

CROSSING THE RIVER

The priest told me not to cross the river. He said he'd already forgiven me for any part I'd had in the deaths, and that I should stop thinking about it. "Over-scrupulous," he called me, as if I'd been doing nothing but worrying about those dead women for twenty years, when the truth was, I hadn't blamed myself nearly enough. Really, if the doctor hadn't said I should put my affairs in order, I'm not sure I'd have been so determined to learn exactly how Mary came to kill those two women. Anyway, I didn't have a lot of time left in this world, so no matter what Father O'Toole said about how I was imagining old sins, I was going to visit Mary Mallon on North Brother Island.

That Sunday after church, I clumped up the boat ramp with twelve other visitors to the island. Maybe knowing this would be my last trip to Riverside made me nostalgic, or maybe it was the way the water sparkled like a sheet of silver. Whatever the reason, my chest ached and my eyes filled with tears, and I kept repeating a little prayer the nuns had taught me to say before a journey - "May the blessings of light be upon you." Lately, bits and pieces of prayers and poems that I'd memorized over thirty years ago, as a girl in Ireland, were coming back to me.

My first visit to North Brother Island was in 1907, when the Health Department first captured Mary. Back then, the newspapers were filled with stories about how the authorities had tracked down Typhoid Mary after an outbreak of typhoid fever in Oyster Bay. The summer before, six of eleven people had gotten sick in a house rented by a New York City family. The health inspectors had checked the wells, sewers, and privies, and contaminated water, the usual

cause of an outbreak, had been ruled out. After examining the manure pit by the horse stables, and questioning the dairyman, the egg man, and the Indian woman who sold clams on the beach, the inspectors still couldn't find the source of the outbreak. The home owners, anxious to rent the house again, called in sanitation experts who redid all the tests before deciding to follow the trail of people who'd worked in the house that summer. The trail led to Mary Mallon, the cook.

When the inspectors found Mary and told her she had to give them urine and bowel specimens so they could see if she was carrying typhoid, she picked up a meat fork and ran them out of the kitchen. When they returned to explain that she could have the typhoid germs living in her body without being sick herself, she threatened them with a cleaver. The third time the inspectors came, they brought the police and a wagon. Mary saw them coming and ran into an alley and hid in a tool shed, and if it hadn't been for a bit of apron sticking out of the shed door, they might not have found her at all. Kicking and screaming, Mary was dragged to the police wagon. A woman doctor sat on top of her for the ride to Willard Parker Hospital, and from there Mary was sent to a cabin at Riverside Hospital on North Brother Island.

Mary was held against her will for three years, and then, as a condition for her release, she signed an affidavit swearing she'd never cook for other people. She also promised she'd report to the health department regularly, but once Mary was free from Riverside, she moved so fast the health department lost track of her. I lost track of her myself until a letter came asking me to visit. Every few months, I'd receive another letter, and every few months I'd find myself climbing another set of rickety stairs and winding through another hallway filled with slop buckets.

It wasn't friendship that kept me visiting Mary. It wasn't because the nuns had taught me to visit the sick and the imprisoned either. What kept me going was remembering how Mary had helped me find a job when I came to America as a girl of fourteen.

During my visits, Mary moaned about her sore feet and how she wasn't made for laundry work. She hated how the fumes burned her nostrils. She believed her fingernails were getting soft and her knuckles were expanding. She said her back ached and her eyes stung even when she wasn't anywhere near a laundry vat. Stuffing scones and big wads of bread into her mouth, she'd tell me she had no appetite. Tippling porter, she'd say she'd sworn off alcohol.

While Mary moved from place to place, hoping not to be found, I stayed in place, wishing for capture. Mrs. Malloy, the proprietor of the boarding house where I worked, hinted about making me an owner, while I hinted to James Flynn about making me his wife. As Mary droned on about her miseries, I thought about James's broad back and the downward tilt of his eyes. While she soaked her feet, I thought of his lips on my cheek and his brick-layer's hand on my waist. In any case, Mary never asked if I had a sweetheart so she never learned about James, or that I'd gone from kitchen helper to housekeeper's assistant.

In 1914, a month after war came to Europe, I visited Mary in her latest tenement. Of course, I didn't know then that this would be my last visit for twenty years. I certainly didn't know that when I next saw Mary it would be back on North Brother Island. It's strange that I remember that day so clearly, while other days from that time are as murky as fog. James had given me a pearl brooch, and I'd pinned it to the inside of my shirtwaist. I kept my gloved hand pressed to my chest and didn't touch the handrail or breathe deeply in the stairwell, hoping the air wouldn't enter my body. That may be the reason I had to wait for my head to clear before I

stumbled to Mary's door.

In a room that smelled of cabbage and sour milk, Mary pointed to a wooden chair and after I sat, she fell into an overstuffed armchair the size of a boulder. "I keep thinking about that hell hole across the river," she said.

"Riverside?"

"And how those health inspectors did me wrong."

"Are you keeping well?" I smiled, hoping to change the conversation.

"Ain't no better than devils themselves! Keeping me cooped up worse than an animal!"

"Mary," I said., taking small breaths to avoid the marshy odor coming from a box on the floor. "There's a bit of a drizzle coming down but I believe it will be a lovely evening."

"Devils, I tell you."

"Mary, maybe you should forget about Riverside."

"There ain't no forgetting prison, Cecilia!"

Since leaving the island four years ago, Mary's memories had changed enormously. Of course, I knew she hadn't been happy living alone in that cabin, but we'd had some good times during my visits. I was tempted to remind her how we picked wild flowers and counted the birds we saw on our walks. We liked to watch the men pitch horseshoes behind the big building, and sometimes we'd gone fishing in a cove within sight of the flagpole. Other times, we tended the bush we'd planted just up the hill from the dock, to remember all the people who'd died in the fire. Still, when I saw how Mary locked her jaw and narrowed her eyes, I didn't tell her she'd been lucky for her time at Riverside. I didn't say she should be glad she'd had three years without people telling her how to beat the rugs, scrub the floors, and clean the ashes out of the fireplace.

“They said all sorts of foul things about me!” Mary growled. “And the newspapers were after printing every sort of lie.”

“Has something happened, Mary? Why are you telling me all this now?”

“I got me a new lawyer, Cecilia, and he says I stand to get some payment for all they done to me.”

“A new lawyer?”

“I don’t got to take what them courts say as the last word.”

I brought my eyes to the air shaft which looked to a soot-covered wall, and I thought of the lovely sidewalk at Columbia University. Last Sunday, James had taken me to see a sidewalk he’d laid in the herringbone pattern. James’s boss had said a university professor told him the bricks were laid with “perfect mathematical certainty.”

“Mr. Boyle says I got what they call ‘heavy damages’ coming to me, on account of my suffering.”

“Suffering,” I whispered.

“Only thing is, I don’t know when I’m going to get them.” Mary picked up what looked like a blackened pie plate filled with rocks, but it was some sort of platter piled high with scones. “You can’t be eating this, Cecilia, on account of my baking it.” She nodded to me before biting into a scone.

For a moment, I thought Mary was going to ask for money, but after squinting her eyes and swallowing, she turned to the box on the floor which, I could now see, was filled with black walnuts.

“Only reason I ain’t got my money yet is because of them courts saying how the

Department of Health ain't done no wrong in keeping me. They're after saying I was a danger to the public health and some such nonsense." She threw another scone into her mouth, and for an instant, I wondered if she'd break a tooth.

I took a slow breath. It wasn't nonsense, and Mary knew it. She'd gone through three years of having doctors check what came out of her bowels, so she must have understood that she carried the typhoid in her body. She was just too stubborn to admit it. "I don't know what the courts said about you," I said. "But I'm sure you never had it in mind to hurt anyone with your cooking."

"You can't tell them health authorities nothing. But see, that's where my lawyer says we got them dead to rights. They say I ain't done no crime so they ain't had no right to keep me locked up in the first place. It was against the Constitution is what my lawyer says. They got this thing called habeas corpus saying the government can't keep you locked up if you ain't broke the law."

The moldy smell had gotten stronger, but when I turned my face away from the box, I heard a rustling sound from some creature under the nuts.

"I ain't forgot how you came to see me all those times, Cecilia – not like that Patricia, who ain't come but once. And you ain't forgot what I done for you. You been a friend to me, and likewise me to you. So I'm after asking you a favor."

I chewed the inside of my cheek. I couldn't give her money no matter how grateful I once was.

"I want you to write me a recommendation."

"What?"

“I’m after losing my job and I need a recommendation.”

“Oh,” I said. Mary had been talking about her aches and pains as if she’d just stopped scrubbing sheets the minute before I came to the door. She hadn’t said the first word about losing her job.

“You got to write it, Cecilia.”

I felt the blood leaving my head and I was feeling as weak as I’d felt after climbing the stairs. “I don’t know a single soul,” I mumbled.

“You got that friend Kitty McDonough! She’s the one!”

“Kitty McDonough?” I said, as if I’d never heard the name. Really, at that moment I had trouble picturing Kitty at all.

“She’s after running half the city with all the people she’s put in jobs.”

Kitty was a housekeeper in a house where I’d worked, but she’d left to run a tea room on Madison Avenue and the next we heard she’d opened her own employment agency. Now I could see her copper-colored hair, her pale green eyes and the pink splotch on her left cheek. I pressed my hand to my shirtwaist to feel the brooch. “You can’t be cooking, Mary. It wouldn’t be right.”

“I ain’t never made no one sick! I’m after making them well! It may interest you to know that Mr. Drayton up in Maine gave me extra money for helping him nurse all those that got the sickness that summer. It was seven of the nine that come down with the typhoid fever, and Mr. Drayton and me was the ones that nursed them.”

The newspapers had said that typhoid was found in six of the eight houses where Mary had worked. But all that was before Oyster Bay, and before the health department found her. I

wondered what Mary had thought about those outbreaks. Had she wondered why people kept getting sick in the houses where she worked? Did she think she was cursed, or that it was just a strange coincidence? Was it possible that she hadn't thought about it at all?

"Mary," I said "You were up in Maine before Riverside."

"It don't matter when it was! He said how I helped nurse them that was sick." Mary kicked the black walnut box.

I told myself it didn't matter if Mary couldn't say that she'd made people sick. It was probably too shameful for her to say that typhoid germs lived in her body, and even more shameful to admit that the illness wouldn't have spread if she'd washed her hands properly.

"You promised, Mary. You swore you wouldn't cook for other people or work with food."

Mary stomped back to the chair. She stared at me so hard her topknot shook. "It don't got to be a recommendation for cooking, Cecilia. It could be for working is all."

"Another laundry job...."

"I ain't been lazy or anything, and you got that friend Kitty that knows lots of people who are after a hard worker."

I couldn't hear my own breath over the pounding in my ears. "You mean a letter saying you work hard?"

"You know what to say."

"Maybe I could write a general sort of letter about you being a hard worker."

"That's it, Cecilia, only you got to call me Sallie Brown is what I'm saying."

"What?"

“Seeing as how they slandered and libeled me so bad, I got to have another name.”

“I can’t call you another name.”

“What do you mean you can’t....”

The pounding was making me dizzy. “I’ll write something,” I said, “about how you work hard.”

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The boat made grinding noises as we came into the dock. The island that had once seemed gray and brown was now a dozen shades of green. The roof of the big hospital building, which once dominated the island, was barely visible through the trees, and I could no longer see the path to Mary’s cabin. When the other visitors hurried off the boat, I stood on the splintery platform and looked to a clump of elderberry bushes. Mary and I had planted an azalea bush not far from that spot, but it was gone, and now I wondered if under the branches - maybe not far beneath the surface - there were bits of bone and skull. Probably so, I thought, though I couldn’t remember ever thinking about bones and skulls when Mary and I planted the bush and said our prayers.

Twelve hundred people had died when The General Slocum burned to the waterline. The poor souls were on their way to a day of swimming and picnicking when the steamship caught fire. The captain decided not to turn the boat to the closer shore. He said he was afraid the oil tanks would catch fire, so instead of getting off the river, he went across it, turning the boat to North Brother Island. What he didn’t take into account was how the wind would whip the fire

into a furnace. What he didn't anticipate, was the fire hoses ripping to shreds and the canvas life savers crumbling to dust. The captain, who lost an eye in the fire, went to prison for his negligence -he hadn't ever checked one piece of equipment or conducted one fire drill. But even with one eye he must have kept seeing what his failures had wrought - children sinking like stones - life boats that couldn't be lowered - mothers clutching children and jumping into the river.

A sparkling current - a river within a river - ran past the elderberry bushes. "Emerald green beyond the foam...." I whispered. I could see there was enough water in the East River to douse a million fires. But just as I was thinking how the captain didn't think ahead to where his carelessness would lead, Mary began hollering from behind a scrub pine. "Hal-lo!" she called. "Cecilia, is that you?"

"Mary," I said when she clamped a paw on my shoulder. Her topknot was the size of a cantaloupe and wattles of flesh hung from her chin. Otherwise, she looked like she had twenty years ago.

"Ain't had the first word from you since I come back to the island to live," Mary said, coming toward me as if she was a boat herself, riding a strong wind.

Mary didn't know that I'd married James Flynn, or that he'd died in the war. She didn't know that little Jimmy had been taken by the flu. "It's been a long time, Mary," I said, "but I need to talk to you." I was out of breath and there was a sort of whistle coming from my chest.

"You look mighty puny, Cecilia. I expect you got your reasons for huffing out here, but after your letter came, I couldn't think what they could be." She turned to her cabin and I stumbled behind blowing air through my pursed lips.

“They got me cleaning glass tubes in the laboratory,” she said as we got closer to the cabin which had been painted a creamy white and which now had a large stone step in front of the door.

Mary fell onto the bench beside the cabin and I flopped beside her. “Laboratory,” I gasped.

“They been lying about me all these years, saying how I got the germs and that I ain’t safe around food and such, but now they got me working in a laboratory, sometimes mixing stuff they need for their tests.”

“It’s been a long time.” I said again. My gums ached and the back of my throat felt raw. Was she still saying that she didn’t believe she carried typhoid fever? A wave of exhaustion rolled over me. I couldn’t remember ever being this tired.

“Mary,” I began, but my voice cracked and I was afraid I’d start to cry. I took several deep breaths and tried to relax the muscles in my face by imagining I was rolling out a pie dough, making it as flat and smooth as a china plate.

“What’s got into you Cecilia?” Mary turned and the bench bounced.

“I wanted to talk to you....” My pulse hammered my ankles and wrists and my mouth tasted like I’d been sucking pennies. The last time I saw Mary, I told her I didn’t think she had deliberately hurt anyone with her cooking. I didn’t think that now. I couldn’t believe that Mary didn’t know exactly what she was doing when she went to cook at the maternity hospital where those two women died.

“What are you after knowing?” Mary said.

“After you were released Mary, and I came to see you all those times....” My throat was

throbbing and my voice sounded like it was coming through gravel.

“You ain’t fixing to say you come to every place I lived, are you?”

“No, I only want to say that sometimes you said you didn’t believe you’d made anyone sick, but you did know that you carried typhoid. You only said what you did because you ...you were ashamed.”

“You ain’t making sense, Cecilia.”

A picture of Mary wiping her own excrement onto food came to me and I gagged.

Mary stuck out her legs and crossed them at the ankle.

I closed my eyes. “What happened between you and Kitty McDonough after I gave you that recommendation?”

“What are you asking? You wrote me a letter. You don’t remember?”

“But what happened? Did you meet with Kitty and show her the letter?”

“Cecilia, you ain’t talking right.”

“I mean, was it Kitty who told you about the cooking job at Sloane’s? Or did you hear about that job some other way?”

“Course it was Kitty! You think Saint Patrick was after telling me about jobs?”

I dropped my head. Of course I always knew my letter was what put Mary in touch with Kitty.

“If it wasn’t for all your meddling, and Kitty’s too, I could have married my gentleman friend, maybe even gone to Chicago like I always told you I had a mind to do.”

“What? What are you saying?” Mary had never mentioned a gentleman caller, and I’d take an oath that the word “Chicago” had never crossed her lips.

“Me and Mr. Garrity were sweet on one another back then, but you said I should take that job Kitty was looking to fill at the maternity hospital.”

“Mary, I never said any such thing!”

Mary closed her lips tight and nodded.

“And I never heard of such a person as Mr. Garrity!”

“That’s the one. Me and Mr. Garrity were talking about tying the knot and going to Chicago when you said I could make a good nest egg by helping out that friend of yours who was looking for a cook.”

“Mary, what are you saying? I only wrote a letter saying you were a hard worker. I didn’t know about a job at a maternity hospital. ”

“You and that friend Kitty - the one that died so sudden just after I started at the Sloane place - put it in my head that I should be making money by cooking for those rich ladies having babies.”

“Mary, I don’t know what you’re talking about. I never said anything like that. You weren’t supposed to be cooking for people. You knew that.”

“You saying you ain’t wrote me a letter?”

“I wrote a general sort of letter so you could find another job as a laundress.”

“Laundress? I wasn’t looking for no job as a laundress!”

“You’re saying you told me you wanted to cook?”

“Course I told you! You said they was looking for a cook and you wrote to that friend Kitty saying I’d come and work. What else do you think?”

After the typhoid fever outbreak at Sloane Maternity Hospital, and the death of two

women who worked there, the health department learned that the hospital cook was an Irish woman - a Mrs. Brown - who disappeared when the first people became ill.

“Do you remember promising the health department that you wouldn’t go near food? That’s the only reason they released you from Riverside.”

“I might of said something like that, but you were the one told me I should make some money. Sallie Brown was what you said I should call myself. I wouldn’t of done no such thing without you telling me.”

I leaned over and put my head between my knees a moment before salty fluids began dripping from my mouth.

“I don’t hold it against you, Cecilia, if that’s what’s bringing you all the way out here to see me. I been happy here this time. They fixed up my cabin and I got my privileges. I been going off the island for years now, and I got my laboratory work and some spending money.”

My mouth was a faucet. I knew I’d have to get back to the dock while I still had the strength. Back in Ireland, Sister Joseph Marie had told me that sinners needed to admit their faults to find forgiveness. The nun had said you shouldn’t make excuses or try to explain yourself. You had to just be sorry. Once you started to explain why what you did wasn’t really wrong, you were in trouble. I had to admit that my action - writing a recommendation - had gotten Mary a job as a cook, and that Mary’s cooking had infected dozens, and killed two.

“Remember, Cecilia,” Sister Joseph Marie used to say, “The first duty of a Catholic is to save your own soul.” I could see the nun standing next to the statue of the Sacred Heart that rested on a pedestal in the front of the room. But was I remembering wrong? Was the Sacred Heart statue really at the end of the dark corridor that smelled of mothballs? Was it a statue of the

Blessed Mother - the one with a big yellow crack in Our Lady's cloak - the one that was in Sister Joseph Marie's room? And was Sister Joseph Marie the nun who had big knobs on her pinkie fingers, or was that Sister Mary Alberta?

When my mouth stopped dripping, I pushed myself up. "I've been sick, Mary, and I have to go."

"I forgive you for what you did, Cecilia. I expect that's why you come out here to see me. Mary put her arm through my elbow and walked me down the path. "You come back and visit when you ain't so poorly."

My arm burned where Mary touched me, but I fought the hatred that was simmering in my heart. "Save your own soul," I whispered to myself.

Mary was gone before the boat pulled in. I hoisted myself up the ramp and went to the railing. The water was even shinier than before and now it looked as if diamonds had been sprinkled onto the silver. Six seagulls flapped into view and hovered in the air like kites on a string. I stared at them until my shoulders eased and my arms grew slack.

Like the captain on the ship I'd been careless, but I had two eyes to see where my deeds had led. And I could find forgiveness in this world. I'd press my hands together and point my fingers to heaven, and Father would slide the confessional door open to hear me say my sins without excuses.

"Running waves." The words came when the boat pulled farther from the dock and the water folded outward in a foamy broth. It was another snippet, but I couldn't remember what it came from. I looked back at the island that was growing greener as it shrank. "Peace," I whispered, a moment before the blessing floated up from the water and I actually felt a stillness

in my chest. “Deep peace of the running waves to you.”