

## **“Francis' Mystery” written by Catherine Pittner, Age 17**

The navy blue house at the end of the long cul-de-sac cast a shadow on the quiet suburban hill. At twelve noon the only sound on the whole street was of Mrs. Hammond's porch rocking chair, squeaking so gently that she herself could not hear it. At 12:01 Francis Loft broke the silence, running out of that navy blue house and screaming some unintelligible attempt at the English language so loud that no one on the street could have missed it.

The effect of the screaming on the neighborhood was immediate, a new front door opened every second. As the neighbors poured out of their houses, some simply watched, others ran toward the child. A woman by the name of Rebecca reached Francis first; she knelt down in front of him to meet him at eye level and held his arms at his sides to try and calm the hysteria. As the other neighborhood spectators watched Rebecca try to talk to the boy, they noticed his screams slowly soften and transform into words too quiet for them to hear. For a moment the peaceful stillness of the street was restored, but only for a moment because it wasn't long before Rebecca yelled with a sense of urgency.

“Call the police!”

\*\*\*

Francis stayed quiet as he built a castle-like structure with colorful wooden blocks. The toys were pretty much the only colorful thing about the room Francis sat in; the walls, ceiling, floor, and even the furniture were all a similar shade of white.

Unnoticed by the young boy, Dr. Miller stood in the white hallway watching Francis play alone through the window of a closed door. Dr. Miller stayed there, watching Francis, until a man vaguely resembling the boy thundered down the hall to meet him.

“Dr. Miller?” the man asked. He was met with a nod and an extended hand, which he shook.

“I assume you're Nick Loft?”

“The one and only.”

The two men looked at each other in uncomfortable silence, so Nick turned his head toward the door. As soon as he did however, Dr. Miller called his attention back.

“Look, I hate to get straight to business, but after watching him for a few days, I most definitely have concern for your nephew.”

“Yes, well, I do too.”

“As the boy's psychologist, I've tried to get him to open up about the incident, tell me any details at all, but I'm not making much headway. He's a quiet one.”

“Yes, well, I would be quiet too if I went downstairs one day and found my mother lying half-naked in a pool of her own blood, eyes open wide at the ceiling and grasping a bouquet of dead flowers, with no life left in her—”

“Mr. Loft?”

“Sorry Doc, it's just... horrible.”

Dr. Miller looked sympathetically at Mr. Loft, who spoke his next words softly.

“It's just, how is he supposed to live now—with no parents?” Mr. Loft paused for a while. “I mean, Francis' dad has been missing for over a year and now his mother's passed? No kid should have to go through that. No kid, especially not Francis.”

Nick Loft paused long enough that Dr. Miller got the impression he was finished, but as soon as he began his sentence, Mr. Loft went on more frantic, eyes pointed at the floor.

“He’s a splendid boy, just a splendid boy,” Francis’ uncle said, “He does puzzles, reads mysteries, he’s a splendid boy. God, he loves mysteries. Nathan used to call me all the time, before he went missing of course, and tell me all about Francis and his little mysteries that he’d make for him. Nathan would call me, so proud, and tell me about how Francis had done it again. Created a little mystery for Nathan to solve in the woods behind their neighborhood. Nathan would boast about how not even he could solve Francis’ murder mystery. He’d say, ‘Nick! My son is the smartest little boy in the world!’ Then he’d tell me about all the books Francis was reading, and good gracious! Some of them were dark. I’m not sure I would let any kid of mine read some of those books, but Francis is so smart and mature for his age. Too mature, especially with both of his parents... and Nathan and Molly were such great parents too. Francis doesn’t deserve this.”

With the silence that followed, Dr. Miller knew Mr. Loft had really finished speaking this time. Dr. Miller jotted down some notes concerning what Nick Loft had said.

“I’d love to talk to the boy again with you here if that’s alright. You won’t have to talk, but maybe he’d say more with family in the room” Dr. Miller said.

“Of course, of course.”

At that, Dr. Miller opened the door to the room, followed by Mr. Loft. Francis looked up, uninterested, and then back down at his toys. He had since knocked down his castle and was now building a tower. Dr. Miller addressed Francis first.

“Hello Francis? How are you feeling today?”

Francis looked up again, eyes lingering on Dr. Miller, then looked back down. Choosing to focus on his construction, Francis placed a blue cube at the top of his tower. Dr. Miller went down into a catcher’s squat, eye level with Francis, before speaking again.

“Francis, did you hear me?” Dr Miller asked calmly. Francis responded to his first question without looking up.

“Good. Hi Uncle Nick.”

“Hey, I missed you, buddy.”

An unsettling quiet followed as Francis had no reply. Mr. Loft moved to sit in the white armchair in the room’s corner and crossed his legs. Dr. Miller clapped his hands together and spoke jovially.

“Francis, we don’t have to talk about anything serious just yet. Let’s talk about something fun! I hear you like mysteries. What mysteries do you like to read? Do you like The Hardy Boys?”

Francis scoffed.

“The Hardy Boys are child’s play. But I don’t like to read mysteries anymore anyway.”

“You don’t like to read mysteries anymore? Why not?”

“I could always guess the ending. And they made me angry. The normal people in them wouldn’t have actually been able to solve those puzzles. They always ended happy, when really they should’ve failed. If the people in the mysteries failed they would’ve been punished for it, but they never failed when they should’ve.”

“Just because of that you don’t like mysteries anymore?”

“I like mysteries. Just not reading them. There’s a difference.”

Francis peacefully took a green block from the base of his tower, causing the whole structure to collapse. He then collected the red blocks and started to construct the bottom layer

of a new tower. Dr. Miller ignored this, looking at Francis' face all the while, and continued the conversation.

"Well, explain the difference to me, Francis."

Keeping his attention on the building blocks, Francis spoke in monotone.

"I like creating mysteries, not reading them. I used to make them all the time for Daddy in the woods before he failed. I would lay out clues and make traps. I like thinking of puzzles no one can figure out."

At the mention of his brother, Mr. Loft uncrossed his legs and leaned forward in his chair.

"What do you mean he failed?" Dr. Miller asked politely. Francis stayed quiet and threw the room into absolute silence; a silence broken soon after by Dr. Miller.

"What about your mom? That must be a mystery for you."

"No."

"No?"

Francis stacked a yellow block on his tower before answering, seemingly unbothered.

"She said she needed to go. Go find Daddy."

"Why?"

"I accidentally told her about Daddy."

"What about your daddy; he went missing a long time ago."

"His punishment."

Dr. Miller's legs were starting to ache from the squat he was in, so he moved to his knees. A theory was turning in his mind, and bile rose into his throat at the thought of it.

"What punishment Francis," Nick spoke up for the first time, eyes boring into the boy with deep concern. Dr. Miller glanced at Mr. Loft, as if to tell him to stay quiet. This look did not go unnoticed, so Francis took it as a cue to avoid his uncle's question. Dr. Miller intentionally let the silence settle before speaking again.

"Punishment for what, Francis? Failing your mystery?"

"Yes."

"And what does that look like?"

Francis started building a smaller tower made of only yellow blocks.

"In mysteries, if you get it wrong, the puzzle fights back. If Sherlock didn't figure out the whistling in The Speckled Band, that girl would've died."

"Do you know where your father is, Francis?" asked Dr. Miller with masked panic.

Francis turned his face out of Dr. Miller's sight, and the psychologist couldn't help but wonder if he turned to hide a smile.

"You said your mother needed to go find your father. Did she find him?" Dr. Miller pressed on. For the first time, Francis turned to meet Dr. Miller's eyes.

"No. But I think she would've. Mama wasn't stupid like most people. She picked up on clues. She was smarter than Daddy."

Dr. Miller looked back at Francis without moving a muscle.

"Why didn't she find him, Francis?" He spoke in a much more serious tone now.

Completely unbothered, Francis knocked over the red tower without averting eye contact. Mr. Loft flinched when the red wooden blocks hit the floor, but neither of the two on the floor looked over to him. Eyes piercing Dr. Miller, Francis smiled.

"Well that's the mystery, isn't it?"

