

The Life She Wanted.

By Mary E. Martin

Martha Myles dusted the flour from her hands and wiped them on her apron. She found the beaters at the back of the kitchen drawer and pressed them into the electric mixer. Her new cookbook was propped open on the counter. With reading glasses perched on her nose, she stared at the recipe. Endless fine print ran across the page, obscuring what ought to be a simple task.

"Add two eggs," she muttered. "Mix them with the flour, butter and milk."

She cracked the eggs into the bowl, their yellow yolks staring up at her like blank, unseeing eyes. She stopped to pick out some shells. The mixer whirred making the yellowy eggs dive to the bottom. When the cake mixture splattered her glasses, she cleaned them off, and sighing, she returned to her task. With great concentration, she poured the mix into the pans and set them in the oven. Forty minutes to read, she calculated.

At the kitchen table, she reached for her glass of wine and opened a well-thumbed book. *Studies in Philosophy*, it read in tiny gold letters down its maroon coloured spine.

Could philosophy unravel the riddle? Was there life beyond this one? Within moments, she was seduced by racing rivers of thought. Like a twig caught in swirling currents, her mind paused to puzzle over an idea, then surged onward through the text. Did physical senses cloud other possibilities? Like capricious breezes, glimpses of unknown dimensions teased the fringes of her mind. The kitchen no longer existed. Martha no longer existed. Her mind soared to cool and delicious realms of pure thought.

The high kitchen window, blackened by the night, reflected her hunched form which resembled an apparition from a distant world. She did not look through the oven window to see the cake heaving with tiny volcanoes. Martha remained oblivious to the darkening mass slopping from the bake pans. Only when wisps of burnt smoke wafted through the stovetop did she look up.

In blind confusion, she sought her glasses. Sharp smells of charred ruins filled the kitchen. With uncomprehending eyes, she peered into the oven and saw the lava-like mixture spilling out. Snatching on oven mitts, she pulled the pan from the rack to the counter. In disbelief, she stared at the blackened, crusted cake as if it were a relic inexplicably unearthed from a lost world.

Martha knew to let the cake cool. She poured more wine and attempted to return to her text. But the physical evidence of failure would not let her escape to her world. Why had she tried to bake a cake? To prove herself to the church altar guild, she admitted. The sin of pride, she smiled to herself.

With determination, she approached the cake, knife in hand. She chipped off as much of the black crust as she could, then slathered the cake with icing. Gobs of glistening chocolate helped fill in the craters. It was a sorry job, but it would have to do. After placing the cake on a plate, she put on her coat and carried it outside into the dark street at ten thirty nine.

Martha Myles did not see the shadow of the racing bicycle. She did not hear the frantic bell and the cry of the cyclist as he tried to brake. The front wheel caught her straight on and her body flew upward like a graceless bird, only to thud down on the far sidewalk. The cyclist ran to her. She did not move. She had hit her head on a lamppost and now she was dead. The cake had splattered on the road.

"Mama's dead, Francine." Margaret's voice was a shocked, hoarse whisper on the phone.

"No, that can't be!" Francine clutched her bathrobe about her and sank into a chair. "What happened?"

Margaret's voice choked. "A bicycle killed her."

Francine's sob was strangled, like a bark of laughter. "She was riding a bicycle?" She could not visualize her mother on a bicycle.

"No, of course not!" said Margaret in surprise.

Immediately, Francine was relieved. The image of her mother teetering on a bicycle seat would not plague her.

"She was hit by one."

"But where? How?"

"Crossing the street. Late at night." Margaret whispered. "The cake was smushed too." Francine's hands trembled as she lit a cigarette. "Cake?" she asked.

"Mama baked a cake. A chocolate one."

"What?" She could not imagine Mother baking a cake.

"It's true! The cake was on the road."

"Mom never baked," said Francine obstinately.

"Well, she did this time!" Francine did not miss the defiant note from her younger sister. "The kitchen was a mess."

"Wait a minute, Maggie." Francine was disoriented. "You're telling me Mom baked a cake and walked out into the street with it late at night. Then she was hit by a bicycle?"

Margaret's reply was muffled. "Yes."

"But that's ridiculous! Where was she going with a cake at that hour?"

The telephone line was silent for moments. At last Margaret said evenly. "How should I know, Franny? Come home. Just come home."

At noon, the next day, Francine pulled on the heavy brass door of the funeral home. From the glaring sunshine of the noontime street, she entered the cavernous quiet of the reception room. Taking off her sunglasses, she stood before the polished desk and rang the bell. Her hand sprang back at the jangling. She looked about nervously as if afraid she had disturbed those laid to rest in back rooms. From behind a heavy brocade curtain, a man appeared dressed in a shiny black suit.

"Yes, Miss?" His voice was soft, but his dark eyebrows rose upward unpleasantly.

Francine tried to straighten her coat. Inexplicably, she was panting.

"Mrs Myles, please."

"You are?" The man ran a meticulously manicured nail down a column in a book.

"Her daughter."

"Ah, yes. Mrs. Myles is not quite ready yet."

"Ready?" Francine was confused.

The man smiled sadly at her. A poor attempt at professional sympathy, she thought.

He cleared his throat discreetly and said, "The casket will be brought up to Room Five in about an hour. Perhaps you'd like to see your sister now?" Francine nodded slightly as the man ushered her down a narrow corridor.

In the empty visitation room, the sisters clung briefly in an awkward embrace. Embarrassed by her sister's brimming eyes, Francine sat down and gazed out the window. At last she asked, "Maggie, how did this happen? When did mother start baking?"

Margaret looked oddly at her sister then shrugged. "I don't know. Why does it matter?" Her voice dropped to a whisper. "I mean, now?" Carefully, she dabbed the tears from her puffed and reddened cheeks.

Francine twisted her fingers in her lap. "What does Aunt Evelyn say?" she asked, pursing lips in distaste. Maggie was the spitting image of Aunt Evelyn. In a show of impatience, Francine tapped her fingers on the arm of the chair. Her fingers were like mother's— slim and tapered.

With forced calm, Margaret shrugged again. "She's devastated, of course. But Franny, why are you going on about baking? Nobody else thinks baking is strange."

Anger flared in Francine. "Mom hated baking! That's why I'm going on about it."

Maggie's mouth dropped open and then settled in a pout.

It was ridiculous, thought Francine. On the slightest pretext, some women would bake a cake. Mother had yearned for real challenges in life. Not baking. Francine choked on the thought of dull domesticity hemming her mother in.

Maggie sniffed and clasped her hands in her lap. "Actually, since you've been gone, Mama's gotten quite involved in the church. Probably she was making something for the bake sale."

Francine lurched forward in her chair. "The church? For God's sake, she was always an atheist."

Margaret twisted her Kleenex. "You've been away for some time, Franny." She paused. "Busy with your own life and all."

Francine strove for a controlled tone. "You think I neglected Mom, so she turned to religion?"

Margaret was shocked. "Of course not. She just went on with her own life the best she could. What if she turned to the church when she became sick?"

"Sick?" Francine was rigid. "Mom was ill and nobody told me?"

Eyebrows raised, the undertaker poked his head in the doorway. Francine waved him off.

"Now don't make a scene, Franny. Mom made me promise not to tell you."

The undertaker returned and began re-arranging the banks of flowers.

"What was wrong with her?" Francine demanded. She rummaged about in her purse and then looked desperately about for an ashtray. She found none.

"She had cancer, but the doctors thought it was in remission."

Francine jerked from her chair. "Great! Mother had cancer. Nobody told me."

Snapping a rose from a vase, she began twirling it in her hand. Maggie drew back.

Francine started to pace about the coffee table. First she peeled one petal back and absently ground it between her thumb and forefinger.

"Mom was sick and took up religion," Francine continued, as her face grew pinched and white.

Margaret folded her arms across her chest.

With each determined step, Francine tore back more petals and let them scatter to the floor. Her fingers grew stained with red from the rose.

Margaret stared at the floor and said nothing. Francine shred the remaining petals into a bowl of hard candies. Francine's voice cut their silence. "Then she started baking and nobody said a word."

Maggie pursed her lips then said, "What on *earth* is wrong with baking?"

Francine smacked the stem across her palm. Her white face was red and blotchy. Towering above her sister, she hissed, "Now you call when she's struck and killed by a bicycle."

Maggie sighed and glanced at her watch. "Yes, Francine. That's what happened."

"Listen Maggie, Mom was a very intelligent woman. She gave up everything when we moved to this town where the biggest excitement is a rummage sale." Francine tossed the stem on the table and stood with hands on her hips. "Did you know what Mom dreamt of?"

Margaret shook her head. "She was happy enough here," she insisted.

"Happy? Suffocating in this backwater? Did you know Mom wanted to go back to university and study philosophy?"

Maggie smoothed her skirt and replied. "No Francine, I didn't know. Mama was happy enough here. She had her sister and her friends."

"And no chance for the life she wanted," Francine breathed as she fought back her tears.

Maggie shrugged and sighed. "Not everyone saw it that way, Francine. Besides she had me, too."

"That's right. Everyone around to hold her back," concluded Francine. The two sisters glared at each other until a soft sniffing distracted them.

Framed in the doorway, stood Aunt Evelyn. Just like a puffed up, quavering hen, thought Francine.

Margaret ran to her side. "Aunt Evie! Thank goodness you've come." Tears dampened Margaret's cheeks as she hugged Evelyn. Francine approached her aunt with care. She knew deadly charm bathed Evelyn's critical eye.

Francine held out her hand and smiled sadly. "How nice to see you, Evelyn."

Evelyn took Francine's hand and drew her close in a suffocating embrace. "Franny, I'm so sorry. This must be a terrible shock for you."

Francine's chest knifed in spasm. Her vision clouded as she fought back sudden tears. She smiled so broadly, it hurt. "Apparently, I knew nothing of my mother and her life," she said.

"You've been away in the city, dear." Evelyn patted her hand. "Your mother was so proud of you and your career. She understood, I'm sure." Francine withdrew her hand. Evelyn sniffed gently and turned back to Margaret.

"When are they bringing her up, dear?" Evelyn asked.

Margaret glanced at her watch. "Any moment now."

Francine winced. Unfamiliar with funeral custom, she floated off to examine the rows of flowers stifling the room. Dozens of blood red roses, she thought as her stomach pitched with revulsion. Words choked in her throat. Everyone else knew what to say in their comfortable grief.

"It's an open casket, isn't it dear?" whispered Evelyn in Margaret's ear. Francine stiffened at the soft, insinuating words.

Dabbing her tears, Margaret nodded. "And they've done a lovely job, too."

Spinning on her heel, Francine faced them. "You mean everyone will see her?"

The eyes of the two women widened in shock. Their round bodies puffed up with indignation. How alike they were, was Francine's only thought. Within ten years, Margaret would be Evelyn and Evelyn would be gone.

Evelyn cleared her throat and did not hide her smile of pity. "It *is* customary, dear," "Mama would have wanted it," said Margaret uneasily.

"To be on display?" Francine was incredulous. The silent undertaker stepped into the room and glanced warily about. Over his shoulder, Francine saw two smooth, pink-cheeked young men. Together, they carefully wheeled the gleaming oak casket into the room, on a stretcher of stainless steel. With great care, they parked it at the far end of the room in front of the banks of flowers.

With quick, dainty steps, Margaret and Evelyn approached the casket. Francine watched in growing horror as Evelyn nodded to the undertaker, who nodded to the young men in black suits and stiff white collars. Silently, they opened the lid of the casket.

Focusing only on the crouched backs of her sister and aunt, Francine approached cautiously.

"Oh!" gasped Margaret.

Francine could see nothing but the backs of the women blocking out the view.

"She looks wonderful," murmured Evelyn in reverential tones.

"Just like herself," crooned Margaret.

"Let me see!" said Francine as she crowded in between them.

Francine pushed the women aside.

"Oh my God!" Francine whispered. Her hand flew to her lips to stifle a cry.

"What's wrong dear?" asked Evelyn, gently taking her hand. "I know it can be a shock, but..."

"What's on her nose!" laughed Francine as she pointed at the corpse. In consternation, the young men stepped closer to the casket. The undertaker's frown deepened.

"Are you all right, dear?" Evelyn pressed Francine's hand and looked up at her anxiously.

Francine could see only one thing. A huge, dingy pink moth appeared to have perched on the tip of her mother's nose. Desperately, she glanced about the frozen faces circled around the casket. Laughter choked her. Her mind reeled with improbabilities. It could not be a moth, she thought in an extreme effort to sober herself. What was it then? Pushing her way to the head of the casket, she peered directly at the body.

Old-fashioned glasses, just like Evelyn's sat on the tip of the alabaster nose. The frames were pink with silver sequins on the hinges. Their upswept style gave the impression of wings in flight. Not a moth, after all.

Sternly, she told herself to stop laughing. For a moment, she fought the convulsions welling up in her. "How ridiculous!" she announced angrily.

"What is *wrong*, Franny?" Margaret demanded.. "You're beside yourself."

Despite her best efforts, a chuckle escaped Francine as she turned on her sister. "It's grotesque! It's absurd!"

"What?" came the chorus.

"The glasses."

"What's wrong with the glasses?" asked Evelyn patiently.

"What possible use has she for them? She's dead. She cannot see."

Rolling her eyes, Margaret stepped forward. "Francine, you're making a scene. They try to make her as she was. As life like as possible."

"She's dead, Margaret! Why pretend she's not?"

Francine reached for the glasses. Margaret's hand shot out and held her sister's hand fast. Francine withdrew.

"Besides, the glasses are hideously ugly," Francine said quietly.

Evelyn stiffened. "I know you're upset, darling. Perhaps a glass of water?"

Francine hugged herself. She heard voices surrounding her.

"Are you shivering? Are you cold?"

Francine shook her head. "Look what you've done to her."

Francine touched her mother's hand. How cold and hard and brittle it was. The unlived life was forever gone, suffocated by the commonplace wishes of others. Now they wanted to prolong it. They wanted to pretend she was still with them baking cakes in church halls and kitchens, filled with clucking hens. Where was the adventure, the love of life and pursuit of thought? Where were the books and the paintings?

Francine began to weep in useless anger. "She wanted to study philosophy. She wrote to me about that," she insisted.

"Philosophy?" someone asked in surprise.

"But all of you narrowed her vision. What chance did she have? She hated baking cakes!"

"No one stopped her from reading," insisted Margaret. "Whatever she wanted."

"She offered to bring something for the bake sale," said Evelyn. "She was part of the community here."

Francine cried out. "Look at those glasses! They're ghastly and she doesn't need them anymore." She reached into the casket. With one swift movement, she snatched the glasses from her mother's nose.

With a deep breath, Aunt Evelyn drew herself up. Her bosom almost reached Francine's midriff. In quavering tones, she said, "Take the glasses if you must, my dear. But we really can't understand you. Why can't a philosopher bake a cake, if that's the life she wants?"