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*August 30, 1797*

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Mrs. B

**M**rs. Blenkinsop arrived at a neat circle of three-story houses at the edge of North London, surprised to find her charge at the open door, holding her ripe belly with both hands and ushering her inside with an easy smile and no apparent terror of the event to come. The home and its mistress, in a muslin gown and indigo shawl, smelled of apple dumplings. Though they hadn't met, the woman took the midwife's hand and led her past half-furnished rooms, introducing them as she went, waving away stacks of books on a Turkish carpet, anticipating shelves, and the occasional wood box and leather trunk, as "the old life still finding its place in the new." Mrs. Blenkinsop had seen far more disarray in her time, and liked the simple touches, cut flowers in every room and a single oval portrait, just a face (that looked very much like the missus herself) gazing out from over a mantel. In the garden out back, which was enjoying its first late-summer bloom, the midwife caught sight of a little girl, three years old, she guessed, playing with a young woman who seemed to be telling her the names of plants.

It was a fine house, with fresh white walls and open windows, tall as Heaven, inviting a cordial breeze that followed them down a hall, up two steep staircases, and into the airy bedroom where the missus led her, answering each of Mrs. Blenkinsop's questions with an uncanny calm: Her waters had started as a trickle but ended as a gush as she'd stood in the kitchen that morning. She'd felt a dull

ache and scattered pains, with no sensible pattern, but she wasn't unwell, and remembered eating, only two hours before, a small breakfast, which she hoped was enough nourishment to sustain her for the labor to come.

"I don't imagine there'll be much for you to do, Mrs. Blenkinsop, but sit by and wait for Nature to do what your art cannot."

"No objection by me." The midwife put her old bag and bottle of gin on the floor.

"I can't abide the lying-in. I was up next day with Fanny."

"Sweet girl in the garden just now?"

"Yes, with our dear Marguerite. Both too sweet for the world, I'm afraid. But Fanny wasn't shy coming into it."

The midwife took off her brown cape and folded it over a chair. "Well, I've never seen two births the same. Not in all my time. But we'll hope for the best."

"I told Mr. Godwin I'd be down for dinner tomorrow afternoon."

"Let's have a look, then," said the midwife, eager to attend to the business at hand. "D'you mind if I take off my cap?"

"Of course, Mrs. Blenkinsop. We don't stand on ceremony here."

"Mrs. B' ought to do fine," she said, taking some almond oil from her bag and rubbing her hands clean with it. "Shortens things up."

"Mrs. B, then."

A servant appeared with a pressed apron for the midwife, which she wrapped around her own dumpling of a stomach and tied at the back. She removed the woman's slippers, squeezing the arch of each foot before lifting her legs onto the bed, then laid her palms on the great taut womb, and closed her eyes as a way of gathering all her senses to feel the child inside. Satisfied that the baby had fallen down proper and headfirst, she sat on the edge of the bed to raise the missus's knees to a slight bend, rolled her gown to the crest of them, pulled off her underthings, and lightly

pressed her legs apart. They had the give of a woman who'd done this before.

As the midwife inquired into her case—dilated only one finger's worth across—the pregnant woman exhaled a slow breath and talked to the ceiling.

"I told Mr. Godwin over breakfast I had no doubt of seeing the animal today, but that I must wait for you to guess the hour. I think he was somewhat alarmed at the prospect of it all, but relieved when I sent him away. Though I promised I'd send word throughout the day."

"Then it'll just be the two of us, for now." The midwife wiped her hands on her apron. The custom of gathering a gaggle of female relatives and friends, as far as she was concerned, did nothing to serve the cause, or the patient. None of them, in her experience, could agree on a best course going forward or backward: Was it oystershell powder for weak digestion, or crushed chamomile flowers? Cayenne pepper or laudanum for morning sickness? A "cooling" or a "heating" diet throughout? (Mrs. B had seen too many women living like a horse on grassy food and water.) If a woman's pains weren't strong enough, her attendants promoted large quantities of strong liquors, and if very strong, even more. The only thing worse, in her mind, was the calling of a doctor, who was always quick with the forceps and short on patience with a woman in pain.

"We ought to have a good long time together, looks as if," said Mrs. B, rolling the woman's gown back over her calves.

"Are you sure?"

"We must have a little patience."

"Those were my mother's words to me as she was dying."

"'Tis true, comin' or goin'." The midwife gave her a quick pat on the bodice of her dress. "Let's get you out of this into something easier."

The woman signaled toward a wardrobe, where Mrs. B found

a clean, pressed chemise, not a single heavy bedgown in sight, typical for lying-in but much too warm. She was of the view that nothing should be added to dress or bedclothes that the patient wasn't accustomed to in perfect health. When she turned back, the woman was on her feet, arms surrendered to the ceiling, at ease in her body. Her hair was all soft chestnut curls, brown eyes to match, her figure like a bulging flower vase.

"Not to worry," said the midwife, undoing the gown at the back and coiling it up over her belly, head, and arms. "Everything's in a fair way. You'll meet her soon enough."

In seconds the new garment replaced the old.

"Her?"

"Mmm."

"But we were expecting 'Master William.' We've been expecting him from the first."

All the bending and up-and-down had Mrs. B blotchy in the face. She stopped to blow a few strands of hair away, and saw the surprise on her patient's face.

"Everyone does. Expect a boy. But you're fleshy all over, not just out front. Feet nice and warm. Skin smooth as a plum." The midwife put her hands on her hips to squint at the woman's eyes. "Pupils closed up and small." She put her nose in the air and took a satisfied sniff. "But it's that smell of apple dumplings gives her away. You've a yen for sweets. That means a girl. Who'll take her time with you, upon my word."

Mrs. B bent over for her bag. She set the gin and satchel on a near table, and began unpacking.

"Another girl," said the woman almost under her breath, "in this world."

Something in the cadence of her voice made Mrs. B turn to take her in. The missus had stepped back into her slippers and redraped her shawl. She was very still, hands circling her swollen belly, staring down through the thin white linen with a wistful

smile on her lips, as if saying hello and good-bye all at once. She'd looked so unafraid of everything until then: an older woman, late thirties maybe, experienced, with the way of the world about her. The midwife thought most women made far too much of the difficulties and inconveniences of childbearing, that it was a natural condition—not a disease at all—and ought to be treated as such. The woman in front of her now seemed not like them at all. No, she seemed the sort to look the task in the face, let Nature take charge, but help it along where she could, a short country walk, she guessed, gentle ride in a carriage, walk up and down the stairs, or busy herself in the early going with the distraction of dumplings, the spiced scent of a groaning cake. But standing there, some softness bled through the woman's strength.

"Shall I call you Mrs. G, then?" asked the midwife. "Just to shorten things up, same for both of us?"

"Mrs. G?"

"Or Mrs. Godwin, if you like."

"Mrs. Godwin? Who the devil is that?" the woman said with a bright laugh.

Mrs. B looked at her, confused.

"I'm sorry. It's only that I don't think of myself that way. 'Mrs. Godwin.' Though it's been four months already."

Mrs. B made the count of months in her head. She was a Christian woman but didn't judge. "Well, then, new married. Congratulations, I guess, are in order."

"Except that it goes against everything I believe."

"What's that?"

"Marrying at all."

Mrs. B was accustomed to women in her state saying things they might otherwise not, especially as the pains came closer together—sometimes things they would later regret, causing them to swear her to silence. She had heard secrets and gossip, pleas and gibberish, screaming, moaning, crying and curses, but never

a declaration so clearheaded as this. Mrs. Godwin seemed to be staring at her, almost daring her to disapprove. But Mrs. B only smiled, in a way that didn't show her teeth.

"Well, we've a bit of a wait on our hands," she said, setting out the last of her tincture jars. "What shall we do with it?"

"I asked Mr. Godwin to send me a newspaper, a novel, any book—some amusement to while the hours away."

"Maybe tell her your story, why don't you?" said the midwife, nodding toward the missus's womb. "Just for her."

"Why do you think she's taking her time?"

"Ooh, the darkness can be a comfort, I s'pose," said Mrs. B. "It's the darkness binds you to her, and her to you. S'where we all begin, don't we?"

When the missus didn't answer, Mrs. B turned to see a shadow sweep across her face as she gazed outside, pulling her shawl close around. Mrs. B took her as chilled, and stepped toward the open window.

"Let me close that for you."

"No!"

Startled by the sharp edge in her voice, Mrs. B let go the tall panes, and felt her own fleshy shoulders drop. She was tired, there was no way around it, eleven days straight, the thrumming chaos of the Westminster Lying-In Hospital, and now this, before a day of rest. Rhythm, routine, as long as was possible, she thought. She could bear up one more time, she told herself, letting the soft breeze dry the water pooling heavy at the back of her eyes. She wouldn't say a word, never would. It wasn't her place. She was tired, that's all.

"I like the feel of it on my face," the missus said, Mrs. B supposed by way of apology. "I cannot abide still air. I can't breathe."

"Open's fine, till you tell me different." Mrs. B set her shoulders and returned to the table. She poured a dram of gin from the bottle.

“You think she can hear me?” asked the woman.

“Oh yes. Same as the *whoosh-whoosh* of your heart. Has done, all along. Why, you and her’ve known each other a good long while already.” She held out the small glass, an offering. “And with God’s blessing, you’ll have a good long time to come.”

The pregnant woman took the glass, held it high, and swirled it, watching the gin catch the light.

“And you think I can talk her into the world?”

“Well, there’s no talking her out of it.”

The woman’s eyes smiled. She tipped her head back to drink down the gin in one swallow, closing her eyes for the burn of it down the throat, which seemed to fortify her. She put the glass in Mrs. B’s hand, cupping her own slender fingers around the midwife’s.

“Call me Mary,” she said, as if restored. “I am Mary Wollstonecraft.”



## Mary W

**A**nother girl. *In this world.*

Like so many passages, it begins with water. Not the wide gray water of chopping seas, not pulling tides or rocky shores, not harbors. This water pools on the floorboards beneath me, clear liquid, splashing like an ephemeral fall from my own body, sputtering news of your imminent arrival. Mrs. Blenkinsop trundles across the circle in my direction, it must be her: good round face and ruddy cheeks, summer cloak flapping behind, clutching a leather bag and glass bottle to her ample chest. Her white ruffle cap's fallen down, showing her woolly hair (holding more to red than gray) swirling in a great bun, illuminated by the tender sun of the late summer morning. When she opens her mouth to speak, I see that her teeth are crooked and yellow, and that she resists smiling because of it. But her eyes are insensibly kind—a primordial mud-green, like a flashing creek after a storm, with twigs and leaves, sediment and rain all mixed together, flecks of light dancing on its rippling surface. Detritus, and all that is necessary for life.

Which is enough to set us on our long, strange journey together.

At the start she warns me that I won't be relieved of my load anytime soon, though she assures me I'll be safely delivered, head foremost, and all is as it ought to be. Some part of me believes in



this seasoned midwife so thoroughly that when she announces your sex (with no fanfare at all) I am won to it like a trumpet call—*réveillez-vous!* “Awake!” she says to me, to the daughter who stirs within. In an instant you spring from my imagination, entire. Never mind those who espouse the art of getting pretty girl babies, who would’ve had me gaze on cherry lips and lily-whites throughout my pregnancy, sitting quietly doing needlepoint, taking care not to think thoughts at all. Indeed, many in my state take up the cause of a nursery in the months before their confinement, if not the refurbishment of an entire house, always with an urgency that resides in our most primitive animal natures. Burrow deep, spin a steel-silk orb, feather the nest. For my part I cannot unpack a trunk without a thought bounding in, a rush to nearby fields and forests, a cold lake-bath, or the desk, the paper, the pen. There is no confinement that can hold me, no drawing of the curtains, but wide-open windows throwing fresh country light across the page, illuminating the blackest ink.

Now, daughter, I’m to tell you a story to coax you into the world. When Mrs. B says it’s the darkness that binds us, I know she means nothing by it; they are words to ease my time. But the River Fleet, in the far distance out my window, demands that I look. More water, flowing across time, beyond pastoral fields and nursery gardens that remind me of the villages of my girlhood and the best part of my youth, out past the occasional brickworks that remind me of the worst. Here, at the edge of Somers Town, and the farthest reach of my vision, the river runs clear under an ancient elm with great gnarled arms. It bows its graceful canopy as if to mark the water’s progress to St. Pancras Church, where, this spring, that same old elm burst with frothy yellow buds that swayed with the wind, and bowed to us, your father and me. The day that I *married*—defying my own nature and betraying all I held dear.

My womb quickening with you.

It was the thirty-eighth anniversary of my birth, the day I chose, and Mr. Godwin consented, to begin this life together, this new world we've made for you. I didn't tell him, but am keenly aware that every year, without knowing it, we also mark the anniversary of our death. For however untroubled the Fleet is here, in this midlife paradise, I know that by the time it joins the Thames, it will be sullied by the bloody scraps of butchers' stalls, the bloated corpses of cats and dogs, dead flowers, and human excrement.

My own story is no prettier, far from it. There are triumphs in it, a scattering of joys, but the beautiful sits side by side with the grotesque; I cannot separate them. All the brutality is there, the hurt I've suffered at the hands of others, but so, too, my own mistakes, missteps, and missed understandings. I have held it close, afraid to unleash it into the world. So how could I tell you, my almost-born daughter, the story of that vivid darkness as if it would persuade you of this place? Would you survive the deepest bone-secrets of our brief shared being? You inside me. Me inside you.

No, I think not.

But then true labor comes, quick and hard.

"Perhaps it's time to call for Mr. Godwin, when he finishes his supper," I tell Mrs. B.

She gives a note to the housemaid to deliver to him, and asks that some fresh butter be sent up. She helps me to the bed, where I'm to kneel, sit, crouch, lie down, as the pains permit. When the butter comes, she stretches my loins to ease the way for your head. I can hear Godwin's footfalls up and down the hall outside, imagine him wringing his hands. He knocks on the door, but I can't hear his exchange with Mrs. B. I want to call his name, to reassure him, but can't find my voice.

The closer the pains, the more I grow quiet and withdraw into myself. Mrs. B mops my brow and whispers into my ear that a child cannot be far behind.

And then at last you slip from my body.

Mrs. B tips you upside down and slaps your feet to wake you into the world. But the moment lasts longer than it should, and I begin to doubt. Then you gasp for air, at last, and live, not with a wail so much as a chirp and squeak I think only I can hear.

*Oh little bird!*

Your father bursts into the room at the sound of my giddy relief—was I laughing? He startles at the sight of you naked and trembling in Mrs. B's hands.

"Is it—"

"Breathing, sir, she is."

"Oh, darling," he says, coming to my side. "A little girl." He half sits on the bed and presses his forehead to mine—his joyful tears, my ragged hair matted against my forehead—as Mrs. B cuts the umbilical cord and washes you with all the ceremony of scrubbing a turnip just plucked from the ground.

"Made us wait for you a good long time, yes you did," she says, sponging your tiny face and chest.

But I know I have waited for you—for this—all my life.

"Let's give your limbs some liberty, shall we?" Mrs. B wraps you loosely in cotton cloth and delivers you into my arms. I free the blanket even more, to survey the whole of you, count your fingers, your toes. I can see in your father's eyes that you aren't what he expected, or what our gentle confederacy of perfections rarely admits: A child at birth is a shocking thing. Your skin is coated, as if with wax the color of jaundice, so thin it bares the atlas of dark veins beneath. Instead of feathers you have fine white down, barely visible, all over your body; instead of wings, arms like spindles, held tight to your heaving rib cage, not much bigger than your father's palm, which he holds against your quick-beating heart.

The love, instantaneous!

Mrs. B tells me to hold you to my breast, but with your eyelids too swollen to open, your lips unaccustomed to the ways of sucking, your little beak searches but cannot find me. I see the worry

in her eyes; she needn't say so. You're too small, your lungs work too hard, each breath a jagged try. But I would tell her I will not let you die, my own life force now inextricably tied to yours, a thousand times knotted together. And though we cannot choose which day we are born, into what time or place, a day chooses us. Never forget, little bird, that the day that chose you comes at the end of a month when a comet blazed across London's skies, heralding your arrival.

*Another girl, in this world!*

And so I *will* tell you the story to fill you up and bind you to this wondrous vale, if you stay with us, little bird. Please stay. I will tell you the moments that begin and end me—because we are made of them all, strung like pearls in time, searching always for where the new circle begins its turn, the place of our next becoming. Where the line becomes an arc, and curves.