"History is being written by those who weren't there and don't know."

Eu'lo.gy

eu′lo·gy

[Gr. *eulogia*] A discourse, commendation of someone or something, or services of a deceased person … also, high praise; laudation.

A memoir by
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CHAPTER ONE

Last night, my two sisters, Pat and Katie, had picked me up at the Albany airport. My husband, Ed, had remained in Albuquerque with our son, Mike, who was to take his SAT's the next day. The flight got in at eleven-thirty and we stayed up in Katie's bedroom until after three, into our memories, talking, laughing, and weeping now and then. We had settled the funeral arrangements this morning over breakfast.

"The Motherhouse? Mom's funeral at the Motherhouse? Why?" Pat asked. "I'm curious. You haven't set foot in the place since you left the convent twenty-three years ago."

"If not from there, where?" I asked. "Our parish church? The place is cold and dark and who'd come? Her friends are all dead but the sisters remember her and besides, they'll let us arrange the funeral the way we want.

"And there's something about the Motherhouse," I trailed off. But Pat was right. Why the Motherhouse? Why did I insist mother's funeral Mass be said there? Why? What was stirring besides sheer practicality? What strange siren was drawing me back into the past? Wasn't Mom's death enough? Must I dig up graves?

"Won't it seem strange not burying her from her parish?" Katie asked, fussing at the sink. "What will the priests think?"

Pat never looked up. "Who cares? The priests didn't know her. Mary wants the Motherhouse, you want a bag piper, and I pick the hymns." She clapped her notebook shut.

"You're determined to give the eulogy, Mary?"

"Yes."

"You'll never get through it." Both of them had been so attentive last night, knowing I'd taken Mom's death hard.

"I can handle it. Her life is not going to be swept away and forgotten, barely commented upon by some stranger. Being a good, generous person should count for something." I could handle

anything, I thought, turn off my feelings like a light switch. Click. Gone.

"I've already called Sister Helen and she's taking care of details." Helen was the current president of the Albany Sisters of Mercy and had been my close friend since grade school days. "She'd do anything for me," I added.

The TV was on in the sunroom and sounds of some game show drifted through the French doors into the kitchen.

"I knew there was something I forgot to tell you!" Katie exclaimed. "I met Jimmy O'Neill at St. Peter's, yesterday. He felt bad about Mom. She always took such an interest in him. He was asking for you, Mary…said he'd see you at the wake." Katie's head disappeared behind the fridge door again but Pat peered at me over the newspaper, appraising my reaction. Jimmy and I had been friends forever, and just before I left the convent, our friendship had rekindled. I always wondered how much Pat guessed and how much she knew.

"I've got to run. I have some extra time so I'm going to drive through our old neighborhood. I have to meet Helen at four and we're going to dinner. I'll be back around seven-thirty." Katie walked me towards the front door where I zipped up my boots and struggled into my winter coat.

"Will you be glad to see her?" Katie's face was clueless. Since the day I left the convent, she had harbored dim thoughts, suspecting everyone in the order of foul play. Why did I leave? What had they done to me? Something had to be wrong with them! Certainly, nothing could ever have been wrong with me.

"Yes, it's been years and I'm always glad to see her. We've had good times long before and long after the two of us entered the convent. Anyway, give me your keys. I'm out of here."

* * * * *

I backed Katie's car down her driveway and into Western Avenue traffic. Sand, salt and bright January sun had cleared the roads and I

could sail along. Good. My mind traveled its own routes when I drove over familiar streets.

I knew she'd die before I got here. "Oh, Mom, why didn't you wait for me?" I fumbled in my pocket for my handkerchief and blew my nose. I guess I'm not as Spartan as I thought.

Everything had turned out a quarter of a cup short…all the things I had planned when Ed and I decided to retire in Albuquerque. Mom could have spent the winter where it was warm, oohing over the red mountains and the clouds. How she loved clouds. Then she began having strokes.

Things don't always turn out.

I could hear Mom. "Mary, you can't always have what you want." Tell me about it, I thought. I remembered one Saturday, when I was about five, she went shopping and promised to bring me home a doctor's kit, the kind with those little stethoscopes. I sat all afternoon on the window seat, watching for her in the rain. I even ate lunch there. You get so caught up when you're little.

But she had completely forgotten, and came home without it. I was devastated, and the more she tried to comfort me, the harder I cried. "Mary," she finally said, "you can't always have what you want." I was sure it was the end of the world, but when I remembered the ends of the world I'd been through since then…the frustration of being human…nothing ever goes according to plan. Especially death. It comes and goes as it pleases. One morning you look up and what you had is gone.

I passed Manning Boulevard's stately homes, with their manicured firs and junipers draped in white fluff, and headed towards our old house on Academy Road. Norway maples lined New Scotland Avenue. In summer time, thick maroon leaves shaded the pavement. Today, their limbs, tucked into white snowsuits, danced with the wind and dusted the street below, beckoning me with long, woolly arms to come out and play.

Nostalgia overwhelmed me as I cruised down old roads and recollections, remembering the cocoon that enveloped my family and friends when I was young. I grew up in a dream world. It was how

things were *supposed* to be then that counted. How they appeared, not how they really were. The whole country was the same way.

When I was in grade school, skating up this street to the nuns in my old clunkers that I had to tighten with a key, my biggest problem was, would the clamps that fastened the skates to the soles of my shoes loosen and send me sprawling? In the meantime, nineteen year-old boys were fighting a war and being maimed and torn apart and killed. Despite that reality, the war was romanticized. Society was determined to cultivate a simple and safe milieu for its children, truthful or not. For me, growing up during the early war years had been one big marshmallow.

I caught the green light at Cardinal Avenue and noticed the rambling old private homes below St. Peter's Hospital were now doctors' or lawyers' offices. I remembered walking towards the Motherhouse with the nuns, on my way to piano lessons, carrying some favorite sister's book-bag. In the old days it was common to see nuns, always in pairs, walking somewhere, wrapped in curious habits designed over a hundred years ago. Protected only by crocheted shawls, with veils flowing, they were seemingly unaware of the biting winter winds that blew across the fields chilling their bones…their simple presence proclaimed to the entire world that God was worth it. A total enigma to most and perceived as more angel than human, they appeared to hover between heaven and earth.

Those 'angels' had been a prime ingredient in my fairy tale world…human beings leading supernatural lives, piquing my imagination and desires until finally I could resist their message no longer.

Twenty years later, following the revolutionary changes proclaimed by Vatican II, I left the community. The decision had been excruciating. I felt the way fervent Jews must have felt at the time of Christ, called away from the Old Testament, its pomp and rituals and its devotion to trivial detail and into the new gospel of love of neighbor.

I rarely reviewed the past. To what purpose? But today, it banged on my doors and rattled my windows. This was crazy. Here I am, a counselor, forever cajoling clients to air out used bedding, find peace

with old decisions. Was something still unsettled (something I was sure I had put to rest years ago) or was I simply grieving, missing people I had lost? Maybe my youth? What was it?

Cutting over Lawnridge Avenue to Academy Road, I took the old route I had walked on my way home from St. Teresa's School. The area had changed. Brick buildings had crawled up New Scotland Avenue, swallowing up the blocks, tarring over the killdeers' nests, and driving away the quail. No one hunted rabbits with B B guns anymore or sledded down the hill across from our gray house. Those fields were now a parking lot.

On summer nights, we had played 'Red Light' and 'Giant Steps'; in the fall, we had run down those hills, flushing out pheasants. Today, I was flushing out memories. Reserved signs dotted the parking lot, but I found a spot that faced our old house with its twenty-nine windows and cozy sun porch. I turned off the engine and settled myself. My heavy coat and fur-lined boots would keep me warm.

A sweet sadness overcame me; I felt as if I were watching soup simmering on a cold November day, comforting and nostalgic, its contents slowly bubbling to the surface. I closed my eyes and thought, Dad and Mom, you're both gone. The sweet life you wrapped around us, the fun, the pizzazz, the honor, the innocence, the optimism, the sheer goodness. I hadn't thought about these things in years. I observed the rose bushes Mom had planted by the front door, bare and dormant, gathering strength for the demanding spring ahead. Against many odds, my religious vocation took root and blossomed in this house. I settled down in the car and began to deal with my memories.

CHAPTER TWO

We were a moral family, not a strongly religious one…not typically Irish Catholic if such a thing exists. Dad came from a long line of disgruntled Catholics. "The closer you are to the Church, the further you are from God." I'd heard that one enough. In 1904, when he was considering attending Union College, the parish priest had arrived with his wisdom. "Send him to work," he told my grandmother. "He's had high school, more than most. Send him to the foundry and let him support you." She showed him the door. "You have your nerve," said she. "Education is good enough for the likes of you but not for the likes of us," and off Dad went to Union College to become an engineer. He had more respect for his country than the Church, he said. "What had the Church ever done for me except give orders?"

However, the subject of religion came to a head when we moved to Albany from Utica on the Monday during spring vacation in April 1940. Dad had flourished in business during the twenties and Mom and he were planning a trip on the Queen Mary when the Depression wiped him out. He returned to civil engineering and ran the Works Project Administration in five counties in upper New York State, building roads, bridges and swimming pools. But the economy was improving, the bureau was closing and he needed to find work. Dad took a Civil Service exam for Assistant Commissioner of the State Department of Corrections, got the job and here we were.

The next Saturday afternoon, Mom stood in our big kitchen over the huge porcelain sink, dropping peeled vegetables into a bowl of cold water. Dad stared out the window at the fields and I sat on the radiator. A pot roast was simmering and I could smell the dark juices and sweet onions.

Dad and Mom had sauntered in and out of this conversation for days. P.S. 19 or St. Teresa's? Dad liked the idea of public school and wanted us enrolled there, especially me. I had attended John F. Hughes in Utica. He claimed that Our Lady of Lourdes where Pat

went was too far for me to walk. Now, Mom wanted us in Catholic school together.

I had loved public school, especially kindergarten. There was music and art all day, a totally creative program: stories, dramatics, swathed in an invisible routine. Despite this gossamer regimentation, my report card read, "Delightful child, imaginative, *but does not like to do what she is told*."

Dad could not see me in St. Teresa's. The fact that all Catholic children were supposed to be in Catholic school meant nothing to him.

In those days, the Church was so definite. "I speak," it said. "You believe." Dad feared its subtle and not-so-subtle codes would lean against our choices. We needed room, he said, not a web. But my mother, for all her seeming compliance, was determined that we go to Catholic school and she met him head on.

I was naive enough to believe my parents were of one mind, since they never argued; they just talked and talked, and gave reasons that they were right until one of them wore down.

"Why pay money for books and uniforms when there's a perfectly good public school one block closer?"

"As far as uniforms go, they'll still have to wear clothes," Mom answered, "and they can resell their books." She always futzed during a serious discussion, and today, she pared carrots and scrubbed little potatoes. I sensed uniforms and books weren't the issue.

"The classes are overcrowded"

Mom countered it didn't matter, that the nuns could handle an army. Their whole life was devoted to their work. They taught discipline and ideals and stressed written English. The Sisters of Mercy were an Irish order, weren't they? Some of the old nuns still had brogues. Was there a soul on earth who spun the English language as well as an educated Irishman? Look at Shaw and O'Connor, she said.

"Now Winnie, be reasonable," Dad complained, staring out the window. "It's too strict, too narrow, too confining."

"Where else will they learn about their religion, if not in Catholic school? We don't know enough to teach them."

He continued, addressing the glittering windowpane. "If they go to Catholic school, I admit they'll get a hell of an education but they won't learn a thing about life." He received no comment from Mother, who didn't seem to care what we knew about life. He was licked and he knew it.

"I don't know about Mary and Catholic school." Jingling his change, he disappeared into the living room and behind his copy of *The Knickerbocker News*. What was the difference? I thought. The schools were both brick and only a block away from each other. St. Teresa's did appear more inviting, flanked by the church, the rectory's front lawn dotted with evergreens, while down the street stood P.S. 19, stranded in concrete, barren and dismal. Was it the way they looked?

But it was something else that made the difference because I soon learned Catholic school was the way you dressed, where you went and with whom, what you did on weekends, what you read, what you mocked, what you thought or refused to think. It was truths you couldn't escape.

Catholic school was a way of life.

* * * * *

The following Monday, off we went to join others in brown and tan uniforms, to *The Baltimore Catechism*, the small green paperback that synthesized our religion, and to the mysterious nuns, clothed in yards of black serge, with flowing see-through veils and long clacking beads…to seemingly heavenly beings. Did they fall out of another world?

Dad decided it was his duty to enroll us and made his one appearance at St. Teresa's that day. After a few words of greeting to the principal, a pupil ushered Pat into sixth grade, but Katie and I remained behind. Katie grasped Dad's hand while I stared up at the face of the nun. He kept talking, Katie kept clinging and I kept staring.

Katie looked scared to death.

I was fascinated.

I hadn't seen creatures like this before. My First Communion nun had worn a blue gown and big white wings on her head and had a neck. This one had only a face. The starched white cotton that held up her veil had a hole in it where she peeked out. Dad had prepared me.

"They're only people, Mary. Just look at their faces." Sister Boniface was beautiful, just like the Blessed Virgin and eventually became my fourth grade teacher.

Every morning after prayers and 'I Pledge Allegiance', we would sit transfixed for an hour. As Sister Boniface leaned against the front edge of her desk, her eyes found a spot between the back wall and heaven. Then, she described St. Sebastian with all the arrows in him and the Christians eaten by lions and St. Joan, gone in the fire. I sat there shuddering inside. I was terrified of fire.

St. Elizabeth's husband was furious at her for giving bread to the poor and when he caught her, God changed the bread to roses. Finally, he believed her and saw she was a saint. What was wrong with him? I was only eight but I could tell something was going on.

Sister assured us later that he turned out all right.

But most saints' lives were frightening. How about St. Peter who was crucified upside down and some English priest who had his insides torn out when he was still breathing? Being a martyr scared me and I kept telling God I wouldn't be good at it. Sister Boniface, however, made it clear we should keep "our minds open for that grand consideration and special crown of martyrdom."

I wasn't sure, but she mesmerized me.

I was thriving. But poor Katie! Because she was shy and behaved well, she sat in the back of her classroom, even though her name began with B. All the troublemakers were in front. She tried becoming an A student. It did her some good and it did her no good. She led her class but felt little approval because her nun was too busy, too overworked by sixty-four second graders, only seventeen of them girls. Katie never recovered from her original terror, and the worst of it?

She was afraid to make her First Communion!

We shared the back bedroom, a four poster and our deepest secrets. Saturday mornings, lounging in bed, we reviewed the week.

"Why don't you want to make your First Communion? Don't you like your dress?" I couldn't understand it. First Communion was big time.

In second grade, the nuns decided children knew right from wrong, and taught them everything in *The Baltimore Catechism*. Well, not everything, but the basics anyway. Then, they sent them to the priests who heard their 'sins' and forgave them in the name of God. They said it was God who really did it…forgive the sins, that is. On a special Sunday, usually Mother's Day, the girls dressed like brides in short white dresses, and the boys wore white suits. Everything was white, and the whole class received Communion at a Mass the priest said especially for them.

Presents, relatives, friends, pictures, parties! First Communion. Definitely big time.

"I'm scared I'm going to be sick," Katie confided, eyes brimming.

"You're not going to be sick."

"I am too. I'm going to be sick." Clearly, Katie was upset.

"Why?"

"I can't eat somebody's body and blood, even God's." I pushed myself up on one elbow.

"Oh, is that all?" I sank back on the bed. "Don't worry. It tastes like bread. The host tastes like bread. But it serves you right for reading all those awful comic books where everybody gets cut up, and all that blood." She was close to tears. "I'm only kidding," I said. "There's no blood, there's NO BLOOD."

"I'm scared I'm going to be sick," Katie persisted. "Sister Gerald told us it was the body and blood of Christ." This was serious. I got up on my elbow again.

"Now, listen. It's not the way it sounds. The host tastes like dry bread, like cardboard. Save up a lot of spit, let the host melt in your mouth and it will go right down." Since I had made my First Communion two years ago, I was an authority.

"Sister says it's the body and blood of Jesus. I'm going to be sick." Katie looked so white and upset, I thought she was going to be

sick right here in the middle of our bed. She was still trying to get used to the nuns, who scared her speechless. And now, this, this body and blood stuff. I sighed. What was wrong with Katie's nun? How could she miss a point this big? Why couldn't she do it right? Why didn't Sister Gerald do what my First Communion nun did? When it came to getting people ready for First Communion, my nun with the white winged hat had it all over her nun.

She had smiley lines around her eyes. I used to stare at a brown mole on her neck and at her square hands and nails. Not polished like my mother's. But when my nun talked to us, she bent down and made her voice low and we thought we had a joke together that nobody knew about except us.

One afternoon after school, she led us from her classroom, through the church and into the sacristy, where the priest dressed. We were the 'publics' and had special lessons, because we didn't know as much as Catholic-schoolers. They had religion every day.

"You can talk in here because this is not the church. It's like a back hall." She opened a drawer and pulled out a small box of white wafers and put it in her bag.

"These are not Jesus yet. The priest hasn't made them Jesus. He does that when the bells ring at Mass and everyone bows his head." I never bowed my head. I always kept it up. Something was going on and I didn't want to miss it. Maybe someday I'd see it happen, like Jesus coming down from heaven and disappearing into the round flat piece of bread the priest held up.

SHAZAM! And I'd see it because I kept looking. But I didn't tell her I looked.

She pulled up a straight backed chair and the eight of us settled at her feet, wondering what else she had in her bag and what she was going to do next. Would she make it happen right here in the sacristy?

Could she?

"Look at your hand, and make a fist. Spread out your fingers. Isn't that a miracle?"

We weren't sure. We'd never thought about it, but we went along.

"All the things inside your hand that have to move so you can close it." She sat there, opening and closing her hand and I could tell by looking at her she thought it was something. Her face sort of lit up.

"And you can see me!"

"And you can hear me!"

"God makes it all happen. Think of all that He can do. How smart God is! He can think up anything. He can do anything, anything."

We agreed. She brought out a picture book.

"Now close your eyes and think of an elephant and a bee."

We did.

"Think of how big one of them is and how small the other is. Think of all the different things they can do. Each one is a miracle.

"An elephant can feel things with the end of her trunk, feel things the way you feel with your fingers, and pick things up. And as big as she is, she never steps on her baby, even though her baby likes to walk under her." We all looked at the picture of the mother and baby elephant.

"And the bee is tiny and goes to work every day just the way your fathers do. He comes home and puts all his honey into a wax box and seals it up. No matter where the bees live, they do the same thing." She showed us the picture. We had been creeping up, some of us on our knees, and we looked again. We liked being close to her. She smelled like Ivory soap.

"Sit down, now. I have a surprise for you." She pulled a jar of honey out of her bag and said, "Who would like some honey?"

We all wanted some. It was messy but as we sat in the sacristy eating crackers and honey, I thought I must be in heaven. The sun sprinkled through the colored windows. Confetti light fell around my nun and any minute, I thought she'd rise right off the chair and disappear before our eyes. "God knows that children like to eat," she began, "and since He wants to be part of you…" she held out her hands, palms up, eyebrows lifted, and waited for our answer.

"He turns Himself into something we can eat!" we chorused.

"Yes." There we sat, munching on our snacks in a dusky sacristy, learning how miracles happened. Made sense to me. It seemed to make sense to everybody else, too.

Then, we ate the dry hosts and she told us how to melt them and swallow them. We knew what they tasted like and that the priest hadn't changed them into Jesus yet. We figured she knew everything, and that we weren't far behind.

So why was Katie stuck on thinking gory thoughts about something so wonderful, such a miracle? She deserved better than that. I told her the stories my nun had told me and she seemed a little better. Then, I said, "I have an idea."

"What?"

"Let's go."

Mom was doing the laundry in the cellar and Pat was still asleep so we had the run of the house. We threw off the covers and padded barefoot downstairs into the kitchen where I took out a slice of bread and cut a hole in it with the top of an orange juice glass.

"There." I pushed my hand on the bread, flattening it out. "Come on upstairs. We can't do anything here." When we got back to our room, I shut the door, just in case Pat woke up. "Okay. Now you kneel on the chair." I put my bathrobe on backwards, wrapped a handkerchief around my neck and stood behind the chair.

"I'm the priest and it's your turn to go to Communion. All the kids will be kneeling with their heads down. You keep looking at the priest out of the side of your eye." I moved to her right and watched her eyes. "When you see him coming, maybe two kids away, fill your mouth with spit as much as you can. The bread will taste like cardboard, but you can get it down. Remember, let it melt. It's just bread."

Katie knelt on the chair and looked at me solemnly.

"He holds it up and says, 'Core puss dummy knee' or something like that and puts it on your tongue, all right? Don't lose your spit, all right?"

"All right."

"Close your eyes, and open your mouth."

"All right."

"You're not going to get sick!"

"No." It went off well. She swished it around and down it went. Too bad Daddy had sent Katie to Catholic school. If she had been a

'public,' maybe she would have had what I had. I guess her nun couldn't do it with sixty-four kids in the room.

"How about confession? Want to practice?"

"Yes." There was a closet in the middle of the wall in our bedroom with a door that frequently came in handy. Pat hid behind it Saturday mornings when Mom came upstairs to give us the deuce for raising hell on the beds, and knocking out slats. She never did see Pat making faces at us from behind the door and Pat got us into terrible trouble with Mom more than once. Today, we used the door for a confessional. I sat on a chair in the closet and Katie who seemed terrified still, knelt on a chair on the other side.

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. This is my first confession." She grabbed the doorknob and stuck her head around the corner.

"Now, what'll I say?"

I sat there, thinking. "What'd you do?"

"Nothing."

"You can't say that."

"Okay." We thought for awhile. She pulled herself back and said, "I lied a' hundred times." I jerked my head around the door.

"Really?" Katie never lied.

"No." I retreated and then stuck my head around again. "You can't tell him that…you didn't do it. What about stealing?"

"No."

"Talking back?"

"No."

"Did you disobey or commit adultery?"

"No." I flipped through *The Baltimore Catechism*. This job was proving harder than I thought.

"What's a dull tree?"

"I don't know but it's here." I shut the book in disgust. No

help at all.

"What about not picking up your dirty clothes? Mom doesn't like it when we don't pick up our dirty clothes."

"Is that a sin?"

"I don't know but you have to say something."

"You sure about a dull tree?"

"You can't use it."

She kept looking at me hopefully, so I went back to the book. "It doesn't fit. It means marrying someone else's wife. It doesn't fit."

Katie sighed, "I didn't pick up my dirty clothes a hundred times." She leaned around the door again. "Can you think of anything else?"

"No."

"For your penance say five Our Fathers and five Hail Marys and say the Act of Contrition."

"Oh, my God, I am hard'ly sorry for having offended Thee and I detest all my sins…"

We lived in an age of innocence.

CHAPTER THREE

School might have been a pain for Katie but we loved our new house and neighborhood, our own private Sherwood Forest. Academy Road was wide enough for street games and all the backyards ran together and there were lots of kids our age. We could play in the fields with Sally Anne Clinton, build straw huts and weave cattails into mats. Katie scrounged a wooden sign from the cellar and waterproofed our hut. When it rained, the three of us would squeeze in, our heads nearly out the door, and we'd listen to the patter in the fields. One Saturday afternoon in late winter, we were out back near the brook, roasting potatoes, sitting close to the fire and talking, cozy in our snow suits with hoods, hand-knit scarves and mittens. Sally Ann Clinton wanted to play again tomorrow morning. She was Protestant and didn't have to go to church every Sunday but we did or we'd end up in hell.

"You're Catholic," she sniffed, "and you have to do what the pope says."

"Says who?" I asked.

"My mother," she sassed back.

"I don't know the pope and anyway, all he does is take care of pagan babies."

"What are pagan babies?"

"During Lent," Katie answered, "we give up candy and ice cream. We buy pagan babies. Chinese are pagans and they kill their babies."

"How come?"

"They haven't got any food," she continued. "They'd starve anyway. They cost five dollars apiece and Catholics buy 'em. I put in my birthday money and saved the most so I got to name her Rose Marie."

"We're not Catholic and we don't kill babies!" Sally Ann protested.

"You're not Chinese, either, and you're not pagan." So there, I thought. "They only kill the girls." That made it worse.

"What does the pope do with the babies?" Sally Ann wanted to know.

"He doesn't buy them. He sends the nuns the money. They take care of 'em." We stared at our potatoes for a while.

"Mom says your church is dark and scary," Sally Ann ventured.

"Want to come see it? You can see ours but we can't go into yours," I said.

"Why not?"

"The nuns are afraid we'll lose our religion."

"Just by going in?"

"I guess so. What's yours like?" I asked. "It must be something if we can't even go in!"

"It's a big white hall with pews. The choir stands in front where Mr. Turner talks." Katie and I waited.

"Anything else? Do you go to Communion?"

"Yes. They pass Communion around."

"Wow! In our church, no one touches Communion except the priest. Do you go to confession?"

"No. My mother says you shouldn't tell anybody except God what you do wrong."

"No kidding! The nuns bring us to confession once a month whether we need it or not. What do you do in church? Do you have Mass?"

"What's Mass?"

"If you don't know, you don't have it. There must be something we do the same."

"We sing hymns." Sally Ann stood right up, shook her straight blond hair out of her hood and in a sweet, clear voice began,

" '*Jesus loves me this I know,*
For the Bible tells me so.
Little ones to Him belong.
They are weak but He is strong.
Yes, Jesus loves me.
Yes, Jesus loves me.
Yes, Jesus loves me.

The Bible tells me so.' "

I coughed, smothering my laughs. We never sang stuff like that in church. Old ladies with high voices warbled from upstairs with the organ, and they didn't sing in English. But they never sang about the Bible. The Catholic Church was never big on the Bible. We had *The Baltimore Catechism* and the pope. I didn't want her to know what I was thinking so I said, "I want to see your church. Do you think we'd get into trouble?" Katie thought we would but Sally Ann and I made plans over her head and decided to sign a pact in 'blood' by each chipping in a nickel and walking up to Abrams Drugstore for a small scoop of strawberry ice cream.

We never did see her church.

* * * * *

Mom thought I was getting too old to play in the fields. She had vainly hoped the nuns might transform me into a lady, but finally decided she would tame me herself. "There is more to life than building tree huts, creating straw villages and declaring war on those boys from Grove Avenue."

For my tenth birthday, she promised to buy me a pretty dress, grown up pumps, stockings with seams, and throw me a big party. I'd even get a pair of black racers, but I must act the part of a lady, just for that one day.

It was a deal.

She taught me how to sit, my back not quite touching the chair, how to cross my ankles and bend my knees ever so slightly to the left. She showed me where my hands belonged, and, above all, how not to fidget. I bore up because I was getting a McCall's mannequin with removable arms and real sewing patterns out of this, plus the ice skates.

At last came the day to buy my dress. Mother, as usual called The Young Folks Shop in advance so the owners would lay out the right size and colors. I had to wear my best clothes: leggings and a coat

with a velvet collar. Gloves even. I'd made the bargain. There was no escaping.

We took the bus downtown to Pearl Street, and it was unusually crowded. All the men were standing and when another woman got on, Mom signaled me to give her my seat. As we reached Madison Avenue, a young black and very pregnant woman boarded the bus and as she waddled past us joggling for space, Mom rose and insisted she take her seat. She protested but finally did.

"I remember how I felt the last month I carried my oldest one," Mom remarked. "It was summer and my ankles used to swell." They chatted like neighbors about children and the woman said she had two more home. I kept watching because no grown-up I knew talked to a Negro woman like she was a person.

When we got off the bus and began walking towards The Little Folk's Shop, I asked Mom why she stood up for another lady. "She wasn't older than you. She was young and she was a cleaning lady," I insisted. In my eyes, my mother was royalty. Why should she stand up for anyone?

"Should that make a difference? She was pregnant and she was tired and people should think of someone besides themselves. Please open the door for me, Mary. We're here."

Sylvia and Rose, the two elderly maiden ladies who owned the store had long, very black hair, tied in neat buns on the top of their heads. There, the similarity ended. Sylvia was tiny, sharp, well groomed, and ran the show. "Mrs. Bergan," she cooed, sweeping towards her with arms thrown out in welcome, "we're all ready for you." She jerked her head towards the silent Rose, who smiled sweetly at Mother and shooed me into the dressing rooms off the back corridor.

While Mom sipped tea and nibbled homemade cookies, Rose dressed me. "Where is your sister today?" she asked. I told her the birthday story and how I cut a deal and she smiled.

"But I hate this dress!" I moaned. It was plain navy blue, like all the others Sylvia chose for me. But, I hated every dress because I was so skinny, and nothing looked good, just hung there.

"So, you hate this dress," and she winked at me and stepped out of the dressing room for a minute, returning with a pretty light turquoise thing with a swishy skirt and little brick red flowers on it. Rose made me bite my lips and lick them, and pinch my cheeks and twirl around. She combed my hair, fluffed it out and said, "Now, walk out slowly and turn and smile at your mother."

Sylvia's eyebrows flew into her hair when I made my entrance, but good old Mom! She saw me standing there, smiling, and she saw Rose, half hidden by curtains, smiling, and I got the dress. I thought, if I had to look like a girl, I might as well do it in this dress.

On my birthday, it was pouring rain and I was in a panic that no one would come. But they all did. I sat on one of the straight-backed dining room chairs Mom had moved into the living room. The girls gathered around and gave me presents. I looked right at them as if they were lovely strangers and said, "Thank you very much."

All the other mothers were there; it was quite elegant and formal. I helped serve the ice cream and cake and never spilled a thing. I was a lady at last! Lady Mary. I liked it, and never forgot it. My mother battled dragons to teach me manners and poise, which she thought was her gift to me on my tenth birthday. But what stuck with me was that she gave up her seat on the bus for a tired Negro cleaning lady.

About the Author

Following an excellent Catholic education, I joined the Sisters of Mercy in the Albany, New York, Diocese. Twenty years later, I felt a strong call to action which I believed I was unable to answer within the confines of religious life. In 1969, I left the community to teach the disadvantaged in the city of Boston. Within a few years, I married a widower with five children and later, had a son of my own.

I now live in Albuquerque where I serve as a Eucharistic minister and counselor in my parish church. I'm also enjoying the charms of my youngest granddaughter, "Little Bea".

Painting and gardening are my major hobbies besides exploring secret places, enjoying long conversations with friends, and tracking down exceptional New Mexican wine and recipes.

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