

MAY'S LAST WISH

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May stood at the top of the stairs, hands clenched around the polished, oak banister, weeping. Her breath came in shallow bursts between her cries — there was little she could do to quiet them. Below, in the foyer, two shouting voices rose. She had raised and loved those voices for many years but now, dripping with disdain, they felt foreign to even a mother's ears.

When May was a girl, she'd dreamt of building her family. A man with strong arms and a wide smile. Two children, a girl and a boy, raised with love and care, bouncing across a manicured lawn, their cheeks rosy and curiosity insatiable. The faded Victorian house with sprawling grounds and dark trimmings was just an added bonus. After they had first moved in and gotten most of the boxes unpacked, she and Gerry stood on the back porch and relished in the life they'd built together.

But that was before the cancer whittled him to bone and the sour memory of his failing body remained in the living room turned hospital room turned morgue. The children grew up, tall and ambitious, with wide eyes that viewed the

world through lenses of broad acceptance and endless possibilities. She let them fly free, to search the earth and discover its secrets. She wanted the world for her babies, even if that meant they had to leave her.

May had spent many days in the past few years alone, puttering from room to room, drinking tasteless tea and trying desperately to rid the rooms of dust before it returned again. She took great pride in her home, dusting her curtains and planting perennials in the garden. When she woke, she'd have a large, steaming cup of tea in her sunroom and watch as the crows and cardinals circled her property with delicate grace. For a while, May found peace in being alone.

That was, of course, until she'd fallen. May was always careful, knowing a wrong step or a misplaced hand could mean a week in the hospital, or worse. As the years piled on, she was even more determined to stay independent. She hired a cleaner to help her with the second floor, a gardener to help with the landscaping, and employed a neighbor to help bring her groceries.

But her accident had been inevitable, one of her children had said, later, after they were home. An old woman living alone in such a massive house was bound to have its consequences sooner or later. Now, there was a decision to be made. Mom would have to go home with one of them. She needed a place to rest.

"California is beautiful and warm," her son argued. "Our property is peaceful. I'd like to think she'd love to be able to see the ocean. Anyway," he continued. "You don't get a say. You were close enough to check in every once in a while, but when was the last time you visited?"

"You moved too far away!" her daughter retorted. "And you have no right to judge. Mom should come with me. Florida is warm and beautiful, too."

They had pointed fingers and thrown blame across the

kitchen, eyes wide and filled with fury, spittle flying from sneering words. May couldn't bear it, clenching her fists as she stood in the doorway watching the two people she loved most in the world hurl insults and accusations around like boomerangs. And how could she possibly choose one of them to go with? They were placing her in an impossible predicament.

She found solace in her sunroom, where she watched dusk turn to dawn that first night her children had returned. But the once warm room had turned cold and bleak from the misery of their arguments. May's ears rang with agony, replaying the fights and the nasty words. Guilt crept upon her shoulders like dead weights, reminding her that the state of their relationship, the reason for their arguments, was her.

In the morning, her youngest had come to her, eyes swollen red. He could barely look at her, his head bowed and ashamed as he wept in the chair beside her.

"I wish you could see it, ma," he told her. "California. We've got a view of the Pacific. It's beautiful. Sadie and I go for dinners in Napa and drink red wine until the sun goes down. We're trying for a baby."

May wept tears of joy, her smile proud and wide for her baby boy — a father, himself. It was a joy she could barely contain. But still, he looked up at her sadly, his eyes heavy with tears. She reached her arms out, longing to hold him, to hug the sadness from his very being, but he shook his head and left her in the room, alone.

That evening, she found her daughter in the same chair, head buried in her hands, her shoulders heaving with sobs.

"I miss you, ma, and I'm sorry," she wept. "I should have come to see you, I should have come to check, to make sure you were taken care of. You've always been so independent and strong, I just never thought—"

Guilt seemed to have her in its slimy grip and she shook

her head as May approached. Like she couldn't bear the sight of her. May watched her daughter turn to leave the room and head to bed.

And then, the next morning, before she'd even gotten to her tea, May heard them fighting again from the top of the stairs. Sadness overwhelmed her for her two children — the same ones who had held hands as they walked through her garden, the same ones who had kissed each other's boo-boos and wiped each other's tears.

What had happened to her family?

"I'm not doing this," her daughter cried, wrestling something out of her brother's arms. "She's coming with me, and that's final."

"You can't be serious!" her son scoffed. "And where do you plan on putting her? Under the kitchen sink?"

Despite her unwavering love for her babies, the unfamiliar heat of anger boiled up inside her. They weren't even trying to keep their conflict in hushed whispers. They yelled and screamed and cried, slamming on tables and stomping their feet just to make their point. And, May thought bitterly, didn't she get a say in where she was heading? She deserved to be part of the discussion, too.

May was not an angry woman. She could count on one hand how many times she'd yelled in her life. She had always been meek and accommodating, looking on the bright side for things yet to come. But this had pushed her to the edge of no return. She grasped the banister and as carefully as she could muster, made her way to the wide, carpeted stairs that stood in the middle of her foyer. It felt like an eternity. Neither child looked up to address her. They simply scowled and screamed at one another, faces as red as the carpet she stood on.

When she reached the middle, she held herself steady, cleared her throat, and bellowed, "ENOUGH!"

The reaction was immediate. It was as if a hurricane blew through the middle of the house, knocking out the lights, and blasting a gust of wind through the wide foyer. In one slow, synchronized movement, both children looked up the stairs at her, their eyes wide, faces void of color. Both of their similar mouths were puckered in Os of disbelief.

May instinctively crouched, heart beating wildly, looking over her shoulder and up the stairs for the source of the blast. Only there was nothing there. No explanation, no reason for why her anger had created such a phenomenon. She looked back at her terrified children, her anger softening as their faces contorted in fear.

Her daughter burst into tears, placing the item she'd stolen from her brother onto the floor at her feet. She edged forward, shaking her head in disbelief, before wrapping her arms around her brother. He sighed, embracing her, and the pair stood together for a while, letting the silence comfort them both.

May reached the bottom of the stairs, eager to be included in their embrace, to hug and hold them, to remind them that family was the foundation they had built together. And nothing, not even a clumsy old lady's fall, should tear them apart. She had finally made her peace with leaving behind her big house. If it fixed things and made them happier, she was okay admitting it was time she needed some help.

The object at her daughter's feet reflected the sunlight from the windows, making it shimmer and cast rainbows across the hardwood floor. As May approached it, every inch of her tingled with delight – there was something special in there. Something otherworldly. Transfixed, with her children forgotten, she bent down to inspect it more closely.

Engraved on the front in a legible script read:

May Evelyn Michaelson

1940-2022

Forever Loved

Forever Missed

Her breath caught in her throat as she looked up from where she crouched at her two children. Neither of them met her gaze. They hadn't the whole time they'd been there, and suddenly, she understood the arguments and the anger, the overwhelming sadness and grief they'd thrown around since they had gotten here.

With her anger gone and her children reunited, May straightened and went to her sunroom to watch the birds and the breeze and reminisce on her life with her children and Gerry. And when she returned to her children, they'd decided on scattering her ashes in the garden out back.

And May couldn't think of a better place to be.