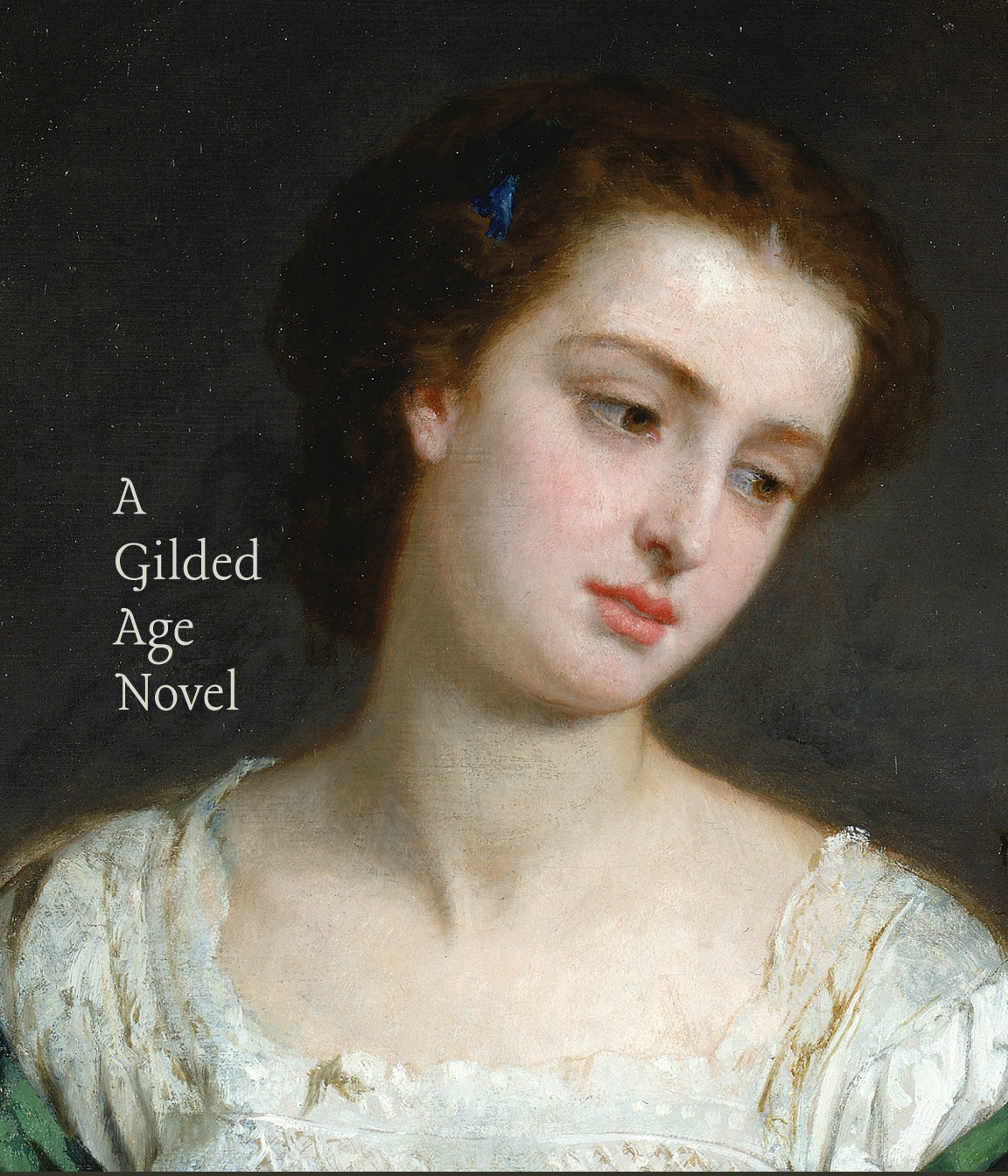

A Maid's Life

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Unexpected Love in New York's Gilded Age

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DermodyHouse.com

ISBNs: 978-1-7355923-9-8 (ebook)
979-8-9868992-0-6 (paperback)
979-8-9868992-1-3 (hardcover)

The Cover: *Portrait of a Young Woman*, 1862, Edward Harrison May. Available courtesy of the Smithsonian American Art Museum.
https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/portrait-young-woman-16612

Introduction

This is one of a series of stories about life chiefly in New York City in the 1870s. I earlier wrote the novels *Róisín Campbell* and *A Studio on Bleecker Street* as well as several shorter pieces. Although one character, Inspector Washington, from *Studio*, appears here, there is no other overlap.

1.

I arrived in New York in early June of 1872 on a warm day, the likes of which I never before knew. I was barely able to walk down the gangway after ten days mostly belowdecks on a steamship called *Nevada* with so many others who like me had seen the sea but never spent a moment on it till the lot of us were all crowded on board in Queenstown, County Cork, Ireland. There were times when I hated being there, whatever my prospects, the puke and the smell and the crying. Those first days with food that couldn't be kept down even were it actually food. Listening to men beat their women for something or other like my papa sometimes did to my mama when the portions were too small or whatever meat we had too tough or for no reason at all.

Unlike many who started the journey before me, though, I made it across. My older brothers couldn't stay home in County Mayo either. They found work in Liverpool. I was sent to America, far away with no hope of going back. Maybe I would get a position as a maid in one of the mansions that lined the great avenues we all heard about.

We all were hoping, those of us on board who were still in our teens. We didn't have much beyond hope, though I was blessed to have an eye and an ear for reading and writing, unlike most of the others. I knew parts of the Bible by heart, it being one of the few books in our cottage. Sometimes I read parts of it to my mama and the others. From someone else in Backfox—my little village—we heard of a place some Irish nuns had set up

in New York for those of us from the country, to learn to become servants in the great city with those grand avenues. I was told that somehow there was a place for me there, and I got the address of where I could sleep when I arrived so I wouldn't be wandering the streets.

It was still dark on the tenth morning on board the *Nevada* when a crewmember, an Englishman, came into steerage and began banging on a bucket. "Get up you. We be in New York in two hours and yer need to be gone as soon as we do." A second crewmember (he wasn't as mean to us as the first one though he was also English) carried a torch and began lighting the candles in lanterns that lined the wall as he followed his mate. They did a circle, clockwise, with their banging and their message and then went back to the deck. After some trouble getting awake and up, we all were able to do what needed to be done for our toilets.

I pulled together my belongings—a pair of everyday frocks and one for Sunday, undergarments, and shoes, all well-worn, and the small Bible given to me by our priest before I left Backfox. In it were letters from my family and friends and some documents that were protected in its pages. As I was finishing, someone shouted that he could see land. We wouldn't be allowed on deck just yet, but lines formed at the portholes on the right side, and I almost thought the rush of people might capsize the boat.

But people were kind, and few overstayed their time looking out. I had my first view of America, which I now understand was the southern coast of Long Island, the great approach to New York City itself.

Things seemed to move very quickly then, in contrast to the slow pace since we'd last seen land, the coast of

County Cork. In no time, they let us on deck, kept well away from those who were of the more important (and far more expensive) classes who we had seen only in the brief time allotted to us to walk on part of the deck each day.

The hands kept order, preventing too many from flooding the right side as we saw the beaches and the houses built on them and the greenery a little in from the water.

Suddenly someone shouted, "This side!" and those not leaning to the right hurried to the left. There were more beaches and more houses. A tug came out to us, and two men from it climbed up a rope ladder dropped to them, and we watched as they shook the captain's hand and one went to the front of the boat. We could hear the other calling out orders to the crew and the ship slowed and it felt like we were walking, delaying our arrival in the New World, delaying the moment when the horrors of the journey would be over.

The *Nevada* moved carefully through the traffic. So many boats of all sizes, coming and going. I found myself on the rail on the right side, and word spread that it was Brooklyn we were looking at and there was dock after dock and men waving to us and blowing their boats' horns as we passed. It was still early in the morning and the sun was low and very bright and the air was hot and sticky.

The rest was a blur as we came to a stop at a dock, and all we could see in front of us were buildings in size and number I couldn't have imagined at home. So many and so wide and so high. What I think were doctors came on board to examine us, pulling several of us to the side for

what I expect were more complete examinations. But I was handed a blue card and was told not to lose it.

I was confused and more than a little frightened as I held my satchel and followed the others through some kind of official building with my information taken down by a man in a uniform sitting at one of the many tables set in a long line:

Name: Margaret Treacy.
Home: Backfox, County Mayo, Eire.
Age: Eighteen, born on 18 March 1854.

I was told to show where I intended to stay and pulled out a piece of paper from my Bible on which was written: *Mrs. Caitlan Bulger. 47 Henry Street. NYC.* It had been sent to me by a distant cousin of someone my papa knew in Backfox.

"'Tis not too far, lass. Someone'll tell you. How do you intend to make a living?" the man asked.

"I hope to become a maid."

He looked at me as he lifted a stamp.

He smiled. "Good luck to you then. Welcome to America." He stamped my blue paper and as I began to walk, he called out "Next" and I was in America.

When I reached the street, seeing more people in a moment than I saw my entire life before I left Backfox, my first task was finding 47 Henry Street. I tried to ask several people, but they raced by until a nice, older man with a grey mustache was kind enough to send me towards it.

"I'm not sure about number 47, but it'll be easy enough to find when you get there."

I thanked him and he tipped his hat and resumed his going wherever he was going.

I wasn't used to seeing buildings next to buildings, the closest being when my papa took me to little Castlebar to the north and Tuam to the south at home and they had at most five or six buildings connected and no one needed a number to find where they wanted to go.

It was all almost more than I could take, far more than I expected. Dust rose from the street that ran up along the docks, and wagons were going this way and wagons were going that way and their drivers were shouting at their horses and at the other drivers and at pedestrians threatening to get in their way. How I was to cross I couldn't imagine but I joined a small crowd. I heard a whistle, and a police constable stopped the wagons on the street and the crowd hurried across, all the time while being shouted at by drivers telling us "to get a move on now."

Once I was across and heading away from the river, things began to quiet. There were many people who all seemed to be ignoring each other as they were going where it was they were going. Fast as they went, they somehow seemed able not to run into each other and some said very unpolite things to me when I was not going fast enough to suit them. There were, though, fewer wagons than by the docks. When I came to the first street, I turned right like the old man told me. "The street's name'll change," he said, "but stay on it till you get to Henry Street."

I wanted to stop I was so tired and amazed but I didn't think I could start again and was ever more curious about this Caitlin Bulger woman and what she would be like

and what my room would be like and whether I could ever be happy in America. Girls on the boat said they had sisters and brothers who'd come before them and in some cases helped pay for their own passage and who wrote home and said how very different it was from Ireland. Nervous as that made me, I could never have prepared myself for what I was seeing and hearing and smelling.

Of course I had no choice but to make myself happy as there was no going back and with each step I got closer to where it was I would finally begin this new life of mine. I became more and more frightened because I couldn't imagine how this could ever become my home.

But that stranger was right and as I was a literate girl, I found number 47 with no trouble, though I was sweating greatly by the time I did. I couldn't ignore the smells of the manure and the garbage waiting to be collected in large piles here and there. There was even a dead horse pushed off to the side of one street waiting, I hoped, to be collected by someone, though no one seemed to pay it any mind except for the flies circling it. Everything was so different from the boat and far different from my farm and seemed like a blanket in the heat. Indeed, it must've warmed up several degrees since I left the water and the sun beat down on my back as I walked north. I was wet and I stank.

Forty-Seven Henry Street had four stone steps that led to a black door with a brass knocker. With my satchel over my left shoulder, I used the knocker and stepped back to the sidewalk. I looked up at the five stories and on the third floor a head popped through.

"The door is open. You must be new?"

I could only make out a round head of an old woman with a scarf. She—it was Caitlan Bulger herself—was coming down the stairs as I entered. It was by far the biggest house I was ever in, for sure, and I was amazed by the wide staircase she hurried down. It was black and it creaked here and there as she came to me.

"And who might you be, love?"

And there she was, my first acquaintance in America, a short, skinny woman in a black frock and red scarf, with a white apron tied around her waist. Her hair was white and she flashed quite the smile, and it calmed me down right off.

2.

It was only to stay at Mrs. Bulger's for a few days. Irish girls just off the boat like me kept coming and going, and I used the opportunity to explore the area with some of them. So many people and (living) horses and muck. If we went far enough to what we were told was the west, we could watch fancy carriages pass with coachmen and footmen and people whose faces we could barely see. If they were stopped in traffic, we could peek in, but they would ignore us, and someone said they were the types we would serve if we got a job as a maid, which we all wanted.

We saw boys run out and bang on the sides of carriages asking for coins, but the coachman or the footman, dressed finely, each time pulled out a whip and shooed them away and the boys would laugh and say rude things to them and all the time those in the carriage paid it no mind and the carriage would follow the others to a dance or a party or we knew not what.

We thought that is what they must do, these rich people. Dances and parties and teas. There were rich people in Backfox but not enough to have a ball except once a year when similar people from nearby towns would come. We'd watch their carriages pass by the farm, going to and fro one of the big houses of the Protestants who lorded themselves over us.

We girls from Mrs. Bulger's were all waiting for our first Monday in New York. We went to Mass together on the Sunday, and on the Monday I went to the House of Mercy with two others.

It was a large building on East Houston Street, with four stories covered in a yellowish stone. The entrance was up several steps to a pair of doors with windows, and above the entrance, which was curved, was a large crucifix. We entered and the ceiling was very high, higher than I ever saw, except of course, in a church. Its walls were very dark wood but there was a hallway to the right side. The room didn't smell. It seemed that everything in New York smelled, mostly of manure and at times garbage and things that I realize great cities create. Perhaps that was the thing I most remember about this room and that first time I was in it. It didn't smell.

There was a row of wooden chairs along the left wall and a large desk along the right, but no one was there, and we didn't dare go down the hallway. One of the others noticed a bell on the desk. She lifted its hammer and banged it two or three times.

"Coming, coming" we heard from the hall, and soon a nun appeared in full habit. She seemed about my mama's age, in black and, around her face, white.

"You be a little early," she said. "We are waiting for several more so please sit, sit." We each found a chair along the left wall, as she sat at the desk. I think the others were like me. My stomach was sick and none of us ate much before we left or said much once we got there. I just wanted it to start. After we sat, a second nun, much younger, joined her and the two were going through papers. More girls came through the door and sat with us. It felt like church, so we all kept our voices down. The others were western Irish too and none of us had any idea of what was to happen to us.

Soon, though, we found out. We were marched inside to a large room on the second floor. I was told that for some reason the first floor at home was called the second floor in America. No one knew why as far as I could tell. A large room facing the back of the house on the "second" floor was lined with cots and thin mattresses. We were each given a small box, a cube of maybe three feet on each side, where we were told to store what we could with a closet over by the door for us to hang our other things on assigned hooks.

By noon, we'd been provided with maids' frocks and aprons and hats and stockings and shoes, and by one and after a cold meal in the small room where we would eat three times a day, excepting when we ate with the sisters, where we would eat three times a day, we began our training to become servants in the houses of wealthy New Yorkers. We had no idea what wealthy people did, let alone how to care for them, but we learned. The arts of cleaning silver and sewing fine fabric. Carrying and curtseying. We were given uniforms to care for and each morning at seven we went to Mass in the House's chapel with the Sisters of Mercy.

Once a week, after Sunday Mass, we were allowed out. Everything was wonderful and scary to us foreign country girls. All the buildings and people. Horses pulling wagons and carriages this way and that, all in a hurry. We wandered about as I had in those first days when I was at Mrs. Bulger's. Things weren't quite so sad and dirty where the House of Mercy was and the accents of the people we passed weren't all so Irish and some were speaking languages that were so difficult I couldn't see how anyone would understand them.

Some of the girls were lucky. They would get jobs in a kitchen. This was good, solid if often very hot work more regular and not dependent on the mood of a member of the family on a particular day. Some of us weren't lucky at all and after several weeks some girls were forced to leave, likely to work as seamstresses for little pay or in some factory or other.

I was neither and was getting used to the weather. There were some very hot days, as bad as when I arrived, but as autumn got close, there were more cool nights and fewer of the bugs that plagued us all.

3.

It was early autumn and after we'd been at the House for over a month of classes and exercises when Sister Reilly came to us one night to prepare us for the next day, which was a Monday.

After our daily Mass and breakfast, we each put on our best frock. Sister Reilly inspected us. After a smile and a nod, she led us to the ground floor. There was a large room just off the one we sat in on our first day. This room was used mostly for the dinners held twice a week with all of us and all of the nuns. We ate, just us students, in a smaller one off the kitchen the other days. We took turns helping with the cooking and the cleaning up.

On the day I'm talking about, though, the dining tables were off to one side. Instead, small tables were set in two rows of six. At each, there was a single chair on one side and two or three on the other. With their backs against the wall there were twelve chairs, and Sister Reilly had us sit. I was the fifth girl. I wasn't sure, but I think it was shortly after ten and we were sitting for ten minutes afraid to speak and my stomach was increasingly off just like that first morning there. Then the door to the foyer opened and a flood of women's voices entered, followed by Sister Olson—the mother superior of the House—and the women themselves.

These women were all dressed in a way I only saw when we girls wandered about on the streets on Sunday afternoons. All sorts of colors, and their hats matched their dresses, and their dresses and their hair were very complicated. They came in in twos and threes. Most were

about my mama's age but there were several younger women, who couldn't be more than a few years older than me, and even a few girls, too. Each was next to an older servant, as was clear from her simple dress.

Sister Olson directed them to the chairs at the tables. The ladies were looking at us. Some were pointing. We were called in order. I walked to the proper seat at the proper table. A mother, daughter (about my age), and older servant. The daughter was quite plain looking and fat, and her mother introduced her as Elinor Palmer. Mrs. Palmer and the servant, Mrs. Burnley, asked me questions about my background and experience

I was as honest as I could be because I didn't want to mislead them about something, which could get me dismissed if they discovered it. It wasn't as if I had anything to lie about. They knew my general history as someone forced to leave the west of Ireland, like most of the other girls meeting potential employers. I was a little different from most of the others, though, because I could read and write.

When she and the housekeeper were done, Mrs. Palmer asked her daughter if she wanted to ask me anything. I realized that while I was paying attention to the other two, she kept her eyes locked on me. It suddenly made me nervous and uncomfortable, her seeming to study me like a cat getting ready to pounce on a trapped mouse in the barn at home.

She didn't pounce, though. She smiled and shook her head.

"No, mother," she said. "I think I've heard quite enough," and she again smiled, at me I thought. I got up to return to my original chair by the wall, and when I sat,

she was still looking my way, though she turned to her mother when I caught her.

I was soon called to meet with another family, though I can't (and don't want to) recall their name. A mother with two daughters, one several years younger than me. I don't recall the name because this younger girl took a disliking of me from the start, which I know because within a minute or so she said, "I don't like her" to her mother and the interview didn't last much longer. I can't say why she didn't like me, but she didn't, and I was glad to be back in my seat, waiting for the other interviews to be done with.

As I sat, I watched the Palmers. The daughter kept looking over at me. She seemed to be paying little attention to Rowan, who sat where I had, and when Rowan got up, Miss Palmer leaned over to her mother, and her mother then signaled to Sister Reilly who, after she got there, looked at me and nodded and I watched the three leave. One other lady and her maid followed the Palmers out and the next round of interviews began except Sister Reilly took me and Aine (who thought it best to call herself Annie since she arrived) to the back when the other ten were settled.

We—Aine and me—were told we didn't have to meet with anyone else because we were selected, and it was only a few days later that I was saying goodbye to the others and stepping into a fine carriage for the first time in my life. We headed to the north. I didn't have much, so it was all in the carriage with me. It wasn't long before the streets were smoother and numbered, and I swear the smell was nicer.

4.

We—the fancy dark green with a dark maroon trim brougham and a coachman who introduced himself as Henry Covings, a footman called Patrick Norman, and a pair of chestnut horses plus me—turned onto Twenty-Eighth Street. We stopped in front of a house with the number 45 in gold paint above a wood door shining in black. I heard the coachman put the brake on. As we stopped I opened the door and, forgetting that steps needed to be pulled down for me—I should've known though it was my first time in a fine carriage—I dropped straight onto the sidewalk, my satchel flying somewhere, and I was lucky I extended my hands to break the fall.

The footman, Patrick, was on me in a flash and helped me to my feet and seeing that I was no worse for my adventure except for scrapes on my left knee and my left hand, he put his hands on my upper arms. "You'll be fine," he said and he smiled and he helped me with my shaking.

With that bit, I brushed the front of my frock as best I could and got my first good look at the house. It was on the north side of the street not far from Madison Avenue.

The house wasn't large and the others on the block pretty much looked the same. The only difference I noticed was the colors of the front doors and the variety in the flowers popping out from the boxes that hung beneath nearly every window (except those small ones on the top floors). There was some type of fancy carvings above the entrance with columns on either side. Above

the ground level were four floors, with three windows on each and very small ones, like eyebrows, on the top one.

It was, all in all, a handsome house with several small bushes to the left of the steps. A black wrought-iron fence with very sharp points was on either side of the stairs and it connected with its neighbors. There was a gate to the right, which led to several steps down and then to a simple door directly beneath the top of the stoop.

"That's where you go, Miss," the footman pointed out before wishing me good luck. "Mrs. Burnley will see to you. We must put the carriage and the horses away. I expect I'll be seeing you often enough here. 'Tis a happy house."

He had a soft brogue, and I was very glad for what he said, tipping his hat sharply as he did. I opened the gate, with one last look at Henry Covings, Patrick Norman, and their carriage with those two horses, and waited until they were gone down the street before I went down the steps. After a final, deep breath, I pulled the cord by the door and another footman in an apron opened it.

"What you want?" he said, in yet another brogue.

"I'm to work here." It wasn't the kind of welcome I at least hoped for.

He looked me up and down, me with my satchel held in front of me. "Mrs. Burnley didn't say nothin' 'bout you. Come in and I'll see if I can find 'er."

I followed, and he shouted for Mrs. Burnley. He was told she was with the mistress, and I was told to wait. There was much running around in the kitchen of the sort I'd never seen, and I was forever being yelled at to get out of the way till the cook pulled out a chair to the side and told me to sit there and stay there. Which is

what I did, my satchel in my lap, being afraid to move a muscle as I watched the hurried goings on.

The housekeeper finally appeared. I stood and recognized her right off. "'Tis very nice to see you again, Margaret Treacy," she greeted me and then grabbed my hand to get me out of the way of the cook and the others working to make lunch and led me into a small windowless office down the hall. It was painted in some kind of old yellow that was stained and faded in spots, and the only thing on its walls was a calendar on which I could see but not read notes, which was on the wall behind her desk.

Mrs. Burnley closed the door so we wouldn't hear the noise and smell the smells from the kitchen and pointed to a rickety wooden chair. The room was small, as I said, and the desk was too large for it, but as she was a small woman herself, she could squeeze by it and when she did, she dropped onto her own larger wooden chair. She didn't seem quite so proper now that she was in her own place and not with Mrs. Palmer at the House of Mercy. She was still very severe.

"We've had success with girls from the House of Mercy and I hope you prove up to the task. Mrs. Palmer and Miss Palmer liked you. That's good enough for me. But it won't be good enough no matter who likes you if you cannot do your job. Is that understood?"

I nodded.

As the housekeeper, Mrs. Burnley was in charge of us maids. She explained my role: do whatever either she or a member of the family told me to do. Do not speak unless spoken to. Smile and be glad and thankful for the opportunity to serve a family as fine as the Palmers. (I

had no idea the degree of fineness of the Palmers, but I accepted that if Mrs. Burnley said they were fine they must be so.)

I followed her to my tiny room on the top floor, and there on the small bed were several maid's uniforms—black frocks that more or less fit based upon, I guessed, rough measurements someone had got from the House of Mercy—as well as white aprons and small white caps. She told me to get dressed in my uniform and be quick about it and then to return to the kitchen to begin work. There were two pairs of black shoes that fit as well as stockings and undergarments given to me at the House of Mercy in the satchel I carried, and the latter I put in a small bureau. My photographs of my parents and members of my family that were taken in a studio during an outing to Castlebar I put on top of it, beside a small mirror, and I placed the brushes and combs I was also given at the House of Mercy next to them. I'd written home since I arrived, and I put the two letters from my mama in a drawer.

There was a small toilet at the end of the hall on the floor below mine for the servants and after I changed, I took care of myself. I hoped I did a good enough job to make myself presentable when I appeared again before Mrs. Burnley in that office off the kitchen.

Another Irish girl, only two or three years older than me herself and also from County Mayo, though I didn't know the town, was assigned to see to the education of me. That girl, Bridget Fallon, was relieved to have me take the place at the bottom she held for over two years.

"You get used to it," she said about midway through her tour of the house. We went from floor to floor and

from room to room (except for the two that had one of the Palmer women still inside). She explained that the family consisted of Mr. and Mrs. Palmer and the three children.

Bridget pointed to several photographs on a round table in the drawing room on the second floor. The biggest was of Caroline Palmer—now Caroline Evans—in her wedding gown and with her groom and members of the two families.

"Mr. David ain't our concern since he's married and living elsewhere. He be nice enough for a man of his sort but you won't have many dealings with him. If he sees you, he'll try to flirt with you. Don't pay it no mind. He and his wife come regular for Sunday dinner.

"Miss Caroline is married and away, too. She's Mrs. Evans now. She be expecting her first child in a few months. I was here when she was married. It was quite the thing, watching her leave the house for the last time as Miss Palmer. She comes back more than Mr. David. She's very nice, all smiles and even 'how do you do?'"

After telling me about those two, Bridget pointed to a shorter woman on the right.

"And that is Miss Elinor Palmer. 'Miss Palmer' since her sister got married. She's my responsibility though you'll see her."

"She was with her mother," I said as I looked at the image, "when they came to the House of Mercy."

"She's the one I'm responsible for. I was like you, doing the worst jobs, before I got me promotion. I'll try to teach you what I can. Miss Palmer is nice enough. Nothing like I hear others have to deal with in other houses."

Bridget lowered her voice. “There was a maid who cared for Miss Elinor. The fool left for a boy she took a fancy to. We liked her well enough, and me and the others sometimes think of doing the same but what would become of us if we did? Our life in service ain’t great but we be in a good house and ‘tis safe and secure and for girls like us that’s what matters, ain’t it?

“Her leaving though was a blessing to me and maybe to you since it’s why they hired you and why I got promoted to care for Miss Eli…I mean, Miss Palmer.

“You have to understand that what you call someone is important, so be careful about it. Don’t ever call anyone in the family by their first names as I’m sure they beat into you. *Always* curtsey when you see them and when you leave them, even if they ignore you. It ain’t such a bad place from what I’ve heard from others.”

We had this talk while we were finishing the second floor and going up the back steps to the third. She reached the hall there and stepped ahead before I could say anything, and I hurried to catch up with her as she went on with her tour and gossip till we were back down in the kitchen. It took me time to get over everything, it all being so new to me. Bridget and I sat together, at the table where we had our meals and where chores of all sorts were done at other times of the day.

5.

At about four o'clock on that first day, Mrs. Burnley came up to me at the kitchen table and told me to follow her. We climbed the servants' stairway to the third floor and down the hall to Miss Palmer's room. Mrs. Burnley knocked, and she and I entered without waiting.

"Yes," Miss Palmer said. "I was expecting you. Of course I remember you. I hope you are settling in."

"Yes, Miss. 'Tis me first day."

"Be a while," Mrs. Burnley interrupted, "until she is passable, but Bridget will be helping her."

"Very good. Thank you." She turned to me. "Can you—Margaret, is it?—can you and Bridget come up at six to help me prepare for dinner?"

With a curtsey, I said I would.

"Good," she said as I turned to leave.

At six, Bridget and I were at Miss Palmer's door. Just as the clock in the foyer struck the hour, Bridget knocked, and Miss Palmer told us to enter. She was, I'm afraid to say, not a very attractive girl, especially for someone so rich. Rich girls, I thought, must be pretty and she wasn't. She was short and dumpy and had a round face below very black hair and long eyebrows. Were I asked to describe her, that would be what I would have said, though no one ever asked. (I should say now that time and familiarity, though, would greatly soften her looks in my eyes.)

For months, I had little to do with her or any other member of the family directly. When I did see her, though, it lifted my mood and I did not know why and I

was disappointed if I missed her coming or going. This was true even though she usually called me "girl" if she saw me. *"Pick that up, girl." "Why are you always in the way, girl."* Like that, and I fell over myself apologizing. It seemed I was always apologizing to her.

Her mother then heard her call me "girl" and got very cross and said Miss Palmer had better call me by my true, Christian name. Then I was afraid that Miss Palmer would be mean to me for having gotten her in trouble with her mother. From then, she made a point to almost always call me "Margaret" in a nasty way—Mar-Ga-Ret—(except when her mother was near her and she was all sweetness) and strangely I missed her simply pointing and saying "girl" to me.

If I did see her, it was by luck. My job was harder and more tiring than I expected, at least at first. I opened the draperies in the main rooms in the morning and cleaned and washed the furniture and the rugs. Once it turned cold, I'd be going from room to room to set and check the fires, but it wasn't yet cold. The others warned me that winters in New York were something I'd never experienced in Ireland.

I spent hours at the table in the kitchen to either polish silverware or sew some tear in a garment. On Mondays and Thursdays, I had to gather all the dirty linen and clothing and such and do its cleaning for both the family and the servants.

I hated those days. The work was backbreaking and as I wasn't myself responsible for any member of the family, like Bridget now was with Miss Palmer, I didn't get a break from after breakfast until we had dinner. Sometimes, I got some help from one of the footmen.

Some of the sheets and such were too large and heavy for me to handle on my own, so he helped with the scrubbing and the hanging—so they would dry—and the folding.

How I cleaned the dresses depended on the material and whether there were stains. Even those gowns that would be worn only once or twice had to be cleaned after wearing to preserve them so they could be put into storage. The room for doing this off the kitchen was large because of all the various vats and powders that were needed, not to mention the ironing, which required an open board. Thank goodness the family had one of the new Mrs. Potts' Irons, which allowed it to warm in a fire without the handle attached. That way I wouldn't burn my hand too often on it, as I did back at home.

This made the work easier. It didn't make it easy, I promise you. And the room had no window, only some sort of ventilation grill that led to a pipe that went up to the roof and if the door was closed one might quickly suffocate, it was so harsh.

Certain ladies' garments were exclusively my responsibility. Early on when I was still learning, I might have torn one of Miss Palmer's dresses. I didn't notice it and hung it where her dresses were kept. It was a few days after that when I was sitting at the table in the kitchen doing polishing and I heard an angry voice calling, "Where is that girl?" several times and when I looked up Miss Palmer, with Bridget close behind her, was coming at me very fast.

She wore a dress she said I'd torn. It was a green but not particularly fancy thing, with some yellow and red striping and a low collar. Its bottom hem dragged along the floor because she was in bare feet, or at least she

wasn't wearing shoes. She was staring at me. I jumped up so fast that the chair I was in crashed loudly to the tile floor behind me. Everyone in the kitchen stopped whatever they were doing to see what was happening.

Miss Palmer stopped perhaps a yard in front of me. I saw Bridget was over her left shoulder, shaking her head with very big eyes.

"You. Girl." Everything was quiet before Miss Palmer spoke and stayed that way while she did. "You have ruined my dress. I should have Mrs. Burnley take it from your salary."

Now, this would've been difficult since I was paid so little. My room and board were taken care of. It was thought I had no reason to have any money, but as we had to be paid something, and several of us, myself included, sent money home when we could, we got a meager salary. In those days, there was little for me to use it on. At most I might buy candies at a shop after Mass or save up to buy a book. I was also saving to buy a proper dress to wear when I wasn't at the house, like for strolls after Sunday Mass. But that would take some time and I was left with a simple frock that was the nicest that I brought with me from home.

Miss Palmer's threat was therefore real to me. I could never pay for the dress. It was, as were all the family's clothing, made by a dressmaker and I couldn't imagine how much it cost and how many years of working it would take for me to afford such a thing.

Everyone in the kitchen moved so they could watch, and Mrs. Burnley hurried down the hall to reach us. With a "may I, Miss?" she bent down, and Miss Palmer lifted the skirt so the damage I caused could be examined.

"Miss Palmer. 'Tis not so bad. I think we can fix this right off. I'm sure it was an accident." She looked at me and so did everyone else. I, though, could only really see Miss Palmer.

"If I did it, Miss, I didn't mean to. You must know that."

"Are you calling me a liar?"

I couldn't mumble a response, and Mrs. Burnley later told me she feared I would shake myself dead.

"It is torn. Why did you allow it to be sent up when you did it?"

"Miss, I didn't know. I swear I didn't know."

Miss Palmer glared. She, too, seemed not to care about the others.

"Come," she said.

I turned to Mrs. Burnley, who asked Miss Palmer, "What are you going to do with her?"

"Oh Mrs. B," she said in a completely different tone, "We are only going to my room. I promise you I shall not murder her."

Mrs. Burnley directed me to "do as the lady says," and I handed my apron to her and followed Miss Palmer. It was like the parting of the Red Sea as everyone in the hall squeezed to the sides as well as they could.

Miss Palmer called over her shoulder to the housekeeper. "And if I do murder her, I'll try not to make too much of a mess," and she laughed and I heard a "thank you, Miss," from Mrs. Burnley as we started up the servants' stairs.