

Part II—Chapter 43. Dust to Dust.

“Where are they taking Will?” James turned to Lena when he saw his father carrying Will’s body out of the room. The police had told them to bury the body immediately. Father Starrs had said a grave was already open. The body of another victim—a poor old lady—had been brought in for burial. Will’s body could be doubled in that grave; a double funeral could be held the next morning. Tom hadn’t time to build a coffin so had to use a large storage box from the woodshed. He, Dan and Mark took the body directly to the cemetery and put it alongside the old woman’s makeshift coffin.

“What happened to Will?” No one had taken time to explain to the children what had happened.

“Will’s gone, Lizzie. Papa took him to the graveyard,” Lena answered

“What’s in a graveyard?”

“Dead people. He’s dead, James.”

“Why is he dead?” Lizzie asked.

“He died of cholera,” Lena answered. “There’s an epidemic.”

Even four year-old John was perplexed. He said nothing but watched and listened. All the children had seen death—the older ones remembered when Dolly had died. Horses often fell in the streets and never rose. People simply stepped around their bodies. Even beggars were found dead in spots where they had sat for years. Death was around them, but death had never invaded their family. The older ones understood it was final—the younger wondered where Will had gone. They tried to understand his death in their own way.

“Will he stay in the graveyard?”

“Only his body will stay; his soul will go to heaven, to be with Jesus,” Lena concluded.

“You’ll see. There’ll be a funeral for him,” offered Dan. Dan now reluctantly accepted the role of leader that his father had been trying to thrust on him even when Will was still alive. Now he would have to step up, take charge, volunteer, be responsible for the others. He knew that his father counted on him. He would set a good example, as Will had set a bad one—until recently.

Mr. Newman had asked them to remove everything from the apartment, burn anything they weren't taking with them, and to scrub every surface with lye. As soon as the men returned from taking the body to the graveyard, they loaded the few essential possessions onto the cart and moved up to stay with Tim and Betty, until they could find a suitable place to live. They could have Nell's old room, Tim said. It won't be for long, Tom promised.

It was a sleepless night for the family as they slept together, the women on Nell's bed, the men on mattresses on the floor of Nell's room. Each was remembering Will's and grieving in his own way.

As Bridget reviewed his short life, she reproached herself for not giving him more love, especially for letting him go to work as a peddler in the streets, where he caught the cholera. She tormented herself with memories of her oldest son, the one named for her father, who looked like Thomas, who had been her hope for the future. She had looked to him to support her should anything ever happen to Tom. She had secretly doted on him. She had encouraged his notion that he was a Chieftain; to her the name fit him, for his love of ordering everyone about. Maybe she had spoiled him. Perhaps that was why he wanted all the attention, and wanted to occupy center stage. Had he been jealous of the attention she gave the other children? Had he been unwilling to share her with them? Was that why he had rebelled and asserted his will against hers?

When the twins were born, was that when he had begun to stray? She couldn't remember. She regretted that she hadn't spent more time with him, wished she could now hold him in her arms, as she hadn't done then. If she hadn't had the breakdown when the twins were born. What had he thought—a five year-old watching his mother, confused, incoherent, unable to speak or eat or respond. He must have been terrified. She had never considered him then. And when she recovered, she could see only the twins. Caring for two at once had overwhelmed her, taken all her time. If it hadn't been for Betty and Lena, she wouldn't have recovered, she thought. She had turned to them, without thinking of him at all.

Perhaps he had understood her plight, but when he saw her *enjoying* nursing the twins, how he must have felt. This was what tormented her—that he might have felt himself unloved. Why hadn't she let him know that he was always her favorite, in spite of what he might have thought.

When he saw her giving the twins extra time, did that drive him to become disruptive just to get her attention, even if it was to force her to send him away and leave her in peace so she could return to them? She felt chagrin that she had failed him so. Why had she sent him away? Was that when he began searching for substitutes? Why he turned to the low-lifers that she knew his friends to be?

Looking back, she imagined him feeling worse and worse as each new child divided her attention more. Hadn't he in turn exiled himself more by disruption and domination? Whenever he had seen someone happily occupied, he intruded. When Daniel had wanted to play with some toy, Will had taken it away. When the twins collected pretty flowers, Will scattered them. He became a master of interruption, she recalled.

This was a topic that Mrs. Childs should have addressed—how to reassure one child of a mother's special love when five other children are clamoring for her attention. Tears filled Bridget's eyes at the thought of how she and Tom had both failed him. She couldn't discipline him, nor could Tom, until finally Tom took lost patience with him and put him to work, and wasn't it that work that had exposed him to the cholera? None of her other children had come down with it. Only Will. She had utterly failed him. She felt responsible for his death. None of her children would peddle in the streets again.

While Bridget reproached herself for her failure, Tom remembered every scolding he had administered to his son: "You'll learn how hard life is and maybe you'll appreciate the chance to learn." . . . "You've had your chance with me, Will. I've no time for you. You'll never make the grade as a cart man. You have to pay attention to what you're doing." . . . "You need to learn discipline, but I can't afford the time to teach you; you're losing me money." He remembered pleading with Will to value his education and how hurt he felt when Will had dismissed his argument with "What good did it do you?" And again, when he offered his son the choice of working by his side or by himself, he had been hurt by Will's answer: "By myself." He hoped that hadn't been punishing his son by putting him to work. How had Will felt when ordered to stand on the corner and sell matches? Had he really been glad that he was making money, or was he only proving that he wasn't the failure his father expected him to be? He would never have a chance to ask him. Of all the trees he and Bridget were planting, this one would never grow to maturity, never bear fruit. His only achievement in life was selling matches on a street corner of New York.

At the funeral Mass, the old woman's son with his wife and family sat on the left; on the right Tom and Bridget, Mark and Maggie with their children were joined by Brian and Nell and the Learys, as well as Peggy and her children and others from the boarding house. After Mass all the mourners processed out to stand together around the open grave. Father Starr read the prayers:

"May the angels escort thee to paradise, may the martyrs receive thee at thy coming and bring thee into the holy city Jerusalem. May the choir of angels receive thee, and with Lazarus, who once was poor, mayst thou have eternal rest."

'I am the resurrection and the life,' says the Lord; 'he that believes in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever lives and believes in me shall never die,'

*“The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters;
he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name’s sake.
Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me;
your rod and your staff— they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.
surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD my whole life long”.*

Bridget sobbed throughout the psalm. Every word seemed to refer to Will. She felt her grief lifting. Will had walked through the dark valley of evil, but the Lord’s rod had chastened him and brought him back and led him along the right path. Now his head was anointed; he was in green pastures and would dwell forever in the house of the Lord.

Lena took her mother’s hand and squeezed it while the priest sprinkled holy water over the coffins, saying,

“We therefore commit the bodies of William O’Shaughnessy and Mary Christopher to the ground--.”

The men lowered the makeshift coffins into the ground. Father took a handful of dirt from the pile beside the grave and scattered it over the grave, saying, .

“Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust; in the sure and certain hope of the Resurrection to eternal life.”

He indicated that others were to follow and Lena took a handful, tossed it in, saying “Goodbye, Will.” The other children followed her example.

As they were leaving the cemetery, Father suggested that Tom apply to the Ancient Order of Hibernians for aid. “They help when there’s a death, they take up a collection for a family in need.” Tom would have none of it. He didn’t want any charity; it irked him that he had to impose on Tim. But where could he take his large family?

Where indeed, but Chicago, Tom thought.

“Now’s the time, Bridget. Tommy is two.” She shook her head

“I’m not going to travel into the wilderness when I’m expecting another child.”

That was the first Tom knew that she was pregnant again.

It wasn't long before Mark declared that New York was "too big, too dirty, too unhealthy, not a good place for a man to put down roots and raise a family." He would head west. There was a Gold Rush out west and he was thinking of that, but Maggie refused.

"Do you expect me to face plains, mountains and deserts, not to mention Indians!"

Tom welcomed his brother's show of initiative. As long as Tom and his family were in their own rooms, Mark was content to hang on, but now that they were guests, living off friends, Maggie must have made him realize they were imposing.

"Go to Chicago, like you've been saying you would. No mountains, no deserts, no Indians, positively genteel." Tom would write to tell Mike of Will's death and Mark's decision. There was a big send off at the docks.

For a time, the epidemic affected everyone in the city. Even the Board of Health had briefly roused itself to open a few hospitals in public schools, but no one wanted to be near the sick, and the hospitals were so badly run that victims avoided them, preferring to die at home, where others were endangered by their presence. Nor were the streets cleaned of refuse that some thought helped spread the epidemic. The pigs continued to be the chief pick-up crews, but city reformers drove them from the city that year, so the streets were even worse. When contractors were hired, they moved the garbage to corner dumps where it remained for days before it was finally dumped in the river. The family had been lucky to have found a place for Will's body; many of the cholera victims were dumped into trenches outside the cities or piled in common graves in the "plague cemeteries."

As Lena's final year of school began for her, and the epidemic continued, she worried more about what it could do. It could carry off a family member overnight. Overnight it had carried off her own brother. Will's death had stunned her with its quickness and finality. In a big city, anyone might carry a disease. Anyone might catch it. There was no recourse. If Will could die, then Mama could die, and Papa. One night she dreamed Mama and Papa had been taken away—they weren't dead but had gone to Chicago to get away from the epidemic, leaving her alone to look after the rest of the children. She had to get them to Chicago. She gathered them with all they needed and they were standing at the river front where the steamer was about to leave for Chicago.

She struggled to speak, to let the captain know her plight—that her parents were waiting for her in Chicago. She wanted to beg him to take them on board the steamer. But no words would come out, she was mute; and the crowds shoved her aside. She struggled to make herself heard but all she could do was mumble. She felt as if she were under water. The boat pulled away without them. After that night she always had the feeling that she was responsible for them all—the only one they could turn to. She was going to get them all on that boat.

By the winter, the epidemic seemed to have run its course, after killing more than five thousand— forty percent of whom were Irish. Cholera would continue on and off for the next five or more years. Its continued presence was another reason that Tom gave when pressuring Bridget to leave New York and when postponing moving to another apartment. The steady Irish immigration was another reason he wanted to leave. “There’s less and less work.”

Bridget had too much on her mind to think of moving again. When the children were in bed in the evenings, she continued to make the shirts, which sold steadily in Tim’s shop. The holidays were joyful and with the Learys, they celebrated the beginning of a new decade. It was 1850!

By March, another son was born. Lena insisted that he be named George Washington. “We already have the second and third presidents. Can we ignore the first?”

Having a new child, and without Maggie, Bridget asked Lena to stay home from school to help with the children. Lena was had only a few months of school left—she had learned as much as she could, given the hectic home life of the last years, feeling fortunate to have read as much as she had in her favorite subjects—history, literature, geography. She didn’t begrudge the loss of these final few months, though she would miss the final tests and might not receive her certificate.

“Do you want me to quit school and go to work too, Papa?” Dan asked. As he was already older than Will had been when he had quit and gone to work.

“I haven’t thought about that yet, son. Finish this year—it’s your last, isn’t it anyway? Then we’ll talk about it.”

Tim brought home some startling news from the Daly’s: Mrs. Daly had moved out, taking Will (16), Molly (11) and Charlie (6). She was staying with her mother. “There was another woman—an actress,” the servants had heard, though servants’ gossip was frequently wrong. Bridget hoped that wasn’t true. She

knew little about actresses but remembered how Mr. Daly had blamed her for taking his wife to that concert hall, where women were actresses and dancers, and waitresses. Since that time—five years ago, she hadn't been allowed to visit the Daly's home. Now she resolved that she would visit her friend at her mother's house and share her grief. Each woman had suffered a devastating loss. She would be needing the support of an old friend at a time like this.