Typhoid Mary's Proposal

BY KATHLEEN FORD

New York City, 1907

She didn't get famous right away. In fact, the health inspectors came to see me long before we started reading about her in the newspapers. The newspaper drawings made her look like a society lady, with her hair all swept up into a giant pastry puff, but I knew in real life, her hair was pulled back on her scalp so she looked like a seal climbing out of water. In one drawing, she wore a lace collar on a neck no bigger than a swan's. In real life her neck was as big as a donkey's, and when she dropped her chin to roll out a pie crust or cradle a bowl, she had no neck at all. Still, the biggest difference between the newspaper sketches and the flesh and blood Mary wasn't her hair or her neck—but her face. The newspaper Mary had an upturned mouth that seemed to remember the smell of summer roses. The real Mary Mallon kept her mouth closed tighter than a clam shell, and looked as if she'd just swallowed vinegar.

Still, even if the drawings didn't resemble Mary, I studied the papers as if they were the gospel. I wasn't the only one. Everybody at the Pattersons' wanted to learn about Mary's life on North Brother Island. After all, Typhoid Mary was famous, and here I was, someone who had cooked in the same kitchen with her and slept in the same room.

A few weeks after the stories began, Little Bertie came into the kitchen and plopped herself down. "They say no one knows how long she'll be stuck on that island in the middle of nowhere, rotting away, with only a dog to keep her company."

"That's not exactly what it says, Little Bertie."

"She must be sad though, don't you think, being all alone."

"There's a hospital on that island, and other people have to stay."

"But, Patricia, she's in a little house all by herself."

"Well, a house to yourself isn't a bad thing, and the East River isn't the middle of nowhere. I expect if we stood in Queens, we'd be able to call to her."

"But don't you think it's a terrible thing—a woman as healthy as a horse, to be locked up for who knows how long?"

"I don't know about terrible. There's them that died because of her carrying the typhoid fever."

"The papers say she doesn't remember having the fever, and you said yourself she wasn't sick that summer when you worked with her."

"The doctors say maybe she didn't know she had it. Anyway, she can pass it along without being sick herself. They say the typhoid lives in her gall bladder or some such place, and from what I can tell, it shouldn't be passing at all, if she was keeping her hands clean and not infecting the food."

"No one is as clean as you. With all the scrubbing you do, it's a wonder you have any skin at all."

I brought my hand to my face. I could rub pots until they were shiny as mirrors, but could never erase the mark on my cheek.

"I wish the rest of us had been able to go to Oyster Bay and work for the Warrens."

"You're not a cook, Little Bertie."

"We got stuck for the whole summer in that haunted house up in Maine, with Mrs. Patterson's sister."

"It wasn't haunted."

"The Pattersons got to see whatever it was over there in France and Italy, and we couldn't see anything but rocks." Little Bertie stretched her arms across the table, then dropped her forehead onto the oilcloth. When she spoke again, it was to her own chest. "Dorothea and I think you should visit her."

"What? I can barely hear you?"

"I said Dorothea and I think you should go visit Typhoid Mary on the island."

"Go to see her?"

"They have a boat that takes you. Dorothea and I found out Sunday is visiting day."

"I expect you know Sunday is not my day off. And in case you haven't noticed, we're short-handed since Agatha and Elvira left."

"Don't get angry, Patricia."

"We weren't great friends, you know. Mary Mallon wasn't given to chatter the way some are, so I didn't get to know her very well. No one did."

"That's just the point. She probably doesn't have anyone to talk to, and she must need someone, especially now, in her hour of need."

"Her hour of need?"

"The marriage proposal."

We'd read about a Michigan farmer who'd said if the authorities released her, and the health officials in Michigan agreed, he would be happy to make Mary Mallon his wife.

"I'll think about it," I said to Little Bertie. "I really will."

I don't know why I decided to visit Mary Mallon, though I'm sure it had more to do with Dorothea's urging than with Little Bertie's curiosity. Dorothea told me straight out that I'd be performing a good deed. "Visiting the imprisoned is one of the corporal works of mercy," Dorothea said. "Besides, you know better than anyone how important it is to have a friend."

I had told Dorothea—and everyone else with ears on their head—how an old lady named Elsie Cavanaugh had helped me when I came to America as a girl of fourteen. Elsie took me with her to her daughter's house, and Elsie helped me find my first job.

On the dock at North Brother Island, I whispered a prayer for Elsie. Then I prayed for the poor souls who'd died on this very spot when their boat caught fire and burned to smithereens. I'd just finished my prayer, when Mary Mallon came toward me with her arms held out, and I could see she was glad for my company. "Patricia Duffy," she said, "aren't you the picture of health."

"You're looking fit yourself," I said, but at that exact moment, I felt as if someone had punched me with a fist full of daggers.

"Come on then." Mary turned and headed toward her cabin while I hobbled behind, trying not to think about the next three hours. Why hadn't I realized that going to an island was like falling into a pit? I was as trapped as any dumb animal in a hole. Sweat broke out under my arms. My eyes darted to the scraggly brush beside the path. If the boat didn't come back, I'd be lost forever. Or maybe it would return, and no one would believe I was a visitor, and I wouldn't be allowed to board.

I couldn't remember why I'd come. After Dorothea said it was

the right thing, I'd remembered the corporal works of mercy and how performing them gave graces to the soul. Still, if I'd come to do a good deed only because it benefited me, did that mean I'd still get the spiritual benefit? Or did thinking about my own good deed mean I'd be punished? "Visit the imprisoned," I said under my breath. "Bury the dead."

We had to bend our heads to enter the cabin. Once inside, the smell of ashes, dried perspiration, and rotten eggs put the stomach daggers into motion. A hammer, a coil of rope, and a pile of clothes had been dumped onto the unmade cot. A small table, one leg propped on a pan, stood in the center of the room and we sat in the wooden chairs on either side of it.

"I can't be offering you tea, Patricia. They got their rules about my handling food for others."

"I couldn't fit a drop in me." The newspapers had said the sickness was in six houses where Mary had worked.

"They've kept me cooped up, saying all sorts of evil things."

"Mary, the health inspectors visited me to talk about our summer in Oyster Bay."

"The very vipers themselves! And what were they wanting from you?"

"They asked about the kitchen and such. They said you'd left the Warrens' just three weeks after me."

"Aye, I left them high and dry. I don't want no part in cooking for the likes of them. They wouldn't throw a crumb to the starving—and them not able to see the end of their money."

"Well, I didn't know where you were until I read about you in the papers."

"Oh, the newspapers are libeling me something awful! Printing every sort of devilish lie. But I got a lawyer now, and he says the newspapers are doing me good because nobody paid no mind to me before."

"So you think you'll be able to leave?" The shabby cabin was half the size of my room at the Pattersons'. The newspaper artists hadn't drawn any pictures of North Brother Island, but somehow the words *cottage, island,* and *hospital* had painted a picture of a different sort of place. I'd imagined Mary stretched out in a lounge chair, watching the river flow by, while a nurse in a starched uniform fed her some broth.

"They got no right to be keeping me! You know I ain't had no sickness, so how do they figure I'm making people sick?"

"Aren't they doing tests, Mary? I read something about tests."

"Oh, they do their tests, all right, and I do mine. I got this gentleman friend, he comes to visit and I got him looking into things. There's more than one laboratory in New York City."

I hadn't gotten used to the cabin smells, but at least I was no longer swallowing bile. "A gentleman friend?" I squeaked.

"We'll be getting married when I get released from this hell hole."

"Good on you, Mary," I said, shooting my eyes to the corner of the cabin where something had just scurried along the floor. I stamped my feet as if I was getting rid of pins and needles. "So you're not interested in the farmer we read about in the newspapers?"

"I don't want no farmer. And I don't want no place called Michigan neither." Mary got up from her chair and reached under the cot. "Here," she said, slapping her hand down on top of an envelope. "You take it. I got better things to do than be writing some farmer."

"Maybe we can go for a walk?" I kept my eyes on the wooden rafters and away from the rustling sounds that were now coming from under the cot.

When Mary lifted herself up, I ran to the door, stomping my feet as loud as I could. The outside air had never smelled fresher. When a breeze blew in from the water we turned to the gravel path, keeping the river on our left. After a minute, I touched Mary's elbow and pointed to the landing site. "Wasn't it there that the *General Slocum* burned up?"

Mary stood with her feet wide apart. "An excursion boat is what they called it. Germans going for a picnic and a day of games."

"The summer before we met." The papers said over a thousand people had drowned or been burned to death, and that the captain had been made to stand trial. People said he should have docked at one of the Manhattan piers instead of heading across the river with the wind fanning the flames. He said he was afraid the oil tanks on shore would cause explosions, and that's why he brought the boat into North Brother Island.

"They still find bones and bits of clothing in the mud," Mary said.

"Heaven have mercy!"

"Sure you know there's bones all over Ireland, Patricia. You can find bones just about anywhere."

"Hundreds of children were on that boat."

"Rich bastards owned the boat get off with nothing," Mary shouted. "Ain't no fairness in the world."

I turned and caught sight of a large building rising from the trees.

"Them that *has,* is them that *gets!*" Mary said, spitting out her words. "The same here, as in Ireland."

"Many people have been good to me, Mary."

"If you ask me, there's none of them rich folks that's any good." Mary dropped her head, and we continued our walk.

As we got closer to the hospital grounds, we saw groups of people sitting on benches. We found a bench at the edge of the woods. "I brought us a bit of cake," I said, reaching into my bag for the slices I'd tied in a napkin.

I let Mary eat while I did my best to keep up some chatter. Still, it was a relief when a group of men began tossing horseshoes. After some long quiet spells, and talk about the meals we'd prepared together, and talk about horseshoes, it was time to go. Mary walked me halfway to the dock. "Good-bye." She patted my shoulder with her paw. "Thank you," she called, when she was close to her cabin. I waved.

Thirst nearly closed my throat as we crossed the river. I was tempted to reach over the side and scoop up some water until I remembered the water wasn't fresh, but salt, and that the East River wasn't really a river at all, but something called an estuary.

That evening, I took myself to the iron love seat in the Pattersons' garden where the heat sat on my head like a boiled cabbage leaf. Perched on the edge of the seat I held myself as stiff as a rolling pin, but staying still didn't stop my blood from flowing, or my lungs from feeling they'd been soaked in molasses. Stillness didn't stop my head from filling with pictures of a pretty house where I'd live with children of my own.

My daydreams brought me a great deal of pleasure but they also brought guilt. Here I was, indulging myself in greedy notions, when truth was, I'd been given more than anyone in my circumstances had a right to hope for, and I knew I should be grateful with every breath I took.

Sweat covered my torso and pooled under my skirts. I'd always hated the heat and summer brought rashes. Rashes could turn the same dark red as the mark on my cheek—a mark that stayed no matter what the season. My birthmark was as dark as a strawberry, and like a strawberry, it was wider at the top than the bottom. Aunt Clare had said it was put there on the day my grandfather drove my mother from

the house. "He took a stick to her," Aunt Clare told me. "And her, just days from bringing you into this world! It's no wonder your face was scarred."

After I was born, my mam left me in a cow shed and Aunt Clare raised me. "You were a sight to scare the living," my aunt often told me. "With those red bristles on your head, and that mark on your face, there wasn't a soul didn't open his eyes wide at the sight of you."

On the day I left Ireland, Aunt Clare sat me down to say that though she was certain my birthmark had been put there in a fit of anger, it had turned out to be a blessing. "It's sure no man will come after you with that flower on your face," she said. "And isn't that a blessing the holy saints and martyrs would send to a poor girl like you."

I was unable to speak for the sadness that held my tongue. But on the ship to America, I learned what a blessing really was when I met Elsie Cavanaugh. The blessings grew when Elsie told me about her daughter who'd married Mr. E. R. Robertson, a widow man, with grown children. Lucy Ann and Mr. Robertson lived outside Rochester, in a house with twenty-four rooms. "Two rooms for every year my daughter has been gone from me," Elsie said, adding that I'd have trouble finding my way in New York City, but if I went with her, she was sure that with all those rooms, her daughter would have a place for me.

In Rochester, I worked under a kindly housekeeper, with never a thought about heat or rashes. Maybe there were a dozen days when I wished for cooler weather, but a dozen days in a dozen years isn't many. And a dozen hours is no time at all, but that's how long it took to know Rochester was the place for me. There I was, on my third day, shaking a mop on the side porch, when the wind lifted off my cap and plopped it down on top of my head. A moment later, the wind blew the dust balls straight into the air, swirled them into a funnel, then directed them over the porch rail, like a dog herding sheep.

I used to wonder if my mother had liked the cold, too. That sort of wondering led to pretending Mam and I were snuggling in a big feather bed, telling each other all sorts of things. We'd hug and look into each other's eyes, and I'd get a peaceful feeling in my chest. Sometimes I was the baby and sometimes I was the mam. We lived in a place like Norway or Sweden where hot summer days could be counted on fingers and toes.

Of course, it was fingers and toes that others complained about all through the winter. Their fingers were going numb. Their toes had

started to prickle, or were itching terrible from a touch of the frostbite. While they groaned about the snow and wind, I breathed the winter air and felt a force within me. Some days, it seemed the strength of giants had taken over my body. Some days, I felt I could rush outside and pull up the trees.

Old Mr. Robertson was the only other person in that big house who liked the cold as much as I did. In the afternoons, when the housekeeper had nothing for me to do, I'd go outside to find Mr. Robertson in his long dark coat, walking his dogs. There were two of them—box-shaped Scotties named Flim and Flam. Early mornings, the dogs sprawled on the rug in the drawing room, waiting for me to clean the ashes and get a fire started. Afternoons, they paced the back vestibule, waiting for Mr. Robertson to sit on the bench and put on his galoshes.

I'll always remember a certain January day, the year before Mr. Robertson died and Lucy Ann was forced to sell the house. That day, the sky was the color of cornflowers. Eight inches of snow had fallen in the morning, and I felt I was strolling in a sapphire. My usual route took me down the driveway to the fishing pond, which was rimmed with spruce trees. After circling the pond, I usually followed the town road as far as the tree with the silver bark, then I'd pat the tree and make my feet move double-time back to the Robertsons'.

This day, though, I was so filled with energy that instead of heading home, I went to the carriage house. The summer before, the gardener had nailed a trellis to the side of the building, and now, sliding my boot into the first rung seemed the right thing to do. When the narrow strip held, I climbed to the next strip, then the next. Before I could change my mind, I'd darted up to the top and was perched on the long peak that ran the width of the roof.

I was as close to heaven as I'd ever been and in that moment, I was queen of the whole world. I ruled the air, the trees, the lakes and ponds. My heart thumped the way a queen's heart would thump if she was high in her castle looking over her land. My eyes filled with tears and I shouted a big long "Hel-lo!" to the world. A moment later, my arms began to pulse and I was sure they'd turned to wings. The wings were aching to fly. I pumped my arms, believing that the power running through my body would lift me and I'd soar over the roof tops. I had the force of a thousand ravens.

I don't know how much time passed before I folded my wings. I was filled with so much happiness that not being able to fly didn't make me sad. For the first time in my life, I believed in my own goodness. I believed that like every other creature, I had a right to be alive and at that moment, it didn't matter how I came to be born, or that my mother had left me in a cow shed. It only mattered that I existed.

I closed my eyes, hugged myself tight, then swung my shoulders back and forth. After awhile, I began to hear an echo—my own laughter coming back to me, only deeper. A second later, when I heard dogs barking, I opened my eyes and there was Mr. Robertson, looking up at me from the bare lilac stalks beside the garden house.

"How's the view?" he yelled, shading his eyes with a gloved hand.

"Wonderful." One part of me knew I shouldn't be yelling at my employer from the roof of his carriage house, but another part realized I was just too happy to stop.

"I'd join you, but I'm too heavy for the trellis."

I waved and closed my lips, keeping the smile to myself.

A few seconds later, the dogs began non-stop barking and a vibration rattled up to the roof. The next thing I knew, Mr. Robertson's head was perched on the slope of the roof. In that instant, I thought about John the Baptist and how his head had been put on a platter and given to Salome.

"I made it this far, dear girl," Mr. Robertson said, "but I best not try to get any farther."

"Are you all right?"

"I'm backing down to *terra firma,* but don't let me interrupt your fun."

I could no longer see Flim and Flam but their barking was so loud I was surprised no one came rushing from the main house.

"Mr. Robertson?" I called, above the racket. "Mr. Robertson?"

I swung my left leg over the roof pitch and slid to the end of the slope, praying hard that my boot would find the trellis. When it did, I climbed down even faster than I'd climbed up.

Mr. Robertson was on his back and the dogs were barking alongside his head. I knelt beside him, and for whatever reason, the dogs stopped yelping. "Mr. Robertson?"

He opened his eyes. "I thought I'd gone to heaven."

"Are you all right?"

"Fit as ever, dear girl, just a spill. The snow made a nice cushion for these old bones."

"Do you want to sit up?"

"I think I'll take a little rest, if it's all right with you."

I took Mr. Robertson's gloved hand into my gloved hands. I looked into his face then up to the sky, which was starting to whiten as evening came on.

"You'll have a long, happy life," Mr. Robertson said, his voice rolling out over the snow so it seemed he'd shouted his message and his words had returned as an echo. I smiled, then watched his eyes drop to my cheek. Without thinking, I pulled my hands away and covered my face.

I stayed that way, holding my cheek, not wanting to move.

Mr. Robertson groaned and propped himself on his elbows. "Dear girl, you're as full of the vigor of life as any young girl should be. And besides that, you're sweet and kind-hearted. That mark on your face means nothing. Do you hear me? Nothing."

I nodded, but kept my cheek covered.

"I've seen a good deal of the world. Why, I'm older than even my wife knows. I've seen a lot of the beautiful and the not-so-beautiful and a rosy spot on your pretty face has no importance at all—unless you give it importance, or let others give it importance it doesn't deserve. Now help me up if you will, it's time we were getting back."

I took my hands from my face and Mr. Robertson and I looked at each other. Then I crawled around to his back, shoved my hands into his armpits, and heaved. Seconds later, we were walking with our elbows linked, the Scottie dogs on either side of us.

"I'm on the last lap of my life," Mr. Robertson said. "But you're at the start, with a whole long stretch in front of you. Don't waste a moment worrying about the unimportant. Do you hear me?"

"Yes, sir."

"I can't hear you. Speak up."

"Yes, sir." This time my voice, like his, seemed to roll out over the snow before returning as an echo.

It was still hot when I left the love seat and climbed the stairs to my room. It was hot the next day when I prepared the luncheon for Mrs. Patterson's niece. After the guests left, I was stretched out on a chair in the back room when Little Bertie and Dorothea found me.

"Tell us everything about Typhoid Mary," Little Bertie said.

"Everything," Dorothea repeated.

I told about the boat ride, the cabin, the horse shoes, but I didn't tell about the filth or Mary's outbursts. When they asked about Mary's marriage proposal, I went to my room and got the letter.

"She's not interested," I said.

When Little Bertie left to fetch iced tea, Dorothea leaned toward me and squeezed my arm. "You write him, Patricia."

I borrowed the atlas from Mr. Patterson's library, but I had trouble finding Petoskey. Then, once I found it, my eyes couldn't look at the map without going straight to the town.

"Dear Mr. Ernest Rooney"—I picked up and put down the pen half a dozen times. I closed my eyes and squeezed my face until my cheeks twitched. I rested my head on the table and took a deep breath—that's when Agatha and the egg man came onto my eyelids. Agatha, who'd gotten herself in a family way, had run off to New Jersey with the egg man. During a forbidden visit to the Pattersons', Agatha persuaded Elvira to join her. A month later, word came that Agatha was as chipper as her laying hens, and that Elvira was being courted by the egg man's cousin.

On my eyelids, Agatha looked beautiful, her face as smooth as the eggs in her basket. When she spoke, I heard the same certainty I'd heard the day we met. "I helped my mam raise eleven babies," she'd told me her first day at the Pattersons', "so I know for certain I want babies of my own."

After Agatha left, Elvira, who limped from where a donkey had kicked her, stumbled into my head. She fell onto a kitchen chair. "Patricia," she said, "I didn't want to be running up and down stairs in someone else's house for the rest of my life."

I stood and put a damp cloth on my eyes. When I sat down again, I began writing. "Dear Mr. Ernest Rooney," I wrote. "I'm sorry to tell you that Mary Mallon has an understanding with a gentleman in New York. She plans on marrying him when she is released from North Brother Island." I took a breath and wrote more. I asked how he came to write to Mary in the first place.

Box 321
Petoskey, Michigan
August 22, 1907

My dear Miss Patricia Duffy,

Of course I should have known that a woman might wonder why a man would offer marriage to a woman he didn't know—a woman

living in the middle of a river. But how can I explain my proposal when I don't understand it myself? I just know that on the day I saw the newspaper article about your friend, nothing was ordinary, and for the first time in my life, I thought I was getting signs from the other world.

I woke early that morning—the morning of my birthday—to the sound of wolves. That wasn't usual for summer when they go into Canada, but once outside I found no trace of wolves and heard no howling either. In fact, the air was as still as a corpse and the only sound was my own breathing. I took the trail to the lake and waited on the rocks for sunrise. The whole time I was thinking about my brother Edgar, and how it was his birthday too. Maybe I'd put myself into some sort of mood, but I swear when the sun came up over the lake, the mist turned itself into a human shape. The next I know, it turned into an exact likeness of Paulette, my fiancé that died with scarlet fever.

Paulette was hovering over the water in a white gown, her hair falling onto her shoulders and a dreamy smile on her face. There was nothing like what you hear about wraiths coming back to frighten us. "Paulette," I said, keeping my voice soft. The cloud moved closer and came onto the shore. I stood up fast and the cloud drifted around me. Her face merged with my own. A second later the cloud was gone.

I fell back to the rocks and closed my eyes. I'm not the sort that goes in for seeing phantoms, so after a minute I reasoned how I must have seen some vapor coming up from the water. With it being my birthday and Edgar being gone, I probably let my mind wander to past years.

Being twins made our birthday special, and every year Edgar and I would have Mama tell how Papa went for the Chippewa woman, to help deliver us. And every year Mama would change the story. One year, it was me coming first, with Edgar coming a full hour later. The next year, Mama would say it was definitely Edgar who was older. Papa went along, saying, "It's exactly what Mama says." When we'd tell him how she'd changed the story, he'd say, "There'll be no contradicting your mother in this house."

It wasn't until Edgar and I got to be men that we understood Mama didn't want either one of us to lord it over the other one. We didn't either. We didn't get into that rivalry you hear about with brothers. We were matched in size and strength and we had the same interests, too, though I liked fishing off the dock, while Edgar favored night fishing from the boat. Those nights, we'd light balls of cloth with kerosene and watch the fish swarm toward us. We'd spear them until our arms ached.

I would have said Edgar and I thought the same about everything, but that doesn't take into account the war down in Cuba. Edgar wanted to go down there while I thought fighting Spain on an island I had trouble finding on a map, was worse than crazy. But Edgar kept talking about the sailors killed on the *Maine,* and by April, there was no stopping him.

At first it didn't seem there was anything to worry about. Edgar was in the volunteers, and not in the ones that charged up San Juan Hill. Mama said Edgar was lucky to be in an engineering regiment not involved in any charging. We didn't know until later, that he was keeping San Juan under siege. It wouldn't have mattered if we had known, because by the time we learned Edgar had contracted malaria, he'd already died on a hospital ship bound for Long Island.

Well, after the disappearing wolves, the lake gases, and my thoughts about Paulette and Edgar, I decided to go to town. Truth be told, I was hoping there'd be a birthday letter at the post office, though I couldn't think who'd be writing me. Still, I hitched the wagon and set out with a dab of hope tucked in my head. I was past the burned-out Larsen place when right there, in the middle of the road, not three miles from the village, I found the spotted hound that ran off after Mama died. Seeing that dog shaking his hind quarters just about had me fall out of the rig. When he hopped into the wagon there wasn't a scratch on him. In fact, he looked better than the day he left.

Maybe telling this explains why, when I saw that envelope from my mother's cousin with the story about Typhoid Mary in it, I got a strong feeling. Here was a hard-working woman coming right into my post office box—and not on any day, but on a birthday filled with strange happenings. The more I thought about it, the more I figured I was supposed to do something. I wrote my proposal that very evening.

Miss Duffy, I've gone on at great length trying to explain why I wrote to Miss Mallon. I hope I didn't say anything to offend you and that you will write me more about your life. Until then, I am,

Most sincerely yours,
Ernest R. Rooney

I hid Mr. Rooney's letter behind the flour tin, and dropped my face in a bowl of cold water. The next afternoon, I put the letter in the center of the table and smoothed out my writing paper.

"Dear Mr. Ernest Rooney," I wrote, before I was struck by a bolt so strong, I felt as if someone had dropped a soup tureen on my head. I ran up the stairs and knocked on Mrs. Patterson's dressing room door.

"What is it, Patricia?" Mrs. Patterson looked up.

"Sorry to disturb you, Mrs. Patterson, but I was wondering if you could tell me old Mr. Robertson's Christian name."

"Why in heavens would you ask me that, Patricia?"

"I was just remembering what a fine gentleman he was." After Lucy Ann sold the house in Rochester, I'd been given excellent references and sent to the Pattersons because they were close friends of Lucy Ann's stepdaughter.

Mrs. Patterson furrowed her brow. "Edgar Roderick Robertson," she burst out.

"Thank you," I raced down the stairs with my heart in my throat. Ernest R. Rooney had the exact same initials as Mr. Robertson! And Mr. Robertson had said I was at the beginning of my life and not to worry about my birthmark. And now, here I was, not just writing to a man with the same initials, but learning that Mr. Robertson and Mr. Rooney's own twin brother had the same first name.

I picked up the pen and asked Ernest to write about the weather and the wolves. I asked what kinds of fish he caught and how he cooked them. I asked whether he met up with bears, moose, and elk—animals I'd never seen.

As I went through the kitchen with the new cook, another person flew inside my skin. This person showed account ledgers and lists of purchases. This person had no difficulty leading the way to the storage rooms and wine cellars.

The morning I left, I put a dollar into my letters to Little Bertie and Dorothea. I touched the door knob and pressed my forehead against the door to my room, then I whispered a prayer to my guardian angel. A moment later, I picked up my valise, ran down the stairs, and slipped out of the house.

In the train station, I worried that my fear would turn me to stone and I'd be too crippled to move. But as it turned out, once I was

underway, the opposite happened and instead of fear, a feeling of calm washed over me. Quietness filled my chest and the motion of the train and the sound of the track lulled me to slumber. When I woke, it wasn't to panic, but to peacefulness.

The ticket clerk had given me a map with a star on Toledo where I was to change trains. After switching to the Pere Marquette Railroad, I began to recognize the names of towns. I didn't think I'd memorized Mr. Patterson's map, but as the train moved northward I found all the names were familiar. I can't say I knew about land or pine forests. I didn't know about building materials or shingles and butter bowls either. Even so, Ernest had sent me an accounting, saying I was entitled to know his financial situation, just as my parents would be entitled to know if they were alive. I read his letters over and over, seeing the good qualities they revealed. I read them again, searching for the bad. I'd lived long enough to know that no one was perfect, so of course I couldn't expect that Ernest was without his faults. Even so, I couldn't find them. Maybe it was the rocking of the train or the way my eyes skimmed the landscape, but whenever I searched for Ernest's sins, I fell asleep.

As the train drew closer to Petoskey, I stopped thinking. Instead of thoughts, single words kept repeating in my head—first "Mackinaw," then "Otsego" and "Charlevoix." Somehow the map had gotten stuck in my head. When the word turned to "Petoskey" and the conductor lifted my valise from the rack, I stood and wobbled forward.

The conductor swung down from the train before it lurched forward, back, then forward again. "Pet-os-key! Pet-os-key!" he called, but no one else was climbing down the steps. The conductor reached toward me and put his arms into my armpits. Then he pulled me onto the platform.

I stood where the conductor left me and when the train pulled out I felt the air move at my ankles.

And then I saw him, standing to my right. He was bigger than I'd thought, with a wide brow and even wider cheeks. He was clean-shaven and there was a dimple in the center of his chin. He was wearing a brown leather vest over a white shirt. He slapped a large-brimmed hat on his knee before walking toward me. "Patricia," he said.

"I'm pleased to meet you, Ernest." The words came from my mouth in a normal way even though I didn't feel I was saying them. Then, with no warning at all, my bottom lip began to tremble, my back shook, and I began to sob.

I didn't turn away or lower my head but just looked right at him and cried the way a child would cry.

"I didn't know you'd be so pretty," he said. His smile turned to a chuckle as my crying turned to a shuddery sort of breathing. Tears ran down my face but I didn't brush them away. Ernest didn't either. Instead, he put his hat on his head and rested his hands on my shoulders. We stood that way, looking at each other, until, as if we'd been given a signal, we both bent down to pick up my valise. He touched the bag first. "Thank you," I whispered, a second before I turned and walked into my life.