Silent Mothers, Silent Sons

Nanny Pearl, whose name was Mary Day, was eighty-four years old on October 2, 1972. When she was sixty-five, her husband, Bart, who had been a teacher in St. Louis when they married at St. Roch's church, smoked his last cigarette and died at sixty-six, the night before Saint Valentine's Day, 1954. When she was born in St. Louis in 1888, the priest baptized her Mary Pearl Lawler.

When she was seventy-eight, her son who was a priest, shaved himself for early Mass in his rectory bathroom, clutched at his chest, and fought for the heart inside him. She was his parish housekeeper. She heard him fall. He died in her arms.

He had been a military chaplain in World War II. *Life* magazine, documenting heroes, had published photographs of him administering the Last Rites to dying infantrymen during the Battle of the Bulge. He was famous. His name was John Bartholomew Day. When he was buried, Governor Otto Kerner led the dignitaries to his gravesite next to his father, a hundred yards from President Lincoln's Tomb in Springfield, Illinois. He was fifty-four years old.

By then she had two real names. The parishioners of St. Cabrini's Church called her either Father Day's Mother or Mrs. Day. Close friends called her Pearl. Eight months later, when she was seventy-nine, her second son, Patrick, who was also famous as the owner of the swank Patsy's, "A Bit of Dublin Pub & Cafe" in St. Louis, turned yellow, perhaps from an ill-washed glass in his own kitchen, grew hepatic, and died. He too was fifty-four. That very same day, her grandson-in-law, a young St. Louis policeman,

seated in his squad car accidentally discharged his own service revolver, and killed himself. He was twenty-five. Seven years later, when her youngest son Harry, who was not at all famous, died, he was fifty-four.

For a woman who survives her husband there is a word; for a parent who survives her children, language has no name.

Nanny Pearl lived through the unspeakable and when she was eighty-four years old, her three boys dead, her two daughters at odds, she was swept up by time and history.

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The sign on the red brick wall read *St. Michael's Garden Floor Nursing Home*. St. Mike's Garden Floor was an ice floe of chrome and Kleenex and bathrooms close at hand. Simple solutions to complex lives. Old women were separated from old men. Deafness was a blessing from the sounds of ancient lips sipping noodles from cups of good hot soup. Blindness crept like a nun dispensing milky cataracts, blurring the veranda rows of former persons in whose mouths fear had replaced wisdom. "Please, just don't hurt me." Clarity was timeworn, lost, or drugged on schedule.

It was ten in the morning, November 29, 1972, when the Ace Ambulance Service, unimpressive without its siren, routine without its flashers, pulled up the long macadam sweep to St. Mike's. Inside the ambulance, swinging up the drive, being delivered, Nanny Pearl was mounded under sheets, swathed in them, re-babied by them. Her mouth was set. She said nothing. Her eyes knew all. She remembered kidnappings as famous as Lindberg's baby. She read about the new worldwide fad of skyjackings. Both were like rehearsals of this ambulance ride. She remembered full well what had happened to Katharine Anne's old Granny Weatherall, but this was personal, about herself.

"Hang on tight, Nanny," the young attendant said through the open rear door. He pulled her stretcher towards himself.

She thought two things: first, that with his kind brown eyes

he was exactly like the young men calling and courting sixty-five years before, except he was colored that high octoroon that through a squint can pass for dark Italian; and, second, that lying down in an ambulance was like a ride in a hearse. "God, soon can't be soon enough."

The second attendant, groomed like a handsome Irish police cadet, helped unload her. Behind the disguise of his perfectly clipped moustache, he was very young, so young in fact that his previous job was stocking shelves at a St. Louis supermarket. He carried the number "466" carefully folded in the pocket over his heart because he had been lucky in that year's National Draft Lottery. With a serious job, if his number didn't come up, he might not be shipped off to Vietnam. He was too innocent to know that gaining paramedical training increased his eligibility.

"I shouldn't be here," she thought. The Receiving Nurse tucked the sheet tighter around Nanny's wattles of chin. A wave of claustrophobia sucked away her breath. She made little gulping noises. The Receiving Nurse seemed to understand. She pulled open the sheets, massaged the old woman's hands, and laid her delicate arms carefully outside the blankets. "There you go, Nanny," she said. The nurse, like the ambulance attendants, was very young. Everyone was very young. They were all strangers. They were not her family, not her children, not her grandchildren.

"Why didn't I notice? My children, especially my girls, kept me young. Until they didn't," she thought. Time had slipped into the future so gradually, then all those deaths so quickly. "My God! John. Father John, my son. Sweet Jesus, I was once the mother of a priest."

Her place had slipped, or her staunchly Catholic family had slipped, from the cold mists of Ireland to the breathless humidity of St. Louis. They had receded glacially, her grandparents and parents and brothers, evaporating into thin air, leaving her behind, alone, their dependable rock, ancient as the stone Burren her grandparents had left behind. Their nostalgic immigrant stories, often beginning

in Celtic myth, always ended with the promise of one day taking her to Ireland. She had been born in St. Louis, but she knew in her soul's eye the vastness of the Burren's monumental swirl of limestone karsts, smoothed by ice and elements and time, east of Galway, northwest of County Tipperary, as familiar to her as if she herself had walked the rocks and furze of the Burren in her own bare feet.

Nanny Pearl was alone.

Her children and her children's children knew nothing, cared nothing, really, how the bridge of her life spanned from horse carts to jet rides. What did they remember of her own parents, her own four brothers, her husband's ancestors, her girlhood friends from St. Louis like Mary Hale who had given her a porcelain nut bowl on her wedding day?

Odd. But no matter. She held them all in her heart that would not not not quit beating.

She could not, would not be bitter. Had not the Blessed Mother survived her own Son's death? Through joys and sorrows, with her crystal rosary blessed by Pope Pius XII in her hand, she had held her fiercely independent head high with as much Irish pluck as luck.

Even with her men in so many wars, especially the one in Vietnam which she refused to discuss because she did not understand it, no one had died violently. Except for that policeman her granddaughter had married, they had all slipped away so quickly she could do nothing: not with all her womanly love of parents and husband and children.

"Don't bother about me," she had always said to her husband and children. "I take care of myself by taking care of you."

But time turned life into a vaudeville slip on a banana peel.

Quickly. That's how control is lost.

Slowly. Control is lost slowly too.

Slowly, then quickly. That was how her daughter, Nora, had gained the upper hand. That girl, herself sixty-two, had gradually, carefully, then quickly, at last, taken over everything. It had happened so easily.

"Here, mother, let me do this."

Too polite to resist, she yielded—but secretly never surrendered to the tiny manipulations daughters contrive to coerce their mothers, as she had coerced her own—not to Nora's first persuasions after her husband Bart had died making her the widow all wives presume they'll be, but after her son, the priest, who was her very life, who was supposed to have outlived her and protected her and buried her, had died in her arms with the water in the shower still running.

"Mother, let me," her daughter, Nora, had said when the arthritis pained.

"Fool that I was, I let her. My God, John, I let her."

A second Receiving Nurse read efficiently through the old woman's charts. "Husband's name. Let's see, Nanny," she tested. "Can you remember your husband's name?"

"You fool," she thought. "He's deader than a door nail."

Suddenly, for the first time, she realized her sweet sweet husband had been gone so many years that she no longer talked to him. Instead, it was to her son John, the parish priest, with whom she had lived until he died, that she addressed her plaintive whispers. She felt herself blush. "God forgive me! How I loved you, Batty," she thought.

"Bart," she said. "My husband's name was Bartholomew. Everyone called him Batty." His name came hard to her throat. "God took him a lifetime ago." The wife she had been remembered the husband to whom she had gladly given up her first control when she gave up loving anything more than him, and then for him, loving his children, their children, more than herself.

"And the number of your children?"

"Will you call them for me?"

The nurse cocked a curious look.

"That's a joke, missy. I may be old, but I don't have Old-Timers' Disease. When you x-ray inside this haggis-baggis, you'll find a girl who's still seventeen."

"We're very busy today." The nurse smiled crisply. "How many children? You remember, Nanny."

You don't forget your children, she thought. One way or another you always remember them. The good things and the bad. The youngest, her baby, with his secrets, so different from her two older dead sons who had been so close, born ten months apart, so good as boys, definitely easier to raise than the girls, her two daughters, odd in their relationship as sisters.

Nora was three years older than Margaret whom everyone called Megs.

Evenings, double-dating, her daughters would return from a dance and lie across her and Batty's bed telling stories about their best friend Beulah Draper and how smoothly Joe O'Riley danced, and arguing who was cuter Nora's beau, Bill, or Megs' new boyfriend, Georgie, who earned four letters his senior year at Routt High School in Jacksonville.

Under their gaiety, even then in the hard times of 1935, she had sensed Nora's careless way of borrowing Meg's clothes, the easy way Nora slipped out of the supper dishes to sit before her vanity playing with her makeup. She had always told her children, "Think good of yourself or no one else will." But Nora only invoked the first part of her advice.

"Nora," Beulah Draper had once told Nanny, who had been "Mrs. Day" then, "certainly can shop for a bargain."

The three girls had been selling hose at Woolworth's Dime Store at ten cents an hour.

"Nora knows," Mrs. Day and her husband liked to quote the Irish, "the price of everything."

"And the value of very little," Mr. Day added. He made no secret, spoiling both his daughters, that he favored his younger.

Megs, much to Nora's chagrin, had been born on her parents' eighth wedding anniversary, July 12, 1919. Megs had made that date an even higher family feast by marrying Georgie on July 12, 1938. Nora was her bridesmaid and Harry, Georgie's best man.

Her brother, ordained April 24, 1938, officiated at the wedding at Our Saviour's Church. It was Megs' nineteenth birthday and their parents' twenty-seventh anniversary. Nora, always in competition, couldn't top her younger sister's timing. Nanny stood back from the rivalry. She trusted Megs to invent ways to outwit Nora, usually with the help of the three brothers who nicknamed Nora, Boss Lady. Everyone always said Megs was such a peppy tomboy and clever little miss as a girl and a woman.

Odd fate and bad luck: she had lost that younger girl too. Good as she was, Megs, vowing through sickness and health, had become absorbed into her own husband's chronic illnesses. Who would have thought that Georgie, so strong as a young man, so like another son to her, would be struck down so young and linger and linger, unlike her three sons who dropped dead without warning.

Maybe Batty had been right, always joking about an ancient Druid curse on the Celtic descendents of the High Kings of Munster. Nanny had laughed him off. She had heard the same blarney from her own grandfather. "I'm telling you, Mary Pearl Lawler, a hundred and fifty kingdoms there were and Ireland hardly bigger than Iowa and much more interesting."

She finally stopped laughing the year Batty was diagnosed with a brief blood affliction, an episode of Blue Blood, "Hemoragica Purpura," that Dr. Carrier said, quite seriously, usually ailed only people of royal ancestry, but then, Dr. Carrier, flipping away his diagnosis, said, "Try and find a Mick who doesn't claim royal blood."

"Five children," Nanny said to the St. Mike's nurse. "Two boys. Two girls. And last, another boy." She studied the starched young woman who had yet to learn the gamble of parenthood.

Nanny examined her conscience about her last and only remaining son, the one Batty had named Harry after a hunting dog he had once owned. "Crazy Harry." She said the name and hated herself for laughing at her baby the way they had all laughed in parochial school and high school at "Crazy Harry," the life of any party, fox-trotting with a lamp shade on his head, a practical joker who

would do anything for a laugh. She loved him immensely because her mother's heart knew all the Whoopie Cushions in the world couldn't assuage his hidden pain. Five years after the war, in 1950, she found she had lost even him, just as his wife and children lost him, living at the bottom of a bottle where he hid the big secret he covered with his antic, diverting looniness.

Somehow it was all linked to the way Harry had wrestled with his boyhood chums. She hadn't known that his affliction, as she had always thought of it, had even existed out in the world, much less in him, until she grew older and wiser about the world's silence and secrets.

She knew finally.

Deep down she knew he knew.

Maybe Batty had been as right about the Druid curse as he had been about the Blue Blood affliction on kings and queens, blood sweating out of their pores.

"God, forgive me if I caused it."

But, between them, between her and Harry, the knowledge went unspoken so long it became impossible for either of them to speak of it. Not all sins are committed; some silences are sins of omission. She skirted the secret, wanting advice, but Harry's secret was a word that could not be said, even by her son, the priest who, despite years of hearing confessions, would say nothing to enlighten his mother how she might help her youngest son.

She regretted that she had never had any control there with Harry. Mothers didn't discuss then what mothers, like her granddaughters, discussed easily what they watched on their endless television talk shows and soaps. She, usually so outspoken, regretted she had let Harry's secret, remaining unspoken, cut distance between her and her baby. If she had only said something, maybe something positive about making the best out of the bad deal of it, maybe Harry would not have turned to the real Irish curse of whiskey.

Maybe it was fate.

"If you believe in luck," she thought, "you have to believe in fate."

The St. Mike's staff was rolling her gurney again.

"I shouldn't be here."

Ceilings of corridors. Light fixtures. Sounds of efficient care. Lives prolonged at all cost. She found it impossible to see above the rail of the gurney which wheeled down the hallways. Straight. Right. Right. A left turn. She had to remember the directions so she could escape. She could walk slowly but well. Again the claustrophobia sucked the air in tight past her lips. She felt the fear of the foreign. She recognized in herself the fears of her grandparents, shipping out from Cork in 1838, seven years before the Potato Famine, from County Tipperary for "Americay."

She was headed for the final emigration to parts unknown.

Her grandparents and her parents had been young enough to invent new lives in St. Louis. Her four brothers had worked building the Eads Bridge across the Mississippi from St. Louis to Illinois. They, all of them in her family, blessed with blarney, knew how to talk their charming way in, or get out fast if they had to. But in those earlier days of fine vigor, none of them was old the way she was.

She had lost her gift of gab when she could not speak to Harry. Her silence then had cursed her later.

Her spirit was willing. She truly felt herself no more than seventeen. But her flesh was weak. Her once-beautiful hands ached. Her arthritis was worse. Her twenty-eight finger-knuckle joints had turned crooked as stone cold pain. In the mirror, she feared time had turned her into an old Irish hag. In truth, because, weekly at the hairdresser's, and nightly, anointing her skin with Pompeian Olive Oil, she had cared for herself with more pride than vanity, she had aged into a dignified beauty who had risen as high as a Catholic woman can aspire: she had been the mother of a priest.

In the summer of 1910, long before she was Nanny Pearl, when she was still the cheery young Mary Pearl, she had taken the river boat up from St. Louis to Kampsville, Illinois. Her cousins,

the Stillbrinks, had invited her to visit for her last summer before her marriage to Francis Devine. But something uncontrollable, an infinitesimal intuition, heading north up-river made her unsure that her love for Francis was deep enough for a lifetime bound in the sacrament of marriage.

At the Kampsville Landing, Cecilia Stillbrink, with her new husband, Cap Stillbrink, had noticed. Something. Mary Pearl seemed flushed, pinker than usual to her pink cousins.

"Pearl," Cecilia said, "Mary Pearl Devine. Mrs. Francis Devine. Oh! Mr. and Mrs. Francis Devine request the pleasure of your company...." Cecilia chattered on hoping to tease small virginal gossip from the first of her cousins to be engaged to be married.

Nanny remembered how odd she felt upon arriving at Kampsville.

As if something unusual were about to happen.

Cecilia annoyed her about as much as a fly.

Yet a fly could spoil the ointment. "Not now, Cecilia dear. I promise to tell you everything."

"Hurry then," Cecilia said. She climbed hastily up to the wooden seat and Cap Stillbrink, proud as a banty, gathered the sorrel horse's reins. The clutch of girl cousins climbed in, eager for gossip about St. Louis. Mary Pearl held them at bay to protect her feeling that lightning was about to strike.

Like an answer to an unasked question, what Mary Pearl felt unreeled like film in a Nickelodeon.

Riding in the Stillbrinks' open carriage, she spied a man walking across a field. It was not the Burren, but it could have been. He had red hair and she had always hated red hair. Despite herself, as if self-control evaporated into the summer humidity, she announced to her cousins, "That's the man I am going to marry."

Years later, after she married Bartholomew Day, she told her own children. "I always hated red hair, and when I told your daddy I was going to marry him, he said he hadn't planned on marrying just then, because he was taking a trip to Oregon to visit his

granduncle, John T. Day, who had come directly from Ireland to the Gold Rush and done quite well moving up in the Northwest. So I said to him, 'Bart, you just go to Oregon, and if you come back, I'll marry you.' He said, 'If I come back, we will.' When he came home, his red hair wasn't red anymore. My prayers had been answered. His hair had turned black. It was a sign for true and for sure he wanted to suit me and marry me. That's how a true suitor acts. We were a match made in heaven."

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It was her favorite story to tell her grandchildren when they got to be that curious, but brief, age when children ask their parents and their grandparents how they met and how they fell in love, and were they ever really young.

She wondered whatever happened to poor Francis Devine. "I was a willful devil of a girl back then."

A voice strained over a tinny squawk-box calling a nurse from one station to the next. "Hijacked," she thought. "Old people should never give up their own homes. I don't regret I lived with Father John. I had my son, but I should never have given up my home."

She wanted to shout a warning.

But she did not shout.

Dignity is control.

Pure and simple.

Of oneself.

Silence was the only dignity left her.

She could not control growing old. She knew how haggard and repulsive she must have looked at the Northern Pacific Railroad Hospital where first, before Saint Mike's, they had admitted her immediately into Intensive Care when she was too ill to care at all about anything.

She had wanted to see all her grandchildren, but the world had flung them far, even farther than her own family of Lawler's and McDonough's, and Bart's family of Day's and Lynch's, who all had

been launched from the emerald green of Ireland. But better they did not see her wired to machines and tied to tubes that pumped into her, and out of her, measured amounts that were charted and examined by well-meaning strangers who were someone else's grandchildren.

"That's a good girl, Nanny Pearl," the nurse said when all she had done was sip some water through a bent straw to swallow one more pill. Did she look like a circus act? Did she need applause? What's the difference between an old-folks home and an orphanage? Nothing. They both treat you like kids they'd rather be rid of. She resented St. Mike's making her into a child-thing fed and emptied and washed and moved under their pale-green control. She resented the other residents whose age was a reproach to her that she too was as old as they. She had always preferred the company of younger people. Their liveliness energized her.

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Before she had been transported to St. Mike's, while she was still in the Northern Pacific Railroad Hospital, a grandson flew in to see her and brought her a single red rose.

"Sorry. No flowers," a nurse said. "Rules are rules in Intensive Care."

So he had taken the rose away with him to his motel.

Several times in two days the Northern Pacific allowed him see her. Nanny knew these visitations were the last for them. She regarded everything with a longing, knowing everything was the last, a sweet last, so far off, so slow in coming.

This young man, who was thirty-two, was her first grandchild, Megs' son, baptized John by her own priest of a son, John. Yet Johnny seemed more like Harry whose flare he had without the screaming looniness. He seemed happy, as if Harry's secret had become Johnny's gift. They talked the way they always had. Johnny had a human openness she had never seen in Harry, who Johnny

told her, oh so subtly, had been a sensitive man born into a time that couldn't understand him.

Johnny knew Harry's secret.

Johnny had the gab, respectful of her feelings, revealing nothing directly, but saying everything she needed to hear to right her final examination of conscience about Harry. She appreciated he knew she needn't be hit over the head with a frying pan, because he, of all her kith and kin, knew she wasn't stupid. She had always preferred tasteful honesty to secrets and deceit.

He leaned in over her bed, reaching over the high rails and around the tubes. He held her hand. She was conscious that her wrists had disappeared. Intravenous fluids had infiltrated her flesh. She felt puffed and lay back on her pillow, not comfortable, but satisfied.

It was the two of them together again.

They were related by blood, but they were special pals.

In 1943, thirty years before, they two, when she was young Johnny's Nana, had pacted a friendship beyond a grandmother spoiling her first grandchild.

She had been fifty-four herself when Johnny was two, and they all called her Pearl. Batty once, only once, dared call her Pearl Harbor because she'd changed his plans about Oregon. "Bartholomew," she had said, "I laugh at all your jokes, but there's nothing funny about Pearl Harbor." She was no longer remembered as the daughter of John Patrick Lawler and Honora McDonough Lawler who both had died in the 1918 Influenza Epidemic. She was Batty's wife and the tense mother of three soldiers.

The war raged in Europe and the South Pacific. It took her three sons and two sons-in-law from her into the faraway fighting. Nothing she could do about it. Nothing any of them could do about it.

Those years the world had a run of bad luck.

In the summer of 1944, leaving Batty in St. Louis helping Nora with her four babies, she traveled to Peoria on the electric Traction Railroad to visit Megs who was expecting. During the long

warm evenings, she sat with Megs swinging on the front porch at the corner of Ayres and Cooper. They traded Johnny from lap to lap. Megs was due in three weeks. Georgie was an Air Corps ball-turret gunner stationed somewhere in England. Megs needed her mother's help with Johnny and then with the new baby who was to be baptized either Elizabeth or Robert, but called Betty or Bobby. On the sidewalk the air-raid wardens, men either too young or too old for the draft, strolled by, tolling the darkness of each house and calling night greetings to the neighbors rocking on their hot sprawling porches.

Next door, Mrs. Janet Blanchard played the piano in the dark: "In the Good Old Summertime," "Meet Me in St. Louis, Louis," "Sentimental Journey," "I'll Be Seeing You." Mrs. Blanchard's right hand tinkled treble notes with her strong thumb, index, and middle finger. Her left hand splayed out arcing rote chords from the middle of the keyboard down to the sad deep bass, and back, wringing the longing out of songs popular because they were about families and wives and husbands desperately separated by war.

In the evening darkness, Mary Pearl imagined Janet Blanchard's flabulous arms flying up and down and sideways giving all the syncopation possible to "It's a Grand Night for Singing." Some evenings, when only Janet's playing broke the twilight silence of the neighborhood, Pearl hoped for the overweight pianist, Janet, who was her age, to be bombed by the Germans, or, at least, to gain enough momentum on "Roll Out the Barrel" to knock her fat fanny off her own piano bench. Janet had beautiful hands untouched by the pains already sneaking into Mary Pearl's fingers.

What does anyone remember of the First World War, or the Second? No one remembers the longing loneliness, the aching fear, the terrifying reality. Everyone remembers the nostalgia of the songs, the movies, the dancing, the styles of clothes and hair. Pearl hated trivia. She had suffered through the bitter winters, fearful that a son's death in war might make her a Gold Star Mother. She hated the Gold Stars hanging in the windows of bereaved parents on every

neighborhood block. She resented all the days and nights living in a world of women and children, when nearly all the men were gone for four years. Separation had been the hardest. She hadn't raised her boys to be soldiers.

Pearl was quietly proud that Ireland, despite controversy, stayed neutral, just like Charles Lindbergh tried who had flown his plane, "The Spirit of St. Louis," from America to France and then lost his only son to a kidnapper. Ireland had its own Troubles. Her grandson stirred in her lap. Not if she could help it would Johnny grow up to ship off to some new excuse for war. Words had begun to form in his mouth like butterflies. No one knew why he invented words he added to the words they taught him.

He refused to say Grandmother.

He called her at first Nana and then Nanny.

She knew the name wasn't original in the world, but she knew it was original with him. So she squeezed him, hugged him in thanks. Always she had hated the simplicity of her name Mary, which was not a grand old name to her, and secretly she recoiled, being a St. Louis girl, at the negroid sound of her name, Pearl. Names could be a curse. She felt stuck with Pearl for reasons she thought proper to keep secret, another unspoken secret, she could not tell her priest-son, because she respected his vocation, which she didn't see as hers, to save souls of all colors. When Johnny had so easily babbled Nana, she blessed his little soul, and fostered the change so quickly at home and in V-Mail letters, that within weeks, everyone, even Nora, giving in to Megs' little brat, called her Nanny.

Grateful to Johnny, she gave him a one-dollar bill and a small plastic pocket statue of the Virgin in a thumb-size carrying case. He kissed her and led her to the bathroom. He seated her on the edge of the tub and worked his short pants down his hips, the Blessed Mother in one hand and the dollar in the other. He was proud to show her how grown up he was in controlling himself. She found it oh-so-sweet: the two of them alone together, with the others arguing about Eleanor Roosevelt in the living room.

Suddenly, she realized she hadn't been listening when Johnny asked her a question. For help.

She looked up.

Too late.

He pulled the flush handle.

The dollar and the Virgin Mother lay in the Y of his tiny lap. The water swirled. The Y parted as he stood, and they both watched in fascination as the green money and the plastic statuette plummeted into the roaring swirling suction of the bowl.

Neither dared reach in as George Washington and Our Mother of Perpetual Help swirled around together finally to disappear in the last great gulp of the toilet.

At the same instant, Johnny began to cry and she began to laugh, both so hard that the others came running from the living room.

"It's alright," Father John, home on leave, said, and she, with her new name looked at both her John and her Johnny and kept on laughing.

"Nanny knows," she hiccupped. "Nanny knows."

She gave Johnny another dollar.

Those homey adventures, like flowers, except for this last adventure, were over for her now, she guessed. Not even that one red rose from her grandson could she keep in the Northern Pacific's Intensive Care, and even he would soon have to leave her for the last time.

She wanted a good look at him. She raised up, white hair flying and worn thin in back from her weeks in bed. She was satisfied with what she saw.

"What do you want, Nan?" he asked.

She lay back, taking his hand, and told him that her own mother, Honora Anastasia McDonough Lawler, had been laid out in St. Louis under a blanket of red roses. Her mother, she said, had been jealous of her. Honora had not liked the way Mary's four brothers and father spoiled her. But she had outlived her mother in quantity of years and quality of life and no longer begrudged

Honora her petulant looks that were so much like her own daughter she had named Nora to placate her own mother, Honora.

"I don't blame my mother," Nanny told her grandson. "Never blame yours."

"I don't. I wouldn't. What for?"

"Mothers always get blamed. Your mother is as good a mother as she was a daughter and she is a wife."

"Nan, I'm too old to need mothering."

"No one's ever too old for that."

"I mean Mom and I, since dad got so sick, have become friends. Like you and I are friends."

"Just never blame her. I don't blame her. I don't blame anybody. Not even Nora. That's why I know now I've been through it all, been through all of it, when you don't blame anyone anymore, not even yourself."

"That's some kind of peace," he said.

"Until someone pulls some new trick on an old dog."

Her grandson had left her sweetly, she, leaning up on her elbow in the Intensive Care Unit to receive his final kiss.

That evening she imagined she heard his flight pass over the Northern Pacific Railroad Hospital where she told Dr. Carrier in no uncertain terms she had been railroaded.

Johnny was flying over head, flying out of St. Louis Lambert Field Airport, where Lucky Lindy's plane hung suspended from the ceiling concourse, back to the university where he taught and led protests against the war. He was her only relative truly and constantly interested in her past, her present, her future. As she was in his, because, with her sons dead, her daughters old, he was her future. In him would lodge the only lasting detailed memory of her whose only sadness was he'd never have children to listen to her story.

She imagined him at that moment taking off up into the dark night sky. He would see all of St. Louis laid out in lights below him, just as she had marveled at the model "St. Louis of the Future" laid

out in miniature lights at the St. Louis World's Fair in 1904 when she was a young girl and fighting a war of independence from her mother, Honora, who said no daughter of hers was spending every Sunday at the Great Exposition.

Honora had been no match against the five men who were less husband and four sons to her than they were father and brothers to her sassy daughter whom Honora herself always, after her daughter had won, called Miss Mary Pearl. Honora had been no match for Mary enthralled by the million dazzling Edison electric lamps, the new Ferris Wheel the barkers called "The Big Eli," the gondolas shaped like swans gliding through the grand "Canals de Venice," skimming past the glorious band concert gazebos and the outdoor waltz pavilions surrounding the myriad lagoons. Forest Park had never looked more beautiful.

Nanny warmed. She knew. She felt in her bones that her grandson high in the Ozark airliner would think to himself the words of the tune which that long-ago summer had become the theme song of the Fair: "Meet Me in St. Louis, Louis." She had sung the melody to lull him to sleep during the war. She and Megs had taken him to see the movie and he had asked if the girl singing on the screen was his Nana before she got old. He often asked her to sing the song. He even recorded her once on the tape recorder Megs and Georgie had given him on his fifteenth birthday. "Meet Me in St. Louis, Louis! Meet me at the Fair." The melody was forever her song. "... lights are shining...." The music made her young again. "...We will dance the hootchy-kootchy. You will be my tootsie-wootsie." He was gone and she knew she would never see him again.

Loss fisted her heart.

Her face grimaced in pain that alarmed the nurse who did not understand.

She reached under Nanny's hospital gown: "This won't hurt, Nanny. You'll sleep."

The needle-sting blossomed to a rose in her hip. *Ah*.

Don't tell me the lights are shining anywhere but there.

"My God, Batty," she thought, the ending is more confusing than the middle and the beginning.

We will dance.

This is the future and I shouldn't be here."

*

November 29, 1972, three days after Johnny's visit, the Northern Pacific Railroad Hospital packed Nanny into the Ace Ambulance that drove seven miles through St. Louis streets, passing nowhere near the rundown ruins of Forest Park, to St. Michael's Nursing Home.

"No, no, no," she cried. "You all promised I'd leave Northern for home. I know what St. Mike's is. Help me. Don't hurt me!"

"But, Pearl," Dr. Carrier said, "you need a week or two of convalescence."

"I need to go home. Just prescribe me something."

"Nora's made all the arrangements."

"Sure, of course, she has," Nanny said, "without asking me or Megs."

So Nanny Pearl was carted off, her thin lips set tight against the betrayal that no one whom she had repeatedly rescued from one thing or another could rescue her. Old age had made her their hostage. She took back her last words to Johnny. She blamed them all, even him.

At St. Michael's Nursing Home, they added new torture. Music from an easy-listening radio station was piped everywhere through the facility. They played instrumentals of all the old songs. She remembered all the words, against her will, all the words associated with times, sweet and bitter, and all gone, but for the sentimental memories she hadn't the strength any longer to entertain. The lyrics broke her heart. She pulled her pillow around her ears. In her bed, she heard the melodies; in the bath; in the hall; on the long veranda; even behind and underneath the music at morning mass. She complained of it the third day she was there when Nora finally came to visit.

"Ignore it, Nan," Nora said. "You'll only be here until you're well enough to go home."

Nanny Pearl set her lips. "Your home," she said.

"You know how much," Nora said, "Bill and I want you home with us. You'll be back in St. Louis where you lived your whole life."

"Till I made up my own mind to live with Father John."

Nora's lipstick, leaving her face behind, smiled. "You can live with us like you lived with him."

"He gave me a choice!"

"God forgive me," Nanny thought in sharp words she had never spoken, even though she should have, always knowing Nora, like Harry, had her own secret. "My daughter's a bitch."

Nora looked and sounded exactly like Honora: women who say *no*.

"You can't stay in Peoria with Megs. She has her hands full with poor sick Georgie in and out of the hospital like a revolving door."

"If your daddy was here..."

"Well, mother, he's not, and I am."

*

Nanny Pearl despaired again she had ever given up her own home. She had been dispossessed without notice. After the war, her priest son, with so many decorations for bravery, had been given his own parish by his proud bishop.

He needed a housekeeper.

"You can cook and clean," Father John had said, "and Dad can garden. It will be wonderful for the three of us."

She and Batty considered their son's offer for a week, and then packed up their small apartment on Pershing Avenue near Forest Park. Much they owned they gave away to young Harry and his new bride, Rosalie, setting up their own apartment three doors down on Pershing. After that first move, their life had been a round of parish after parish as their son rose through the ecclesiastical ranks. In each

place, she had lost more of her household belongings. Somewhere, even her grandmother's Irish linens disappeared.

Batty had said, "No matter. Better to leave everything than move it."

She had let her men let her things slip away from her.

Then Batty slipped away the eve of Valentine's Day, 1954. He dropped dead in Father John's Mother Cabrini parish house in Springfield.

"God's will be done."

Then for years, it was she and her son who ran St. Cabrini's, until he too fell dead in the early morning of May 9, 1967, showering and shaving to say Mass.

Without him, she had no claim to live in the parish house. She had seventy-two hours, the Bishop had said, to move. "Seventy-two hours," she said. "God's will be done."

"Mother," Nora had said, "Let me help. Megs is so busy taking care of Georgie. Who'd think he'd outlive John and Patrick? Megs can't take care of you both."

"What makes you think I need taken care of? I've run Father John's house perfectly well, thank you. Besides, I can help Megs with Georgie."

"Come back to St. Louis and live with us."

Nanny Pearl looked up from her rocker. Her knees pained constantly, bone on bone. She was angry. "Why did He take my boy? Tell me, Nora. Why did God take two of my boys?" Her Irish was up. "Why is Harry always drunk? Why has Georgie been so sick so long? Why has Megs had to suffer so? Can't God give us a weekend off?"

"You're talking nonsense," Nora said.

"How many of your brother's sermons did you ever listen to?"

"St. Louis is your home." Nora packed Nanny's bag. Everything fit into one gray-blue valise.

"Why has nothing ever happened to you, Honora?"

"I'm Nora, mother."

"What's the difference. You tell me, Nora, why has nothing ever happened to you? This wasn't supposed to happen to me."

The bishop's new pastor was arriving at St. Cabrini's the next day.

"What will I do now?" she cried.

"Nan, don't you worry," Nora said. "John had lots of insurance."

*

Long nights in St. Louis at Nora and Bill's she lay awake. Over her bed hung, almost the last of her possessions, a Holy Crucifix, built thick enough to store inside its metal crossbeams the candles and oils for the Last Rites of Extreme Unction. After a lifetime of father and brothers and husband and sons, she lay alone in her small room under her daughter's chenille spread. Next to her bed was a photo album. One of the oldest pictures was of Honora, yellowed and fading. "Batty was right about the Druid curse. He was right as rain about my witch of a mother."

Through the heat vent in her room, she could hear Nora and Bill drinking at the knotty-pine bar in the basement rec-room with Harry and Rosalie. She could hear them arguing about elections and what the Negroes were doing to Forest Park and the Jews were doing next door and how the St. Louis Cardinals were the best team in baseball because Stan Musial belonged to their parish.

She heard their friends come and go.

She was hungry, but it embarrassed her to ask Nora to bring a tray. It embarrassed her more to walk slowly into the kitchen. It embarrassed her that her failing eyes caused her to make crumbs on the cabinet in Nora's spotless kitchen. Anyway, she had small appetite for anything. Crackers. Just crackers. And maybe some warm milk. Dr. Carrier had said she must eat more, but crackers were all she wanted. Something to tide her over. Anything to tide her over. "God, in the name of your Blessed Mother, let it be soon!"

Late one evening through the vent, she heard Nora's voice, husky on Jim Beam, say, "Harry, you can bet your ass I'm claiming

every last penny. You and that Megs can go to hell. You don't know what I know. Megs either."

Against her soul, Nanny Pearl cried that she hated Nora as much as Honora. She hated them all. They preyed upon her. What hadn't been taken by life they schemed to take away. She had lied to Johnny: she couldn't forgive any of them. She couldn't go. She couldn't stay. She couldn't die. She had stayed too long at the Fair.

She should never have come back again to St. Louis. She should never have gone anywhere on someone else's terms into someone else's house. No matter what any of them said, she was a guest, a paying one at that, who was staying too long, long enough for Nora to add insult to injury.

She had even managed a small smile, apologetic, and broken-hearted, when Nora told her in no uncertain terms that she always left the bathroom untidy, that, in fact, she who had been pristinely clean and proud of her appearance all her life, was herself dirty.

Nora won.

She had cut her like a knife stabbed precisely into the last vestige of her personal pride.

"Perhaps it's true," Nanny said.

"I can't take care of you, mother, not like that. I can't wash you and feed you."

Silently, Nanny vowed never to eat another bite in Nora's house again.

"I bathed and fed five of my own kids. I'm sixty years old myself."

"You're sixty-two," Nanny said.

It was only days from that remark to the Northern Pacific Railroad Hospital, and then weeks to St. Michael's Garden Floor Nursing Home.

"Bill and I," Nora said, "truly want you very much back at home again with us."

"Then get me out of St. Michael's," Nanny pleaded. "Get me out now."

"When the doctors say you're ready."

Lies. Lies. Lies.

*

Megs came to visit her mother on her fourth day at St. Mike's. She had left her invalid husband and flew to her mother's side. She manicured Nanny's nails and brushed her hair. They drank tea in the dining hall and ate all the crackers on the surrounding tables. Megs was her only hope, but Nanny wouldn't tell her about Nora, because Nora's victory meant her failure as a mother. She hated that she finally had become another one with an unspoken secret.

"Get me out, Megs," Nanny Pearl begged. "You live far away, and Georgie is so sick, but you must get me out." She was embarrassed at the tone in her own voice. She had never begged, but these children with their lives defeated what she had always called her "Irish." They had her surrounded. Her control was gone completely.

"I can live with you and help take care of Georgie."

Megs held her mother tight and close. "My plane is leaving soon."

"Get me out."

"I'll talk to the doctors."

"Dear God," Nanny Pearl said. "Give Georgie my love and prayers."

"I will, Mom."

*

Seventy-two hours after Megs left, on her seventh day at St. Michael's, Nanny Pearl awakened and looked at the ceiling. The phone had not rung. She had received no mail. "No one will ever come," she said.

The old woman sharing the room asked, "What did you say, dear?"

Nanny Pearl, resolved, said nothing else.

She rose from her bed, crossed to the small table where her

breakfast had been set and ate in silence. The piped radio music broke for an announcement: "Today is Tuesday, the sixth of December. The temperature is 38 degrees. The time is seven AM."

*

At that exact time, Megs, driving her car, with her son, Robert, Johnny's younger brother, riding shotgun, as much passenger as accomplice, sped down the snow-cleared highway from Peoria toward St. Louis, their radio tuned into the seven AM news right at the tone. President Nixon was in the fast-breaking lead story the announcers called Watergate.

Robert asked to stop for coffee.

Megs said, "I brought the thermos."

Robert reached behind the seat and pulled the thermos off the pile of blankets folded ready for Nanny Pearl's escape. Dr. Carrier had said Nanny was stubborn as a mule, but strong as an ox, and if she could sit all day long at the nursing home, she could sit in the car while Megs drove her from St. Louis to Peoria. In the right environment, Dr. Carrier had said, she'd be better off taking care of herself, especially if she felt useful attending to Georgie.

The radio news of Nixon finished and Megs had heard none of it.

"Legally," she said, "Nora can't stop me." Her foot pressed heavy, speeding the car down the Adlai Stevenson Highway toward St. Louis.

"Mom," Robert said, "let me drive." He had served two tours of Vietnam with the Marines.

"No," she said. "I'm doing this."

*

Nanny swallowed the last of her breakfast.

She neatly wiped her lips with the paper napkin.

She looked at her fingers gnarled with arthritis.

"No one will ever come," she thought. "So my will be done."

She rose from her chair and smiled at the woman in the other bed.

"Who is she?" Nanny thought. "Who am I? We're the same old lady. We're the same old, old, old lady."

An infinite sadness...*Don't tell me*...filled her...*lights are shining*... and as she walked...*anywhere but there*...toward the bathroom, she stepped...*we will dance*...out of herself: part of her floated away with more relief than surprise, and part of her crashed to the cold tile floor, while the stranger in the next bed screamed and screamed and screamed at death working so close to her.

*

St. Michael's Nursing Home was efficient and neat, set up with Christmas trees, and carols playing on the Muzak.

When Megs arrived, not sure exactly of anything but how swiftly she and Robert might pull off the legal kidnapping, Nanny Pearl's bed was neatly made up.

The pillow was in place.

Her crystal rosary was gone from the bedside table where the clock read 8:12 AM.

It was as if no one had slept the night there.

Even the other bed was empty.

Megs ran down the hall to the nurses' station. She held out the legal papers. "I've come to get my mother. Where is she?"

"What is your mother's name, dear?"

"Mary Day."

"You're not Nora are you? You must be the other one."

"Believe me," Robert said, "she's the other one."

"Let's us see," the nurse said cheerfully. She punched her computer which lit up the typed words: "Mary Pearl Lawler Day; female caucasian; 84; admitted November 29, 1972; deceased December 6, 1972; cause of death: internal bleeding."

The room crashed down in a wind-shear of shock and embarrassment. Dead!

The nurse stood bolt upright.

She spun the computer screen away from the counter.

Too late.

Megs, always the quick sister, had read the screen.

Her face, reddened by the excitement of her dangerous drive through the snow, blanched whiter than white.

"I'm sorry," the nurse said.

Blankness filled the space between the two women.

"Perhaps," the nurse said, "you'd like to sit down. Perhaps some coffee while I page Dr. Carrier.

"You fucking careless bitch," Robert said.

"Sir, I'm sorry. I just came on duty."

A second nurse, Nanny Pearl's nurse that morning, ran apologetically up to them. "We're so sorry. I called your home myself."

"You told my husband?" Megs said. "He's so sick you could have killed him."

"He sounded very weak. We told him. He knows. He said, 'Why Pearl? Why not me?'"

"Oh, Mom!" Megs said. "She didn't know we were coming to get her."

"Your husband called the Highway Patrol to try and stop you to tell you."

"Oh, my poor Mom," Megs cried. "She got out the only way she knew how."

"You people," Robert, the Marine Sergeant, said, "are real fuck-ups."

*

Winter that December, 1972, in St. Louis was early and fiercely cold. In Forest Park, snow capped the soft curves of what graceful buildings still stood from the 1904 World's Fair. Small floes of ice clung to the piers of the Eads Bridge. Automobile traffic across the span was more choked than usual as the hearse, and the cars following in cortege, their antennas flagged with mourning ribbons, headed

away from St. Louis, across the Mississippi River, back to Illinois, to Springfield, to the cemetery where Batty and John lay waiting patient as the ancient Irish dead in the burial cairns of the Burren.

Perhaps only the dead can be trusted.

The car radios, the sound breaking up crossing the steel bridge, said, "...and that's the President's latest statement about Watergate. In Vietnam, heavy fighting was reported today near Da Nang. Local news after this message from Double-Good Double-Good Double-Mint Gum."

"Why would Nora make such a lie," Megs cried, "about codeine, five years of codeine."

Johnny held his mother's hand. "Doctors will give anything to the mother of a priest."

Off the bridge, the announcer's voice, fading slightly as the cars headed north into Illinois, reported that a mystery pilot had become the talk of St. Louis, baffling police and aviation authorities. Repeatedly, at odd hours on odd days, he arrowed his small plane under and through the great Gateway Arch causing delighted crowds of tourists to cheer. The radio editorial denounced the pilot's lack of respect for the new public monument and his disregard of the common good.