

Marie's Journey

Cries of labor erupted from a young woman in the makeshift delivery room in the parlor. The sound flooded the house and washed over Marie, who was snatched from her sleep. She pulled the covers up over her nose. She knew she would have to get up and pee soon, but one more moment hugged by the feather mattress in the warmth of her own breath would be worth the discomfort. She exhaled over the edge of the blanket and saw the steam of her breath in the early dawn light.

Outside, rain pelted the roof and windows as gusts of wind shook the treetops. The bare branches of the old maple tapped on the weather-beaten clapboard. The 10-year-old wished that she could fly out of her bed and soar downstairs—past the room where the girl lay agonizing—and out to the outhouse, without actually having to face the weather.

“Marie!” Her mother’s voice resonated up from the parlor. “Come quickly. You need to go get Ila.”

Before she could even pull the bedding back her mother called up the stairs again.

“Don't forget your prayers!”

The urgency in her mother’s voice propelled Marie from her bed. The bedroom’s cold air sucked the heat from her body. She really had to pee, but she tried to put the ache from her mind as she knelt next to her bed and made the sign of the cross.

“In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,” Marie began.

“Hail Mary, full of grace.” Marie mouthed the words as she formed them in her mind. She felt the words become alive on her tongue. They became something more than words and as she uttered, “Pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death,” a perfect rose escaped her lips. Its iridescent red glow cut through the darkness and hovered next to the crucifix on the wall.

Marie began the prayer again, tasting the words as they gave life to another flower, which bloomed on her tongue and filled her mouth. She could smell the warm spring air that wafted about her as she said “Amen,” and a second perfect rose ascended toward the cross.

Despite the warmth of the prayers and the folds of the sleeping gown beneath her knees, the hard floor was biting cold.

Just one more, Marie thought. I will pray this one for the girl downstairs.

Again she prayed, “Hail Mary, full of grace.”

As she prayed and a third rose formed in her mouth, she thought how the Virgin Mary would help take care of that girl; about how when the girl finally released the soul of the child within her massive belly there would be a baby in the house; how she might be able to help her mother bathe it and swaddle it in the patchwork quilt Marie had set at the foot of the young woman's bed the night before. Marie could not wait to hold the baby and she hoped she might even help name it.

As the last rose left Marie's lips she was pulled from her thoughts by her mother's voice.

“Get dressed and come quickly, child,” her mother called from the bottom of the stairs.

Marie dressed quickly by the glimmering light of the roses suspended near the cross on the wall. She knew that in a few moments the roses would be collected by an angel and carried to the Virgin Mary in Heaven. The long skirt of her dress was chilled, but somehow it seemed warmer than the air in the room. She pulled on the sweater her mother had knitted for her last fall and hurried down the stairs in her stockings.

By the lamp burning in the parlor, Marie could see the silhouette of her mother sitting next to the girl. There were no sounds, but she could smell the sweat of the young woman lying perfectly still on her side. Her mother was rubbing the girl's back with one hand as she fingered

her worn wooden prayer beads in the other. The room was filled with the glow of her mother's prayer roses. Momentarily, Marie wished that it was her setting next to woman in the bed, wiping the sweat from the girl's brow, consoling her during her suffering.

“Go get Ila,” her mother said without opening her eyes. “I’m going to need her help when the baby comes.”

Marie shivered at the thought of the one-mile trek down the hill, but she knew that once she made it to her brother's farm he might saddle a horse for Ila and her to ride back to the house.

Marie drew her long, wool coat over her arms and pulled her boots on over her stockings, lacing them swiftly. She said goodbye to her mother and tugged her hat over her slight brow before she closed the door tightly behind her, the glass rattling before the latch fell into place.

Marie cringed as she stepped into the darkness. The icy, November sleet assailed her exposed face and the wind only further propelled the frozen droplets, which felt like shards of glass when they struck her cheeks. She scurried to the outhouse, lifted her dress and tried to squat over the cold seat without actually setting down. She left the door open and could see the lantern light in the barn where her brothers were milking the cows and tending to the calves. She pulled the collar of her coat over her throat and tugged her hat securely over her ears as her relief was replaced with the shivering cold.

Marie headed across the barnyard, but before she had even reached the road the leather of her boots began to feel damp. As her eyes adjusted to the darkness she could see the giant maples that lined the lane. She tried to walk in the middle of the road to avoid the ruts that had filled with frigid water and mostly frozen during the night.

The maples must be terribly lonely, thought Marie. The only contact they ever have with another spirit is when the wind blows and their wispy branches can reach for each other. They can't even talk to each other—or anyone else.

Marie thought about how the trees were alive and had souls of their own, but she wondered if any of these giant maples might be harboring the souls of any of the people who had died in her house.

Her mother had been comforting those who needed help for as long as she could remember. Sometimes her mother helped those coming into the world and sometimes she assisted those who were leaving this world. All those that sought refuge in the old house were on the verge of an adventure: some on the journey of life and others on the journey of the afterlife.

Her mother had taught her of the glories of heaven, of the joy of seeing God face to face, of being filled with the Holy Spirit as you saw the glorified Jesus Christ and his loving mother, Mary. She also knew of the horrors of hell, of the dreadful restlessness of never knowing peace, of the absolute agony one must endure when they realize they can never choose anything else.

Her mother had also said that not every person who died was ready to make the passage to their final destination. They were just not ready to make afterlife's journey to face God. These souls would sometimes stay here on earth. They might stay here on earth as a ghost, but much more often they would find refuge in a quiet place. Marie was taught that some of those lost souls would hide in the solace of a tree. Her mother always said that Marie's grandfather's soul had hidden in the twisted, old apple tree in front of the house.

Marie knew that it was a long way to her older brother Patrick's farm, but she tried to think about just making it to the end of the south pasture, where she could cut across and save a

little distance from the hike. Marie put her head down to watch her feet so as not to step into the deep puddles.

As she walked, Marie thought about the girl lying in the parlor with her mother. She wondered what the girl's name was. She wondered where she had come from. She thought the girl must have come from Quebec because she only spoke French. Marie had understood most of the whispers the girl and her mother had shared, but she had only seen the girl for a few moments from the bottom of the stairs before her mother had sent her to bed.

The night before, when Sister Theresa arrived with the young woman, Marie saw that the girl was wrapped in an old blanket and a worn overcoat. Sister Theresa was Marie's aunt, her father's sister, but Marie never called her Aunt—she was always Sister. Sister Theresa did not come to the house often and she told Marie it was because she had prayers to say and children to teach. Sister Theresa told her that once Marie was a little older, she could come to Newport to go to school there and have her aunt as a teacher.

For as long as Marie could remember, Sister Theresa brought people who needed help to the house. Sometimes they were pregnant women who would have babies in the parlor; sometimes they were the infirmed who would be cared for until they were well enough to leave. Others now lay in the cemetery at the bottom of the hill.

Marie longed to see the new baby when it came, but often a baby and mother were not at the house very long before Sister Theresa returned to take them away with her. She told Marie that the mother would return to her home and the baby would be taken to an orphanage far away from the hill where Marie's family farmed.

The wind blew through Marie's coat and dress as she hurried down the muddy path. Her legs began to ache from the cold. She leaned into the wind and it began to lift her from her feet.

She pumped her legs, hoping it would warm her limbs. At first she could feel the ground through her boots as her toes stretched down, but before she could force herself back to the ground the wind swept her up from the path; she pumped her legs as though she were running with all her might. Now the wind was in her dress and she was being carried down the hill towards her brother's house.

She grabbed her hat, pulling it tight over her ears as she felt herself lift into the wind. She knew that it was her guardian angel carrying her. She knew she would be safe, even though the wind nearly blew her coat open and chilled her legs beneath the calico dress on which her mother had taught her to sew.

Marie kept thinking about Sister Theresa and the girl. She wondered how Sister Theresa had found the girl or how the girl had found her aunt. She wondered if the girl knew how to pray and if she prayed for her child. She wondered if the baby would be a girl or a boy.

Marie was plucked from her thoughts as her toes once again reached the frozen earth. She could see the light in her brother's barn. Off in the distance, the first rays of sunlight illuminated the Northern Vermont hills to the east.

With her feet back on the ground, Marie rushed up the path. She was out of breath when she opened the barn door. The pungent, sweet, warm air pushed past her as she entered. The great heads of a dozen Jerseys turned to see the girl as she leapt across the manger to where her brother, Patrick, and nephew, Rosaire, were milking the cows.

“Marie, what are you doing out in this weather?” Patrick bellowed. Not a cow stirred. They had long been used to the boisterous tones from the strong lungs of their caretaker. He had his head buried deep in the side of one of his cows. His large hands rhythmically stripped the warm, frothy milk into the bucket beneath the cow's tan udder.

Rosaire smiled as he held a bucket of milk for one of the calves to drink.

“Don’t tell me Mother sent you down here for coffee at this hour.”

Patrick was two decades her senior and already had four children. Rosaire, Patrick’s eldest, was two years older than Marie.

“No, Ila needs to come right away. There’s a girl and she’s going to have a baby any moment and Mother needs her help.”

“Well, what are you doing in here? Get over to the house and help Ila with the children. Do I need to go get Dr. Lewis?”

“I don’t think so,” Marie called back as she rushed out across the barnyard toward the warm glow of the house.

“Well, better get a horse ready for your mother,” Patrick said to Rosaire, who hurried out the barn door behind his young aunt.

The rain had become even fiercer and it felt like a slap to Marie’s exposed face. As Marie reached the kitchen door, her dress was a half-step behind her. Once through door, the smell of coffee and ham filled her nostrils. She realized then just how hungry the flight down the hill had made her.

“Marie!” two young voices sang as she shook off some of the wet and cold from her journey. The voices came from the table that sat near the huge stove where her sister-in-law was cooking. Ila’s apron was tied around her ample waist, her belly already showing with her fifth child.

Marie walked over to the table and began playing with her youngest nephew, Bernard, in his highchair.

“Ila, Mother needs you right away.”

“What's going on?” asked Ila, turning from the stove to fix plates for David and Nora, the two middle children.

“There’s a baby coming and Mother sent me to get you.”

“Does she need us to get the doctor?”

“No, I think she just wants you to come right away. I think the baby is coming soon.”

Ila began to move about the kitchen, making sure there would be a breakfast for her husband and Rosaire.

“Marie, you'll have to watch the baby for me until the boys come in from chores. David and Nora need to get going on their chores, too, and then they need to head down to the school house.”

Marie’s heart sank. She wanted to be there when the baby came. She didn’t want to be left here by herself with Baby Bernard. And she didn't want to have to hike the mile uphill after Patrick and Rosaire came back from the barn.

“Can’t Rosaire watch the children?” Marie protested. She knew that when a baby was coming every moment mattered; something could happen at any minute.

Baby Bernard cooed as he reached for Marie and she instinctively picked him up.

“You can leave as soon as Patrick and Rosaire are back from the barn. It should only be a few more minutes.”

Marie sighed heavily and sat at the table with the baby in her lap. She picked at a piece of toast on the table and Ila brought her a plate with some bacon and an egg. She was so hungry that in seeing the food she almost forgot about the reason she was there.

David and Nora were finishing their breakfasts and began crowding around Marie, asking her about the baby that was coming and if she was going to be able to keep it.

Ila hushed the children as she prepared for the ride up the hill.

“Of course Marie is not going to keep the baby. It’s not hers. And you two need to go and take care of the chickens and head down the hill to school. And mind that you bring your primers. I will not have the teacher sending home anymore notes. Do you hear me, David?”

“Yes, ma’am,” said the seven-year-old, lowering his head slightly for being chastised in front of his aunt.

Ila was just about ready to go when Rosaire came across the porch and poked his head in the door to tell his mother a horse was ready.

The door shut with a bang.

Ila, Nora, and David left in quick succession, ready for their respective chores.

Now Marie was in the kitchen by herself—just her and the baby. She ate her breakfast and tried to keep Bernard from crawling too close to the stove.

She began to pray that Patrick would come in soon. She knew that he must be almost done with chores and would surely come in the house to eat any minute now.

Marie finished the breakfast Ila had prepared. It made her feel better because Ila had made the bread with her own hands and had kneaded love into it. She knew that it was the love that made it taste good and warmed her heart. She loved Ila as though she were her own sister and prayed for her as she finished her food.

Marie heard Patrick and Rosaire come into the muck room, where they changed their chore clothes before coming in for breakfast. The two hurried into the kitchen to warm themselves next to the cook stove and prepare a plate of food.

Marie was anxious to leave and began to ready herself as Bernard clung to the muddied hem of her dress.

“Marie, where are you going?” asked Patrick as he took the pot of coffee from the stove and poured himself a cup. “Aren't you going to have breakfast with me and Rosaire?”

“I've already eaten and I want to be there when the baby comes.”

“Can I go with her?” begged Rosaire.

“No Rosaire, I don't think that's a good idea. You'd just be in the way. You two should both get yourselves to school,” said Patrick.

Marie feared missing the baby coming. She knew she would have to do as Patrick said. If he told her to stay, she would. If he told her to go to school, at least she could use the excuse of not having her lunch to go back to the house.

“I need to be there,” pleaded Marie. “They might need me.”

“All right, you head up the hill and make sure Mother doesn't need me to go get the doctor—or the priest,” said Patrick. “I'll wait with the baby until Ila comes back. But you tell her to hurry back once that child is born because I need to get out to the woods.”

Marie assured her brother she would tell Ila to hurry and she rushed out the door in triumph.

The rain had stopped, but the cold wind from the north still chilled her to the bone. Marie began running up the hill as fast as she could. As she ran she prayed her guardian angel would carry her up the hill. She prayed that she would see the trees, with their bare arms reaching for the sky, from high above them. Her lungs ached with the cold and the leather of her boots quickly soaked through as she no longer watched where her feet landed.

As her legs pushed her body up the steep trail toward the farm she thought she felt herself leaving the road again. She ran even harder and pumped her arms to the rhythm of her breathing. It felt like forever, but finally she could see the smoke rising from the chimney of her home.

Before she reached the driveway, she saw her older brother Leo driving the old mare.

“I’m going to go get the doctor,” he said. “That girl ain’t doin’ too good.”

Marie burst through the door and instantly felt that the house was eerily quiet. She heard neither the wail of a new baby nor the moans of the girl. She walked gingerly toward the dining room and saw Ila standing next to the sideboard with a wash bin. There lay the tiny body of a baby boy.

Marie’s heart leapt in her chest. She had never seen a baby so close to its birth. There had been many babies born in the house, but she had always been sent to school or out to the barn. This time was different. She had been part of the baby’s coming. She had prayed for this baby, she had gotten Ila, she had helped bring this baby into the world.

Immediately Marie noticed the baby’s face had a blue hue. He was still wet from the birth and Ila was briskly rubbing the baby’s back with a towel.

Ila had powerful hands and potent prayers and had been present for many births. She was the person families in town called on when the doctor said there was nothing he could do. Many of the sick had survived and those that hadn’t left in peace, holding Ila’s hands.

Marie stared at his perfect little wrinkled face. His small arms and legs moved in rhythm with Ila’s persistent pressing. His tiny lips were parted and his eyes seemed buried under so many small folds of flesh. His perfectly formed fingers and toes looked like a doll Marie had once seen.

Ila’s lips were moving, and though Marie couldn’t hear the words she knew Ila was praying for the baby and his mother. Marie was afraid for the baby and she began to pray also. In her thoughts, Marie asked the Virgin Mary to offer the prayers to her son, Jesus, who could help

the child. She prayed for God's Will to be done. She prayed for a miracle. She prayed as Ila bent over and blew her breath into the child's mouth and nose and pressed his chest with her fingers.

After a moment, the baby let out a wail. Ila immediately picked up the tiny baby and began to swaddle him in a towel.

Marie's eyes welled with tears. She had never heard a more beautiful sound in her entire life. She put her head down to stop from crying, but the lump in her throat meant she could not hold the tears back for long. She wrapped her arms around Ila's protruding midsection and pushed her face against the warmth of her apron. She wiped the tears from her cheeks as Ila carried the baby to the parlor.

Marie followed Ila to the doorway. In the dim light, Marie could see her mother comforting the young girl, who was lying still in the bed. The covers were pulled down and Marie saw the bloodied sheets.

The young woman slowly turned as Ila brought her the wailing child. Her wet hair clung to her sallow cheeks. Marie's mother helped the girl sit up in the bed. The young woman's bare breasts glistened with sweat as the top sheet dropped away. Ila handed her the still-wailing baby. The girl closed her eyes and mumbled something in French.

Marie saw the girl squeeze her closed eyes even tighter as tears streamed past her thin lips and off the end of her little chin. At that moment Marie realized that the girl was not much older than her, and much younger than Marie's seven older siblings. Then the girl shakily handed the baby back to Ila.

Marie's mother sat next to the young woman and gently wiped her brow and neck with a damp washcloth.

Marie searched the shadows for her mother's steel-gray, loving eyes.

“What happened to the baby?” Marie whispered.

“He wasn’t breathing when he came, but I knew Ila would know how to care for him.”

“What about her? Is she going to be okay?”

Marie’s mother slowly shook her head and held a finger to her lips.

Marie left the parlor and joined Ila near the washbin where she was wrapping the baby in the quilt that Marie had left at the foot of the bed the night before.

“Is that girl going to be all right?”

“Oh Marie, that little girl has an angel just like you and me. She may have had some difficulty in this life, but she will be cared for. The Blessed Virgin will take care of her.”

Marie still wept. She knew that Ila was right, but she wanted that girl to live. She wanted to ask her so many questions. She wanted to know the name the baby. Maybe she could help—maybe she could whisper the name in the girl’s ear. Maybe, but what she really wanted was to name him herself.

“Marie, please get more towels from the kitchen,” her mother said from the parlor.

“Yes, mother,” Marie said as she rushed to grab two small towels that unfolded as she pulled them from the drawer.

Marie slowed her step as she entered the parlor. Her mother was still comforting the woman. She pulled a bloodied towel from beneath the woman and gently replaced it with a fresh one. She dipped the other in a wash bin and rung it out with her thin, sinewy fingers. Her lips moved with fresh prayers as she again wiped the girl’s forehead.

Marie’s heart ached and she prayed for the young girl and the baby boy as hard as she could. She wanted to see the girl healthy again, but she knew that whatever happened it would be

God's Will, not her own. If it was time for that girl to find her place in heaven with God, then that is what would have to happen.

"Hail Mary, full of grace," Marie thought, but her prayer was interrupted as the girl sat upright in the bed and her muscles stiffened as if she were in horrible pain.

"Mon Dieu, prenez soin mon bebe," the girl whispered.

Marie stood motionless and watched as the girl's body slowly relaxed and her breathing faded to nothingness.

Marie's mother reached up and gently brushed the girl's pale blue eyes, which closed with the touch of her hand. As she brushed the wet hair back from the girl's forehead, a final bead of sweat trickled down her face.

"I pray she is ready for the next life, Marie. I don't know if even the doctor would have been able save her."

Marie turned to Ila, who was sitting with the baby. He rested on Ila's protruding belly, his face pressed to her plump breast.

Marie scurried to the chair and knelt with her head in Ila's lap. Finally, Marie sobbed. She was overtaken with emotion. She felt completely overwhelmed and her little frame shook as she gasped to catch her breath. She wished she could do more for that girl. She wanted God to do something. She wanted her prayers to have helped.

"Why?" Marie managed to say while gasping for air.

Ila whispered words of comfort down at Marie, but she could not make them out.

"Marie, we don't know what gift God has prepared for that girl, but she will find her way there. You may be the person that helps lead her there. Pray for her now. Your prayers can help

her now and in the future. As she takes that journey, your prayers can help guide her on her way her way to heaven.”

Marie began to take deeper breaths. She imagined the girl’s soul trying to wind her way from the house. How would she open the door? Would she be cold out in the sleet? Would the wind blow her soul away like a dandelion puff?

“Maybe it would be best if you went to school. The kids need your help getting up the hill. You know they never make it home in time for chores and Patrick needs the help,” Ila said, helping Marie from the floor.

“When you go down the hill, stop and tell Patrick he needs to bring Bernard here and then I’ll have him fetch Father Roule,” Ila said as she moved the baby from one breast to the other.

Marie nodded and slowly got up. She went to the kitchen and cut two thick slices of bread and took the last of a chunk of cheese from the icebox. She found an apple with no bruises in the bin and she carefully wrapped the food in a kerchief.

Marie held the door for a moment, just in case the girl’s soul needed to leave the house. She braced herself from the north wind as she prepared for the trek down the hill. She stopped for a moment to look at the old apple tree in front of the house. She prayed that if her grandfather’s soul was hidden in there that he could someday find the courage to go on to the next stage of the afterlife.

She thought about the girl in the parlor. Tears again streamed down Marie’s cheeks as she prayed. She wished the girl had lived; but she knew that it was just not so. She prayed the girl would find her way to God. She prayed that if the girl was not ready for the journey that she

would find refuge on the hill, maybe in one of the huge old maples along the road and wait patiently until she was ready to make the next journey.

“If you stay here in one of these trees, I hope I find you,” Marie said aloud. “If you are here in a tree, I will sing for you. I’ll keep you company. I’ll help you prepare for your final journey.”

Suddenly Marie thought about the baby Ila had held so dearly. Deep in her heart, Marie prayed she could hold the baby. She wished she could name him. She knew he was special and that she had helped bring him into the world at the same time as his mother was leaving.

“Dear God, have mercy on her soul,” Marie said, the warm air of her breath was swept up towards the forlorn maple branches.