

## Boobies and Bathtubs

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*Patricia Flinn*

The thing I remember best about my mother was her fascination for peering through keyholes. Anytime there was the slightest hint of a commotion in the hallway outside our five-room railroad flat on Adams Street in downtown Hoboken, her face would light up like the night sky on the Fourth of July, and she would spring into action, tossing aside her broom or dishrag or whatever else she happened to be holding, and dash to the door. There she would drop to her knees, wedge her head beneath the heavy glass doorknob and with one large and expectant eye, spy to her heart's content on whatever was taking place at that moment on the landing.

"Who's there, Ma?" I would whisper, sometimes crouching down beside her. "What do you see?"

Usually it was Mr. Reilly who lived in the apartment two flights above us with his wife, Rita, whom the neighborhood women referred to as "that long-suffering saint."

We all liked Rita, but not many of us, not even the men, liked Reilly. He was a silent, morose man who worked as a night watchman down in the Maxwell House Coffee plant on Hudson Street. He was forever coming home drunk in the dead of the night, waking everybody up and sending tremors through the house as he staggered and stumbled his long gangly limbs and bone-thin body up the winding, narrow staircase.

For at least two years, I lived in mortal terror of the man. A six-foot-four, one-hundred-fifty-pound Irishman with flaming red hair, beet-red skin, and wild, blood-shot eyes, he was the leading character in all my childhood nightmares. Perpetually tottering, he seemed always on the verge of bloody destruction. In my worst moments I'd see him tumbling down the stairs backwards and crashing through the milky glass pane of our front door like some terrible ogre, his flaming red skull split from end to end.

My mother, on the other hand, seemed to enjoy Reilly. Every time she heard him stumbling along, even in the dead of night when she was already tucked safely in her bed, she'd jump up and rush headlong

through the dark, cold rooms until she arrived at the front door, her right eye twitching with anticipation.

Blow by blow as the action unfolded she'd fill me in on all the bloody details: Reilly was down on his hands and knees and crawling; Reilly was being pulled to his feet by two burly cops; poor saintly Rita was bending over Reilly, weeping and wailing as she wiped the blood from his long pointy nose.

From time to time my mother would get so excited watching the continuing adventures of the Reilly family that she'd even clean out the dusty keyhole with a Q-tip dipped in rubbing alcohol just to make sure she didn't miss anything.

But despite the endless fascination my mother held for Reilly, he was not the only person in the building who captured her attention and devotion.

There was also Mary the Mop Lady who lived in the apartment below us and who wandered the halls on occasions mumbling to herself as she searched high and low among the rickety rails of the bannisters for her dead husband, Harold, who had died one night scrubbing down the linoleum on the third floor landing. After his death, which Mary never quite believed in—she claimed he had simply gotten lost in the building somewhere—Mary took over his duties as janitor. In return for her labors of hauling out the garbage from the back cellar and mopping up the hallway floors once a week, she was given a three-room flat on the first floor at half rent.

We'd see her every day as we went up and down the stairs since she kept her door always open a crack. My mother claimed this was Mary's way of letting Harold know he was still welcome, but other people in the building thought differently.

"She does it to let out the stink," they'd say, joking that they had to hold their noses every time they went by the door.

And it was true. There was a terrible stink to Mary's flat. It came from all the mops and dirty rags and old pails she used for cleaning the halls. She kept them lined up against the wall in her bedroom where she'd sit for hours mumbling to herself in the gloomy dark.

Since we all felt sorry for Mary, however, and knew that she was a bit off her rocker, no one ever complained. Nevertheless, it wasn't easy. Moldy mops are a terrible thing to keep on smelling every day.

But despite all this, my mother always got excited when Mary came up to our landing to scrub down the floor.

"She's here," my mother would exclaim, rubbing her hands together and kneeling down to watch the show begin. "And this time she looks bad, real bad."

I would sit at the dining room table glancing at the back of my mother's head, as I did my long division and dreamed of Sister Ellen, my English composition teacher, whom I was madly in love with at the time.

As far as I was concerned, she was the most beautiful, exciting woman in the world. Not only did she have exactly the kind of eyes I wanted—sapphire blue flecked with hints of purple—she also had the kind of voice I wanted: soft and low and lilting like notes from a toy xylophone.

It was like no other voice I had ever heard. Certainly nothing like my mother's, which some people described as being similar to a gasoline explosion, and certainly nothing like any of the voices of the people I knew who lived within our red-brick tenement. But since my mother got angry every time I mentioned Sister Ellen, fearing that I would one day grow up and turn into what she called a "liz-zie," I rarely talked about her.

"What's Mary doing now, Ma?" I'd say from time to time, just to let her know I wasn't thinking about Sister Ellen. "Is she rambling on about Harold and Lithuania again?"

"Oh, you want to see her," my mother would exclaim. "The poor thing looks like she's about to drop. She doesn't know what the hell she's doing. She doesn't even know enough to rinse out the rags. No wonder this place is crawling with cockroaches."

Sometimes my mother would insist I take a peek to see for myself what she was talking about, but the sight of Mary down on her hands and knees among the filthy soap bubbles did not work the same magic on me as it did on my mother. In fact, if you want to know the truth, it made me kind of sad. Especially when I saw how the hem of Mary's dirty yellow slip used to hang down from her housedress and trail in all that filthy water and how her stockings, which she tried to hold up with big round garters, would slip and sag beneath her fat, knobby knees.

But on top of all that, I knew how important that keyhole was to my mother, and how she really savored the moments she spent at it. The last thing I wanted to do was to steal those moments or hog them in any way.

In fact, most of the time I was very generous with my mother's keyhole. That is, until the Two Women arrived. Only then did I acquire my mother's fine taste for peeking.

They moved into the five-room flat directly above us—Edna, a pleasant-face buxom woman in her early forties who, we soon learned, wore see-through blouses and long flowing kimonos that opened to

the waist, and Dorothy, a tall, blonde lady in her early twenties who, it was rumored, sang and danced in exotic nightclubs all over New York City and was once engaged to a man on death row.

On the day of their arrival, however, my mother and I knew nothing about our new neighbors, but after listening to all the excitement taking place outside our door, as the women came trudging up and down the stairs with box after box of belongings, my mother's curiosity was driven beyond its limits. By 9 A.M. she was already at the keyhole, providing me with one of her finest play-by-plays ever.

By noon I learned that our new neighbors were two women who spoke a foreign language, wore long funny dresses, went in for lots of weird jewelry, had pointy fingernails, drank lots of white wine, and owned lots of unusual things like feathers and fur pillows and bright orange and purple paintings and big statues of fat, naked women with gigantic boobies, and large round bellies.

"Talk about shit!" my mother said, her mouth pressed against the doorjamb. "You wanna see this crap! Come on, take a look."

I didn't need much persuasion, especially since it wasn't every day I got a chance to see naked boobies. My own hadn't begun to appear yet, and so naturally I was more than curious to see what I was in for.

I knelt down, pressed my right eye up to the keyhole and stared. At first all I saw was part of my eyelash, but after blinking a few time I focused in on the two women. They were standing a few feet from my door, facing one another, their hands resting atop each other's shoulders. Then all at once they both leaned forward and kissed. A long, lingering kiss, smack on the lips. Just like that.

I was so flabbergasted, I almost fell over.

"What's the matter?" my mother screamed in my ear. "What's happening? Why are you so pale all of a sudden?"

I couldn't say a word. I simply hung onto the keyhole as if it were a life preserver.

"Answer me," my mother roared. "What's going on out there? What do you see?"

Never before in my life had I seen two women kiss like that. I felt like I was going Down in an Up elevator at breakneck speed.

"Move over!" my mother shouted, pushing me aside. "If you're not going to tell me, I'll see for myself."

It was an eternity before she removed her eye from the keyhole, but when she did her face was ashen.

"Did they stop?" I asked, after a long moment, wondering if it were safe to steal another peek.

"Never you mind," my mother said, grabbing my arm and dragging me to my feet. "Get out of here. Go to the bathroom. Go pee. Do something."

From that moment on the keyhole, Edna and Dorothy became my obsession. Every time I heard their door slam shut and their feet tapping down the stairs, I longed to throw myself on my knees and press my face to the door. But since my mother's startling and terribly unjust pronouncement that keyhole-peeking was now suddenly off limits, there was no way for me to satisfy my curiosity.

Thus, I was forced to live only for those rare and exquisite moments when I encountered both women in the flesh.

"*Bonjour, Mademoiselle,*" they would say, smiling at me as we'd pass on the narrow stairway. "*Comment allez-vous?*"

Most times I was too shy and tongue-tied to say a word. Compared to all the fat housewives in the building who spent their lives hanging out their windows screaming after their children, Edna and Dorothy were like creatures from another planet. Especially Dorothy who within only a few short weeks had captured my heart by becoming the talk of the building, the scandal of the whole neighborhood.

To my mind she was even more exciting than Sister Ellen who wore a black veil all the time and whose hair I had never once even seen. Dorothy's hair was like satin. Long and flowing and brightly gleaming, it shone like the sun on a lovely lake or a soft wet flower.

Night after night I would lie in my bed, picturing her in the room above me smoking cigarette after cigarette as she tiptoed around in her open kimono kissing Edna and crying a little over her old dead fiance who to my mind was the spitting image of Jimmy Cagney.

Why someone as fascinating as Dorothy could inspire so much gossip among the neighborhood women was something I just couldn't figure out, but there was no question that she was on everyone's lips. Even Mr. Reilly and Mary's stinky old mops took second place to what people had to say about poor old Dorothy.

"If only she wasn't that obvious," Mrs. McCarthy, who lived on the top floor, said to my mother in the laundry room one day. "If only she didn't flaunt her *aberration* so much. I mean, you think *those* kind of people would at least know how to use a little discretion."

"What kind of people," I asked, staring up at my mother defiantly. "What's she talking about?"

"None of your business," my mother said, giving me a vicious shove. "Now go over there and play."

I went no farther than earshot would allow, figuring that if I couldn't peek at my friends at least I could eavesdrop on my enemies.

"Oh, I tell you, it's terrible what this world is coming to," Mrs. McCarthy continued. "And to think they actually go around naked and wash one another's backs in the bathtub!"

"No!" my mother said, grabbing hold of her throat. "You can't be serious?"

"That's what I heard," Mrs. McCarthy insisted, nodding her head. "One of the neighbors across the street said she saw them from the window. Their shades weren't even down. Can you imagine?"

"That's unbelievable!" my mother exclaimed.

"Yes, and what's more, they do it all the time too. Right here in this *very* house under our *very* noses!"

The thought of Dorothy and Edna being so maliciously maligned while they sat naked and unsuspecting in their bathtub was simply too much for me. I burst into tears.

"What's the matter?" my mother screamed, running toward me in a frenzy. "What's happened now?"

All I could do was wail, my face swimming in misery and snot.

"Stop it!" my mother said, yanking me by the hair. "Stop it, you hear?"

"But it's not fair," I screamed. "It's just not fair."

"What's not fair?" my mother asked, eyeing me suspiciously.

"What are you talking about?"

"Dorothy and Edna," I sobbed. "Everybody's always picking on them."

Mrs. McCarthy glared down at me.

"It's not polite to listen in on grown-up people's conversations," she said. "And what's more, children should be seen and not heard."

I began to wail even louder until my mother shut me up by clouting me on the ear with a right hook that left me reeling.

By the time my head cleared, I knew it was all-out war, and what's more, I knew I was firmly on the side of Dorothy and Edna. Even if it was true that they were taking baths together and looking at one another's boobies, I didn't think it was right for other people to go around snooping on them and then talking about them behind their backs.

I began plotting my strategy. My imagination knew no bounds. Like superman, it soared through the air faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive.

I saw myself crawling through their bathroom window as they sat together naked in the tub scrubbing one another's backs.

"Beware of windows and keyholes," I warned. "Your lives are in danger."

Other times I imagined myself flying straight through the ceiling like a mighty bird and burrowing myself in the warm sleeve of one of Dorothy's silky kimonos where I would lie in wait for her enemies like a deadly vulture ready to spring.

In bed at night as I lay listening to their soft laughter rise and fall in gentle ripples above my head, I pictured myself in the bathtub with them, splashing among the warm bubbles and then rushing to their rescue with one of Mary's mops as Mr. Reilly came crashing through their front door, his red lips frothing at the sight of their wet naked bodies.

For weeks I racked my brain, wondering how best to declare my love and allegiance. Then one morning out of the blue I came upon the answer. It was the simplest, most natural thing in the world. I would write them a long, passionate letter explaining everything that had ever been said about them, and how much I loved them. Then I would quietly slip it beneath their door and wait for their message.

All that afternoon through my geography, spelling, and science classes, I wrote and rewrote, telling them in the kindest way I knew that, although lots of people thought them bad, I would always remain their true and faithful friend no matter what. And although I tried not to mention anything about bathtubs and boobies, I did manage to say something about how important it was for them to keep their shades down "whenever they did funny things together." Finally, after six drafts and lots of crossing-outs, my letter was complete.

I was about to put it into the nice blue envelope I had brought along when suddenly I heard Sister Katherine Eucharista, my Earth science teacher, call my name.

"Laura O'Neill, bring whatever you are writing immediately to my desk."

At first I couldn't believe my ears.

"I must be dreaming," I thought, remaining glued to my chair. "This can't be happening."

But I wasn't dreaming, and before I knew it Sister Katherine was charging down the aisle at me like a raging bull, her long black veils flying behind her like the wings of a rabid bat.

"Next time you obey when I talk to you, young lady, understand?"

I was so stunned I couldn't even cry.

The rest is history. By the time Sister Katherine, Sister George, Sister Veronica, Sister Mary Louise, Sister Grace Edwards, Sister Claire, Sister Thomas, the principal, and my mother got through reading my letter, my fate was sealed.

Justice came quickly and unmercifully.

For almost a week, I couldn't sit down without crying out in holy terror, and although I was permitted food, I might as well have been dining in the state penitentiary, bread and water being all that was allowed me until I confessed my terrible sins and begged for God's sweet mercy.

As luck would have it, I remained the topic of hot conversation throughout the school until the day Felix Fitzpatrick snuck up onto the roof and threw a brick at Sister Louise's head while she monitored her class of fifth-grade girls skipping rope in the courtyard at recess.

After that, my reputation as the school's leading misfit faded considerably.

Slowly the weeks rolled on and by the time spring arrived, turning the only two trees on Adams Street from dirt brown to dull green, things were back to normal again.

The nuns stopped telling me what an awful child I was; Mr. Reilly broke two ribs by falling into one of Mary's metal pails; and Rita, Mr. Reilly's saintly wife, suffered a miscarriage after trying to drag her husband by the necktie up three flights of stairs.

As for Dorothy and Edna, well, I really don't know if they went on kissing and taking baths together since my mother wouldn't let me anywhere near them. All I know for sure is that one day I came home from school and saw them driving away in a big moving van.

Where they went is anybody's guess, but for years I prayed like hell that they would remember to keep their shades down and to stay clear of keyholes. □