

## **Little Mary**

by Cathy Fiorello

We had a secret in my family when I was growing up. Her name was “Little Mary.”

Little Mary was born before I was, to an aunt I never knew. Her mother, my Aunt Mary, died in childbirth. This aunt’s life was, and still is, a mystery to me. The few photos I’ve seen of her reveal that she was the prettiest of my mother’s sisters, but give the impression that she was more reserved. She appeared to be neither as flamboyant as Aunt Anna, nor as feisty as Aunt Grace, and certainly not as formidable as Aunt Susie, whose edicts neither child nor adult dared defy. When Aunt Mary was spoken of, it was in whispers, cloaked in sadness. When we kids asked, “Where is Little Mary’s mother?” the only response was, “Be kind to your cousin.” We did as we were asked and we shared our beds, shared our meals, shared our toys, but our cousin’s history was never shared with us.

Motherless, Little Mary was cared for by my mother and her sisters for the first two years of her life. The infant was passed from one aunt to another, each trying to give her the love she would never know from her mother. When her father, Uncle Frank, remarried, it was to a woman who wanted him but not his child. Forced to raise Little Mary, she could not find it in her heart to love her. She abused her, both emotionally and physically. Whenever this reluctant stepmother’s abuse escalated in its severity, Uncle Frank brought Little Mary to her aunts to heal. Bruises and scars marred her young skin. Once she arrived with evidence of a cigarette burn on her arm. But the hurt in her eyes, her guarded manner, told an even sadder story. When she arrived for a stay, she was wary at first and it took days of her aunts’ gentle care before she began to behave like she was safely out of harm’s way.

The aunts were outraged each time Uncle Frank arrived at their door with his battered child. They demanded that he leave his wife or leave the child with them

permanently. He refused to do either. Little Mary, a powerless pawn, spent her early years shuttling between the stepmother who broke her and the aunts who put her back together.

We never knew when she would leave us. When Uncle Frank reappeared, without notice, we knew our cousin's visit was over. My mother hurriedly packed her clothes and gathered the children to hug her goodbye. None of us knew when, or if, we would see her again. In time, the separation became permanent. When she was four years old, Uncle Frank moved his family South and Little Mary moved out of our lives. Uncle Frank, eager to sever relations with his dead wife's family, never sent them his new address. The aunts never heard from her again. With time, our memories of her faded.

In those early years I was too young to understand anything except that my cousin was visiting for a while. Now, decades after she left us, I am haunted by questions that I wish I had asked. My mother, who was close to her sisters all of her life, never talked about the sister she had lost. Her silence wasn't because that's how death was dealt with by my family. I have vivid memories of my grandfather, who died long before I was born, because my grandmother kept his memory alive for all of us. One of our regular Sunday excursions was to St. John's cemetery to visit Grandpa's grave. We knelt in the grass, and everyone whispered prayers for Grandpa's soul, everyone except Grandma. She just stood there and talked to him as if he were standing before her. Though I had never met him, my grandfather was very much a part of my young life. Yet I have no memory of my mother, my aunts, or my grandmother talking about Aunt Mary.

Thinking about this so many years later, I am consumed with sadness for my cousin. All these years later, I still have a vivid picture of her fair-skin and her straight, chin-length brown hair, bangs cut to rest on her brows just above her sad brown eyes.

All my mother's sisters and their children were vivid characters in my childhood. Writing about them reminds me that there are two vacancies in my memory bank: the aunt whose unique traits should have been stored there, waiting for me to call them up, and the cousin who became a blank in my family history.

Her aunts knew nothing of Little Mary's life after she left their care. They died not knowing what became of her. At reunions of the cousins, we remember her only in sadness and wonder why she has never tried to reconnect with us. The cousins are

scattered all over the country now; maybe she's tried and can't reach us. Or maybe she has chosen not to remember her traumatic beginnings. Maybe by not looking back, she was free to move forward.



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