

Part II Chapter 28 What's Wrong with Mama?

"Are you ready to go home, Bridget?" Thomas came into the room where Bridget was sleeping on the Leary's bed. "It's time to leave, if I'm to get back tonight." He knew it would take hours to rejoin Michael in their tent at the Croton Aqueduct work camp. And the work crews were up early, now that there was more daylight.



Betty caught his sleeve and eased him out of the room. "Bridget just gave birth to twins, Thomas. Surely you wouldn't want to set her on a cart jolting down Broadway in her condition? Leave her here with us. We'll figure out a way to get her back home when she's ready. You go on, and don't worry. I'll look after the children."

Embarrassed that he hadn't realized as much, Tom thanked Betty, told the children that he would see them next week, and left, letting Will help him harness Jackson to the cart for the trip back up north.

When Bridget awoke later that night, she didn't know where she was. "We put you into Nell's bed, Bridget." Still drowsy, Bridget didn't ask about her other children or Tom, or even to notice her two daughters sleeping beside her, so Betty asked, "Maybe you should wake them and feed them?"

Bridget nodded, but didn't even turn her head toward where Betty had nudged them toward her. "Bridget? It's time they were fed. They'll need to be fed before you go to sleep again."

Bridget still made no effort, so Betty managed to open Bridget's dress and free her breasts, then attached one twin to one breast, where it gradually began sucking, then did the same with the other. She sat on the bed watching as the twins took nourishment. Bridget seemed unaware of what was happening. Taking the twins when they were finished, she fastened Bridget's dress again, and found a laundry basket where she put the twins. She left when the three were asleep.

During the night, she made several more attempts to get Bridget to feed the twins and had to repeat the procedure herself. By the morning she was exhausted, but managed to feed all the children, suggest that Cathy and Will play outside, arrange for Nell to take Lena to St. Mary's Primary School--which was fortunately near St. Mary's Academy.

Will ran up to tell his mother that he and Cathy were going outside to look for the milk cart. "Go away, Will. Leave me alone."

When Betty found her still in bed, she sat beside her. "Bridget, do you want some porridge? I've fed the children and Nell will drop Lena at school."

The babies were crying, but Bridget seemed not to hear. She turned her head away from Betty and leaned back on the pillow. Bridget barely noticed when Betty repeated the feeding for her.

"Something's got into Bridget, Tim. She's not herself. It's like she doesn't even know the babies are there. I took up some porridge but she didn't even look at it."

No response. She couldn't share her problems with him.

The twins were sleeping when Betty returned. Bridget had gotten herself out of bed and used the chamber pot, and seemed not to know where she was.

"Can I get you something, Bridget?"

"Where am I? This isn't my room."

"You're not in your rooms, Bridget. You're with us. You gave birth here yesterday. Do you remember? See? Your twins?"

"Oh?" Bridget looked back at the bed, then shook her head. "Two babies? Are there two??? Daughters?" She looked away from them.

"Yes, beautiful daughters. When you go home, you'll be wanting to make them fine little dresses."

"Twins?" She returned to bed. "Home?"

Betty left the room with the chamber pot.

"Tim, Bridget is talking very strange. She doesn't seem to remember where she is or anything that happened. Maybe she had better stay here for a few days until she's back to herself. Is that all right?"

He shrugged. It was her decision.

For the next couple of days, Bridget remained lethargic and indifferent. When Betty gave her the babies to feed, she reluctantly accepted them but regarded them as if they were foreign objects that she didn't recognize. Betty had heard of women who rejected or even abandoned their children. The children went into foundling homes--if they were lucky, or died--if unlucky. The mothers ended on the Bowery. Betty couldn't imagine this happening to Bridget.

“What’s wrong with Mama?” Lena asked. Why was her mother not talking to her? Why was her mother still in bed? She was afraid to leave her and sitting beside her, unwilling to leave except to go to school, where she asked Sister Rose Marie in private, to pray for her mother. After school, she ran up to her mother’s room, and finding her still in bed, bathed her face, smoothed her hair, cradled and rocked first one baby, then another. When one began crying, she said, “She wants you, Mama,” and handed it to her mother. Dully, Bridget took and nursed it.

Betty brought dinner stew up for them, and watched as Lena coaxed her mother to eat, feeding her with her own spoon. Maybe, under Lena’s persuasion, Bridget would take over caring for herself and her children.

On Wednesday, while Mr. Leary was at Daly’s adjusting something on a coat he had made for Mr. Daly, he mentioned that Bridget had given birth to twin daughters that Sunday, and that she and the children staying on at the Leary’s “until Bridget feels well enough and her husband comes back to take her home.”

When Mr. Daly mentioned this to Mrs. Daly before he left for work, she immediately sent her maid over to ask if there was anything that Bridget wanted, and to invite her to come and bring the twins by when she felt well enough.

“Mama, Mrs. Daly wants to see the twins,” Lena rushed in to say, when she heard the servant’s invitation.

“Mrs. Daly?”

“Oh, Mama, can we go visit Mrs. Daly?” Will added his plea. There were so many toys there—especially a train set that he had been allowed to play with.

Bridget shook her head. “No. Nothing to wear.”

“You can make them something, can’t you, Mama?” Lena pleaded.

Betty asked Tim if he had some fine soft linen that Bridget might use to make something for the babies to wear. She then directed Lena to pick up her mother’s sewing box and any of her mother’s favorite things.

Lena returned after school with the sewing kit and *The Mother’s Book*. “Mama likes me to practice my reading with this. Maybe I can read to her.” She ran upstairs.

“Mama, come downstairs to look at the nice material Mr. Leary has. Maybe you can make something—for the babies.” She took her mother’s hand, helped her out of bed, then led her down the stairs. Bridget surrendered herself to her daughter. Betty followed them down the stairs carrying the babies in the basket.

Lena spread out the material for Bridget to see. “Isn’t it nice and soft, Mama? You can make something pretty from it! ”

Her mother felt the material, looked at the twins, closed her eyes, took a deep breath. When she opened them again, Lena noticed that a flame had been rekindled in them.

Bridget asked, hesitantly. “Lena? Will you help me?”



Lena was not even seven, but she understood that her mother her help for more than the sewing. “Oh yes, Mama!”

A sort of mutual understanding was reached that day between Bridget and Lena. Her mother **needed** her. It was a realization Lena would never forget. She had her own first communion.

By Saturday afternoon, with the help of Betty and Lena—who stayed nearby, tending the babies as her mother worked, Bridget had made two simple smocks for the infant girls. The only adornments were some ruffles and tucks.

“Too bad Mr. Leary has no pink ribbons, Bridget.”

The twins were bathed and their new dresses were slipped on and bows were tied, as everyone watched and admired. When Tom stopped by that evening on his way home, expecting to find that his family had left. He was surprised to see them still there, as Betty said when she greeted him at the door.

“Bridget wanted to stay over, to show the twins to Mrs. Daly, who has invited you over tomorrow afternoon.”

“No need to tell him about Bridget’s collapse, if that’s what it was,” Betty whispered to Tim. Lena also managed to keep it to herself.

The next day, the family walked the few blocks over to No. 3 Washington Park North. “Rosana and Elizabeth,” Bridget introduced the sleeping babies to Mr. Ruggles and Cook, at the Daly’s servants’ entrance.

The visit with the Daly’s wasn’t as long as the children would have wished. Willie led the boys to the playroom, where the train set occupied them until Dan started crying. “My turn!” It was never his turn, under Will’s rules.

“Let Dan play, or we’re going to leave, Will,” Tom said. That brought on a furious bawling from Will, who ran to his mother.

Bridget shrugged her shoulders and rose, thanking Mrs. Daly, and heading for the door.

“I hope we’ll have another chance to visit, Bridget. I miss our chats.”

Bridget looked at her wistfully. “I do too. I wish I could stay another week with the Leary’s. I don’t know if I’m ready to go home—I’ve gotten used to being looked after by Betty and Lena.”

Tom hadn’t heard this part; no one had told him about Bridget’s bad week. When they were walking back to the Leary’s, he asked her what she had meant.

“Oh, I thought Betty told you, Tom. I don’t know what got over me. If it hadn’t been for Betty and Lena, I don’t know what I would have done.”

“What was wrong?” Bridget didn’t usually confide her problems to Tom, just as he never told her his. Each had burdens-- Bridget had assumed all the responsibility of caring for and raising the family, while he had assumed all the responsibility for providing for them. Each had enough to worry about. Neither wanted to burden the other with more.

“Oh, I guess I wanted to be pampered, and Betty and Lena were willing to do it.”

Tom guessed there might be more, but she seemed to be okay now.

“Well, you know you could stay, if Betty would let you. Besides, I didn’t bring the cart, as I was expecting you’d be home by now, so we’d all have to walk back home. Perhaps that is too much to ask of you, since this is your first time out.”

Betty agreed. “It would be nice to have you here another week, Bridget.”

Lena was overjoyed to spend another week with Nell, walking beside her to school with her in the morning and feeling like a big girl in public, as she now felt like a big girl in the family.

