had passed away in, and everywhere in between.

At that instant, an officer opened the door to Caroline’s right, and bent down to speak to the young criminal.

“Caroline Ash, I am sick of seeing your face in the back of my squad car, you read me? These guys are no good for you. Clean yourself up, if I catch you in another car with one fart’s worth of marijuana in it, you’re

done for. Stop pissing away your future.” He stopped, took a quick breath in, and softened his tone with Caroline.

“I don’t know why you have to put your mother through this. You would think she’s been through enough, having to deal with you and your sister on her own. She’s not doing so hot, you know? I’m going to write you a warning, and then I am driving your sorry self home and you’re going to apologize for being such a headache. Now you just keep quiet.”

“Thanks, Paul. I appreciate it.” Caroline’s voice softened.

“Stop calling me Paul! When I’m out here and you’re in there it’s Officer Green, you read? I didn’t get this job being soft, and I’m not going to keep it if I keep covering for you, and I don’t care how inconvenient that is, miss.”

He slammed the door, and Caroline shut her eyes, wet with embarrassment and embedded with a million tiny striations of guilt and remorse, letting her back ease into the hard plastic of the seat. Francis sat there, silently, and wondered just who his daughter was. Was she the person who he shielded his eyes from as she shared lit cigarettes with the shaking fingers of stubble-faced boys, cussed with abandon, and crept into closed swimming pools? Or was she somehow less than that... Was the abandon in her eyes the symptom of something lost and dangerous, and entirely irretrievable? He grew angry, and for the first time thought about all the terrible ways his daughter let him down. The smoking, the disrespect, the lack of motivation. If he was there, well, if—that’s a loaded word. “If” was the difference between a father daughter dance and a candle lit on Sundays. “If” was all he had, and it dawned on him that “if” is not a scale adequate to measure the worth of his daughter. He settled himself on it.

Caroline, still lost, remained next to him. He placed a trembling, transparent hand over Caroline’s shoulder, but thought better of touching her. He knew, always knew that it was his death that would shake her deepest. It was going to be painful, and he knew his trace would loom largest over her, especially while she was young. She had become more reserved, but at the cost of her once great love for people, for knowledge, for her family. And in a way, Francis was gratified by her crying out in that cop car, because he knew this was the beginning of her upswing. She got lucky again, like she always did. The world would batter, bruise, and sometimes beat his daughter, but she kept on.

On the way home, Caroline leaned listlessly against the seat and faced the father she could not see. Francis looked at his daughter harder

than he had in years. He noticed in her frame a sort of collapse, shoulders set inwards, as if to protect her from the elements. Even on a clear night, she held herself like a bomb. Crisscrossed by the shadows of the wire mesh separating her from Paul, her face drew his attention. In her face he saw the grey eyes grown tired, edged in crow's feet suited to a woman twice her age, giving form to the stress of being so young. There is nothing to be gained without a loss, and although she was without a true youth, his daughter had learned lessons she would not have in a household where "dad" was someone to roll her eyes at. The bags under her eyes, from so many fights and losses, were undeniable. These scars, these imperfections, would serve as a medal of honor, strength irreplaceable. When Paul opened Caroline's door, Francis followed, hoping her mother would see the same.

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Francis liked sitting in the rear when Caroline drove. He couldn't help but feel that, at any moment, he wouldn't be the only departed soul in the car. He could hear his daughter's voice, just like she was still sitting on the rocking horse. Caroline sang quietly, and never at stoplights where passing cars could see her; in her voice he detected the same evenness that once pervaded the basement workshop. He shut his eyes, and was glad the speed limit was well under fifty.

In the weeks since she had been driven home, something in Caroline centered itself. She was home more; Francis was not as compelled to shadow her. This day would be one of their last together. As she pulled into the forty-seventh row of the cemetery, she sat as the engine cooled, wiping swollen eyes, bracing herself for the long walk ahead. As she shut the door, fumbling to lock it while maintaining a hold on the pictures in hand, Francis watched his daughter shrink into the distance. She was walking to his grave for the first time, almost eight years after his life had ceased. He would wait in the car.