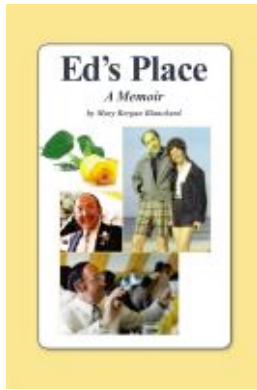


Ed's Place

A Memoir

by Mary Bergan Blanchard





We were emerging from different lives: Ed, a widower, looking to remarry and I, having recently left the Convent, devoted to teaching in the Inner City. I had no interest in men, a family, a new direction or complication. Monday, I'll tell him Monday. No need to waste his time. One week later. "Five children!" Sheila exclaimed. "You're still seeing him? Are you out of your mind?" I didn't think so.

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CHAPTER ONE

I SAID YES

Spring, 1971

It was a dark and stormy night.

No cliché intended.

It was.

A noreaster had sped up the coast, swirling over the ocean. Gathering fuel from the cold Atlantic, it attacked Boston about eleven thirty Saturday night, soaking Rhode Island and Provincetown for a lead-in. The drenching rain drowned The Common, pummeled its way past the Hancock and whooshed up Boylston Street to the Prudential Building, slinging gallons of water onto the pavement and the music lovers pouring out of Symphony Hall.

The intensity of the storm rattled my windows and woke me up. I lay in bed for a while, listening to the advent of spring washing away the dregs of winter.

I wrapped my spread around me, dragged it across the wide pine boards finally tucking it around my cold feet. Settling myself on the window seat, I peered out into my dark alley.

Not much visibility.

The old Victorian windows grumbled and complained, like old men out of sorts, having to have the last word. No sign of letting up. I sat there enjoying the mayhem until after twelve. Finally padding back to my bed, I addressed the commotion out loud. "Silly storm! What are you doing here? You were due in last month." And I thought of Helen's recent message because I knew that part of my life was being washed away too. "Let's hope you make things new ... and I don't mean just the trees and flowers. My life could handle a little spring right now."

That said I fell into a mindless sleep.

I woke to a dismal Sunday morning ... steady rain drenched the city. I had gone to Mass at the Franciscan chapel in the Pru Saturday afternoon, so I didn't have to leave my lair. It was a wash your hair, give yourself a pedicure, clean out dresser drawers kind of day. I decided to make a soft cushion for the window seat and wrote it on one of my lists. The weather might be against me but being cheerful worked. Why not?

Arranging leisure time had become a priority on these afternoons and evenings.

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Instead of settling myself into my one comfortable chair with Agatha Christie's *The Body in the Library*, I prepared a three course breakfast, made a fresh pot of coffee and carried it into my room.

Forget the TV ... it was a Beethoven day.

I loved it when Sheila left for the weekend. I could blast the stereo without disturbing anyone, dance through the apartment, sing my way through the third movement of his Seventh, directing occasionally while waiting for my guest appearance at Symphony Hall ... the brilliant undiscovered amateur.

I was going to have a fine day. My spirits were high. Then, the phone rang.

Would I like to go to singles party tonight around five, leave at four?

Drat it!

I wasn't keen on driving from Back Bay out Rt. 9 to Southborough to a mixer where I didn't know anyone and I didn't care to. I was warm and cozy and safely tucked in on this Sunday.

"But you're the only one with a car." My friend needled me over the phone. "The girls have just returned from Paris!" she exclaimed. "They taught in primary classes for a year. They might have a fresh approach to early childhood education."

That intrigued me. I was currently teaching kindergarten in Boston and organizing new strategies.

"And Judy and Vivian have so recently come back and they don't know anyone," Anne continued, sensing some interest, "and we all need to meet new people and you should get out too. Our work is so serious, so taxing etc., etc., etc."

Oh well, I thought, she's right, but there goes my day.

I said yes.

CHAPTER TWO

MAURICE, WHO ARE YOU, REALLY?

The Wellesley crowd. College graduates. Tonight would be a far cry from the party at the bachelor apartment on Commonwealth last month ... semi-inebriated male guests chipping golf balls down the narrow corridor into the toilet.

I was chauffeuring three quite proper women ... Anne, a colleague from school whom I had recently met and had conned me into the evening and the other two, impeccably dressed, whom I didn't know.

Unfortunately for me, they weren't interested in children.

I collected them on Boylston Street across from the Pru, and after hurried introductions, Anne settled in the front seat with me and the conversation of the other two immediately turned to men.

"I want to meet ones who speak English, who are looking for more than sex, widowed or divorced, no young children, good looking, professional and well off," Judy began.

I wish you luck, I thought. You are about to encounter some stiff competition. I'd been to these gatherings before.

"I'd love to meet a widower with grown children, but no divorced man," Vivian continued. "Some exes never let go. Even if they lived in Tahiti, they'd keep their finger in the pot, especially if they have children. I don't blame them for being interested in their children. I just don't want the hassle."

Anne said nothing. I uh-hummed a great deal, trying to navigate the wet, dark roads and ignore the dancing windshield wipers. We finally passed Framingham and were in Southborough. I took a right and we all began searching for Lover's Lane.

"Who'd believe anyone lived on Lover's Lane?" I asked no one in particular but there it was.

I drove at least a quarter of a mile under a canopy of pines, past stables, an Olympic-sized swimming pool and a guest cottage before we reached the main house. The rain had let up by the time the four of us arrived but I had worn a lime-green cape with a huge Vogue stand-up collar that I happened to look good in.

I kept it on.

The evening was chilly for early May.

A tall male was leaning against the front door, highball in hand, giving us the

once-over and not being coy about it either. He didn't move so I quipped, "Are you checking I.D.s?"

"No, I'm Maurice, the butler," and he bowed slightly. "Can I take your coats?" I doubted his explanation but, why not? I couldn't wear a rain cape all night.

"Certainly," and in we went. The house was large, rambling and inviting. The walls were mahogany, the floors were polished hardwood, the kitchen was industrial and the library was Victorian. The rooms were packed with flowers, food, drink and fortyish singles making a great deal of noise. I grabbed a Chardonnay and a plate of munchies as Maurice came downstairs and singled me out.

Here we go, I thought. Let the games begin.

"Well, Maureeece, are you from Boston?"

"No, I'm a widower."

I turned and looked up at him. "I'm sorry. I asked you if you were from Boston."

"I thought you asked me if I was divorced."

"How rude," I exclaimed. "How could anyone ask such a thing?"

"You're the first person here who hasn't asked me ... such a thing." He laughed a nice easy laugh.

I liked him.

"Maurice, who are you, really? I doubt if you're the butler."

"I'm not. I don't know anybody here except the hostess and I was looking for something to do. I'm Ed Blanchard. I'm a widower and I live here in town. Who are you?"

"I'm Mary Bergan and I live in Back Bay. Shake."

We moved into the library and I sensed he was relieved to escape an unfamiliar scene, a scene quite comfortable for me. He wasn't fishing. He hadn't asked me if I were divorced nor had children. Very polite. I liked that. He told me why he had accepted Ruth's invitation and about his misgivings.

"This is a singles party for college graduates. That's not me. I hated school. My mother wouldn't let me quit so I got my high school diploma at night. After I came home from the service I took courses at Clark in accounting but no degree." He studied his drink. "Most of these people are lawyers or doctors. I've always been in business. But they are people. You have to talk to somebody. I don't want to turn into a hermit."

The library was crowding up with couples who had paired off so we ambled into the kitchen and sat on the high stools near the counter. Ed continued where we left off. "When your wife dies, you're the one left and your married friends disappear,

people you've known for years. It's bad enough that so much of your life changes but there you are ... alone. So I came. Why not?" He turned and smiled. "But who wants a man my age?"

"Plenty of women," I answered, including two out of the three girls who drove out here with me, especially if you own a house like this." We both laughed.

"I don't, but my house is a nice Garrison Colonial that overlooks the reservoir. We had it built. Wanna see it? It's less than a mile from here." He stood up and said, "Don't worry. I don't own any etchings." He dramatically put his hand over his heart and recited, "My heart is pure and your virtue is safe with me."

"I believe you," and I laughed again. No way would he be invited here if he were a serial killer. It was a small town and people knew each other. Besides, I liked his eyes. I checked with my passengers who had connected with partners and had rides home, so we left.

We entered his sprawling Colonial through a side door near the rear of the garage that led into a family room. We settled down there and eventually sipped Galliano from a ceramic Italian soldier with a cork in his head.

"I suppose you wonder what I do for a living," he commented as he sunk into the arm chair next to me.

"Not really," I lied.

"Well, when Jean died, she was only forty. Everything happened so fast ... I just couldn't believe it ... and it hit me. It could have been me who died!

"And I thought," he continued, "what do I really want to do with the rest of my life?" He was staring out the window into the dark. The rain had turned to an occasional light drizzle, like a dense fog.

The moon had little chance of performing tonight.

I broke the long silence. "Like, what was your dream if you could do anything you wanted to?"

"Yes," he said, "and I decided I wanted to own a tavern. I thought it would be fun. And I liked the idea of working for myself. I was a distribution manager working for Narragansett ... they sold beer in the New England area. I'd been in business my whole life. Small business. Always working for someone else." He was staring out the window again and seemed so far away. I wondered if he were talking to me.

"The day I went back to work after I buried Jean, I upped and quit. Just like that. I didn't like my boss and he was nagging me for paper work. I didn't need anyone pushing me around so I threw the papers at him, right across the desk." Ed laughed at the memory.

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“I told him if he wanted the job done, he could do it himself. I stayed home for six weeks and the children and I built the shed out back. It came out nice but you can't see it tonight in the dark. In the meantime, I looked around and bought the bar, renamed it Ed's Place and that's what I do. I run a bar.”

“And do you like it? Was it worth it?”

Here's someone who doesn't fool around, I thought, waiting for an answer. How many people in this world take chances like that and really go for what they want?

“Yes and yes,” he answered, finally and he was smiling.

We continued chatting until after two a.m. when he led me as far as the Pike, told me how to get off at the Pru and made a date for a Red Sox game Tuesday night.

CHAPTER THREE

MARY, WHO ARE YOU, REALLY?

That was the question.

I kept mulling it over as I drove home on the Pike. Traffic was sparse because of the hour so I could allow my mind to relax a bit and shuffle through the facts without interruption.

What was I going to tell him or did I have to tell him anything? I usually fudged. Dedicated teacher, traveler, amateur artist, interested in politics, etc. I wasn't lying, just omitting. People were curious. How many social-minded thirty-nine year olds hadn't been married, or at least had a past, unless they were stuck away in a convent?

And there it all was.

I had been in a convent for nearly twenty years.

In the mid-Sixties, my hunger for social justice had pushed me outside the convent doors. The civil rights movement had touched my heart and conscience. I was teaching high school in an inner city area and was bombarded by problems I barely understood. As much as I tried to keep up with the changing times, I needed experience the convent could never give me. It was suggested I take a two-year leave of absence, called *ex claustration*. The latter would relieve me of the obligations of my vows and allow me to live and act like a lay person.

It wasn't the first time I had attempted to expand my horizons. In 1966, my Community, the Sisters of Mercy in Albany, New York, had been offered a mission in Beirut, Lebanon. I volunteered, hoping to find some room to work with the poor, and was sent with three other sisters to open an English speaking school in the suburbs. But we were drowned in red tape and the school never materialized ... victim of the antiquated political system left over from French rule and lack of interest from the ones who had invited us there in the first place.

We were finally ousted by the Six Days War in June, 1967, and I returned home more disillusioned than I realized.

Of course, there were other reasons I took the leave of absence. Poverty and chastity hadn't been too taxing but obedience wasn't in my genes. I wanted action and I wanted it now. As they say about that period, "You had to be there."

I opted for *ex claustration*, moved to Boston and decided to teach in the inner city while I studied for my Master's degree in counseling.

“Why are you going back teaching kindergarten?” my friends asked, “after all those years in high school?”

“I can’t study for my Master’s degree and teach in high school,” I answered. “I know Early Childhood inside and out. I have to hang on to one thing I can do cold. No papers to correct, no extra-curricular activities.”

I, now not known as Sister Mary Irene, RSM, but as Mary Bergan, traveling incognito and teaching in kindergarten in public school, was also pursuing my Master’s degree at Boston University and had moved from Albany, New York to do both.

I truly believed I would return to the convent a great deal wiser and able to handle problems that my high school students continually dropped in my lap. I could teach in a public school, share an apartment with two other nuns. They could do volunteer work and we could live on my salary.

We’d deal with current situations.

My old friend, Sister Helen, visited me in March, 1971, a year and a half after I had taken my leave of absence. I was bursting with all my news. I had been accepted by the Albany School System to teach in the South End. She and Sister Nora had volunteered to share an apartment with me in Albany. Under those conditions, we could do all kinds of social work, the kind I had dreamed about when I left Albany for Boston.

“I’ll have my degree by the end of May, Helen, and I’ve learned so much, inside and outside the classroom. Testing the veterans during my psychology course, listening to their stories, all the people I’ve met, what they’re thinking, what I’ve done makes me feel confident counseling now. I’ve planned to come back to Boston to visit friends in the fall. I can see the faces of the faculty at the Gibson when I walk in my habit.”

Helen sighed. “Mary, I’ve got some bad news.”

It was not to be. The convent brass and I didn’t see eye to eye. Bad idea. Out of the question. Permission denied. I was to return home in June to the convent. If I wanted to teach in the public schools (and they weren’t too sure it was a good idea), I would have to do so in my habit. That would have completely defeated my purpose.

They had sent Helen to tell me.

We talked until early morning. “Look, you’ve been knocking your head against walls for years, Mary. I’m amazed you’ve lasted this long. No matter what suggestions you ever made, they were the wrong ones. If Nora or I had brought them up, they would have been fine. It’s you. You rattle their chains. Why don’t you take this as

a sign? You have a great belief in Divine Providence. Has it occurred to you God might want you somewhere else? Maybe here in Boston?

“You’re finally doing what you want,” she continued. “You’ve never been as dedicated to convent life as you were to your idea of social work, of being a witness ... of looking like everybody else, the same problems, doing the same things but with a different view. Convent life is supposed to be visible. They’re two different things,” Helen said. “With you, *it’s by their fruits you shall know them*, not by their habits, the clothes they are wearing.”

“But that wasn’t the way religious orders began,” I countered. “Mother McCauley was a social worker. She was dedicated to the poor and their problems. She didn’t just sit in church. She took to the streets, the hospitals, the ...”

“Well, you can blame the hierarchy for that,” Helen interrupted. “They have to control everything, especially women. May God protect them from a woman with ideas! They probably figured they would be safer from their wiles by sticking them in the cloister and out of their hair.” She stood up and yawned. “You’ve been fighting the establishment for years. Maybe it’s time you put your energy into something positive. You never could bring yourself to admit that maybe, just maybe, you were in the wrong place.

“Well, here is the message ... from on high,” she continued. “The fates have decided for you. Sleep on it. I’m going to bed.”

And she did.

But I didn’t. Why did I need someone to tell me? I had exhausted myself examining my vocation for years and now I realized that my life was taking another direction that I had to follow. Finally, I was done forcing myself to be someone I wasn’t.

I didn’t feel sad.

I didn’t feel anxious.

I was relieved. The battle was over.

However, nothing could separate me from my ideals and my friends. I would take all the good stuff with me. My spiritual life and my values had grown and flourished in the convent.

I would never look back with regret on those years, never.

It was as if Helen had turned on a light, a very bright light, and it happened that quickly that night.

I applied for a dispensation the next week. Reverend Mother was a wise and good woman. She knew that I had always been a displaced person and had never been convent material. It was a swift and peaceful parting.

I was never one to look back. It was fruitless.

So here I was ... a single person. Men weren't on my mind. I didn't need anybody and I didn't want anybody and I figured I was too old for that stuff anyway. Besides, I was busy. I was observing everything. How people thought, what they did, what was important to them, how they were adjusting to the social changes that consumed my life. I had things to do. I was being interviewed for a job with an insurance company. They were seeking teachers to deal with newly hired inner city employees who needed instruction in writing English. Right up my alley. Maybe, after I finished my Master's in counseling, I'd pursue my doctorate in race relations.

I had gone out with men many times since I moved to Boston, but as a social scientist. I had my share of dates in high school and college but now, I needed experience acting like a grown woman. The convent never cultivated that field. I was seeking current information, comfortable, innocent social experience with adult males. They would be my bosses, especially if I left teaching. What were they thinking? How could I fit into a corporate world if I decided to enter it? What were the rules? What was a sensible response?

So, I went out.

And I found out.

I fell in with a young thirties crowd. I loved the winter which revolved around skiing at Sugarbush. Thursday night after school, I bought the groceries and packed. Friday night, around 5:30, we were off. After we arrived and stored the veggies, meat and whatever, we headed to the Blue Tooth or some other noisy bar and danced until two or so. We hit the slopes early Saturday morning, had a big dinner that night at home. Sunday, we skied until noon then back to the chalet. The men adjusted the furnace, dripped the faucets, and shoveled the driveways. The women cleaned the kitchen, straightened up and we all headed for Boston.

It was a comfortable and exciting entrance into the single life. Great crowd, great fun, and no one got too close.

I led a busy social life. Dinner was good, crowds were good, bars were good, couches and bedrooms were not. I lived by the flaw-proof rules ... keep to public places and let men talk about themselves. It usually worked.

But, a single woman sitting having coffee and reading in a crowded cafeteria (which seems innocent enough) might, even then, run into trouble. Once, a character sauntered over with a proposition which I listened to without expression. When he finished I told him, as I rose to leave, he was drunk and go home and go to bed ... alone! His equipment, about which he had elaborated at length, was useless at the moment.

Mary Bergan Blanchard

It didn't take me long to expect anything at any time.

The first summer at Boston University, I had joined a study group and had to drop off some notes to a fellow student in his dorm room. When I arrived, the lights were dimmed, the wine poured and the soft music lilting. I never went in, but eased out of the situation gracefully, ignoring his subtle nuances. And he was ten years older and married and a minister!

Life and its surprises! But somehow, Ed hadn't frightened me or put me on my guard.

I'd had a nice, pleasant evening.

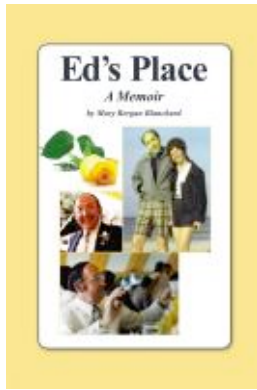
As I exited the Pike and headed towards Beacon Street, I decided I had no intention of telling Ed I had been in the convent. Why bother? This wouldn't last forever. Granted, I felt more comfortable with him than other men I had met but he was hunting for a mate and grieving for his lost spouse. I had other things on my mind. But, after all, I was a counselor. It'll be practice. What possible harm could there be in a simple baseball game?

Tuesday night I didn't pay much attention to the Red Sox but I remember Lonborg pitched. Ed brought a married couple with him. They had driven all the way in from Springfield, old friends of his and a real comfortable pair. Being with married people was a relief. No tension, no too-bright smiles, no one trying too hard. I found it interesting that he had arranged an atmosphere that suited him.

We had a good time.

They left early since it was a long drive back but Ed and I stopped by the Half Shell on Boylston Street across from the Pru and he talked for two hours over one drink, hilarious stories about his tour of duty in the navy, on a submarine no less ... all six feet of him.

I just listened and didn't have to say too much, reveal too much. I was still off the hook.



We were emerging from different lives: Ed, a widower, looking to remarry and I, having recently left the Convent, devoted to teaching in the Inner City. I had no interest in men, a family, a new direction or complication. Monday, I'll tell him Monday. No need to waste his time. One week later. "Five children!" Sheila exclaimed. "You're still seeing him? Are you out of your mind?" I didn't think so.

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