

Frances, the moth

Her name was Frances and she lived for the most part, as people did. There was monotony, duty, compliance, occasionally subjugation, but also moments of kindness. The part that was different was that Frances had a magick pair of sewing scissors that were gifted to her by her Grandmother. They had used them together to cut out the little clothes that Frances learnt to sew as a child. Young Frances had learnt to rock the treadle foot on Grandmother's sewing machine back and forth, back and forth, driving the motion of the needle in and out of the fabric, while her hands carefully held the cloth flat.

Now that the scissors belonged to Frances they lived close to hand in the single drawer in her old kitchen table, in the back room of her little weatherboard house. Frances lived alone. She endured life, and life endured her. Frances worked a lot, leaving early and arriving home after dark. How does life pick up some people, and leave others just – there?

One night when leaving the train station after work, her eye was caught by a moth flying up to a streetlight. She saw the moth join four others. 'An eclipse of moths', she thought. Their wings had small dot markings, concentric circles and ovals in various shades of brown. The patterns looked like eyes. As though blinking at her they batted their wings open and shut. She watched them. Time passed. They seemed to watch her back.

Moth time is different to human time, it passes quicker. Each night under that light was like a year. They could talk with the trees closeby and interpret the wind. The raindrops spoke to them, dripping staccato poems upon their wings, speaking of weather to come and the best places to rest come daytime. A spider waited patiently nearby in its web. Spiders live on faith and patience. They cast their net and wait and they are often rewarded for their effort.

But we are talking about Frances. She was still there. She almost thought she could talk to the moths too. As they flitted about, she asked them questions in her head about the cold and the dark and not having a set home. She imagined how they enjoyed the darkness, and having the whole neighbourhood as their own. They were overlooked, quiet creatures, but they liked it like that. Up in the sky, flitting about en masse, drinking nectar and living in delight under the stars.

Out of nowhere, a man appeared on the corner startling Frances from her reverie. He looked like he might have been waiting for a train, but he was watching Frances and didn't enter the station. She steeled herself and quickly left. She turned the corner and hurried home under the cover of darkness and moonlight, thankfully watched only by the stars, the moon and some errant bats.

When Frances got home she put herself to bed as usual. In the middle of the night she awoke with a start. She had dreamt of her late Grandmother, that they were together and laughing. Her Grandmother explained that she'd been on a long trip where she was unable to get in touch, but now she was back – joy! The dream was so real that upon awakening Frances was overcome with grief at the realisation that her Grandmother was in fact still dead. She howled as if it happened yesterday and not fifteen years ago.

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Frances got up and wandered about her little house, adrift. She opened the curtains then the windows letting in the crisp air. It was that witching hour before dawn breaks, the time of night that doesn't belong to humans but to bats, rats, moths, street cats and all manner of feral little creatures. Frances was sick of her routines, her aloneness, the weight of pretence that seemed required by her daily interactions with others. She thought back to earlier that night, the moths a conglomerate, gossiping and fluttering together, all of the same ilk, their wings dusty, glittery, well-designed variations on a theme.

The cold air brought her back to her surroundings. As she stepped into the kitchen she saw that the drawer was open. The blades of her fabric scissors glinted and winked at her calling her closer with all their might. She picked them up, slipping her fingers and thumb into the handle. The scissors hummed approvingly, the metal somehow already warm. Pulling the blades apart and then closing them incisively, she snapped at the air like a fencer. She felt reckless. What if, what if... a cloak, a disguise, a transformation. Frances thought about how different it would be to belong to others like those moths, to feel a sense of acceptance, of collective consciousness, to lose the weight of her individual human body.

She pulled the tablecloth off the table in a trance state and laid it flat on the floor. She knelt down on her hands and knees over the cloth, the scissors hummed more urgently. They tugged at her hand, guiding it to the exact right spot. They directed her and she began to cut, making a large semi-circle, starting at the top left corner down to the centre of the bottom side and back up to the top right corner. In the centre at the top side Frances cut a much smaller semi-circle curve. She cut quickly and assertively, in fact it was not even her choice; the scissors had control over her body such was their magick. To finish, she pinched the fabric to gain purchase, and incisively cut two slits, each halfway down the fabric shape and one third of the way in from each side.

When she had finished cutting the scissors fell silent. Frances placed them on the ground and stood up, flexing her hand, reassuring herself of her command over it. She recognized the shape she had cut as the perfect outline of a simplified travelling cloak, with no hood or collar, and slits for her arms. (The scissors had used their muscle memory from Frances' grandmother making a cloak herself many years ago). She thought about the moths' wings as functioning as a kind of protective cloak, enabling movement and warmth.

Frances reached down and picked up the cloth, swooping the heavy cotton fabric over her back, the smaller semi-circle nestled into her neck and the deep curve of the hem swirled about her calves, her nightgown just peeking out underneath. Deliberately and slowly, Frances put an arm through each slit. She lifted up her arms and began to twirl. The fabric flared out behind her. Upon the completion of one full rotation, Frances disappeared, and after hanging in the air from the momentum, the fabric collapsed to the ground in a heap. Out of one of the slits flew a little brown moth with wings patterned with concentric circles and coloured in various shades of brown. It did a gleeful lap of the kitchen then abruptly left, out the window.