

Frugal

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The taxi pulled up to the curb and stopped next to where Eloise was patiently waiting with relaxed but perfect posture. The driver quickly got out of the cab, picked up the large suitcase with scuffed leather trim from its place on the ground next to Eloise's feet, and tucked it expertly into the trunk. Then he swung the rear door of the taxi open and gestured her in with a smile that was practiced and yet sincere. Eloise got in, straightened the hem of her tweed skirt around her knees, and settled back into the well-worn upholstery. She didn't ride in taxis very often, and as she looked at the rates printed on the meter as the driver pulled away from the curb, she remembered why: *So expensive*.

Oh well, she thought to herself, at least I'm not likely to need to take a taxi after today. Still, she felt a little alarmed to see how quickly the amount on the meter was increasing. But even so, she would be sure to add a good tip. ...

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Eloise thought herself frugal, rather than cheap. For her it was just a matter of common sense: Why buy steaks from the butcher when his leftover scraps would make a perfectly fine soup or stew? And picking up the windfall chestnuts, apples and figs from around the neighborhood was good exercise; being outside in the fresh air was good for her. Why, for pity sake, let all that perfectly good food go to waste?

"Good heavens, Mother," her daughter Priscilla complained one afternoon, sipping iced tea and examining Eloise's split ends, scissors in hand, "that is just so, well, *wrong* for you to be doing. Out there in all kinds of weather like those old Chinese people down in the park. It's embarrassing."

"Priscilla Ann, don't be ridiculous. And by the way you are just a beautician, not Mrs. Rockefeller. Your husband wouldn't have to work so much if you were a little more careful with the cash." She regretted the snipe the moment she said it, but damn it, it was true.

"It's not my fault I have good taste, mother," Priscilla shot back, the scissors snapping in time with her words as she trimmed. "And I notice you don't complain about my occupation when you need a haircut or a perm."

Her son David wasn't any better. He was a dentist, living in a large modern house in the suburbs, with an overbearing wife and yappy little dog. Eloise was pretty sure he didn't really want to visit her every other Sunday afternoon, but she could understand if he wanted an occasional break from his daily life.

"Mom, you don't *have* to live like this," he kept telling her, which sounded to Eloise like she was living under a bridge in a tent, instead of in the bungalow David grew up in, on a quiet tree-lined street. "Phillipa and I would be happy to have you move in with us, or you could go to one of those retirement communities, where they cook and clean for you and you could be around more people your own age."

Eloise scowled. "I know, the house is a little big with all of you gone, but I still love it; I am independent, and you know as well as I do that your lovely wife would rather gouge her eyes out than have me move in with you." She smiled in order to hide her clenched teeth. "And a retirement community?" She shivered. "Good lord no. That's where people go to die, or where

their children put them so they don't have to think about them any more. Besides, David, those places are horribly expensive - my Social Security wouldn't even *begin* to cover the cost - and Phillipa would have a conniption if you spent money on someone besides her. Even if it was me." She patted his hand and smiled again as he finished his coffee.

Eloise had been squaring off like this with her children for years. She used to take a certain enjoyment in the banter, the challenge of it; but now she was beginning to find it tiresome. Pointless loops of angry argument and frustrated accusation that never changed any of them (even if she didn't feel like her attitude needing changing). She found she didn't have the heart for it any more. It made her wonder where she had gone wrong raising her kids. They had seemed to have fun gardening with her when they were little, helping her glean windfall apples, making and canning applesauce and jelly; going to the Goodwill every Thursday morning to rummage through the new arrivals, always on the lookout for interesting clothes or toys or maybe some of those pretty blue-green canning jars they used for drinking lemonade in the summer. They had thought it was an adventure. They had had fun together.

Hadn't they?

Living this way had also meant Eloise could stay home with the kids before they were old enough to go to school, and then be there when they got home. It meant she didn't have to work beyond the bit of mending and alteration piecework she took in from time to time. Charlie's commission as a Fuller Brush Man could easily stretch the entire month, no problem, with even a little left over to put into savings. She remembered her own mother being at home when she was little, remembered the smell of cookies baking when she ran into the farmhouse kitchen after the school bus dropped her off at the end of their lane. It was her mother's thrift and abilities at making do with whatever was available that got their family through the Depression so much better off than many people they knew and others they heard about. Eloise had felt ill equipped to deal with her teenage children and a world she felt was too complicated and dependent on having store-bought things. When her children started junior high - first Priscilla, then David a year later - everything about them and about their relationship changed. All those comparisons with their friends (why did they always compare themselves with the richer kids and not the poorer? Eloise wondered), all the arguments about why they couldn't buy more clothes and had to wear the things she sewed for them. Eloise shook her head. She was tired too, of this conversation she already had so many times with herself. What might she have done differently? Her mother would have explained mothering to her if she had lived to see her grandchildren be born into the world.

Really, Eloise *was* tired. She wouldn't admit it to her children, but some evenings she wished someone would have dinner waiting for her when she returned home from her late afternoon walk around the neighborhood, wished someone else would have done the dishes, the laundry, the dusting...

The only one who always seemed to understand was her niece, Elspeth.

Eloise had missed much of Elspeth's growing up, as Eloise's brother's career in the Air Force kept his family moving from base to base for most of her early years. She and Eloise had exchanged frequent letters and postcards since the time Elspeth had been in grade school; she often referred to her aunt as her "favorite pen pal." The closeness Eloise had always felt with her younger brother seemed to automatically transfer itself to his only child. Elspeth eventually married into a French winemaking family, the son of whom she met while on a solo traveling adventure to Europe after graduating from college, and once married they ended up living near the family's winery in a small village in central France. Eloise had met Christophe once, when

they had come to the states for a visit shortly after the wedding. Eloise liked Christophe. Soft-spoken and always attentive to the person he was speaking with, he clearly adored Elspeth, and vice versa. He had a good laugh. It made Eloise very happy to see her niece so well loved and respected. From then on, Elspeth's letters described life in the French countryside, the beauty and hard work of the vineyard. She often included pictures of Eloise's rosy-cheeked twin great-nephews, Adrian and Étienne.

Elspeth and Christophe had invited Eloise to visit them in France (now *that* would be much too expensive, Eloise had thought at the time) and hinted that if she liked it she could eventually come live there – they had a small guest cottage on their vineyard property that she would be welcome to move into. She could have a vegetable garden, and Elspeth had always wanted to learn how to make jam, but had never quite gotten around to it. And there were the twins, who were already about to start school in the fall, and who Elspeth was sure would love their great-aunt. Eloise wasn't so sure about this, feeling that her track record with children to date was not very impressive. But she was willing to try. She had always loved children, and felt like she could very adequately dote on these two; maybe more freely because they weren't her own, and not her primary responsibility. It was an interesting thought.

"What's this?" David picked up the French language tape she had borrowed from the library.

"I wanted to be able to write to Elspeth in French a little bit. I read somewhere that learning a new language was good exercise for the brain. I am keeping dementia at bay - you should be happy for me." She smiled, wishing her son had a sense of humor. He had knitted his brows together then moved on to something else he could potentially disapprove of. He decided on the old standby discussion.

"You really should reconsider getting out of this house, Mom. Seriously. I worry about you living alone. I mean, what if you fell? And I swear Priscilla and I are the only ones who come to see you. Don't you get lonely? You don't even have your cat any more, for Christ's sake. I don't think it's healthy to spend so much time alone." He hurried on before she could say anything. "I stopped by that retirement community on the way here yesterday and looked around. It's nice, lots of trees and flowers. You could have your own apartment and still cook for yourself if you wanted to, or you could eat in the dining hall. You could make new friends. There's a really nice library and Bingo every Friday." He took a brochure he had been keeping in the inner pocket of his raincoat and set it on the kitchen table next to the language tape box. She mused that he looked a little like a dyspeptic bulldog when he was trying to be serious with her, but she didn't say so out loud. She was touched that he was, in his own way, making a genuine effort to be helpful.

"Alright, I'll think about it," she said instead. He brightened up. Thought he had scored some big victory in the realm of familial relations, she figured. Okay.

Eloise didn't sleep well that night. She had found the smiling faces of the gray-haired men and women in the brochure unsettling; on one hand she couldn't picture herself sitting companionably with them, talking about the weather, comparing the current aches and pains, whether or not they were going to play Bingo on Friday, et cetera. But for some reason David's seemingly genuine concern had slipped in under the radar of her defenses. And she hadn't told anyone about the fall she had taken the other day on her walk – more of a stumble really – and nothing got bruised but one knee and her sense of dignity for a moment. But still, it had rattled her for the rest of the day. Rattled her still, if she were to admit to it.

Finally giving up on sleep just as the sky started to lighten, she made herself a cup of tea and sat out on the porch swing, wrapped up in the faded red plaid bathrobe that had been Charlie's. She had worn it every day since he died, taking care to patch the thinning spots on the elbows, stitching up the fraying cuffs. She had spent so many mornings on this porch, across the landscape of births, deaths, all the life in between, facing the glorious bright beauty of the sun rising up over the foothills...she sighed. She hated the feeling that she was old. That was it, after all, wasn't it? The people in the brochure were, well, *old*. Older than Eloise felt, at least most days. But they did look happy, and what else? Carefree? Something like that.

Oh seriously, Eloise, she chided herself, are they going to put pictures of miserable old people who have been abandoned by their children in their brochures? Still. Maybe she should take a look. Much as she hated the idea of leaving it, she knew she couldn't stay in this house forever. With everyone gone it was getting to be more than she could handle. Maybe time to let it go.

"Well Charlie, what do you think?" She often talked to him from her thoughts after he died. It brought her comfort, and imagining what he would say helped her when she was pondering a question or when there was a decision to be made. She sipped her tea thoughtfully, watching the sky slip effortlessly from dusky blue to pale with streaks of salmon-pink. It was hard to imagine not having this porch, this view.

"I'm scared, Charlie." There. She said it.

The check that had arrived in the mail hadn't been huge by some standards, but it was more than enough. Certainly more than she had ever seen in one place. Charlie hadn't told her he had taken out a life insurance policy after they got married; the lawyer broke the news to her as she sat across the desk from him, a few days after the funeral. He told her to expect a regular beneficiary check from Social Security too. That was three years ago. He gave her a recommendation for a financial planner, who had helped her invest the money. Eloise was impressed with how much her accounts had already grown. She hadn't told anyone about it, not even David and Phillipa. She knew Charlie would want her to save it for a "rainy day." Well, now it was beginning to feel like a monsoon.

The taxi pulled up just as it began to rain. The intrusive, loud sound of an airplane close overhead momentarily delayed her thanking the driver as he retrieved her suitcase, though she smiled at him and handed him her tip in cash.

"So where are you going, ma'am?" he smiled.

"France," she said, smiling back at him.