

The Ford Paralysis

by

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FADE IN:

EXT. FARMHOUSE - NIGHT

RAIN, THUNDER. A single window glows a soft yellow.

INT. FARMHOUSE - BEDROOM

Candles flicker on the chrome of a wheelchair.

OLD WOMAN

My husband started out as a grave digger.

A CRACK of LIGHTNING causes her to pause.

OLD WOMAN (CONT'D)

No back hoes in those days. Men opened the graves. My William would start digging and not stop 'til he was done. Not always six feet deep. Sometimes you ran into rock.

Candlelight brushes the rapt faces of two children: ANNIE and EVAN.

OLD WOMAN (CONT'D)

Your mother doesn't like me telling you stories about the dead.

ANNIE

Great granny she said you could 'cause it's Evan's birthday.

GREAT GRANNY (OLD WOMAN)

You want more Coke?

Both children shake their heads.

GREAT GRANNY (CONT'D)

Wasn't 'til later he went to the embalming school.

EVAN

My teacher said no one today can embalm people like the Egyptians.

GREAT GRANNY

Honey, that's not true. They removed the dead person's organs and put them into jars. They did a good job.

(MORE)

GREAT GRANNY (CONT'D)

But not like today's modern embalming. Why, William told me about a casket he opened that had been in a vault for ten years. The body had mold on its eyelids and was shriveled a bit. That's all.

Annie's eyes are wide.

ANNIE

Dead people's hair grows after they're dead.

GREAT GRANNY

How can hair grow after someone's dead? The life process is over.

(sternly)

And fingernails don't grow either. They appear to because the flesh of the fingers shrink.

Her bony arm reaches through the candlelight for the glass of bourbon.

EVAN

Mother said you shouldn't drink alcohol.

GREAT GRANNY

Honey, at my age it can only help.

ANNIE

Did great grand dad William ever have a person sit up on the embalming table just before he was going to embalm him?

GREAT GRANNY

(gargled laugh)

Not that he told me about.

EVAN

Can a dead person can be brought back to life with electricity?

GREAT GRANNY

Only in Frankenstein movies.

EVAN

(matter of fact)

People dig up dead bodies.

ANNIE

(to brother)

Remember the movie where they  
needed a dead person to become  
Frankenstein?

EVAN

Does that mean grave robbers aren't  
real?

GREAT GRANNY

Grave robbers are real all right.  
People with a dark sense of humor  
called them resurrectionists. But  
they didn't bring dead bodies back  
to life. They sold them to  
scientists who dissected them to  
learn how the body works.

A CRACK of LIGHTNING fills the window.

GREAT GRANNY (CONT'D)

Ever tell you about casket  
torpedoes?

Both children eagerly shake their heads.

GREAT GRANNY (CONT'D)

Explosive devices attached to some  
caskets. A grave robber tries to  
open one of those caskets the  
torpedo explodes and scares him  
off.

ANNIE

How long after you die you begin to  
rot?

GREAT GRANNY

On a hot day a corpse starts to  
decompose really quick.

EVAN

The worst thing is to be buried  
alive.

GREAT GRANNY

The ultimate claustrophobia.

ANNIE

What's that?

EVAN  
 (to sister)  
 When you're afraid of small places  
 like elevators...

GREAT GRANNY  
 ... or graves. A century ago people  
 were afraid of being buried alive  
 because embalming was not a common  
 practice. Say a lot of people died  
 in an epidemic. Doctors want them  
 buried quick to prevent the spread  
 of disease. By accident someone  
 gets buried who wasn't really dead.

ANNIE/EVAN  
 Oh, noooo!/Ewww.

GREAT GRANNY  
 There were devices to prevent that  
 from happening.

ANNIE  
 What kind of devices?

GREAT GRANNY  
 Life signals. Quite ingenious  
 things really.

EVAN  
 What did they look like?

GREAT GRANNY  
 William told me a story his  
 grandfather used to tell. He was  
 also in the funeral business. But I  
 don't think a stormy night is a  
 very good time for it.

ANNIE  
 Oh, yes, yes it is!

THUNDER, LIGHTNING.

A bony arm reaches for the bottle and half fills the glass.

GREAT GRANNY  
 Where's your mother?

EVAN  
 In grandma's room.

GREAT GRANNY  
 Can you sleep there?

ANNIE

There are beds made up. It's Evan's birthday.

The old woman lights a cigarette.

The children see its cherry glow in the dim light.

GREAT GRANNY

Mary Schoonover was her name.

She leans into the candlelight so the children can see her face.

GREAT GRANNY (CONT'D)

Oddly, she was distantly related to us on your mother's side.

EVAN

Like second cousins?

GREAT GRANNY

More like seventh cousins. Still, some of Mary Schoonover's blood runs through your veins.

Evan's finger slowly traces a vein along his forearm.

GREAT GRANNY (CONT'D)

A great beauty, though only ten years old, with long blonde hair she brushed ten minutes each day. Ideal child too. Up early every day, made her bed, did her chores, helped her mother make the breakfast biscuits, always on time for school, even though she had to walk two miles. Mary's brother Caleb, a year older, was her opposite. Did poorly in school, room always a mess and often in trouble 'cause he neglected his chores.

ANNIE

I bet something happens to him.

GREAT GRANNY

Mary's mother was also a great beauty. She was a Ford and all the Ford women were good looking.

She leans into the candle light.

GREAT GRANNY (CONT'D)

Now, in the Ford line lurked a very mysterious illness. It didn't show up in every Ford descendant, but when it did you never saw anything so strange.

The children sit wide-eyed.

GREAT GRANNY (CONT'D)

You fall asleep at anytime, in the bathtub, doing your homework, walking in the park.

The old woman maneuvers her chair closer to the children.

GREAT GRANNY (CONT'D)

This Ford ailment mimicked death. Your heart beats slower and slower, softer and softer. Your body becomes as rigid as a corpse. Your temperature approaches that of the room you're in. You not only look dead but you might really be dead.

EVAN

Did Mary and Caleb have the disease?

The old woman takes a slow sip of her drink.

GREAT GRANNY

Caleb died from it in 1887.

INT. BEDROOM - DAY

Caleb lies unconscious on a small bed. A doctor listens to his heart. Mary sits in a chair against the wall. His parents stand at the foot of the bed.

INT. LIVING ROOM - BEDROOM DOORWAY

Two women witness the bedroom scene through the doorway.

WOMAN #1

Since he's a baby ever year or so he goes into these deep sleeps.

WOMAN #2

I remember once doc was sure Caleb had died. Then he snorted, opened his eyes, and he was back.

INT. BEDROOM - DAY

DOCTOR

I'm afraid Caleb is really gone  
this time. I haven't heard a  
heartbeat in over twenty minutes.  
I'm sorry.

Mary hangs her head. The parents cover their faces in grief.

INT. KITCHEN - SINK - DAY

The mother dries a dish. The father comes up to her and puts  
his arm around her. Both show the wear of losing their son.

MOTHER

Where's Mary?

FATHER

On the swing.

MOTHER

What is this wretched thing I have  
in me?

FATHER

You're not to blame for something  
your mother passed to you.

The mother tears herself away from her husband and walks  
quickly to the front door.

EXT. PORCH - DAY

MOTHER

Mary! Stay near the house. Hear?

Mary swings lazily.

MARY

Yes, mother.

EXT. GARDEN - DAY

Mary and her mother tend to separate areas of their garden.

The mother turns in Mary's direction.

She sees Mary at work weeding.



EXT. GARDEN - DAY

Mary and her mother now work farther apart.

The mother turns in Mary's direction.

She does not see her.

She runs toward the area where she last saw her.

MARY

lies as if peacefully asleep, a tomato in one hand.

INT. BEDROOM - DAY

Mary lies unconscious in bed. Her mother puts a damp cloth on her forehead. Her father sits on the bed and holds her hand.

Mary opens her eyes.

MOTHER

Thank you, Jesus, she's back.

INT. BEDROOM

Mary sits on edge of the bed and appears completely normal.

MARY

I reached for a tomato and then I  
was rising on a cloud to heaven.

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

Mary does her arithmetic while her mother washes the dishes.

Mary quickly falls asleep and knocks over her glass of milk.

The mother runs to her side.

MOTHER

Mary!

INT. KITCHEN - DAY

Mary is awake and drinks a glass of milk.

MARY

I'm sorry, mother.  
(fixes eyes on mother)  
(MORE)

MARY (CONT'D)  
On that cloud rising to heaven  
again.

SERIES OF SHOTS

Mother checks a sleeping Mary to make sure it's not the diseased Ford sleep.

Mother looks through window at Mary playing in the yard.

Doctor listens to Mary's heart as she sits patiently. He nods all is well.

Father sits at kitchen table with Mary. Both enjoy slices of pie.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

The mother tidies. The father comes quickly through the door.

FATHER  
I can't find Mary!

The parents run out the front door.

EXT. BACK YARD

The parents run across the yard. The father quickly gets up onto the roof of a shed.

He looks out into the field. He sees a child lying face down.

EXT. FIELD

The father runs toward the house with his unconscious daughter in his arms.

INT. BEDROOM

Mary lies unconscious on the bed.

The doctor listens once again for her heart. He shakes his head.

DOCTOR  
How many times must I tell you?  
She's dead, dead, dead.

EXT. CEMETERY - DAY

Mary lies in a wooden coffin.

An undertaker gently places Mary's hand on the wooden handle of a life signal device and secures it with black ribbon.

Mary's parents stand nearby.

FATHER

The life signal is our last resort.  
The grave's shallow and there's an  
air vent.

EXT. CEMETERY - LATER

A steel rod in the form of a large question mark protrudes from Mary's grave. At its tip is a small brass bell.

FATHER

Mr. Crandle will stay in the sexton  
cottage for a week.

THREE SHOTS

Parents hold hands as they watch the bell.

The mother walks in a slow arc around Mary's grave.

Father sits on his haunches staring intensely at the bell.

EXT. CEMETERY - DAY

Mr. Crandle, his dog by his side, tends to grave sites near Mary's. He turns. Sees the bell.

A cat walks along the nearby rock wall. The dog takes after it.

MR. CRANDLE

Abraham Lincoln!

Climbs over the wall and starts across a field after his dog.

BELL

makes an abrupt tinkle. Then another, stronger this time.

A long moment of silence as if a sudden realization within Mary's casket. Then the bell rings furiously.

ANOTHER ANGLE ON BELL

as it continues to ring, then tapers off to a final tinkle.

EXT. CEMETERY - STONE WALL

Mr. Crandle comes over the wall with his dog.

He looks about guiltily.

Whistling, he resumes his duties.

EXT. CEMETERY - MARY'S HEADSTONE - DAY

Mary's parents stand vigil.

FATHER

Emma, I just know it's the  
paralysis.

MOTHER

It's been a week now, John.

EXT. CEMETERY - MARY'S HEADSTONE - EVENING

The parents mourn their daughter. They hold candles.

EMMA (MOTHER)

She's at peace now.

JOHN (FATHER)

And I was so sure it was the Ford  
Paralysis.

INT. FARMHOUSE - BEDROOM - NIGHT

Evan and Annie sit motionless, their eyes frozen wide in  
horror.

CUT TO BLACK: