

# Done Readin'

Long, long ago – 'twas the year Prince Albert died, 1861 if I recall correctly – I overheard two former convict women talking of Van Diemen's Land's Female House of Correction or the Female "Factory", as it was known.

"No matter the season," said one, "the Factory shivered in the long damp shadow of the mountain."

The other drew deeply on her clay pipe, pursed her lips, and exhaled the smoke in a long slow plume. She nodded.

"Oh indeed, there was an achin' coldness to that place. It seeped through the stone floors and walls, stealin' the heat from every flame."

I was at the Factory too. In the convict nursery. From when I was a babe, until about three or four years of age. I don't remember the cold, only the loving warmth of my mother's arms. I'd nuzzle against her and deeply inhale her pungent scent, as fragrant to me as any Parisian perfume. In the darkness, she'd stroke my hair and whisper in a golden voice that, in the summertime, after we were done reading, we'd have eggs.

It's a funny thing to remember. Considering it's my only memory of that place. And just those few words. Not the run of the story, nor the taste of the eggs. On the other hand, I have plenty of memories of The King's Orphan School. And precious few of them are pleasant.

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The headmaster strode from one side of the schoolroom to the other, hands clasped behind his back. The breathless silence only punctuated by the swish of his long black frock coat and his deliberate slow footfalls.

"Repeat after me," he said, "'f' is for father."

"Eff-is-for-fa-ther," we all responded, in a monotone chorus.

"Not that any of you would know your fathers," he said, under his breath.

I should have been more wary that day. Not staring out the window.

"Mulligan!"

I was jolted from my daydream. "Me, sir?"

## Done Readin'

“Yes, you. Stand up. How many Mulligans do you think there are?”

“Umm, two?”

The stinging whack to the side of my head set my ear ringing.

“Indeed. But only one insolent bog-Irish brat with that name in this schoolroom.” The headmaster snatched my slate. “Dear Lord, what’s this? The scratchings of a blind monkey? Inattentive, insolent, and illiterate!”

The other boys’ laughter stung almost as much as the blow from the headmaster. I bit my lip and struggled to hold back my sobs. Burning with anger and shame, I decided on the spot, I was done with writin’ – and done with readin’.

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The very next day, me and another lad were assigned laundry duty. We lugged the big wicker basket filled with piss-soaked blankets down the stone steps to the basement. The new washerwoman turned to us and smiled.

“And who might you two little soldiers be?”

“Billy Williams, missus,” chirped my companion.

“Well, good day to you Billy,” she turned to me, “and you?”

“Michael Mulligan.”

“Mulligan... That’s a good Irish name that one. Do they call you Mick or Micky at all?”

“No. Just Michael. The other one gets called Micky, so as not to get us confused.”

“Well *Michael*, I’m very pleased to make your acquaintance.”

The washerwoman helped us lift the basket and dump the reeking bedding into the steaming copper.

“I’ve known a fair few Mulligans in my time,” she said, with a wink to her assistant, “would you be knowin’ the names of any of your relatives, Michael?”

“Umm, I’ve got a ma. But I can’t remember her name.”

“Well, no doubt she’s a pretty lass. Do you remember anything about her?”

## Done Readin'

I frowned. Unable to describe her voice and knowing no words for her comforting scent. The washerwoman broke the awkward silence.

“What about where you and your ma are from?”

I stared past the washerwoman, through the high stone wall and out of the school. I groped at mist and vapours.

“I don’t remember.”

“I’m supposin’ you were just a wean when you come here?”

I nodded.

A shadow slipped down the stairs. I saw it first. I stood bolt upright and shut my mouth.

“That’s enough chit-chat, Doherty,” said the matron, “you’ve plenty of work to do without wasting time conversing with this miscreant.”

\*

The next week, I was assigned to the government farm. I walked the length of the rows of cabbages, whistling as I swung my hoe and chipped out weeds. The autumn sun warmed my back. As I worked, a melodic warbling rang out from the forested foothills below the mountain. I leant on my hoe and listened. Two native magpies took turn-about to chase each other’s carolling. Doodle-doodle-deedle-doodle-do.

Five of the black-and-white birds swooped down from the trees and strutted across the pasture in front of me. The two largest birds had glossy black chests and crisp markings. The biggest one had a brilliant white cape, while the other’s cape was grey. Grey cape stopped, turned its head to the side, paused, and then stabbed its sharp beak into the turf. It pulled out a wriggling grub. The three smaller birds with fluffy mottled plumage ran over and crowded around it, bobbing and squawking. Grey cape fed the grub to one.

I knew boys who snared magpies. I don’t know why they did it. There can’t be much meat on a bird that size. I wondered, how would the young birds survive, if their parents were taken from them?

That night, I lay awake in the dormitory, ignoring the scurrying rodents. Where was my ma? Was she alive or dead? Did she ever think of me? I took myself back to the nursery at the

## Done Readin'

Female Factory and strained to remember more. Try as I might, no name or face came to me. Just those fragments of a voice, soothing me to sleep with that same promise. Then I thought about the washerwoman.

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We emerged from the schoolroom and lined up.

"...Jones, Abernathy, Stevenson, government farm. Smith and Blackthorn, laundry."

"Beggin' your pardon ma'am," I said, "Jimmy Blackthorn's taken ill. The headmaster sent him to the infirmary. But I'll take his place, ma'am."

"Why so eager for laundry, Mulligan?" said the matron, "are you preparing yourself for a career on the tubs? You'd look so pretty in a bonnet and apron."

The other boys laughed. I felt my face flush.

"No ma'am. I just thought Charlie could do with help."

"How very charitable. Go on then. But I've got my eye on you."

We collected the soiled bedding from the dormitory and headed for the basement.

"Slow down," whined Charlie, "if we finish this too quick, we'll just get given something else to do."

"Hurry up," I said, "I've got me reasons."

Clouds of steam and laughter floated up from the laundry as we brought the basket thudding down the steps.

"Hello lads," said the washerwoman.

As we tipped the blankets into the copper, I whispered to her, "You know my ma, don't you?"

"Maybe."

"I've remembered somethin' she told me. From when I was little."

"Good lad. Hang back when we're done."

## Done Readin'

Charlie and I hauled the last load of wet washing out to the lines. I looked down each of the long grey flapping rows in search of the washerwoman. She was at the end of the last one, adjusting a wooden prop to make sure nothing dragged in the dirt. She looked up and beckoned to me. I glanced around and scurried towards her. I met her broad smile with my own.

“Why so joyful, Mulligan?” said the matron, appearing like a spectre from among the washing. “The Lord may love a boy who’s happy in his work, but I smell a rat.” She turned to the washerwoman. “What’re you up to Doherty? If you’re using him to thieve, I’ll have you back at the Factory quick smart.”

“No, ma’am. Nothin’ like that. I promise. I just took a fancy to this one. He reminds me of my own lad – who died a terrible death at his age. Oh, it was awful. He was gripped by a tremendous fever and great boils burst all over him...”

“Enough! I’ve no interest in the death throes of your purulent offspring. Empty your pockets, the pair of you.”

I silently thanked my guardian angel all I had on me were two coloured pebbles and the long front tooth of a kangaroo. The washerwoman had only her rosary beads.

The matron huffed in disappointment. “If I detect the least sniff of malfeasance from you Doherty, you’ll be back in the cells so quick it’ll make your head spin. And you, Master Mulligan, I’ll be discussing you with the headmaster. I think *other* duties can be found for an eager worker like yourself.”

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Snow lay heavy on the mountain top. Frost crackled under my feet. My arms ached. I lifted one bucket and then the other, tipping the stinking excrement into the cesspit. I tried not to gag. I picked up the other empty bucket and trudged back towards the privies. My mood was as low as the temperature. How could I let the washerwoman know what I’d remembered? It was clear I’d never be on laundry duty ever again.

As I walked under the windows of the schoolroom, I heard one of the older boys reading aloud.

“Thus speaketh the Lord God of Israel, saying, write thee all the words that I have spoken unto thee in a book...”

## Done Readin'

I stopped and stared up, open mouthed.

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Hot sun poured in on the rows of desks. We sweated like horses under the whip. The headmaster's chalk clacked and squeaked.

"Now, what are these letters I've written here?"

I thrust my hand up. The headmaster ignored me.

"Yes, Walker."

"They're the vowels, sir."

"Good boy. Now, all of you, write one four-letter word starting with the letter 't', using each vowel. But no plurals mind, I'll not have you being lazy and just putting an 's' on the end."

I thought for a moment then wrote 'talk, tent, tilt, told, turn'.

The headmaster walked behind me, leant over and with a shake of his head, muttered, "The Lord moves in mysterious ways."

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In the semi-darkness of the late summer twilight, I pulled my blanket up over my head. I squeezed the stub of a pencil out of the seam of my thin straw-filled mattress and unfolded the blank half-page I'd torn from the back of a prayer book. I crossed myself – just in case – and wrote my mother's promise in careful large letters.

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I rinsed the last plate and placed it on the rack to dry with the others. Then I pulled out the wooden plug. The greyish water gurgled as it ran from the washtub into a large pail.

"Excuse me, missus," I said to the cook, "shall I go and put this water on the kitchen garden?"

"Aye," said the cook, "but be quick about it. Then you can take these peelin's to the pigs."

I hefted up the heavy bucket, staggered along the hall and out into the garden. I moved quickly along the beds, pouring water on the plants as I went. I stopped near to the small open

## Done Readin'

window that looked down into the basement. I could hear the washerwoman's cheerful chatter echoing up. I look left and right, and then peered in.

She had her back to me. In her hands was the enormous wooden paddle that she used to stir the garments in the copper. I took from my pocket a rock, around which I'd tied my note. I tapped it on the window frame. She looked up. I was about to drop the rock through the window when she held up her hand and shook her head at me.

"Beth," she called to her unseen assistant, "would you be a darlin' and go and get some more soap from the storeroom? We'll be needin' it soon enough."

The washerwoman waited a few moments, then looked up at me and nodded. I tossed the rock. It clattered onto the floor and skidded under a trestle table against the wall. She hustled over, bent down and looked under the table.

"What are you looking for, Doherty?" My heart sank at the sound of that voice. I dropped flat on the ground below the window.

"Oh ma'am," said the washerwoman, "there was a rat. It scurried under this table. It was ever so big. I'll just crawl under here and see if there's a hole."

"Good Lord! Get up, you stupid woman," said the matron, "if we concerned ourselves with the comings and goings of all the vermin in this place, we'd never get anything done."

"I won't be a moment, ma'am. It's just that I'm a touch stuck. It's the rheumatism in my back. If I stretch my arms out, it usually goes away..."

The seconds that ticked by felt like hours.

"That's got it ma'am," called the washerwoman loudly, "right as rain."

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Kathleen Doherty spied Mary Mulligan across the dusty churchyard of Saint Virgil's. She was just visible through the throng of red-coated Irish soldiers competing for conversation with the prettiest convict girls. Kathleen muscled her way through, took Mary by the arm and led her aside. Kathleen slipped the crumpled scrap of paper into Mary's hand.

"This is for you. It's from him."

## Done Readin'

Mary nodded as she unfolded the page. "Do you know what it says?"

"No more than you."

"Old Brigid O'Shea, then?"

"Aye, she may charge like a wounded bull, but she knows when to keep her trap shut."

They found Brigid sheltering in the narrow strip of shade, on the southern side of the rude barn-like wooden chapel.

"Brigid, would you be able to help me?" said Mary.

"You know the score," said Brigid, "tuppence to read, sixpence to write."

Mary passed her the slip of paper and the coins. The older woman's eyes scanned the page.

"Whose writin' is this?"

"It's a message from my boy," said Mary. "Well, I think he's my boy."

"How old is he?"

"If it's him, he'd be nine, last September."

"Hmm, not too bad, then." Brigid looked up at Mary, "you know, he says you used to read to him."

"Me? No, that can't be right. I can't read!" Mary turned to Kathleen, her face aghast. "Why would he say that? When I cared for him in the nursery, I told him about where he comes from. But I never read to him. How could I? Oh Kathleen, do you think he's the wrong one? You said there was two Michael Mulligans."

Kathleen put her arm around Mary. "Brigid, what's he written? Read it to us. Every word."

The old woman took a deep breath, "When-we-are-done-reading-at-sun-set-in-the summer-time-we-will-have-eggs."

"Oh dear," said Kathleen, shaking her head.

Mary burst out laughing. Brigid and Kathleen looked at her like she'd gone mad. Mary laughed and jumped and clapped.

## Done Readin'

“He’s my boy and he remembers me!” Mary hugged Brigid and kissed her on both her wrinkled cheeks, turned and grabbed Kathleen’s hands and swung her around. “He remembers me!”

“What, how?”

“Done readin, Kathleen. Don’t you see? I’m from Doonreaghan. The poor lamb has just remembered it a bit wrong.”

“And eggs in the summertime?”

Mary laughed, “I used to tell him how in the summer, from up on the cliffs, I’d watch the sun set over the Skelligs.”

Now Kathleen laughed too.

Kathleen held Mary in a long embrace. “Keep out of trouble pet, you’ve served most of your sentence, and soon you’ll get your ticket of leave. Then you’ll be able to see him. After that, all you need do is marry a freeman, and they’ll let you have him back.”

But Mary – my ma – wasn’t listening. She told me so. She said my words carried her back, on angel’s wings, and placed her on a Kerry clifftop, high above a darkening sea. Gulls lifted by the updraft swirled around her. She watched the sun slip behind the silhouette of two distant, pyramid-shaped islands thrusting skyward from the waves. Tears rolled down her cheeks as she described a different pair of strong encircling arms.

“Will you come again tomorrow, Mary Mulligan?” he said.

Mary drew his face to hers and kissed him. Never knowing it would be the last time.

“Michael Brennan, there’s nothin’ in this world that could stop me.”

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