

HAPPY DUST/*Alice Fulton*

IN THE TWENTIETH century I believe there are no saints left, but our farm on Boght Road had not yet entered the twentieth century. At that time, around 1908 it would be, I had a secret I could tell to no one, least of all a saint or an arsenic eater. In my experience, it is better to keep away from saints unless you have business with them. The same backbone that makes them holy virtuosos makes them eager to mind other people's p's and q's. But some of the saints I knew were family, and this made them hard to fend off. Don't think I am speaking of my sister-in-law, Kitty. She was not a saint but a lost soul.

It was through Kitty that I first got wind of the spiritual genius down the road. My sister-in-law had mixed up a batch of French chalk and gumwater colored with Prussian blue and was using this to fashion veins on her face. I was washing the bedroom windows. As she painted, Kitty let it slip that she'd brought some extra milk from our dairy over to St. Kieran's Home. I knew the history of this "extra milk." And I knew only a lost soul would give it to an orphanage. That part of her saga rang true.

While searching for a foundling to take the milk, Kitty said she'd wandered into St. Kieran's garden. It was full of crispy white flowers, and in the midst of these blooms, a nun was standing with her arms outstretched "like an oaken figure on a cross," Kitty said. The nun had her back to Kitty, who was about to vamoose when the sister fell to her knees, kissed the earth, and commenced to speaking Latin.

I put no stock in this at first because Kitty had very refined nerves. I'd sized her up the minute I saw her alighting from our dairy wagon in full feather and needletoe kid shoes. My brother-in-law, Mike Flanagan, was holding a parasol dripping fringe like a horse's fly sheet over her head with one hand and steering her around cowflops with the other. My husband, Joe, tagged behind, lugging her trunks and looking dumbstruck. Oh Mary! I thought, what kind of rigmarole is this? Why would a fine tall man with Mike's black curls and his eyes like bachelor buttons hitch up with such a helplessness? "Enchanted," Kitty said in that voice you'd need an ear trumpet to capture. She extended her hand in glove to me in my leaky shoes and dress so mended it fell apart in the wash. I shook it thinking this girl's a lost soul.

When we moved to the farm, I was a young woman of twenty, hardy though never comely, with lank dark hair grabbed back in a bun. They

called me Mamie Come Running because if anyone needed help, I was the one that would go and do. Now, at twenty-six, I was chapped and thoroughly sweated from the care of four children and the day-in, day-out labor of the place. The washing and mangling, blacking and beating, scrubbing and baking, the making of soap and babies had taken all the calorie out of me. I was thin as a cat's whisker. I had a hacking cough and pallor. My face had taken on shadows. Though I couldn't admit it, I was in a bad state of wilt.

Kitty's delicate ways had me all the more overtasked. She was supposed to do the sewing, but left to herself she'd make only belle-of-the-ball garments and nothing for everyday. And everyday was all there was on the farm. Our little brick house was neat as the Dewey decimal system but meager and common as could be. We had windows but no curtains, rooms but no closets, walls but no wallpaper. It was mostly brown and coarse, and Kitty shed tears when she saw it. She and Mike lived on the second floor. We took our meals together, and I soon discovered she could make a cup of tea at most. She'd drink it in little sips while Joe and Mike poured their coffee into their saucers and slurped. I don't know what she thought of them. She had that way of soft-soaping a man till he felt he was her all-in-all no matter what was in her head.

Her with her milk baths, saying we were a dairy and could afford the waste. We could not. Two quarts, sufficient for a sponge-down, was what we settled on. Then she wanted to sell the used milk to the poorhouse at a reduction. It doesn't take a wizard to figure what she gave the orphans. She and Mike had a childless marriage. If I was called to help Doc Muswell with a delivery, I'd return to a Bedlam of bawling infants, for Kitty was no good with them.

Now that I was expecting again, I wished we could pack up our home and roll it down Boght Road to Watervliet on a barrow. I would have liked to pull a shade on the past and have this baby in town. I had a superstition that a child's birth predicted the course its life would take. And I was determined that my fifth would be welcomed in perfect circumstances, without any forceps or cows in the house.

It was this secret intention that led me to take things up with Katherine Tekakwitha, the Lily of the Mohawks. Kitty begged to join my pilgrimage, and in early September we boarded a steamer for Albany, followed by a train bound for The Shrine of Our Lady of Martyrs in Auriesville. I had baby Edna in my arms, and the three runabout children, Helen, Dora, and my Joseph, clinging to my skirts.

The train left us off, dusty as coalmen, at the foot of the Hill of Torture. This long path wound grandly up through massive gates and meadows toward the sky. I suspected many pilgrims from the city never knew there could be such earth on earth. I shaded my eyes and gave the crowd a once-over but saw no sign of Sister Dorothea or Sister Adelaide. These relative nuns from New Jersey were meeting us and returning to the farm for their annual home visit.

Kitty put down our market basket and fanned herself with a holy card. I tried to keep baby Edna from grabbing it. "What are you going to pray for, Mamie?" she asked.

"That the nuns won't stay more than three nights," I told her. They had requested courtesy at St. Kieran's Home since their Rule required them to sleep in a convent. But yours truly would have to feed and entertain them. How to do that was the puzzle. I only knew they liked looking at the Sears catalogue to see how many things there were in the world they didn't want.

"You'll never guess what I'm going to pray for." Kitty gnawed delicately at the holy card. "But do try."

"A magic lantern and a switch of storebought hair." That was what she'd told me last night. Feeling a cough coming on, I set baby Edna down and fished a clean handkerchief from my shirt-waist.

"No. Something ever so much more important."

The cough changed its mind and I was grateful. "You wouldn't be wanting a little fountain in your room that shoots perfume before falling back into a marble basin, or white satin slippers, exquisitely fitted, that do not button or lace but are cunningly sewn on in the morning and ripped off at night? You wouldn't be praying that your name become Fannie Wellbeloved, Annabel Lee, Clara Lazarus, or Evelyn Friend?" Kitty's pipe dreams were famous to me. "Joseph, get over here while I clean your ears." He was a little redheaded dickens of five years. I went after him with my handkerchief. The girls were nicely turned out in their white pinafores and dotted Swiss, I thought.

"Dare I speak my heart aloud?" Kitty asked. "I'm praying to be accepted as a nontuition scholar at The Troy School of Arts and Crafts." She gave me a cow-eyed confiding look.

"That saloon run by teachers excommunicated from The Emma Willard School?"

"Darling Mamie." It was a sweltering day, and the party next to us had a coverlet fixed to four broomsticks raised above their hats as a canopy. "I wish I'd brought my sundown," Kitty said. Reaching into her purse, she found a little pocket mirror, a jar of finely powdered

starch and orris root, and began dusting herself. "This weather is a persecution, is it not? I'm dying, I'm dying, I'm dead."

"You'll be a beautiful corpse," I told her. And she perked up. If she wasn't bleaching her freckles with borax in rosewater, she was applying solutions of corrosive sublimate, prussic acid, and caustic potash to her complexion. There was a tin of *Poudre Rajournissante* containing ratsbane in her room, for Kitty had been an arsenic eater since the age of seventeen. She stayed pretty nimble despite this habit. But she'd experience the fatal symptoms and be carried off should she stop. Once begun, an arsenic eater is tied to that unnatural diet all her days. I never let the children visit her upstairs for fear they'd get into her poisons and destroy their lives.

I followed her eyes to six-year-old Dora. She was standing with her arms spread like wings and her head wrenched back toward the sky.

"That's cross prayers," Helen told us. "Sister Honoraria showed her." Helen was my eldest, an independent girl of eight years.

"The nun in the garden, I'll warrant," Kitty whispered. "That child has the most charming buck teeth."

The Hill of Torture was lined with hucksters pitching miraculous medals and phony relics, and I just then spotted our Brides of Christ standing in full poverty by a vendor's cart. Nuns had such dignity and difference, I always thought they should be introduced by a loud gust of trumpets. By the same token, ours were something of a Mutt and Jeff. Sister Dorothea was stately as a steeple, while Adelaide was jolly and stocky. Each had her hand concealed up its opposite bat-wing sleeve, and no peddlers were rushing them. Those men knew better than to pester a nun. I ran over to grab the little black satchels leaning against their hems.

"Good day, my dears. God be with you," Sister Dorothea said. The woman had a voice in her like a velvet counterpane. Adelaide was making an ado over the kiddies.

We saw the procession forming then for the march up the Hill of Torture to the park where Katherine Tekakwitha had been born and saints had been martyred in days of old. We fell in with the other parishioners on the upwards trudge, saying the rosary and singing Ave's aloud. Before long, we were wiping the dust off our eyes with holy water passed hand to hand.

Everyone had been fasting since midnight, and I'd all but lost interest in human sacrifice by the time we got to the top. The nuns were still full of tallyho, of course. The procession followed a dirt path through the Seven Dolors and the Stations of the Cross to the Martyr's Chapel. This was a rough-hewn log pavilion, open on all sides so

overflowing pilgrims could hear Mass from the lawn—though being with two Mercy Sisters guaranteed us seats inside. Baby Edna was asleep, my Joseph was hoping for a sermon full of tomahawks, and the girls were busy with the pictures in my missal. In 1908, a wasting disease was a blot on the family name. Seeing as I could not confess my health to anyone alive, I roosted on the kneeler, eager to air my secret shame and heart's desire before God's saints.

I knew Katherine Tekakwitha, the Lily of the Mohawks, had recovered from smallpox. She had been an orphan. And she had been Godly without being martyred. I respected her for that. My prayer went, "If I was not worn out by the white plague, I would not worry about adding again to our household. But as I am poorly, I am sincerely sorry for it. I cannot go to a resort where the air is Adirondack and sleep on a screened-in porch. But help me be fit enough to give the child its life. Give me gumption. My spirit is gaunt." I told Katherine that if I died, my children would be half-orphans, halfway to St. Kieran's Home. As an orphan herself, she'd know that when a mother goes to bed and dies, her little children stand crying because no one is minding them. The father might try, but he is too discouraged and new to the work to be useful.

Since a feeble mother will have a weak infant, I prayed mine would not be a blue baby or an idiot. Let it be born modern, a twentieth-century child, with no muck or mire, no caul or purple mother's marks upon it, I prayed. Lily of the Mohawks, I said, let this baby have a decent, not a blind-alley life. I would not mind this baby being a saint, but I would not like it to be a martyr or a lost soul. A saint wasn't much of a livelihood, but it was better than farming. Farm life was what I did not want for the baby most of all. Last, I prayed it would be an ordinary child and have happy luck all its days.

I got so caught up I hardly noticed the incense and adoration. The next thing I knew, we'd genuflected and were out on the grass again. I spread the cloth and unpacked the bill of fare. I always cooked day and night before the Sisters visited, and then they'd peck away with their puny appetites, selecting a tidbit here, a morsel there. I'd made a round of beef, fricasseed chicken, potato salad, piccalilli, chili sauce, and rhubarb pie, all the same. I knew from last time they would not touch my homemade root beer because of the word "beer."

"Mother, is Sister Dorothea a saint?" Dora asked. She and Helen were braiding each other's brown straight hair. The sky had turned dreary, and the trees looked boisterous.

"A saint has to be dead, I guess." I handed Sister Adelaide a corned beef sandwich and began helping everyone to salad. I didn't know what to say.

"Sister Honoraria is a saint," Dora said. "She was struck twice by lightning, and now if someone sticks pins in her, it doesn't matter, for she don't feel it." I thought this must be a great gift to a Sister. I knew from washing our relatives' habits that nuns were mostly held together with pins.

"Some religious women fancy they are specially singled out for miracles," Sister Dorothea said, brushing crumbs off her worsted skirt.

I'd seen lightning split a crystal dish without a shatter. I'd seen it roll itself up in a ball before exploding. And I believed it could strike twice if it had a mind to. There were but two things I feared: lightning and a dark cellar.

"Sister Honoraria is Dora's teacher," I explained. St. Kieran's was the nearest school. The children went there to be educated with the orphans.

"The Presentation nuns are all very well," Sister Dorothea said. Veils were flapping, and I had to hold on to my hat.

"Their order is enclosed, and a few decades older in the faith than ours," Sister Adelaide allowed.

I told Helen and Dora, who were dandy helpers, to get a move on and find their little brother. He'd gone to watch some boys carve a cross in a tree, and now with a storm brewing, I'd lost sight of him in his everyday blue denim brownie suit.

"Mamie, I couldn't broach this with the children here," Sister Dorothea said, as soon as the girls were gone. "But it is my duty to warn you." She fingered her beads. Kitty leaned forward, egging her on. "It's passing strange how some vowed women believe they're doing God a great favor instead of thinking the world well lost."

"Obedience comes more readily to some than others," Adelaide explained.

"There have been allegations concerning Sister Honoraria," continued Dorothea.

"Concerning her past," said Adelaide.

"Don't be grabbing Sister's spectacles," I told baby Edna.

"It is said that Sister Honoraria was called back from a foreign mission, and that she engages in excessive penitential practices." Here Dorothea touched the big black crucifix shoved under her belt. "What's more, this sister's conduct with a priest was deemed—" she paused and puckered her lips. "Familiar. He was observed to impiously venture to touch her hand."

"It is said," Adelaide put in.

"You mean there was a scandal, Maggie?" The shock made me forget and call Sister Dorothea by her Christian name.

Kitty was in her glory. I could feel her nerves shaking next to me. "The nun in the garden," she said.

The girls came skipping over then, dragging my Joseph behind them, and we had to shush. There was no more talk of Sister Honoraria, though Kitty kept trying to sneak up on the subject. The storm held off, and we spent the rest of the afternoon strolling the grounds, greeting old cronies, and telling each other what a grand time we were having in this heaven on earth before the sun got low and the train left for home.

The nuns came and went without any uproar, and it must have been a week after their visit that Helen raced home in a great state of emergency. I was putting sheets out to dry on the lines and hedges when she skidded into the yard, out of breath, yelling Mother Come Running! Sister Has Fallen! "Sister is down?" I said, stopping my work to listen. When I'd heard enough, I left the little ones with Kitty and took off down Boght Road at a good clip.

Once we got to St. Kieran's, Helen led me through the high brick gates into a big garden patch out back. There was Sister lying down in the dirt. A blunt knife and a jar of water were on the ground nearby. She looked dazed but awake. "Was I struck by lightning?" she said, looking up at me with long gray eyes. I knew I had to get her out of that sun posthaste, but she proved hard to move as a trolley off its track. As I tried to raise her, I noticed an open can of gummy brown perfumey stuff fastened to her belt. When I saw her bare feet, I thought this Sister is a rugged little number—light yet durable, scanty yet galvanized. Once I got her up, Helen wedged herself under one arm, I got under the other, and we limped toward the convent.

As we stepped into the cool gloom of the place, I was struck by its smell of starched linen and dusty paraffin. Though it was a hotter-than-blazes Indian summer day, some frosty twilight poured from the high windows. Sister Honoraria (for she was our fallen nun) said the others were at prayers and must not be disturbed on her account. "Let me take up my cross," she said, "or I will never have my crown." She directed us through waxed amber corridors, up an oak stairway to the nuns' dormitory.

The sisters' beds were separated by sheets hung from poles to make cells the size of small box stalls, maybe six' feet square. We entered Sister's alcove through a curtain and laid her down on her iron cot. The place was dark as an icehouse. It took a while to make out the white wooden box, straight plain chair, washstand, soap dish, and tin cup

that were the furnishings. I told Helen to go rescue the kids from Kitty and ask Papa to fetch Doc Muswell.

I then set about pulling the heavy togs off Sister. She spoke of this and that she had to do, but I said the doctor was coming, and she was too listless to argue. When I unfastened the strings of her headpiece, I was surprised to find that the starched bonnet had pricklers on its inside. I saw they'd left marks on the skin and stubby scalp of her. Under her habit was a muslin gown big as a croup tent, and as I wrassled with her outer outfit, this undergarment pulled in such a way that I glimpsed a scar, livid and cross-shaped, on her ribs. "You got a bad cut there, Sister," I said, just to keep the conversation going.

"Here cut and here burn, but spare me in eternity," she said.

"How'd you get a cut like that?" I had lockjaw on my mind.

"No doubt you've heard tales," she said. "People, even good people, are given to falsehood and exaggeration. And yet I would do wrong to say I did no wrong." She asked about the can that had been fastened at her waist, and I said I'd put it out of the way, under the cot.

"If I had walked too heavily, or used my eyes with liberty, or kissed an infant for its beauty . . . for these sins, I might be forgiven," she continued.

"Nobody's perfect," I said.

"Perfection is a nun's purpose," she replied. "She must wash the taste of the world from her mouth with carbolic and sleep on thorns lest she sleep too well. If the chapel is cosy, let her kneel in snow. If for an instant she forgets Christ's suffering, let her take switches to her shoulders, brand herself with faggots, wear an iron chain about her waist."

I was beginning to think this Sister was a deep customer. "The worst sin is shiftlessness," I said. "It's better to shuck your blues and shake a leg."

"Perhaps tales have reached you. Vile accusations have been made," she said, "concerning the orphans. That I had them kneel like dogs and used their backs as writing desks, when in fact they are raised most tenderly."

"That I didn't know," I said.

"I was torn by a conflict of duty—" and she would have gone on but we heard footsteps. There came a light scratching of fingernails on the curtains, and Doc Muswell entered, along with the Mother Superior or some other bigwig, by the look of her.

In his single-breasted Prince Albert suit, I'd call Doc Muswell pretty nobby-looking for a country sawbones. Before I married, I'd worked as his housekeeper and assistant, so we were old pals. I knew his wife to be a malingerer, and he knew I had a wasting disease. He had

trained me as his nurse, and many times I'd saved him the weary night work of delivering infants. As he saw it, childbirth was long hours for short wages.

"Does Sister suffer from any known disease?" he asked the Superior nun.

"Only the disease of scrupulosity," she answered back. She told him to report to her before he left and excused herself.

Once he'd overlooked the situation carefully, Doc asked Sister if she knew the day and place she was. She said, "I thought I was on the Ganges plain between Patna and Benares, but now I see I'm in Watervliet."

"That's right, Sister," I said, to encourage her. I didn't know where the Ganges plain was located. Somewhere near the road to Damascus most likely.

Doc Muswell took out his stethoscope, and I thought he'd see her scar, but he turned his head to one side and listened without looking, as doctors did in the presence of modesty back then. "You have heat-stroke, Sister," he told her. "Forgive me for saying so, but you are chronically overdressed for garden work."

"Your rebuke is well-taken, Doctor. The great discovery is in the heavens above us, not the garden below." She liked to browbeat herself. I'd seen that instantly.

"Well, Doc," I said in her defense, "Sister's skirt, sleeves, and veil were pinned up, under, and back when she had this spell."

"In accordance with Protocol Number 17," said she.

The words no sooner left her lips than her breathing told us she was asleep. Doc Muswell asked me to stay awhile and see she drank all of the potion he'd leave. He inquired about my own health, and I told him I was expecting. "The married woman disease," he said. When I confessed to coughing blood, he shook his head. "Mamie, it's as I've said. You'll have to get by on one lung the rest of your life." Then he took a packet from his bag and pressed it into my hand. "As a sedative for coughs, this is five times stronger than morphine," he said. By the lion and globe on the label, I recognized it as Bayer Heroin Powder. "Use it sparingly, and you won't become habituated. You will have call for it, I think." I was grateful as this medicine was very dear, and the more costly the cure, the more effective. "With your constitution, you'd do well to avoid stimulating food and drink, heat and cold, singing, hallooing, and declamation." So saying, he donned his hat and took his leave.

Sister opened her eyes then, and I fed her the potion he'd left. She was looking more chipper. "I could not but overhear your conversation,"

she said. "You are in a delicate condition. I have a remedy that will damp the fires of bodily mechanism and shallow the breath, resting your enflamed lung and encouraging the cavities to close." Nothing could be more powerful than the nostrum of a consecrated virgin. This I knew. "It is Indian Perfection Medicine. Take it when your time comes, and the pain will not threaten you," she said.

Hearing this, my heart soared, for I knew Katherine Tekakwitha had answered my prayer. I figured Sister got the recipe from a Mohawk maiden with a difficult vocation, and I thanked her feelingly.

"There is no need to thank me," she said. "There is a giving that does not impoverish and a withholding that does not enrich. I have but one request." Nuns always want some little selfless thing in exchange for their favors, I find. God's the same way when you think about it.

"Everything in the convent is ours, not mine. To give property without permission is a form of theft. I have been chastised in the past for giving to the indigent. I have been called more of a chemist than a Sister, more nurse than nun. I battle for obedience. Yet Saint Dominic said he would sooner cut up the rule book than let it be a burden to one's conscience. I have taken you into my confidence. I ask only that you hold my words in trust."

"You mean keep mum?"

She nodded, and I didn't stop to dicker. Give me that remedy! was how I felt. She told me the way to the convent's medicine closet, a large room in the cellar that would be open at this hour.

"What if I meet up with one of your sidekicks?" I wondered.

"If questioned, you must tell the truth," she said firmly. "Tell the truth, and say Saint Gregory the Great directed us to dispense to all sufferers that which they need."

I set off for the medicine room on a trail that twisted through corridors of mostly closed doors. The worst of it was windows now and then threw rays on big framed pictures whose sudden faces scared the daylights out of me. All along, I worried some nun would creep up on the balls of her feet in high perfection behind me and ask my business. I had to keep thinking of the baby and of all the cures I'd tried to no avail. When I got to the convent's depths, which were dim and dank as a root cellar, I wished especially for a lamp. But I remembered "Tekakwitha" meant "she who cuts the way before her" and felt steadier. At long last, I arrived at the third left-hand door of the west wing. In the sincere hope that I had not gone off course, I stopped and turned the knob.

My eyes had a tolerance for darkness by now. I could make out a long table of ledgers and accounts, along with stacks of labels, stamps,

and envelopes. It looked like a tidy business for the Sisters, and I wished them well. To my left, I saw shelves holding small white cakes and bottles. Seizing one, I read the Indian Perfection label thrice. I'd already knotted the Bayer Heroin in my apron corner, and now I rolled the remedy in this garment and tucked the hem at my waist. It was high time, too, for a bell was tolling. And since early and provident fear is the mother of safety, and I'd as lief have my wolf teeth pulled as be caught red-handed, I fled.

That fall was damp as a gravedigger's skin. By November I'd developed a hectic fever that left pink circles in my cheeks. Before the winter zeros struck, I thought I'd better mend my lacy lung with Sister's remedy. Whether it was her medicine or the disease itself, by some means I was lifted into the high altitudes of hope and held there. I somehow kept my cheer, and in April the last shrouds of snow melted. Though I was large as Jumbo by then, the work of the farm would not allow me to remove myself from view as some think prudent.

One Saturday, having finished the morning chores and served a bountiful hot lunch, I was on my knees scrubbing the kitchen oil-cloth and thinking about Kitty. That one isn't one to make love to the corners! I was thinking. Why, I've seen her grab a pair of silk drawers and begin dusting if she heard a neighbor on the steps. When I opened her trunk to get fresh linen, a swarm of mothmillers flew out, and we had to fumigate. Such were my thoughts when I felt the first pain. I didn't trust it since the baby had been incubating only eight months by my reckoning. And even if it was not a false alarm, it takes time for pain to work itself into a birth. Joe and Mike were leaving for town, but reasoning thus, I said nothing.

Every week they went into Watervliet to buy our groceries at Dufrane's Market. While the clerk was making up the order, they'd go across the street to Sherlock's Grill. Once they'd left, I noticed the pains were coming closer. Mamie, I said, this baby is going places. I stopped scrubbing the floor and began scouring buckets and bowls. I pumped water for boiling and placed torn strips of cloth in the oven to bake clean. A woman in labor should have plenty fixed for others to eat, yet I was caught short. I could only put a big plate of bread and butter on the table.

In our bedroom off the parlor, I set out the spotless containers along with a bar of carbolic. I tied a twisted towel around the headboard rails and fastened two more, like reins, at the foot. Then I covered the

room and the bed with old issues of *The Troy Record*. Some expectant mothers put their own laying-out clothes in a bottom drawer, but my warm hopes would not allow this. I was thinking of the here and now, not the always was and will be. If you go to bed, the infant sleeps and you have to start again. So I kept pacing.

After the third birth, things get riskier. I tried to keep my mind on the happy deliveries and forget the poor devils I had seen. I would not think of the abnormal presentations, hemorrhages, obstructions, retained afterbirths, blood poisonings, convulsions, milk legs, and childbed fevers. Working for Doc Muswell, I'd seen prolapsed women full of ironmongery, pessaries to hold their insides in. Childbirth left them wearing these "threshing machines" only hoop skirts could hide. Such trials swept through my mind in kinetoscopic flashes. Yet those poor devils did not have Sister's remedy. This I knew.

The children were outside playing pirate, and I called Helen in. "You're a young miss now," I told her. She was nearly nine. "You can be your mother's helper." I asked her to go upstairs and alert Kitty, who soon appeared and settled herself on the divan like a brooding hen. When a pain came, I shushed, and when it let up, I started bossing the job again. All along I was trying to gauge the labor's progress, whether I was at the dime, nickel, quarter, half-dollar, or teacup stage. At the teacup stage, I would be "fully delighted," as Doc Muswell said. I figured I was halfway there.

It was twilight, and I was lying down to catch my breath, when Kitty began hollering from the yard. Mamie Come Running! she said. The Team Is Back! Rushing out, I saw the wagon and lathered horses but no sign of Joe or Mike. By the ropes of green froth dribbling from their bits, I could see Ned and Susie had grabbed a bite to eat. "We'll have to unhitch the horses," I told her.

"They are such great brutes, Mamie. Do let's leave them as they are. But what of Michael and Joe? Do you suppose they were thrown and are even now lying in some dark spot?"

"Joe and Mike are skillful whips," I said. "If they got thrown, then they must foot it." I knew those brothers were not brawling or visiting sweethearts. "Nothing ventured, nothing lost," that was the Flanagan motto.

I watered and unharnessed the horses without coming to harm, and when I returned, Kitty was strewn across my newspapered bed in an attitude of weeping. "Perhaps the dainty waist and deep full inspirations of some Watervliet wanton have commanded Michael's admiration," she said. I could hear Helen trying to convince my Joseph and baby Edna it was bedtime. Dora was singing them a little song.

I scrubbed the horse dirt off and lit the oil lamps. Then I lay down on the divan. Now that the pain was mustering, I wondered out loud if I'd have enough of Sister's remedy.

"Mother, if you needed more, we could have made it ourselves," Helen piped up. Having settled the little ones, she and Dora were giving me big looks. I only half-listened as she prattled about *Papaver somniferum* and lancing the pods so sticky flower milk oozed out. She spoke of scraping, drying, beating, molding, boiling, skimming, and straining, but it wasn't till she mentioned covering the cakes with white poppy petals that I sat up and attended. The word "poppy" had roused me.

"Is this what Sister was doing when she took that bad turn?"

"Yes, and I was helping her," said Helen with a proud little smile.

"You were helping her harvest opium," I said. I got up and stood with arms akimbo, thinking. If Sister's remedy was mostly opium, like Black Drop or laudanum, I might have become a dope fiend. Hoarding the medicine for tonight's baby was all that saved me. Now I had to weigh the danger of opium against the danger of pain. Most of all, I wanted this baby to be protected by the power of good. And I thought Sister Honoraria was a good woman, even if she was a bad nun. As I stood thinking, my waters broke.

I marched into the bedroom where Kitty was sleeping. "See here, Clara Lazarus," I said. "It's time to rise from the dead. I need streetcar courtesies. I have to push this baby out."

"Oh, Mamie, I am a wretch. Forgive me," she said. I lay down in a sweat and would have taken Sister's medicine, opium or no, but I could not afford to be dopey until the doctor got here. It must have been near midnight. I sent Joe wireless messages in my mind: come home, come home.

Dora brought me a saucer of dark fruit. "What have we here?" I gasped.

"Kitty says they are little black-coated workers." She looked at me with her bashful, born-yesterday eyes. I set the prunes down carefully and told her to fetch the blessed candle from the parlor.

My mother, Peg Merns, had unfastened every knot or button, door or stall, while I was having baby Edna. She supposed so much opening would help the infant enter the world. Thanks to her, baby Edna was welcomed into a household of men with their garments falling off and an old bossy in the kitchen. I wanted this child to be born newfangled and free of Irish hoo-doo. But I'd kept a copy of a prayer my mother had recited, and I asked Helen to fetch it from the dresser's depths. It was written on vellum older than Plymouth Rock. I used the oil lamp

to light the candle and read the words to myself: "Anne bore Mary; Mary, Christ Our Savior; Elizabeth, John the Baptist. So may this woman, saved in the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ, bear the child in her womb, be it male or female. Come forth." That's how it went. It ended with Latin words written so they'd read the same in any direction:

SATOR
AREPO
TENET
OPERA
ROTAS

Though she was no scholar, my mother, Peg Merns, said the Latin meant "I creep toward the sower and holder of the workings and the wheels." I placed the paper on my big belly, and asked Helen if she could see to read it. With a little prompting, she soon had it down pat. I told her I wanted her to recite the list of holy births in a saintly voice while Dora held the candle aloft. My lambs looked scared in the shaky light, but Helen set her balky tongue to the task. "Anne bore Mary . . ." she began.

She got no further because Dora yelled Papa's home! just then, and the spell was broken. A moment later, Joe was standing at the bedroom door. He had *mea culpa* written all over him, but I was happy to see him in good health. "How are you, Mamie?" he said, with hat in hand.

"I am fully delighted," I replied. His face was barn red, and he looked more at a loss for words than always. "Where are the groceries, Joe?" I asked.

"I guess we lost track of time in the grill, and the team got tired of waiting for us."

He was standing like somebody rusted in place, and I told him he'd better go after Doc Muswell. "If he's out on a call, don't write 'CHILDBIRTH' on the slate or he'll mosey along. Write 'FULLY DELIGHTED,'" I said. Joe repeated this. "You heard," I said.

After he left, I started to cough. Then, my stars! The pain changed in character. I thought I had a lightning bolt lodged in my spine, though I couldn't let on with the children near. I had been leaning on Sister's remedy to see me through. And if that failed, Doc's heroin. But how could I bear down if I was doped? I needed all my wits. And what if those medicines fatally depressed the baby? Once a heavy thought has a grip, it is hard to dispel. I knew labor proceeded at a pace and mine was stalled. I felt my efforts coming to naught. This is the

reckoning, I felt. I'm flagging, I'm past repair. I'm at the last gasp. Soon I will not want my body or the breath I breathe. This is the end of the world.

"Go get Kitty," I told Helen, who was standing by. My sister-in-law had been delicately raised, that was evident. She was genteel and artistic, though the man in the moon would make a better midwife. The children could do worse in a godmother, I thought. She came in, and I showed her and Helen the basin on the chair for bathing baby, the penny and binding for its navel, the boiled scissors, baby clothes, and diapers.

"Mamie darling, don't be blue," Kitty said, in her namby-pamby way. "You must use the happy dust the doctor gave you. It is much favored as a stimulant, I've heard."

"You're a good sister, Kit," I told her. "If the baby's a boy, I want him to be called James, after my brother. And if it's a girl, you can call her Annabel Lee."

"Stop it, Mamie," Kitty said. "You're frightening me." Her hands were shaking like a palsy victim's.

"Ma, are you dying?" Helen asked, and Dora started to cry.

I'd seen women lose heart and die of exhaustion. I'd seen them die with babies half in and half out. They died because they were frightened. I fully understood it. But seeing those little girls with the solemn-waif look already on them, staring at their mother like she was a hobgoblin, I came to my senses. I realized nobody was going to help me. I was it all. And I told myself to get cracking.

"Don't be crying," I said. "Your mother is a fighter. How can I die when there's a baby coming?" Course I can grunt it out, I told myself. God send me a pauper's low Mass funeral with no solemn requiem sung by three priests if I cannot. And I pulled on the towels I'd rigged, and I bore down.

Suddenly it seemed my little shut-in had been cooped up long enough. Suddenly it wanted liberty. It was coming like a locomotive headlight. It was coming quick as scat. God Almighty! Now this baby was helping. Now this baby wanted to be born. "Anne bore Mary . . ." I kept praying, for that was the one phrase I could recall. The pain waxed as it waned, with no pause, and I let the head creep slowly into my hands, though Immaculate Mary, it must be easier to thread camels through needles. The head, the shoulders, then the rest!

I caught the baby and laid it on my stomach. It lay there like a red frog, belly down. I rubbed its back to make it breathe. I held it upside down and patted the soles of its feet. I wiped the blood out of its mouth and blew on its stomach. I dunked it in water. At last I tossed

a pinch of Doc's powder over its head and dabbed Sister's soporific of vegetable origin behind its ears. It gasped and was alive. May God protect the child!

After I'd cut the cord and had the afterbirth, I got up and cleaned the room of gore. Kitty brought in my Joseph and baby Edna. "Meet Annabel Lee," she said. I was imagining what Joe would think of this name. Annabel Lee Flanagan? Sounds like a lost soul, he'd say.

"You know, Kit, now that I see her, she looks more like she should be called Anne." I had it in mind to name her after Anne who bore Mary. And Anne Sullivan who taught Helen Keller to read. And Anne of Green Gables, an orphan of renown.

"Anne is the perfect name," Kitty said. "Though I will always think of her as Annabel Lee." She said Mike would take my Joseph fishing later, and I told her to thank him. "Am I truly a good sister, Mamie?" she asked.

"You are one of a kind," I said.

About thirty minutes later, Doc Muswell and Joe arrived. Joe's face lit up like a jacklantern when he saw the baby. Jiminy Crickets! was all he could say. And he took her to the window to get a better look.

Doc Muswell, meanwhile, had walked right past the bedroom door toward Kitty. I figured she must have arranged herself on the divan in a pose she called a "tableau vivant." "What the deuce is wrong with the girl?" I heard Doc say.

"Oh, Doctor. I'm dying, I'm dying, I'm dead," said Kitty.

"That's impossible, my dear. Mamie would not allow it," said Doc.

Our little bedroom would soon be as full as The St. Louis Exposition with neighbors, nuns, orphans, and my mother, Peg Merns. And I would be unruffled, as if the whole matter had been an everyday affair. Only to myself would I admit there should be singing crowds and a parade. Like every new mother I thought there should be aerial fascinations—gyrating star mines, electric flowers, and Catherine wheels—to celebrate this birth. For it had been as pretty a fight as any sportsman could wish to see. And since my children now numbered five, I would have liked a display of five balloons from each of which depended a single star that changed its color as it burned.

Just then I heard a bird with a voice so rare it sounded like it had studied at a conservatory. The sun was coaxing the first dusty colors from the ground, and I lay there thinking it had been an ideal birth, after all. Everything went smooth as glycerin, I thought. I looked at the children dozing on the floor with their stocking feet flung over each

other, and our Annie in Joe's arms, and I thought perfection is not what you imagine. Happiness is nothing but God's presence in the silence of the nerves. And though my children were sleeping the sleep of the just, I half believed my unvoiced thoughts would reach them across that room full of twentieth-century light.



Alice Fulton is the winner of this year's Editors' Prize in Fiction. She is a widely published poet whose most recent book is *Sensual Math*.



CALLAHAN

THE MENEMSHA BELL/*Michael Pettit*

Ah the world. And us here, in its winds and light,
its distances before us like kisses we wish for at sunset,

like some missed possibility, some failure to risk
ourselves, a flight *from*. The big world, beautiful

noon and night, moon and tides and seabreeze
which sets the Menemsha bell rocking and ringing,

its clear rich note sounding from the ocean,
from some deep blue reservoir of music.

It rings and rings and rings and I would have you
hear it, as it sounds out over harbor and boats,

over low oaks and bayberry and rosa rugosa,
over weathered houses glowing on hillsides,

the Menemsha bell our ear knows like a pulse,
blood ringing morning evening all night as we wake

and listen in the moonlit and starry dark: acute music
we can't refuse, come so far and so far to go.