

Brief Permission Granted

Mary Catherine Murray

It had been the twenty-first of March of that year. With the advent of spring, the lawns and gardens in Wicklow were just beginning to respond to the warmer temperatures. The natural world was racing forward for its appointed rendezvous with summer.

But before Rosemary O'Loughlin could move forward in her life, there was one very important thing that she wished to do; Rosemary knew well that she could do it only once, that she would have to accept the time given her, and that this permission granted would have to last the rest of her life.

That Sunday had been very breezy, very cloudy, and a bit chilly. Rosemary was still dressing, but was nearly finished. Someone had come to the door, and she could hear two voices clearly, the sounds travelling up the stairs in the small flat.

'That is Jack downstairs with Emmet' she thought. He must have come up early in the morning. It seemed that another postal anecdote from the Bray office was making the rounds.

'So, Emmet,' Jack was saying, 'Father Hale had come down to tell me of a box that would be arriving from the North. Very important theological books and rare Bibles, he told me. Gave me all kinds of detailed instructions on where to find him when they arrived.

So, I was on the watch, anyway, for these books. When the lads told me the box was there, I had a look and rang Father Hale myself this morning.

'Father Hale', I said, 'it's Jack Murray here. I just wanted you to know that your books have arrived from Antrim. I knew you'd probably be wanting to start the studies immediately', I told him.

'Good, good, excellent!' he was saying. 'Bring them over to me, will you?'

'Well, Father,' I said, 'unfortunately there's a bit of a problem.'

'What's that?'

'Actually, Father, your books are leaking.'

Jack with this sentence lost his capacity to speak, the words gone in an uncontrollable explosion of laughter. Emmet was no better, and Rosemary could hear the

sound of his teacup being set down quickly on the kitchen table. He was undoubtedly laughing too hard to hold on to it any longer.

Rosemary smiled. The two had been carrying on like this since they were babies sharing a garden.

When Jack had recovered sufficiently to continue, he added, struggling to get the words out, 'The other end of the line was dead silent. So, I said to him, 'Father, you'd better ring Dr. Kennedy and tell him that there will be a problem with the biblical refreshments at the cards on Saturday night.'

As the last sentence drifted up the stairs, Rosemary felt an electric shock of pain in her stomach and caught her breath. Emmet was no longer laughing and Jack was remembering that he needed to cut his grass before it rained. She closed the bedroom door.

Picking her way carefully around all the boxes packed for London, she then sat down at the dressing table mirror. She hovered just on the brink of being late. Her short dark straight hair was smooth and well-brushed, but her hazel eyes looked darker than usual and her skin paler. She hadn't slept well at all last night, and ever since rising that morning, it had been an effort to get her breath. But although she was still somewhat breathless, she could speak normally. She fervently hoped that this would allow her to get through the afternoon. She put on her small pearl earrings, arranged her hair once again, and adjusted the collar of her blouse. Perhaps it had been a mistake to choose a suit over a dress...perhaps her light turquoise wool would have been better than this severe navy suit...what about a brooch...?

Emmet called up the stairs. 'Are you ready, dear? We should be on time.'

Rosemary felt the familiar pain in her stomach again when she heard the word 'time.' She rose from the dressing table, collecting up her navy gloves and her bag. Now, where was her hat? She scanned the room quickly, her panic rising. There! On the top of a box. Through the inside wall, she heard the car door slam and the engine start.

She hurried down the front stairs and out the door. 'You look smart' he said to her from the car window, adding quickly, 'You look very well.' He had realised after a year of marriage that 'smart' was not a compliment.

Emmet reached for her hand as she got into the car. 'Don't be worried about a thing,' he said to her.

'But there is nothing to worry about.' thought Rosemary. 'I have agreed to be invisible.'

It was normally about forty-five minutes from Dublin to Bray. They made the journey quietly, Emmet knowing it would be useless to try to make conversation and Rosemary unable to speak because of all the fright and anticipation chasing each other round and round inside her head. As they drew closer and closer to the seafront, Rosemary felt her heart hammer ever more insistently against her ribs. It was only with great effort that she could even move.

They had by now passed through the centre of Bray, and were only a minute or two from the house. Rosemary gazed almost in a trance out of the window, and tried once again to control her breathing. High fine trees surrounded comfortable houses. Two freckled little girls, one dark-haired and one fairer, in navy plaid skirts, were playing with hollyhock dolls they had made on the pavement. A beautiful smiling baby with soft, curling brown hair was taking the air, pushed along in its pram by doting parents. A mother with a large multi-coloured ball played catch, her little girl rushing to retrieve it in a light pink playsuit.

'The house has large front windows, with a white Renault in the drive' said Emmet. 'There it is', he gestured, indicating a neat, comfortable house on the right. The white net curtains were arranged at right angles. The lawn and bushes were well-manicured. Emmet didn't want to be presumptuous enough to pull into the drive. He stopped the car on the street a little distance from the house, and took the key from the ignition. He put his hand again over Rosemary's as it lay on the seat. She took a deep breath.

'How are you feeling?' he asked kindly.

'I feel ill' she whispered, in so low a tone that he could barely hear her.

'You could reconsider even now.' Emmet's was the voice of reason.

'You don't have to go in, Rosemary. We could go home now...'

'No!' Rosemary woke suddenly, as though from a long sleep.

'I want to go in!' she said firmly. 'I will never, ever have another chance.'

'All right,' Emmet replied, 'it's your decision', and they both stepped simultaneously from the car.

The synchronised slamming of the two car doors made her wince, and it seemed as though the house then also moved in alarm, like a baby awakened from a deep sleep by an earlier-than-expected rousing.

She and Emmet followed the path leading to the house, and it was then that Rosemary thought she saw a sudden movement from the window. There were two small steps with a railing at the front door. It was Emmet that rang the bell, as Rosemary couldn't bring herself to do it. The overly-loud buzzing of the bell seemed to resound through the entire house, and Rosemary's courage seemed to desert her as she heard the keys turning in the lock. She had a sudden memory of Sister Mary Frederick, the keys jangling from her belt, handing her a small, insubstantial square envelope containing thin, almost transparent paper, the kind they offered in public libraries as scrap paper. The note had been very short, with no real explanation. Sister Mary Frederick's voice seemed to be swimming above her even now, as she remembered herself bent over the note.

'This is a story as old as the hills...', it sounded as if Sister Mary Frederick were repeating... 'and it seems this young man no longer has any interest and now he has left you on you own to deal with the disgrace...but, believe me, Rosemary, God hasn't left you and neither have we...'

Dr. Kennedy answered the door. 'Mr. and Mrs. O'Loughlin, please come in.' He was very courteous, but he didn't smile. Rosemary felt keenly the air of someone carrying out a business obligation, or perhaps he was also a bit nervous. He was a small man of dark complexion and wore a very crisply ironed white shirt, and a black waistcoat with large buttons. His manner was gentle but he took in everything around him.

As she and Emmet stepped through the front door, Rosemary realised that they were stepping directly into the main room of the house. which ran the length of the ground floor. The room was like an early daguerreotype in its furnishing, with many combinations of light brown and sepia, dark brown and green, with spare, well-made Edwardian furniture and lightly-washed watercolour prints on the walls. The air carried a mixture of scents; old books, fresh greenery, cigar smoke, furniture polish, sweet bread baking, and strong tea. The room was comfortable and furnished in good taste, but by no means ostentatious. It seemed to invite one to settle in, unnoticed. Walnut bookcases lined the far wall. Two small armchairs, one in a yellowish-gold print, and the other in gold velvet, a tea table, and an upright piano faced the front door. To the far left, a

staircase presumably led to the bedrooms, and to the right, a small chest of drawers with a mirror above it stood beside the front door.

'Please, sit down' said Dr. Kennedy, gesturing toward the armchairs. He himself pulled over a small red leather chair with wide arms. Starting to step over to the armchair, Rosemary's foot knocked against a tiny object glistening on the carpet. She bent down to retrieve it. It was a tiny pearl earring. She placed it on the chest of drawers. The lowest little drawer was slightly open. There was nothing on the top of the little chest but one small navy leather glove and a couple of hairpins. Suddenly, Rosemary heard a small scuffling in the kitchen beyond the larger room. It was like something being pulled quickly across a linoleum floor. She went rigid in all her limbs and had to force herself to sit down.

In the leather chair, with the tea table between them, Dr. Kennedy turned to Emmet.

'Not a bad day for driving.'

'Indeed' answered Emmet. 'We've been quite lucky for this time of year.'

Emmet's vocal cords appeared to be working normally, thought Rosemary. But he passed his hat nervously from hand to hand, and finally placed it carefully on his knee. Both Rosemary and Emmet were still wearing their overcoats.

Dr. Kennedy shifted his weight uncomfortably in the chair. There was an awkward pause.

'Would you like some tea?' Dr. Kennedy asked.

'Thank you very much,' Emmet replied quickly, glancing at Rosemary.

She only managed to nod and smile. Although arrangements had been made several days ago, she still felt unprepared.

Dr. Kennedy turned then, and called into the kitchen. It was an unexpected sound in such a quiet house.

'Catherine, could you come in?'

Quick as a flash, a little girl of about ten appeared beside her father's chair.

'Ten and a week and six days' thought Rosemary.

She was a lovely little child, keen to please her father and his visitors. She had a light complexion, with hazel eyes, closer to a violet green than brown. She had long

straight dark brown hair, well-brushed, which she wore in two plaits falling to each shoulder. Thin and very tall for her age, she wore what appeared to be a new dress, as Rosemary could see the deep creases running across the sleeves, where it had probably been folded into a bag. But there were no corresponding creases anywhere else in the dress as it had been ironed. Of beautiful quality, it was striped in turquoise and white. A matching hair band in cotton was tucked behind her ears.

'Catherine, can you say hello? This is Mr. and Mrs. O'Loughlin.'

'How do you do?' said the child politely. She was a bit shy, and held firmly to the arm of her father's chair, but she looked at both of them steadily.

'Catherine,' Dr. Kennedy continued, drawing the child up to him and around the chair arm, 'would we organise some tea for Mr. and Mrs. O'Loughlin? And then we will all sit down together.'

The child nodded, delighted to be treated as a grown-up, and scurried into the kitchen. There was a heavier, slower step heard on the kitchen floor, and the child was speaking to someone.

'Can you lift the tray by yourself?' he called to her.

'I can, Daddy' she answered him from the kitchen.

'Only the smaller tray,' a woman's voice added.

'I'll be bringing in the teapot, Dr. Kennedy. It is a bit too much for her.'

Catherine appeared a couple of minutes later with a round rosewood tray with brass handles, holding the cream jug, sugar, and her own glass of orange.

It was in fact a bit heavy for her. Rosemary sat forward instinctively, but Dr. Kennedy had risen and he placed his hand under the tray to guide it to the tea table; the child was still holding the handles, eager to show that she could do it. A stout woman in a red flowered dress and a full white apron followed her out with a larger tray.

The freshly-filled cream-coloured Wedgwood teapot stood steaming on the table. The Grecian cherubs in relief on its surface were covered in condensation and weeping bitterly, separated from the dancing ladies on the opposite side. The tray held three matching cups and saucers, and four neatly pressed yellow linen luncheon serviettes. A delicate porcelain plate, edged in gold with hand-painted violet pansies, held thickly-sliced buttered brack. This took up the last remaining space on the tray. But Rosemary couldn't eat.

The lady began to speak like a fast-flowing river.

'I hope you won't mind if I don't pour out, Dr. Kennedy. I have to get to the last mass... not normally baking on a Sunday, I hope I won't be late...my brothers were asking why I wasn't at home today, being a Sunday of course...if it is raining when we come out, I'll ask for a lift... but what will Mrs. Kennedy do if it rains? You could have knocked me over with a feather, out at this time, and little John will be wanting his lunch... she cares nothing for the outdoors, Dr. Kennedy, as you well know...

Dr. Kennedy got to his feet in a flash.

'Isabel, let me introduce you to Mr. and Mrs. O'Loughlin, who are visiting us this morning.'

Isabel, who loved nothing better than new faces, new pieces of news, and new opinions on her fresh brack, began to relax and looked with interest at the two visitors. She appeared to have put aside concerns over spiritual obligations for the moment.

'The gentleman I have seen before,' she said plainly, nodding toward him. 'I believe you are Donal O'Loughlin's son from Kilbride...Now, the lady...'

'Don't let us keep you, Isabel, we will delay you and we don't want you late for Mass. I'll open the door for you...'

'But who will answer the phone for you, Dr. Kennedy?' Isabel continued, looking over her shoulder at the two unknown quantities at the tea table.

'We'll manage somehow, Isabel. I'll ask Catherine to do it.'

'Yes, Daddy, I will do it for you.' the child said eagerly, while Isabel was saying simultaneously, in an incredulous tone, 'Catherine! Why, she's only a child! What if it is an emergency? Well, if I'm needed, I'll certainly stay...'

'I couldn't allow myself to be so selfish, Isabel, much as I appreciate your kind offer. I will ask your brother to bring you home from the church. See you on Monday. Thank you for everything.'

Dr. Kennedy closed the door firmly and sat down.

'His courtesy never seems to desert him,' thought Rosemary.

He reached for a spoon to stir the tea. 'I haven't much expertise at this', he said, colouring slightly, 'but hopefully the tea will end up in the cups.' He seemed grateful for the distraction that arrangement of the teacups seemed to bring.

Emmet looked at Rosemary as if to say, 'Modest enough, a fine surgeon worried about spilling the tea.' He clearly wanted Rosemary to offer to pour it out, since she had been given the afternoon tea shift at the Gresham Hotel for two years, but she

resisted. She did not want her attention distracted in any way. She ignored the ritual of pouring out the tea. She was trying to memorise looks, movements, expressions; just breathing in the same room was giving Rosemary a strong pain in her chest.

There was a small mahogany chair with thin, graceful arms in the corner near the bookshelves, and Dr. Kennedy pulled it over for Catherine. The child sat down politely, her hands folded in her lap like a lady-in-waiting at an official function. All the adults turned toward her.

'Tell Mr. and Mrs. O'Loughlin about school, Catherine,' said her father.

'What is the name of your school?' asked Rosemary

'Immaculate Conception' replied Catherine.

'Do you like school?' asked Rosemary.

'Yes' said Catherine, nodding.

'Are you in the fifth...'

'Yes,' said Catherine, anticipating the question.

'What's your teacher's name?' asked Rosemary

'Miss Wilkie' answered Catherine.

'How many children have you in your class?'

'I'm not sure.'

There was an awkward pause. Emmet cleared his throat.

'What do you want to be when you grow up?'

'I want to be as beautiful as my mother and read as many books as my daddy.'

'But this is not a profession, Catherine,' said her father, slightly sternly.

'Well, a doctor wouldn't be a good idea,' Catherine said, thoughtfully. 'Doctors work all the time, even on Sunday mornings, in the hospital with Father Hale. That's where my father usually is, until eleven o'clock. Why are you here, Daddy?' she said, asking impulsively and immediately, as children sometimes do, without waiting for a response. 'Or other doctors call them from houses for help with difficult babies... Dr. Halloran calls you, doesn't he, Daddy?'

'Once he did,' Dr. Kennedy agreed, 'for one very beautiful little baby, but he is a very good doctor on his own.'

'I understand that Mrs. Halloran is ill' Rosemary said quietly to Dr. Kennedy. 'Is it serious?'

'We hope Therese will recover,' Dr. Kennedy said gravely, 'but complete rest is certainly needed.'

'What was the problem?'

'Overextended kindness', replied Dr. Kennedy, smiling ruefully.

'She is certainly that ...' Rosemary spoke almost to herself. 'She did so much for me...please pass my regards to her.'

Catherine had turned her attention to Emmet. He was not accustomed to children and seemed to stiffen in their presence.

'What are you?' she asked him.

'What am I?' Emmet asked, confused.

'Yes', repeated the child. 'What are you? You asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. What are you? Are you a father?'

'Oh, no,' said Emmet quickly, colouring from embarrassment. 'I'm a stockbroker.'

'Not mutually exclusive,' quipped Dr. Kennedy, and the adults laughed.

He looked down quickly at his hat and looked up again, having regained his composure.

'I'm to work in London. We're leaving tomorrow.'

'Oh,' said Catherine, nodding sagely. 'That's hard work. Do you have Sundays off?'

'Yes, definitely' replied Emmet with relief, knowing these were questions he could answer.

Catherine had finished her orange in two gulps, as the adults were just starting to sip their tea. She had inhaled a slice of Victoria sponge in one breath, and a warning look from her father informed her that it would be lethal for her to reach for another.

She sat patiently, her hands again folded in her lap, waiting for the adult conversation to resume.

She was clearly waiting to be allowed to get up.

A very difficult thing for a child to do, thought Rosemary.

'Daddy, may I be excused?' she asked him quietly.

'Yes,' he answered her, 'but stay in the room with us.'

Rosemary tipped the rim of the teacup toward her face, watching Catherine wander over to the bookshelves against the far wall. Following her every move, Rosemary could just discern a photograph at the child's elbow, showing Catherine herself, a tow-headed, freckled little boy, and a very petite, fair woman with curling hair.

There was an awkward silence as the child wandered aimlessly along the bookshelves, occasionally pushing the spine of a book back into place. She then moved toward the staircase, where Rosemary saw a blonde bisque doll in a red Stewart tartan dress lying on a step. But she stopped in her tracks when her father called her over to him again.

'Would you play the piano, Catherine?'

The little girl sat down obediently at the piano. She played a short nursery rhyme and a simple Bach minuet. She did not do it out of enjoyment, but because she had been asked. Rising quickly from the piano, she approached her father's chair again.

'Very good, Catherine,' Dr. Kennedy said quietly.

Emmet had smiled at the little girl and murmured 'My goodness!'

Rosemary wanted to praise her as well, and it was only with the greatest of effort that she could will the words from her throat.

'You have a nice touch, Catherine' She smiled then at the child but Catherine was already at her father's knee and never saw the smile.

The little girl was becoming a little bit restless, Rosemary observed. She was looking longingly at the lawn outside. Dr. Kennedy could see this.

'Catherine,' he asked her, 'shall we sing something? Do you want to sing something you've learned in school?'

Rosemary was doubtful that the little girl would agree, but to her surprise, Catherine nodded.

'What will it be?' her father asked. 'Down by the Sally Gardens?'

She nodded again.

Her father began the first line, but her sweet, high voice was soon following. She stood with her back to him, the palms of her hands on his knees. Her love of the singing with her father overcame any self-consciousness about the presence of strangers.

As they moved into the second verse, Rosemary heard Emmet's voice begin as well. This was all the encouragement Dr. Kennedy needed.

'How about a second one? Good! Let Mr. O'Loughlin choose it.'

'Do you know 'Will you go, lassie, go?' asked Catherine enthusiastically.

'Yes, I believe I do.'

After three verses of this, all beginning 'I will build my love a tower' since the first line was eluding all the singers, Dr. Kennedy then proposed Fields of Athenry, which ended the impromptu concert, since the little group of three could not recall any of the lyrics to make the words rhyme. Catherine was relieved as her repertoire had already been exhausted.

Rosemary drank her tea as slowly as possible; the finishing of her tea would be the death knell of her happiness in this room, and she wanted to prolong it as long as possible.

Dr. Kennedy was then noticing a somewhat large grape-flavoured lollipop in the shape of a rabbit, wrapped in cellophane and stuffed in the pocket of Catherine's dress. The rabbit's head was clearly broken into two pieces.

'Was that me, knocking him off at breakfast?' he whispered, pointing at her pocket and looking at her closely.

'That's all right, Daddy,' the child whispered back, unconcerned. 'Don't worry; I can still eat him anyway.' She sat down again in her chair, and Dr. Kennedy leaned back on his seat cushion, smiling at her.

The child had been so patient. She went to him and whispered something, he nodded, and she moved toward the stairs and picked up her doll.

The room had darkened as the late morning sun slipped behind clouds and faded from the sky. Dr. Kennedy had finished his tea, but still held the empty cup in his two hands. Emmet was finishing the last of his tea with a loud swallow. He replaced his cup into his saucer a bit too loudly, Rosemary thought, giving it an air of finality. As Emmet lifted his hand off the cup, Rosemary felt an uncontrollable rage rising in her against him for this thoughtlessness.

Dr. Kennedy then set his cup into his saucer with a decided gesture. Placing his hands on his knees, he slowly stood up. Emmet reached for his hat. Dr. Kennedy turned and gazed out the front windows.

'I think the rain may hold off this afternoon. The clouds may clear.'

'No,' thought Rosemary, 'they will never clear.'

Emmet and Dr. Kennedy moved the few short feet towards the front door, one murmuring something about the next election results, the other the next days' weather forecast.

Catherine rose from the steps and moved toward them. She came to Emmet, leaning her cheek against his long legs. He went down on his haunches and gathered her up to his chest, smoothing her hair.

'You're a lovely little one, Catherine. Be a good girl and keep singing your songs.'

As Dr. Kennedy turned the key in the lock to open the door, Rosemary had a sudden image of the morning she had stood at her own door, leaving the farm at Killala in Mayo. Her father had been standing in front of her, turning the key, as Rosemary waited, holding her small suitcase. She was frightened; she had never been away from home before.

She had wanted to kiss her father good-bye, and had reached for his cardigan, turning one of the large wooden buttons round and round. Her father had pulled it carefully out of her hands and had opened the door...

Coming out of her reverie, Rosemary turned round, sensing that Catherine was behind her. Looking quickly at Dr. Kennedy, Rosemary put her hand out to Catherine. The little girl smiled briefly and put her hand into Rosemary's, but she left it there only a second and withdrew it quickly, as children often do.

'It was a pleasure to meet you,' Rosemary said, looking directly into the child's bright hazel eyes, the words catching in her throat.

'Thank you, come again' said the little girl, polite but distant.

Rosemary again found it difficult to catch her breath.

Dr. Kennedy cleared his throat.

Afraid her resolve would fail her altogether, Rosemary decided to hasten her already imminent departure. Looking very intently one more time at Dr. Kennedy, she touched his arm.

'Thank you very much.'

'Not at all,' he said simply, but his eyes were full of kindness.

Passing over the threshold and down the small steps, Rosemary walked down the path from the front door as quickly as possible. She could see nothing now but a blur of hollyhock bushes. She heard only the heels of her shoes clicking on the cement pavement. Going through the gate and down a bit, she and Emmet were then at the car. Emmet opened the door for her and then quickly got in on the other side. They had not been in the house an hour.

Little Catherine was still standing at the open door with her father. Dr. Kennedy lifted his hand, a last gesture to them as the engine started. As the car pulled away from the house, Rosemary took one glance back. It was then that she saw it; Catherine had reached for one of the large black buttons on Dr. Kennedy's waistcoat. She was twisting it round and round as she leant against her father. Rosemary watched them as if she wanted to imprint their silhouettes eternally on the surface of her mind, until they were out of sight.

Emmet, concentrating on his driving, leaned forward over the wheel and peered up into the sky.

'Dr. Kennedy is right', he said with forced cheerfulness. 'The rain will definitely pass over us. The clouds will clear.'

'Everything is clear for Dr. Kennedy,' Rosemary said slowly, her sadness so deep that it had altered her voice. 'But it will never be clear for me. Nothing will ever be clear for me.'

Emmet, also sighing in sadness, could think of no reply. He had a sudden memory of Father Hale during his schooldays, going through the Latin lesson, and repeating lines from Seneca. 'It is a wise man who perceives the truth and does not refute it.'

The remainder of the journey was passed in silence. Emmet and Rosemary both knew that this was necessary. The permission had been brief, but it had been granted. They would never speak of this afternoon again, so that they would be able to continue in peace with the rest of their lives, but Rosemary would remember always.

