

The Children's Ward · Jane Cooper

I

NANNY WAS IRISH, I told my mother, *born* in Scotland. Her sister was Head of Ladies' Ready To Wear at the biggest shop in Greenoch. Her oldest sister that was, there were nine in the family. The youngest of all was Our Joseph, not much older than me, and when the little princesses visited Greenoch, Nanny went to see them, along with all the other people lining the streets, but they couldn't hold a candle to Our Joseph. Nanny took care of me because once before she had taken care of a little boy who was sick the same way I was. So she understood my diet. "Poor wee thing," she would say and tell how one day somebody brought her a box of chocolates and the boy took some, which of course he wasn't supposed to do, and when he heard her coming he sat down on the box and squashed the chocolates flat. But when she caught me lifting icing off my sister's birthday cake, I was spanked. "This hurts me more than it does you," Nanny would say, her wrists like steel, while I screamed. Yet she looked back on that boy with tenderness. "Poor wee lamb"—and she explained how with the disease we had you were supposed to die before you were seven. "And did he die, Nanny; Is he dead now?" But I never found out.

Curds without whey—four times a day Nanny put the junket through the ricer and squeezed it dry—bananas, the lean of bacon, protein milk that tasted like chalk. I was standing holding up my glass and crying. I cried all the time now, every morning playing with the other children I would start to cry. My grandmother's stylish heels clicked across the floor. "Here Junebug, it's not as bad as all that, I'll show you." She took a gulp, puckered up her lips and rushed out into the hall. Nanny handed the glass back to me. "Drink up," she said, out of patience. "If you don't drink your milk like a good girl, we'll be planting daisies on your grave by August."

There was a woman in their town who lost all five sons in the War, and when the Armistice came and they had the big parade, she closed her window shades and refused to watch. I imagined how that house looked, small, between two taller houses, with black shades. I liked the stories about Our Joseph better. And how they all slept together in the one big

bed. I used to wake up early and see Nanny lying in the other half of our bed, her nose pointing to the ceiling, her firm chest rising and falling under the saint's medal and small gold cross. "When Father says *turn*," she would command, "we all turn."

God knew Nanny would have saved my life if she could, but since there was apparently no saving it, she did her duty. Her duty was to see I didn't die any sooner than I had to and make sure I got to Heaven when I did die. So I had *A Child's Tales from the Bible*, in red and gold, every night and "The Catholic Hour" over the radio on Sundays. All day I looked forward to bedtime. My favorite was Moses in the Bulrushes. Fancy finding a live baby floating in a nest down our river, the way Pharaoh's Daughter had! But I hated Abraham. In the picture he held the knife over Isaac's head and Isaac looked terrified; the ram bleated in the bushes. When I had been really sick, lying on my back in bed with a swollen stomach, someone brought Harriet to visit me. Harriet was three, a year younger than me. Over the curve of my huge stomach, I could just see her wedged between the foot of the bed and the wall. She was carrying a present for me but was too scared to budge. After she had gone Nanny said, "Harriet's a Jew." "What's a Jew?" I said. "They're God's chosen people." A few days later I announced, "I'm going to be a Jew." "You can't"—Nanny stopped folding—"you have to be born one." "Can't I ever?" I thought about Harriet's curls and dark, reproachful eyes. She was the most beautiful child I had ever seen. I wanted to be chosen more than anything.

"You have to learn to read now you're five because I learned to read when I was five," said Isabel importantly. I was squeezed into the old highchair because I liked looking down on things; no one used it any more. "No, I don't," I said, "nobody has to learn to read till they're six." At eight, Pen was still learning. Besides, I didn't want to keep growing older this way. The other children raced up and down the room. Nanny burst in, her hands still red from the soapsuds. "There," she declared, plucking me out of the highchair, "can't you see you've gone and made Jane cry again?" "I didn't, I didn't," protested Isabel, "you're unfair." "Don't be impertinent," said Nanny—she pronounced it *impairtinent*. In her arms I was crying harder, leaning my head into her white, starched

shoulder. Pen and Isabel must hate me. Even when the circus came to town, on its way north from winter quarters, they might not get to go for fear they'd bring home another germ.

But the first night I got sick Pen had been excited. We were in our small summer house then, where I used to stand up in my crib to watch the mountains and the long black freight train hooted out of its tunnel in the clear evening light. I was perched on the toilet; a bare light bulb burned against the wall. Pen danced across the bathroom, shrieking and laughing. "There goes the King!" he shrieked. "There goes the Queen!" That was an old game we had, whenever a bad thunderstorm hit. Pen played chess, and he liked to pretend the thunder was giant chessmen falling off the board of Heaven and rolling around on the ground. But tonight the thunder was my farts. Bent over on the toilet seat, queasy and trembling, I hurt with laughter because of Pen. My brother's wiry body flashed by. A shadow jerked up the wall. "There goes the Queen!" I shouted wildly. "There goes a pawn!"

Then I was lying in bed with my stomach puffed so high I couldn't bear to sit up even against pillows. I hurt all the time. My mother read *The Water Babies*. Every time she got to the last page and shut the book I would demand to hear it over again, right from the beginning. Poor Tom, dirty and miserable, sank underneath the river and the whole husk of his body was washed away, and soon he was clean and shining, no bigger than Daddy's thumb. My father blocked the light in the bedroom door. We stared at each other. Then the doorway was empty, he had left without saying anything. "He can't stand to see anybody sick," said my mother to my aunt, in a voice I wasn't supposed to catch. My aunt began to sing to me so my mother could go lie down. Far away the black freight train hooted. "She'll be comin' round the mountain when she comes," sang my aunt.

When we finally traveled north it was on a long black train. We had a drawing room on the Southern Railway. The trip took two nights and a day. I sat with my legs straight out in front of me and looked out the window. Every once in a while I would push the green plush of the train seat the wrong way—dark-light, dark-light; then I would peer around at my mother. What should I talk to her about? For months I had been with almost no one but Nanny.

Every Sunday the two of us would dress to go to Mass. Under the tent of her white cotton nightgown Nanny would mysteriously draw on first her underclothes, then her long, best silk stockings. Then over the top went her best striped silk dress, and the nightgown fell down in a little puddle at her feet. She fastened the neck of the dress with a cameo brooch, slipping the medal and gold cross inside. Then she would dress me. Daddy would drop us off on his way to his own church, where he was a vestryman. By this time I had a medal of my own—St. Teresa, carrying a sheaf of lilies. The Little Flower was Nanny's special saint. That was her middle name, Teresa, after Bessie. Nanny had said I could have St. Teresa for my special saint, too.

Out of respect for St. Paul, Nanny always wore a dark, short-brimmed felt hat which she pulled down almost to the tops of her fiercely blue eyes. I had to wear a bonnet with a snap under the chin that scratched. At the door of the church she would dip her fingers in the scalloped shell over my head and cross my forehead with holy water. The water dropping into the stone shell made a pleasant tinkling sound.

I loved the inside of that church. It was large and dark, like a cave, and you couldn't say anything, but still it was always warm with the rustle of skirts and prayer-book pages and the low groans of old men getting up off their knees. As Nanny leaned forward to pray, I would look up at the reds and blues of the stained-glass windows or try to find through the rows of bodies the pink dress of the plaster saint stretching out her hand from the side aisle. Then the priest would start to chant, little bells would ring, and the church would fill up with the smells of all the different people and the stuffy, interesting smell of incense shaken out by a boy. Above me Nanny's profile was stern but not angry, and I knew she was praying for her brothers and sisters at home, for her father who never made more than two pounds ten a week, and also for the young man she had come over to this country to meet. He had paid her way out, but as soon as she saw him standing on the dock she knew they could never marry. So she went back to being a nanny. The priest in his gold or green or purple cape lifted his hands to the sky. Before him on the altar was a large gold cross. At home we had a black cross with a twisted Jesus hanging over the bed where we slept; there were nails through His feet and the blood

ran down, and on His head was the crown of thorns.

One day the side aisle was crowded with children. Their mothers were trying to line them up two by two and making shushing noises. The boys had on dark blue suits, some even wore long pants, but I couldn't take my eyes off the girls. They were dressed in white, like little brides, and on their heads were white veils fastened with wreaths of daisies or wax orange blossoms. Each one carried a bouquet in a white paper ruffle just like a real bride. Nanny had a friend in Greenoch who became a nun—bride of Christ, she called her. Were these the brides of Christ? "Wouldn't you like to make your first Communion?" whispered Nanny. "But you have to be seven. The age of reason," she added practically.

Nanny took the hairbrush to me. "This hurts me more than it does you," she was almost crying. I had been standing by the ironing board. "Go to the bathroom, Jane," she said. But I wouldn't go. And then I couldn't hold it in any longer, shameful and brown it poured down my legs. The hairbrush hissed through the air. I got down off the bed again stiffly.

I hated Abraham. "Disobedient!" proclaimed Nanny. But was it Abraham's fault or God's? How could God ask Abraham to kill his only son if He loved him? And how could God let His own Son die? I stared and stared at the twisted Jesus hanging over Nanny's side of the bed. There were nails through His hands, too.

In Isabel's room hung the picture of Paradise. Little boys and girls in yellow and red and blue dresses were standing holding flowers, while lambs and rabbits and sparrows played about their feet. "He prayeth best who loveth best," Isabel read to me from the borders, "All things both great and small." On Pen's wall was the face of a tiger, coming out from among reeds at a water hole in Africa. I never went into Pen's room now if I could help it.

My sins were crying, lying and not wanting to go to the bathroom. "Don't touch yourself, Jane," Nanny pursed up her lips in disgust. One day she said to me, "If you don't stop touching yourself, we'll have to take you to the hospital and get it cut off." I screamed with terror. For a long time I wouldn't stop screaming. Nanny still had all her own teeth. And she had a right to feel proud of them, they were so white. "Soot and salt," she declared—who could afford toothpaste? Their father had taught

them all to reach right up the chimney. I watched her smile in fascination. How could anything so white come from anything as dirty as the fireplace? Was this what the priest meant when he said our sins would be washed whiter than snow?

Nanny went up to Communion. She always did that, leaving me alone in the dark wooden pew. But today I felt tired. The people shuffling back down the aisles seemed farther away than usual; the murmur of their prayers was like the sound of the river out our dark bedroom windows on a still winter's night. Nanny was bending over me. My face was cold with sweat. "You fainted," she said with concern. I was surprised to find myself lying in the pew as if it was our bed; a man's jacket lay across my knees. "Poor wee lamb." Daddy came to fetch us, looking worried. Tenderly she carried me out to the car. But after that I couldn't go to church any more, I could only have the Bible stories at bedtime.

"Jane, Jane, Go to Spain, And never come home again!" they chanted at a birthday party. But would I go to Heaven or Hell? I felt very tired. I was standing beside the table where the others were already eating their ice cream and angel food cake. At my place was a bowl of curds.

It was the Depression. But fortunately Nanny's mother had always been a good manager. When nobody else ate liver, she got it off the butcher for dog scraps and they all made a good meal. Not one of them had ever missed a day at school or on the job because of illness. With relish Nanny told how her older sister lost her first post in the hat department in Glasgow. "What you need, madam," Agnes talked back to the customer, "is not a new hat, it's a new face."

Even though it was the Depression, we could still have our new Easter dresses. Mine was to be yellow, with baskets of flowers on a white path down the front. But to wear it, I had to get through the Crucifixion. "Away in a manger, No crib for His bed," we had sung at Christmas-time. Now Jesus was the Lamb of God caught by His horns in the bushes. He was betrayed and whipped and they mocked Him and hung Him on the cross saying, "This is the King of the Jews." And they gave Him vinegar to drink. And after He was dead one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and blood and water ran out. And doubting St. Thomas

had to thrust his hand into Our Lord's side to make sure He was risen. How could he do that?

All during Lent we read these stories about Jesus. Nanny had no use for people who gave up things for Lent, like my grandmother. When you were really poor, she said, what was left to give up? It was better to show devotion.

I woke up crying. Nanny fussed a bit but brought the water. Then she climbed back into bed and turned her shoulder on me, so as to get back to sleep. I watched the white mound of her body in the thin crack of light from the bathroom door and listened to the slap-slap of the river against the pilings below the house. How could God let His only Son die? And how could Jesus, if He loved me, possibly let me die and go to Hell? After all I was only a child. I tried not to think of the face of the tiger gleaming through the dark from Pen's wall. At any moment he might bare his fangs. Other little animals came down to the water hole, Pen said, and the tiger lay in wait for them.

But suppose there was no Hell? How could God send anybody to Hell if He loved them? Jesus even loved the thief on the next cross. I was almost asleep now. I decided God couldn't have created Hell, there was no room for it.

On Easter morning the sun shone beautifully. Isabel and Pen and I put on our new clothes and were driven through the white streets to our grandparents' house for the big Easter dinner. "Liked a picked chicken," one of the uncles said, seeing me in my yellow dress. But Nanny told me I looked a picture. Seated on the high cushion facing my glass of protein milk, I felt high and far away above the rest of the table. The sun shone in on the colors of their new dresses and newly washed hair. Jesus loved me. But today it hardly mattered. For if everybody bad and good went to Heaven, what was the point of being good? There was no Heaven. You died, and that was that.

III

"Take her north to a doctor you can trust. She's dying, and you're dying watching her." That's the way my mother told the story to my aunt, after my father brought home the first real cash he'd been paid in over a

year and laid it on the dresser. Never had he worked so hard, complained my mother, but it was because everybody was going bankrupt. We were in Schwartz's toy store. I couldn't make up my mind between a doll with a whole trunk full of clothes and a cardboard village that had a church, a town hall with a star over the front door, a castle, and a lot of horses, sheep and pigs. Finally my mother said I could keep them both. I couldn't believe it. At home we almost never had new toys. Back in the hotel bedroom she helped me pile up the pillows to make snow-capped mountains. On the top peak stood the castle, down below was the church, and on the green blankets over my knees I arranged the little cardboard houses where people really lived, which I liked best of all. But I still couldn't think what to talk to her about. There were three men and three women in that village. One of the women had no hair and a very red face. She looked bossy, and I decided she had no children of her own. She could take care of the pigs.

The nurse in the waiting room called me "she," though I was standing right there. "But she didn't cry," the nurse kept saying stubbornly to my mother, turning the white-rimmed barium glass round and round in her fingers. "Are you sure you didn't just pour it out? They always cry."

He was not stooping or kneeling down to be at my level. Instead he had put his large square hands under my naked armpits and lifted me up to stand on the examining table. From where I stood I could look directly into his blue eyes. He had white curls all over his head, and I thought that was why he was called Dr. Kerley. Naked, I regarded him with trust. "You know," he said at once, "you're going to be all right." How could he understand all that I had felt? He told me before he told my mother.

IV

My mother didn't want to leave me alone on the ward but I was delighted. Every day while we shared the small room at the hospital I would creep down to the end of the hall and peer in at the ward door and wonder about the children who lived there. Those children were old campaigners. They could tell the names of the various diseases and how they affected you. Frances, for instance, was an epileptic. That meant you fell

down in fits. Frances was very pretty, and I used to love to lie and watch her still profile through the thin cheesecloth curtain that at rest hour divided our two cots. She had long, pale braids, and when she sat up they slid silkily down her back. Frances was almost nine and rarely smiled. After a while I decided she would not get better. You could usually tell.

For over a year I had weighed 42 pounds. Because of the diet my second teeth might not come in with enamel. But I didn't have celiac disease, all I had to do was stay in the hospital and learn how to eat again. Dr. Kerley stood at the foot of my cot, my mother was perched on the side. But I wouldn't look. I held the brimming spoonful up so that it sparkled under the bedside bulb. It was my first real supper—cornflakes, with sweet, thin cow's milk.

The nurses on our ward never felt sorry for anyone. That was what was grand about them, they treated us just like ordinary children. Every morning at 6:30 they would wake us by switching on the harsh overhead lights and wiping our faces with grainy washcloths soaked in cold water. Then we had to wait a long time before they brought up breakfast. "Happy birthday, Jane!" announced the chief nurse, setting down across my knees with a thump a tray that had a green cardboard cake on it. Out of the cake came a sunburst of yellow ribbons, and at the end of each ribbon was a small green box. At last I was six. I turned my shoulder on the rest of the ward. Secretly I opened the first box. Inside was a tiny wooden tea set with red trim. As I balanced the long line of cups and plates down the longer line of my sheeted leg, I pretended they were overflowing with chocolate ice cream, cornflakes and angel food. That night I asked the nurse please to tie up all my presents again, so I could have the same birthday tomorrow morning.

The baby with tubes lay on one side of the hall door and Billy was on the other. They were the youngest children on the ward. Billy was only two and a half. The baby slept most of the time, and the tubes curled out from under his white knitted crib blanket and fell in a red garland to the floor. It was rumored he had kidney trouble. My cot was in the far corner, safe between Frances and the wall.

Once a week we were taken up on the roof to listen to stories. There

we would be joined by groups of children from other wards, and crippled children would be wheeled in by their nurses in special chairs or carried on portable beds. It was sunny and crisp on the roof, and as you stepped out of the elevator you could see a great sweep of sky, blocks of apartment buildings with a few trees down below, and in the distance the glittering river that was still not as wide as our own river at home in Jacksonville. The storyteller wore a long, flowing robe and had an unusually sweet voice, and we would all sit or lie or stand listening while she recited fairy tales and sometimes sea gulls or a pigeon flew by overhead. My favorite was *Boots and His Brothers*, where the third child that everyone thinks is stupid grows up to win the princess by kindness or good luck.

One day when we came down off the roof and were crowding through the ward door, we discovered the baby had been taken away. His crib looked flat and white, and the bunch of red tubing was gone from underneath. "Gone for an operation," said the brisk young nurse who was folding his crib blanket. But he never came back. We all knew he must have died, though someone argued he could just have been put in a private room because he was so sick. Soon his place was taken by a cheerful girl with one leg in traction. They had run out of bed space in the bone and joint pavilion downstairs.

"Nurse-ah. Nurse-ah. Nurse-ah." The whole place smelt like a zoo. There was the smell of fear, the warm animal smell of sleeping bodies, and the sharp stink of hospital disinfectant coming up from the floor and the sheets. Billy had started it. He had waked up wanting the nurse and no one was on duty. She must just have stepped down the hall. By the time I woke up, everybody was shouting or crying. The ward was almost dark, and it took me a few moments to make out Billy clinging to the bars of his crib and beating on the top rail with his fist. Billy couldn't talk clearly yet and he was shrieking in panic. Nobody could get over the bars of their own beds to help him. I sat up, then I stood and leaned over the high end of my bed and kicked at the bottom railing with my bare foot. We all began to pound the rails with our hands. The smell grew heavier. Gradually a rhythm was pounded out, and together we began to shout as loud as we could for Billy: "Nurse-ah! Nurse-ah! Nurse-ah!" At last we could see flashlights coming down the hall, sending slanted shadows

toward the ceiling as they got closer. Then the overhead lights glared on, and three nurses started fussing through the ward, telling the children to lie down and tucking us in with strict tightness. One of them picked up Billy, who was soaked through. Almost at once he fell asleep with his head on her shoulder. But I couldn't sleep for a long time, think-of how we had all called together to save Billy.

I fell in love with George. George was a tall, well-built boy of seven, with a fleshy jaw and brown hair that started straight up from his forehead. All that was wrong with him was that he was waiting for another operation on his harelip. We were two of the well ones now, and every day we spent a lot of time together on the sun porch, building towers out of blocks, eating jello at a low table, or chasing each other around the room. "Be quiet, Jane. Now do be quiet, George," the nurses had to say, as we laughed and scuffled. Once they even had to separate us while we were wrestling, pulling George off from on top of me by the back of his blue shirt collar. Another day George was sitting in the big red fire engine pedaling hard and I was sitting on the back and he drove straight through the ward where our cots were and out the door to the hall and ran into the legs of Dr. Kerley. We ricocheted off the wall then, and both of us fell out laughing. When my mother came to visit, she was shocked to find I had learned to talk just like George. That was harelip language. There were hardly any consonants, only animal noises, and the lilt of true sentences running up and down. George and I always talked that way. It was our secret code to fool the nurses.

It was getting cold. Soon it would be time to go home. My mother came to visit, bringing with her a pair of brown leather leggings outgrown by my northern cousins. She got permission to take me for a walk outside the hospital, and together we set off down the strange city streets. At home I was used to grass and trees, so I stared at the gray, flashing pavements. Then I was leaning against an iron railing, looking down on ranks of boys in gray uniforms who marched and gestured rapidly with their hands. My mother kneeled down next to me and took my body in her arms. "They're deaf and dumb boys, darling," she said. "It's the deaf and dumb school. Those poor boys can't hear anything, and so they have to learn to talk with their fingers." I examined her face in surprise. Her eyes had blurred with tears. Then I pulled away a little and

slipped one hand out of its glove, experimentally. It certainly was a cold day not to be able to wear gloves. Over the curve of my mother's shoulder, I looked down at the boys again where they wheeled and beckoned without a sound from across their paved field. But didn't she know we all had something?