

## Nearer My God To Thee

By

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When I went to confession I got more than Father Flaherty's blessing and penance. I got tuberculosis from him. So did half the parish. Father Flaherty coughed and wheezed through confessions and Sunday communions. He passed the host to my waiting tongue and placed a cross on my forehead with his thumb.

Father Flaherty died a year later.

I had just graduated from high school when our family physician, Dr. Coniglio, broke the devastating news: tuberculosis. That steamy June graduation day had been filled with promises of a bright future. We were the class of 1944, ready to take on a new world shaped by depression, war, and destruction. Some of us were going to college, some were enlisting, some were getting married, some were parents already.

I just got sick.

My mother insisted I would get better. She told me to have faith in God, faith that the Virgin Mary was looking down from Heaven, healing me. At night, as I drifted off to sleep, my mother came to my bedroom and sat beside me, rosary in her hands, murmuring the decades under her breath. "now and at the hour of our death. Amen. Hail Mary, full of grace, Our Lord is with thee."

She sat in a ladder-back chair, next to the window across from my bed. She smelled like apple pies and peppermints. She wore the same grey housecoat almost every day.

"My beautiful girl," she said, caressing my fevered cheek.

"Don't cry. I'm getting better. I promise."

I could tell by her eyes she didn't believe me. She sighed and pulled her rosary out of the pocket of her apron. "Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name." I drifted to sleep lulled by the cadence in her voice.

Some nights, I coughed so hard sleep was impossible. My mother always came with pots of steaming water and towels to drape over my head.

"You must loosen up your lungs. Try to breathe the steam deep into your chest."

I couldn't speak. I coughed so hard, I spat up blood, small dots of crimson sprayed into an old rag. I tried to lie back down, but the cough rose from my core and shook my body upright. I crossed my arms around my middle. A sharp pain shot through my left side. The same rib had been broken twice from my concussive coughing. I was being consumed by the fluid in my chest.

Finally, the coughing would subside, and I would fall into a deep slumber.

My mother and father called me down to the kitchen after mass one Sunday morning in July.

"Maude, we have something to tell you," my father said.

I looked back and forth between them. I sensed something was coming. They looked so worried.

"We've decided to check you into Murray Hill. Dr. Coniglio thinks it's for the best," my father said.

When you said you were going to the Murray Hill, everyone in town knew what that meant. You were headed to the sanitarium. You were sick, and your family was probably infected as well, and there was no cure. I could barely look at my parents. My disease brought

shame and fear into our house. There were times when I couldn't rise from my bed, not just from my tattered lungs but from the grip the disease had on my conscience.

But I'd been expecting this. I stopped going to the Normal School in Geneseo where I was studying to be a teacher. It was too hard to keep up. I knew it was only a matter of time before I'd be forced to leave my home, my bedroom, my life. I put my hands over my face and pressed my fingertips to my eyes, willing the tears to stay inside. My mother reached for my hand and squeezed.

"I don't want to go," I said. "I want to stay here with you. And Tommy and Lizzy."

"I promise to come visit you every day," my mother said. "Dr. Coniglio says they are very close to a cure. You'll be back home before you know it."

"We just can't take care of you like they can up on the hill," my father said. "They have the best doctors and nurses working there. Your job will be to work really hard to get better and get on back home to us." He smiled and winked at me.

I stood up and walked out the back door. I heard my mother tell my father to let me go. The early afternoon sun warmed my skin. My mother's lemon yellow roses next to the back door swayed in the breeze. On the horizon, I saw the monolith that was Murray Hill, an edifice of brick with white trim and high porch windows reflecting sunlight over the valley. I closed my eyes and tried to picture myself there, nestled under a mountain of blankets.

I walked for a long time down the streets of my town trying to memorize each house, each heave of the sidewalk, each bough of each tree. I sat on the steps of Saint Patrick's Catholic Church to rest. Father O'Connell was the new priest. He was healthy. He came to the house and gave me communion on Wednesdays. He asked my parents to keep me home from mass until I was better. I never thought I would miss going to mass the way I did. It was as if my parents and

brother and sister sliced away a small piece of me whenever they left for church. Soon there would be nothing left.

Sitting on the church steps made me ache. I missed my friends, Karen and Martha. We'd sat together every Sunday since seventh grade, whispering during the sermons and giggling at the altar boys. We started college together last year, the three musketeers ready to take on the world. I hadn't seen them since I got sick. Their parents wouldn't let them visit. The only people I saw were my parents and brother and sister. Dr. Coniglio was amazed no one else in the house was sick.

By the time I got home from my walk all I wanted to do was go to bed. My mother brought some chicken broth to my bedroom for my supper but I never saw the soup until the next morning.

The room was dark when Lizzie woke me up.

"Audie? Can I come in with you?"

"You know the rules, Lizzie. You have to sit in the chair."

"Oh, Audie, can't I come in for just a few minutes?"

Since I had been diagnosed, my family was so careful around me. I was like a bird in a cage with my family fluttering just out of reach.

"Bring Ma's chair over. Sit here next to me."

She grabbed the chair and brought it next to the bed. Sleep was tugging at me making it hard to keep my eyes open.

"Audie, you asleep?"

"I was but not now. Everything okay?"

“Yeah, I’m okay.” The chair creaked as she squirmed in her seat. I smelled the lavender that she used as perfume. It was her favorite scent. I started to drift off to sleep.

“It’s just that...”

“Just what?”

“Ma says you’re going up the hill tomorrow.”

“Yes, I guess I am.”

“I don’t want you to go.”

“I don’t really want to go either. But Ma and Father say it’s for the best.”

I yawned and closed my eyes. I heard Lizzy sniff. I reached out, and she took my hand. We held hands for a few moments while she cried.

“Don’t cry,” I said. “I’ll be back before you know it.”

“But what if you don’t ever come back.”

That was the same question I’d asked myself all day.

“Don’t be silly. I’ll be cured and back home in no time.”

“But...”

I patted her arm and swallowed down the tightness in my throat. “Off you go, now. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Night, Audie.”

“Night, Lizzie. God bless you.”

She stood for a moment in the doorway and then turned. I watched her shadow disappear down the hall.

I looked out the window. The moon was full. Clouds rolling across it made it seem more like a harvest moon than a planting moon. I wondered whether I'd be home before the seasons changed.

I finally fell asleep as dawn streaked red across the sky, and the Mars star glowed on the horizon.

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My one and only roommate at Murray Hill was Virginia.

"Hey there," she said to me that first day. My parents had just left. Tears spilled down my cheeks. "Oh, now you look here, no crying allowed. Stiff upper lip and all."

"Sorry," I said, wiping my eyes with a handkerchief my father had given me.

"I'm Virginia Robinson, but you can just call me Ginny. Everybody does." She flopped onto her bed. She was tall with jet black hair pulled back into a tight pony tail. She wasn't pretty but she wasn't ugly either. My mother would have said she was a Plain Jane. I guessed she was a little older than me. "Been here two years last month."

"Nice to meet you." I sniffed. "I'm Maude. Maude Finucane."

"Nice to meet you, Maude Finucane. I know we are going to be great friends, you and me."

I nodded. What I really wanted to do was lay down and not talk to anyone.

"Anybody show you around yet?"

"No, not yet." I sat down on my bed. My mother made the bed up with her latest quilt, a green and white Irish chain pattern. The quilt was about the only color in this small whitewashed room. It occurred to me that I must be sitting on the bed of a girl who had passed on.

“Well, it’s time for you to get the lay of the land.” Ginny bounded up, slipped her feet into white canvas sneakers, and reached for my hand.

It was hard to believe she was sick.

“I’m kind of tired. It’s been a busy day.”

“Dr. McNeal says we have to move around as much as we can. He always says,” her voice dropped into a lower register, “take a walk every day. Fresh air and positive thinking is what we need more of around here.” She giggled. “Wait until you meet him. What a dreamboat.”

“I just want to lay down for a little bit.” I tried not to sound too pitiful or whiney. I yawned for effect. “Maybe after dinner you can show me around.”

“Suit yourself. I’m going out to walk around the grounds. I’ll come back and take you to dinner.”

The silence Ginny left behind was blessed.

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The next morning we had just gotten dressed for breakfast when there was a knock on the door. I looked at Ginny. She giggled and opened the door.

“Good Morning, Dr. Handsome,” she said.

Standing there was a man in a white lab coat with a silver stethoscope around his neck. He had bright red hair, blue eyes and, when he smiled, his eyes crinkled at the corners.

“Well, I don’t know about that,” he said. “I hear we have a new guest at our fine establishment.” He walked past Ginny and over to me. “I’m Dr. McNeal. You must be Maude.”

I nodded.

“Welcome. I’m sure your hospitable roommate has filled you in on all the gossip here at Murray Hill.”

He smiled at me. The room spun a bit. *Pull yourself together, Maude. You're not Lizzy's age.*

“Oh, we haven't even gotten to all that yet,” Ginny said. “She only just got here yesterday afternoon. We're going on the grand tour right after breakfast.”

“Well, how about before the grand tour you bring her to my office so I can do a quick examination? You were referred by Dr. Coniglio, right?”

“Yes. He told my parents I needed to be here.”

“I'll be quick and then I won't bother you again. At least not for the rest of the day.”

“You can bother me any old time of the day. I'd love to play doctor with you,” Ginny said, giggling again. He rolled his eyes.

“Ginny, you're impossible. No hanky panky for me. I am a serious man of science.” He went into the hallway. “See you after breakfast, Maude.”

“Goodbye,” I managed to squeak out.

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We ate our oatmeal and drank some weak coffee. So far the food had not been too bad for an institution. After we finished, we walked to Dr. McNeal's office. Ginny was a nonstop commentator about life at Murray Hill.

“First we have a walk after breakfast, then we lie down until lunch. After lunch it's back to bed. Those of us who are strong enough can take a short walk outside around four o'clock. Then it's back to bed until dinner at six. And then lights out at nine o'clock.”

“Doesn't sound too exciting.”

“It's not very. But it does help make things better. Dr. McNeal thinks I'm about a thousand percent better since I've been here. I'm hoping I can go home soon.”

The hallway was dimly lit from the overhead lights. The linoleum floor was black and white checked, and the walls were white. We walked by the rooms of the other patients and turned a corner to another hallway. We stopped in front of a painting. I heard Ginny groan.

In the painting, a young woman, wearing a satiny, pink nightgown, lay on her side. She was sleeping on what looked to be glossy, white sheets. A gray woolen blanket covered her up to her elbow. Next to the bed was a marble top table with a vase of peach colored roses and red grapes spilling out of a bowl. Even though the woman was sleeping, she looked flushed, as if she had a fever. I looked at the gold plaque glued to the bottom of the frame: "Sleep" by Maxim Lubovski.

I looked at Ginny. She was shaking her head.

"What?" I asked.

"It's that painting."

She pointed to another plaque on the wall to the right of the painting. I stepped closer to read the inscription.

"Nearer My God to Thee. In loving memory of our cherished daughter, sister and wife, Mary Louise McNeal. September 12, 1920 – January 23, 1941.

"There she is," Ginny said. "My competition."

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

She pointed at the nameplate next to the picture.

"That's who I'm talking about. Don't you recognize the name? Mary Louise McNeal?"

"McNeal, as in Dr. McNeal. Was it his sister?"

"No, it was his wife. She was a patient here. She's why he became a doctor, so he could help find a cure." She sighed. "It's so hard to compete with a ghost."

“Did he know she had TB when he married her?”

“I overheard the nurses say she came down with it after they got married. She was a nurse at a hospital where he was already a doctor. The nurses said he kept a constant vigil at her side while she was here. They said he was at her bedside when she took her last breath.” She sighed again. “That is just so romantic.”

I looked at the picture again. She was only four years older than me.

“Nearer my God to thee,” Ginny said, shaking her head. “As if this place isn’t close enough.”

She walked ahead. I stood for a moment looking at the portrait of Mary Louise McNeal. A shiver rippled up my spine. Shaking my shoulders, I hurried to catch up with Ginny.

“We’re here,” Ginny called, opening the door to Dr. McNeal’s office. “Where’s the boss?”

A stern looking woman with coal black hair was sitting at a desk behind a typewriter. She wore a crisp, white nurse’s uniform with an even whiter cap pinned to her hair. She stared at us over cat eye glasses.

“Miss Robinson, do you have an appointment?”

“Well, Nurse Kirkner, I don’t technically have an appointment, but my new friend here does. This is Maude Finucane. I thought I’d keep her company.”

I smiled at the woman. She glared at me.

“I don’t have you down to see the doctor, Miss Maude Finucane.” She picked up a notebook and brought it close to her nose, scowling. “Nothing in here about you or Miss Robinson.”

“He told me to come by after breakfast,” I said. She didn’t look convinced.

“He never told me about this.”

“He did,” Ginny said. “He stopped in our room before we went to breakfast, and asked me to bring Maude to his office when we were done eating.”

“Well, either way, he’s not here. You’ll have to sit down and wait, Miss Finucane. Miss Robinson, I’m sure you have somewhere else you can be.” She waved her hand toward the door.

“Be on your way now.”

“But...”

“Miss Robinson, I’ve been through this with you before. You cannot hang around here mooning over Dr. McNeal. He has much more important things to do than encourage your ...” she paused, looking at the ceiling, “your schoolgirl crush.”

“It’s not a crush. It’s true love.” Ginny clutched her heart. “I am the future Mrs. Donovan McNeal. It’s in the stars.”

Nurse Kirkner stood and pointed at the door. “Out.”

“You’re just plain heartless, Nurse. You have no romance in your soul.”

Ginny slammed the door on the way out. I tried smiling at Nurse Kirkner. My lips trembled.

“And don’t you be getting any romantic ideas either, Miss Finucane. You’re here to convalesce, not get married.”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

She put a piece of paper into the typewriter and flipped open her steno pad. I pulled out a handkerchief from the pocket in my skirt and coughed into it. Nurse Kirkner stopped typing and glared at me.

“You be sure you cover your cough. The last thing I need to do is to get what you have.”

She started typing again. I looked at the clock. It was 9:45. I wondered if Dr. McNeal had forgotten about our appointment. I was just about to get up to leave when he walked into the office.

“Good morning, Nurse Kirkner,” he said. She stopped typing and looked up. “I hear you’ve been crushing the dreams of our patients again.”

“You need to tell that Robinson girl to find someone else to pester.” She looked over at me and nodded her head. “Miss Finucane has been waiting for you.”

I looked up at him into those deep blue eyes. I didn’t think I’d ever seen eyes that blue before.

“Hello, Maude. Come on back to the examination room with me.” He walked through a door behind Nurse Kirkner.

I followed him. His examination room was painted white just like every other room in the place, with a window opposite the door. He opened the window and a fresh summer breeze filled the room. There was a stack of folders on a counter next to the sink. He shuffled through them and pulled one out. It must have been my file. It wasn’t very thick.

“Sit right up there, Maude,” he said, pointing to the examination table.

The metal table was cold and hard. I looked at the wall next to the table and saw several diplomas hanging there. I folded my arms around my middle. He took his stethoscope from his neck and placed the ends in his ears.

“How long have you been sick?” He pressed the stethoscope to my chest.

“About a year I guess. Maybe a bit longer. Dr. Coniglio thought I had a cold. But it wouldn’t go away.”

He hummed a song I couldn't identify, stopping briefly to listen to my lungs. Moving the stethoscope around to my back, he lifted my blouse and pressed the stethoscope into my ribs.

"Deep breath in." I took in a breath and held it. "And again," he said. "How old are you Maude?"

He took the stethoscope out of his ears, draped it around his neck and pressed his fingers into my throat. He smelled like my father: Old Spice and tobacco.

"Nineteen." I tried not to look at him. He was so close I could tell he must have had a cup of coffee while I was at breakfast.

"Nineteen is a good age. Just the start of your life." I nodded. "What have you been doing since high school?"

"I was at the college at Geneseo, but I had to stop. It just got to be too hard."

He nodded and frowned. "What were you studying?"

"Education. I wanted to be a teacher."

"And you will be. The world needs more teachers, and we're going to make sure you get back there."

I nodded and looked at my feet. He wrote some notes in my folder and set it on top of the others.

"I'm going to start you on some new routines. You may wonder if they will do any good, but trust me, they will help.

I coughed into my handkerchief and nodded. Tears were leaking from my eyes. He touched me on the shoulder.

"The thing I want you to do most of all is believe you are going to get well. We are partners in this fight together. You and me. So no giving up, okay?" He handed me a tissue.

“Okay.” I nodded, wiping my eyes.

“Great. Now, go find Ginny and take a walk. It’s a beautiful July morning, and the fresh air will do you good.”

I nodded again and opened the examination room door. “Thank you,” I mumbled.

He was humming that same song as I left the office. I figured out later it was Gershwin’s Rhapsody in Blue.

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The routine was simple. Rest, rest and more rest, x-rays every other week. My mother visited every day, bringing stories about the antics of Lizzy and Tommy. They were too young to visit me. Some days, if I was strong enough, I’d go outside and sit under the giant oak tree at the center of the park across from the sanitarium and read. The hospital had a small library with donated books. I discovered Daphne DuMaurier, Jan Struther and Edna Ferber. I struggled my way through *The Grapes of Wrath*. One late September afternoon, I dove so deeply into *The Good Earth* by Pearl Buck, I missed dinner.

Ginny continued her pursuit of Dr. McNeal. She followed him on his daily rounds talking his ear off about the latest news of the day. When would the Germans surrender? Who was he going to vote for – FDR or Dewey? Ginny was like a dog with a bone. Nothing could distract her from pursuing Dr. McNeal. He listened to her, but I could tell he was interested in her only as a patient.

One spectacular day late in October, I bundled up to sit outside. The leaves on the trees were dressed up in gold and crimson. I was starting to feel the claustrophobia that was sure to set in once the days got shorter. The sun was shining, and the sky was as blue as a robin’s egg. I was just opening the door to go outside when Dr. McNeal touched me on my elbow.

“Mind if I walk with you, Maude?” he said.

“No, not at all,” I said.

“It sure is a pretty day.”

“This is my favorite time of the year.”

We walked over to the park and sat on a bench. I was searching for something to say and not finding much. I didn't want to sound young and foolish, like Ginny.

“Tell me about yourself, Maude.” He smiled at me. “You are, perhaps, our most quiet patient here at Murray Hill.”

I tried to smile, but my face was frozen. “What do you want to know?”

“Oh, just tell me anything you'd like. Things you liked to do before you got sick. Friends you had, places you long to visit.”

“There really isn't much to tell. My mother and I liked to quilt together. And I liked to bake. My best friends are Martha and Karen, but I haven't seen them in a long time.”

“Did you make that quilt on your bed?”

“I helped my mother cut out the pieces, but she did the rest. I was too weak to be of much use.”

“Do you feel better since you've been here?” He wasn't smiling anymore. He was frowning, his brows knitting together above those blue eyes.

“A little, I guess. As long as I don't do too much, I'm better. Some days I have to tell Ginny to stop talking so I can have some quiet time. She's quite a chatterbox.”

“Yes, she is at that.” He paused and rubbed his hands together. The crisp fall air was turning colder. “I have something to ask you.”

He looked up at the oak tree above us. The scarlet leaves glowed like coals against the blue sky. A slight breeze lifted the branches. I pulled the collar of my coat up against my neck and shivered. He shifted, turning to face me. I smelled the same Old Spice scent I'd smelled that first day in his office. Fallen leaves swirled around our feet. I shivered.

"You're cold," he said.

"Not really." I didn't want to go back inside, back to the tedium of lying in bed and resting. I pulled my coat tighter around my neck. "I'm okay."

"We're starting a new drug trial soon. It's a study to replicate one they did downstate a couple months ago. We are very fortunate to have this opportunity. You are a good candidate."

"Me? Really?"

He laughed. "Yes, you really. You've been sick less than two years. Your lungs are damaged, but they're not too far gone. I really want to see you get better. I wouldn't recommend this for you unless I was sure you were a viable patient."

"When would it start?"

"We should be getting the first shipment after the new year."

I saw a curtain move at one of the entrance windows. I thought I saw Ginny waving at me.

"But, I do have to tell you there are risks."

"What kind of risks?"

"This study is a double blind study. Do you know what that is?" I shook my head. "Some of you will get the drug and some will get the placebo. We won't know until the study is over if you got the drug or not. I won't even know."

"What if I get the placebo?"

“That’s the thing. Some will get better and some won’t. There are no guarantees.”

I shivered, feeling cold air creep under the collar of my coat. He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a pair of leather gloves. “Here you go.”

“Really, I’m fine.” I shoved my hands into my pockets and tried not to shiver.

He shook his head and put the gloves back in his pocket.

“What a stubborn person you are.” He rubbed his hands together. “Please give it some thought, Maude. I have my own selfish reasons for wanting you to get better.”

I blushed again, this time up to my forehead. I tried not to look at him.

“I will,” I said.

“Good. Now, let’s get you back inside before you turn into an icicle.”

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Ginny was watching Dr. McNeal and me from the foyer window. That night she was all questions. The lights were off. A full moon beamed into our chilly room. They kept our rooms cold because the cold made it easier to breathe.

“Do you like him? I mean, really like him?”

“He’s very nice.” The last thing I needed was for Ginny to go all over the hospital spreading rumors about Dr. McNeal and me.

“I saw him hand you his gloves. That was so romantic.” She rolled on her side to face me, making the springs on her bed creak. “What was that like? Tell me everything.”

I sighed. “It was not romantic. I was cold and he offered me his gloves. Which, as I’m sure you saw, I did not take. But, he is a very nice man, though.”

“Nice doesn’t begin explain that glad lad.” She flopped onto her back. “He is one big old hunk of heartbreak.” She laughed. “When I saw him offer you his gloves I kept saying to myself ‘Take them. Take them, you dummy.’ But you didn’t.”

I laughed. “Ginny, my hands weren’t that cold. It was nothing more than that.”

“Did he say anything about Mary Louise? Tell you his tale of woe?”

“Good Lord, Ginny. No. He didn’t say a word.”

There was a long silence before I heard her sigh.

“I’d give anything for him to offer me something like a pair of gloves.” She sniffed.

“Are you crying?”

“No,” her voice shook. She coughed. “It’s just that...”

“Ginny, what’s wrong?” I couldn’t believe my conversation with Dr. McNeal was the reason she was weeping.

There was another long silence.

“I’ve been here so long. Two years. I had a boyfriend before I came here. His name was Albert. We were planning on getting married. He used to come see me when I first got here. But after a while, he stopped coming.” She blew her nose. “Then, I read in the newspaper last Sunday that he got married last month.”

Pulling back my covers, I got out of bed and sat next to her. In the bright full moonlight, I saw tears running down her face.

“I’m so sorry, Ginny.” I squeezed her shoulder. “He’s the one who lost out.”

“I loved him so much. I used to write Mrs. Albert Cummings over and over in my diary with hearts and flowers. My mother already made my wedding dress.” Her voice was barely

above a whisper. "I'll probably never hold hands with anyone ever again. I'll probably die an old maid."

There it was. The thing we never talked about. Death stalked the sanitarium like a cat after a mouse. It was hard not to think about death all the time.

"We have to think positive, Ginny. Dr. McNeal told me we're all in this together. He even told me today that there's a new drug out that may cure us."

She looked up at me and wiped her eyes. I nodded my head.

"It's true. We'll get over this. You and me, together." I tried to smile. "Who needs boyfriends, anyway? You'll see. In another year, I'll bet we'll be out of here."

"You think so?"

"I do." I stood up and went back over to my bed. Pulling the quilt up to my neck, I tried not to shiver from the cold in the room.

"Thanks, Maude."

"Go to sleep, Ginny. God bless."

"God bless you too, Maude."

After a few minutes, I heard her heavy, rhythmic breathing. It reminded me of Lizzy. Would I ever cuddle with Lizzy again? Tears ran down my face and soaked my pillow. It was a long time before I finally fell asleep.

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Winter arrived with snow and a fierce cold so sharp it cracked the window in our bedroom. We woke one morning to a spider web of ice on the window of our room. It wasn't until I looked outside that I saw the window was cracked.

I looked over at Ginny. Ever since the night she told me about her engagement, she lost ground. Every day she looked more ashen. She lost weight. She coughed. There were nights when I was moved to a different room because she couldn't stop coughing. She always begged the nurses to let me stay, but they were firm. I was led from our room, down the hall, to find sleep in a bed another resident left behind.

But the morning our window broke, Ginny seemed a little better. Dr. McNeal had insisted she stay in bed for two weeks, only getting up to bathe and use the bathroom. I was mostly bedridden as well so at least she had some company. I started reading out loud to pass the time. *Wuthering Heights* was our favorite.

“I have not broken your heart – you have broken it; and in breaking it, you have broken mine.”

Snow swirled outside our window. The branches of the old oak tree beyond the window were barren and gnarly.

“Oh, Maude, that's just so sad. Don't you just wish they could live happily ever after?” She was snuffling into a handkerchief. “I don't want it to end.”

“I know. If I were Cathy, I would go to the ends of the earth to be with Heathcliff.”

“How about Dr. McNeal? Would you go to the ends of the earth for him?” She giggled.

“Only if he dyed his hair black and wore a frock coat and took me to the English moors.”

We moved on to *Mrs. Miniver* and *Gone With the Wind*. We read *Wuthering Heights* at least three times more. Ginny could recite several lines by heart.

“He's more myself than I am. Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same.” And “Be with me always – take any form – drive me mad! Only do not leave me in this abyss where I cannot find you.”

I told her she should study acting once we were better.

I taught Ginny to knit, and we fashioned long, woolly scarves we twirled around our necks to keep away the cold. Some days the nurses took us to the sleeping porches at the top of the sanitarium. The windows were open, letting in the fresh, curative winter air. Nestled under thick quilts, we could see the Genesee Valley spread out before us, crusted with snow. The Genesee River snaked its frozen way north.

At the end of January, Dr. McNeal, my parents, and I sat in his office. He was explaining the drug trial to my parents. I could tell from their faces they were both worried and hopeful. A cure, it seemed too good to be true.

“This drug trial would replicate one done at a hospital downstate in December,” he explained to my parents. “The results were very promising.” He looked over at me.

“Is it safe?” my mother asked. “I mean, could this harm her in any way?”

“That is always a risk with an experimental drug,” he said. “But we will monitor her closely and stop the trial if she gets worse.” He opened my file. It had grown thicker since that first meeting in his office. “Aside from having tuberculosis, Maude is pretty healthy. She’s lost some weight, but her x-rays have shown only a small progression of the disease in her lungs.” He paused as he looked over at me. “She’s also one of our star patients. She has done everything we’ve asked her to do without a fuss. She is a remarkable young woman with a bright future.”

I looked at my feet trying to hide my red face.

“What do you want to do, Maude?” my father asked. “You’re nineteen after all. It really is up to you.”

I looked up at Dr. McNeal and my parents.

“I just want to get better and go home.” Tears stung my eyes. “I guess I want to try.”

Dr. McNeal smiled. My mother clasped my hand and squeezed. I saw my father brush his fingertips under his eyes. Dr. McNeal passed me a handkerchief, and I wiped my eyes.

“Very good, Maude,” Dr. McNeal said. “The trial starts on Monday.”

I walked my parents to the front door. They hugged me. My mother reached into her coat pocket and pulled out a rosary. It was the same rosary she used every day when she came to visit me and every night before she went to bed.

“Here, Maude, take this.” She held it out to me.

“Oh, Ma, I can’t take your rosary.” That chain, with the white beads, was as much a part of my mother as her salt and pepper hair and gray-green eyes.

“Nonsense, I can pray the rosary in my sleep. You need it much more than I do.”

I took it, wrapping it around my fingers, the cross dangling below. My father hugged me close.

“See you soon, Audie.”

Snow swept into the foyer as they opened the front door. I went back to my room. I lay on my bed and, for the first time in my life, prayed the rosary without my mother. “Hail Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women...” I fell asleep after the third decade.

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Ginny improved enough to join the drug trial, too. All she talked about was getting out of the hospital and going home. I didn’t dare say that out loud. I still had an aching weight in my chest whenever I coughed. I was still spitting up blood, but not much, not as much as before I came to Murray Hill.

Ginny was about the same as I was, sick but enduring.

“When we get out of here, we must take a trip,” she said on the morning we took our first dose of Streptomycin. “We have to go to New York City, just you and me. We will walk in Central Park and eat lox and bagels. I read about them in an article in the newspaper. There’s a deli that serves them in Times Square. I don’t know what lox are, but I think bagels are like English muffins.”

I was lying in bed, trying to decide if I felt any better. Ginny was pacing the floor.

“I can feel myself getting better already,” she said. “Don’t you?”

“It’s only been one dose, Ginny. I don’t think we’ll feel it right away like that.”

“Oh, I do. Think I’ll go find Dr. McNeal and tell him.” She opened our door. “Want to come?”

I sighed. “No, I’ll stay here. Remember, he doesn’t want us up and around too much. We aren’t supposed to let ourselves get too run down. You should lay down for a bit.”

“One little walk around this place isn’t going to hurt me. Besides, I think this drug is making me hungry. Never thought I’d have an appetite ever again. I’ll bring back something wonderful from the kitchen, if there is anything. Maybe some of those chocolate chip cookies from last night.” Ginny was known for raiding the kitchen when no one was looking and helping herself to any sweets she could find. The cooks were always on the lookout for her.

I laughed as she flew out the door. I imagined going to New York together. We would ride the train through the Hudson Valley into Grand Central Station. Maybe we would see a musical on Broadway. Knowing Ginny, I’d have to keep her away from the all soldiers returning from the war, particularly the ones that looked like Heathcliff.

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We'd been on the drug for a month. I was feeling stronger by the day. I sat up in bed most days and was able to take some brief walks around the park. It was almost the end of March, and my birthday was coming up. Maybe I would be home in time to celebrate.

I was sitting outside one day on my favorite bench, looking at the sanitarium. I had come to think of it, maybe not as home, but not as a sanitarium either. I was so familiar with the rhythms of our days. Sleeping, waking, reading, walking to the cafeteria or eating on trays in our room, knitting and doing crossword puzzles were a regular part of our daily routine. I had been here almost a year while the world outside spun along without me. What it would be like to go back to my old life?

I kept the rosary in my pocket. I fingered it at times, saying a few prayers when I was bored or anxious. I was certain I was getting the real drug. I had to be. Since we began the trial, two patients in the study had died. I was still alive.

That night Ginny started coughing again.

Since the day we started the trial, she'd been up and around the hospital declaring herself tuberculosis-free to anyone who would listen. She was so certain she packed her suitcases so she'd be ready when they released her. She left them by our door.

"You should too, Maude. You don't want to waste any time packing your things when we get sprung."

I rolled my eyes.

I was used to her coughing. I coughed a lot myself. Everyone who stayed here coughed, especially at night. But this night, she couldn't stop. We always had a supply of old rags on the dresser that stretched between our beds. They were stained with grey splotches from being

washed so many times. She had used most of them up. After about an hour, she couldn't catch her breath.

"Do you want me to get a nurse?" I stood next to her bed. I wasn't sure what to do.

She shook her head. "I'm going to be ..." But she couldn't finish.

I had to do something. I couldn't believe no one heard her but me. I opened our door and raced down the long corridor to the nurse's station. Nurse Weller was sitting behind the desk, writing in a chart.

"Nurse, you need to come quick. It's Ginny," I said.

"What's wrong with Miss Robinson now?"

"She can't stop coughing. It's been going on for over an hour."

She grabbed her stethoscope and followed me back to the room. I stopped in our doorway as Nurse Weller swept past.

Ginny's bedspread was covered in blood. Her head was on the pillow, her mouth ringed in crimson. I heard Nurse Weller suck in a quick breath, placing the stethoscope in her ears. She listened to Ginny's lungs.

"Is she..."

"Miss Finucane, go get Nurse Henderson. Tell her to call Dr. McNeal."

"Is she's going to be okay?" I was rooted to my spot, staring at Ginny.

"Hurry, Maude. There isn't much time."

I looked at Ginny as I backed toward the door. Her eyes fluttered open, and she smiled a weak smile.

I raced down the hall.

By the time, Dr. McNeal got to our room, Ginny was gone. Dr. McNeal listened to her heart and checked her lungs, then looked at the clock on the wall.

“Time of death, eleven thirty-two. Cause of death, pulmonary hemorrhage. ”

A silence spread over our room. I heard the nurses sniffing. Dr. McNeal shut his eyes and sighed. Ginny’s soul lingered. I closed my eyes as a kiss of cool air brushed my cheek. In my mind’s eye, I saw her floating out our door, up the stairs to the sleeping porches, into the starry night, a caged bird flying to freedom.

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I woke in a different room the next morning. By the time I got back to our room, Ginny’s bed was stripped down to the mattress. Her dresser drawers and closet were empty. I sat on my mother’s quilt and fingered the rosary in my pocket. Should I pray? Would it do any good?

I draped the rosary over my bedpost. I couldn’t bring myself to say the words.

My mother noticed when she came for her daily visit. She picked the rosary off the post and sat next to me on the bed.

“Let’s pray for Ginny. For her soul,” she said.

“I can’t,” I said.

She reached over and placed her hand on my wet cheek. I hadn’t stopped crying since the night before.

“Oh, Maude, prayer will restore you and give you hope. You’ll see.”

I shook my head. “No, it won’t.” I looked out the window. “All I’ve done since you gave me that thing is pray. I’ve prayed for Ginny and me and the others here on my floor. I’ve prayed for so many of us who have just died anyway. Died and left the rest of us wondering.” I wiped the back of my hand across my eyes. “It doesn’t work.”

My mother sighed. "But..."

"Just take it, Ma. Take it home where it will do you some good." I stood up and went to the window. "Go on home. I want to be alone."

"I'll be back tomorrow." She placed the rosary back on the bed post. "This is yours now."

I heard her close the door as she left.

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April came with warm breezes and daffodils. Their lemony faces turned to the spring sun like beams of hope.

I was able to be up and about for entire days at a time for a month. I even had a small job helping Nurse Kirkner file medical reports. Time had a new sense of purpose and hope. My cough was almost gone, and I'd gained back some of the weight I'd lost in the last year.

"I am happy to say your x-rays show no signs of tuberculosis," Dr. McNeal said. "If you keep this up, I can release you in a couple of weeks."

I smiled.

"The drug worked so quickly. I can hardly believe it," I said.

"I always said you were a good candidate for the trial." His eyes twinkled, and I thought of Ginny and his dead wife. "And think of what you've done for all the other patients who have the disease. You've been a part the cure."

"I never thought of it like that. I'm just glad I'm better."

True to his word, Dr. McNeal released me two weeks later. I was packing my bags when he came to see me one last time. He stood in the doorway, smiling.

"I'm going to miss you, Maude." He walked over and lifted the rosary off the bedpost. "Don't forget this." He held it out to me.

“Why don’t you keep it? I don’t really want it.” I snapped shut my suitcase. “Find someone you think could use it.”

He came closer. “Maude, take it with you. It may not seem like much to you now, but you may want it in the future. You’ll find your faith again.”

“I don’t know.” Tears stung at the corners of my eyes. “So many are gone. It didn’t do much for them. For Ginny.”

He put his hands on my shoulders. I looked up into those clear blue eyes.

“I thought the same thing once. I thought, no matter what I did, all my patients died. Especially...” He looked up at the ceiling. “Especially the ones I cared for the most. But things happen and life goes on and cures are found. I don’t know if prayer helped or not. But faith is like that. Sometimes all I do is count on faith, and pray for miracles.”

All I could do was look at him and smile. He was smiling too.

A sharp rap on the door made me jump. My father burst through the door with my mother in tow.

“Hurry up, Audie. Lizzy and Tommy are waiting in the car. It’s been a long time since they’ve seen their big sister. I could barely keep them from rushing on in,” my father said, picking up my suitcase. “Ma, here, has a roast going at home, a special homecoming feast.”

“I’ll be right there,” I said. They gathered up my suitcase and went back to the car.

“I’ll be in touch, Maude,” Dr. McNeal said.

I took the rosary from him and left Murray Hill forever.

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January first. It was cold at the top of the Empire State Building. I stood and looked at the city below, out to Lady Liberty. An icy breeze swirled around and wisps of snow lingered in the air.

I came to say goodbye. I was ready. I heard someone giggle in my ear.

A tug at my sleeve, a puff of smoke from my breath, and she was gone. Out across the island and into the ether beyond.

I whispered goodbye as she floated off.