

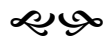
Prologue



The first entry in the diary of Emma Lucretia Miller Beck, age 38:

Sunday, July 28, 1895, 9:15 p.m.: A beautiful day, a lovely bright cool night, when wee baby first came, only 7 ½ pounds, but lively as a little cricket, for she had not been in this world three hours when she put her little fist in her mouth and tried to suck it, for she was so hungry. The moon which was bright and clear was in its first quarter, Mercury as Morning Star and Venus as Evening Star were keeping watch over baby: Days length fourteen hours twenty-six minutes.

Morning, Passion Sunday, 16 April 1933



Lillie stands at the top of the cellar stairs feeling for the light switch, which is just out of convenient arm's reach. When Charley Beck makes the conversion from gaslight to electric—what, almost ten years ago now?—the work crew includes one tall gangly fellow who installs the box in a spot that's just right for him and his rangy relatives. In this more compactly built household, folks have stumbled on the steps more than once trying to find that switch.

Lillie remembers herself as a little girl being wary of the cellar. Dank, with low ceilings, it holds more dark corners than she can keep an eye on during errands to bring up canned peaches or green beans. She can clearly picture herself creeping down the steps, scanning for signs of movement, even then knowing that whatever is down there will hold still, until she is fully in the trap, before springing it closed. Pausing near the bottom step, she would take a deep breath, and then dash for the shelves, grabbing what she'd been sent for and scrambling back up the steps, propelling herself with a little shriek into the kitchen, triumphant once again in her escape. Charley would look from behind his paper and say, "Back again so soon?" and Emma, accepting the jar of peaches, would tell her, "Darling, you shouldn't scare yourself like that. It's just the cellar," and then Charley again, "Yep, we haven't lost a child down there in years," and Mary or Emma or both would scold him for teasing her. Maybe, Lillie thinks now, her young self enjoyed manufacturing that fleeting sense of danger, knowing that the rest of her world was so dependably safe.

This morning she is thinking of her childhood, of all of their collective childhoods and lifetimes, arranged and safeguarded in the trunk that again sits open next to the parlor secretary. She's taking advantage of the empty house and the few moments to herself, over hot tea and soda crackers, to dip in among the letters and photographs, diaries, and other treasures. Any keepsake she retrieves, words or image, she already knows by heart, and part of the sweetness is enjoying the layers of memories each item has itself accreted over the years.

Up the Hill to Home

There are only a few minutes to sit, though, and when the tea is drained, it's time to start the day in earnest. Her nausea is keeping her home while the rest of the family attends Mass; she's had to clench her teeth and breathe hard as she marshals the children into readiness. But the housework never gets done just by wishing, so she takes the teacup and crackers into the kitchen and then steps out onto the spring porch for the washing machine.

In its off hours, the Easy Wash stays out of the way tucked into its own designated corner of the porch, near the big canning stove. When it's laundry time, though, the washer needs to be wrangled from the porch into the kitchen, a tricky maneuver that requires both muscle and coordination. The spring porch is an addition onto the back of the house, and it encloses the original concrete steps that lead from the back door. There never was a railing, but there's a gentle slope meant to shed rainwater. With just enough space between the back of the house and the top of the steps to roll the washing machine, it's crucial not to miss that corner with the outside wheel, or the Easy Wash takes a header down the steps and just as likely takes the hapless pilot with it.

Lillie gets enough momentum up to carry the washer across the threshold into the kitchen. She rolls it into place next to the sink and is just about to connect the hose to the faucet when she thinks to double check the water temperature. She opens the hot side and waits a moment, then another. Cold. A disappointed groan deflates her shoulders; in the rush to get everyone off to church, no one got the task to run down and turn on the water heater. Her hopes of getting at least one load of laundry done before breakfast evaporate. Now she rolls the Easy Wash back out to its corner of the porch, this time needing to check it from picking up too much speed on the downslope. There's nothing for it but to fit in an extra load or two between breakfast and dinner. In a household of thirteen, staying ahead of the laundry pile—washing, wringing, hauling, hanging, plucking, ironing, folding, putting away—is a nearly continuous activity.

Which is why Lillie is looking for the light switch, so she can make the trip into the cellar and belatedly turn on the water heater in time to have post-breakfast hot water. But her mind, wayward this morning, marches past laundry and breakfast and right back to the trunk in the parlor.

Over the course of nine pregnancies, Lillie develops her own little rituals in preparing for a new baby's arrival into the family. One of the first things she does is to have Ferd go up into the attic and bring down her memory box. In fact, she sometimes breaks the happy news to him by smiling and simply saying, "It's time to get the box again." For his part, Ferd responds with some combination of a smile or laugh, a kiss, and a sweeping, feet-off-the-floor embrace before he heads to the attic.

How funny to think that little more than a month ago she catches her reflection in the parlor mirror and stops for a moment, Tommy heavy on her hip, Bernie and Dorothy combatively playing keep-away on either side of her. As she fingers a streak of grey in her

hair, she says to no one in particular, “Look at how old I’m getting! It’s sad to think that soon I won’t be able to have any more babies.” And here she is, already starting through the box once again.

She thinks of the photo she has just been smiling over, taken since Tommy’s birth. What trick of nature causes the first five children to take so much after Ferd—tall, slender, with aquiline features—while the younger four are so decidedly from her Miller side—shorter, solidly built, round-faced? Will this next one complete the set?

Near the bottom step, with Lillie still distracted by the thought, a nail head lurking at the edge of the stair tread grabs the toe of her shoe. With no banister to catch, her arms pinwheel and her body twists as she tries to retain her balance, but her momentum continues to carry her forward. Two simultaneous thoughts go through her mind: *I need Dad to fix that before one of the children trips*, and *This is going to hurt*.

She lands hard and flat on her back, smacking her head against the concrete floor. The impact raises a great cloud of coal dust and other grime that, in the ensuing silence, swirls thickly in the shaft of light thrown by the electric bulb. Lillie watches it, unable for the moment to move or even breathe. Then, finally, she gasps hugely, pulling in as much air as her lungs can hold, eyes bulging, but still able to note with disembodied fascination how her breath has wheeled the flock of dust motes in her direction, like starlings streaming together in an autumn sky.

The spell begins to break. She hears a ragged gasping sound and realizes that she is listening to herself. Before she knows she can move, her arm draws up protectively over her belly, but her brain clamps shut against any forming thought. *Breathe* is all that it will allow.

She lies still for a moment, working to master her breathing, and then begins to take inventory. She starts by flexing and curling her fingers and toes, then the larger joints. She feels behind her throbbing head, but her hand comes away dry; she is not bleeding. Finally, Lillie sits up, which launches a coughing fit that hurts her ribs, and she concentrates on stifling it. She rolls to one hip and uses her hands to push herself first to her knees and then to her feet. She presses on her ribs—they seem sound—stretches her arms, and shifts her weight from one leg to the other. Gingerly, she takes one step and then another. It amazes her that not only is nothing broken, it seems as though she hasn’t even sprained anything. *It’s all right. Everything is all right*. Her head continues to throb, and she knows that she will be bruised and stiff. *Getting out of bed tomorrow is going to be a challenge*. But she laughs out loud in relief as she starts back up the stairs to the kitchen, triumphant in her escape.



“It was the silliest thing, Dad. I just caught my toe on a nail near the bottom of the steps and tumbled right down.” Charley Beck is the only other person in the household

who isn't at Mass, and he walks in from the garden before she's had a chance to get to the bedroom to change clothes and tidy up.

"Did you hurt yourself?" He looks her up and down, and takes her arm gently to turn her around; there is no trace of blood.

"Oh, I'm going to be sore, that's for certain, but everything still seems to be where it belongs. It's funny, though . . ."

"What is?"

"Well, it knocked the wind out of me for a minute, and now I can't seem to catch my breath again."

"Should I be calling Doc Cavanaugh to come take a look?"

"Oh, Dad, it's nothing. I'm fine. I just got my bell rung; isn't that what you used to tell me? And please don't say anything to Mother and Ferd, will you? I don't want them fussing at me."

He gives her a long look, then smiles. "Well, you'd better be fine, because you know I'll catch it from your mother if you pull up lame and I didn't say anything. And if you'd stop doing cartwheels on the steps, we wouldn't have to worry about any of this."

"Well, can you please fix the nail before anyone else goes cartwheeling down the steps?" She pauses and takes a deep breath, a hand to her side. "I need to go clean up before everyone gets home." At the threshold, she lets out a little laugh and looks back. "And while you're down there, can you please turn on the water heater? After all that, I completely forgot!"

By the time the children stampede back into the house after Mass, followed behind by Ferd and Emma, Lillie and Charley are finishing up breakfast preparations. After a quick kiss for Lillie, Ferd lugs the sleeping baby—solid at eight months and dead weight against his shoulder—up the long staircase to put him down in the crib, while Emma and Charley corral the stir-crazy and cranky children. The requirement to fast before the service means that everyone is ravenous by the time they arrive home. It is a challenge to quiet everyone down in their chairs long enough to say grace and to keep the boys from wolfing down all food within their reach.

Lillie is typically in the center of the throng, directing, commanding, or cajoling as the situation requires. At the moment, though, she is happy to leave much of that to the others. As Ferd lifts Jeanie onto the stack of books in her chair and swathes her in a dishtowel bib, Lillie sees Emma's silent look. Lillie gives her a weak smile and nods toward the soda crackers that are still sitting out on the counter. This satisfies Emma, who continues to ladle out scrambled eggs with a definitive smack of the metal spatula against each plate. "Frances, would you like to say grace?"

Francie, the beautiful child with golden hair, whose sweet nature matches her looks, blushes slightly with pleasure to be asked. She clasps her hands and bows her head, as does

the rest of the table, and she recites in a clear voice, "Bless us, oh Lord, and these, Thy gifts, which we are about to receive from Thy bounty, through Christ, our Lord. Amen."

"Amen," the room choruses, as everyone makes the sign of the cross, and the chaos of eight children at one table recommences.

Ferd clears his throat loudly, which does the trick of quieting the rabble. He looks at his eldest son and father-in-law's namesake. "What was the gospel reading today, Charley Boy?"

He is ready for the question. "It was John, talking about Christ and the Jews."

"And Johnny, what did your patron saint say about Christ and the Jews?"

"Don't you remember, Daddy?"

Charley snorts and Ferd shoots him a look before turning back to Johnny. "I do, as a matter of fact. I'm wondering if you do."

Margaret and Francie are both straining for the opportunity to answer; Eleanor knows just as well, but feels no need to show off.

"Margaret, please remind us what Saint John told us today."

"He said the Jews were accusing Jesus of being a liar and possessed by the Devil. They didn't believe anything he said, and then they threw stones at him."

"And so what did he do?"

"He went and hid."

Ferd looks meaningfully at Johnny, who squirms in his seat. "But, Daddy, she's the oldest. She remembers better."

"She has ears and uses them. You need to start doing that too."

Dorothy and Bernie look at each other, glad to still be too young to endure the Sunday breakfast catechism. Church is bad enough: being forced to sit still and quiet seemingly for forever in tight and itchy clothes, while the fearsome old priest stands with his back to everyone and talks in a strange language; and constantly standing, sitting, and kneeling for reasons that no one ever explains. After what seems like hours of this, it's finally getting close to the end when everyone stands up to get in the long, slow-moving communion line. At last at the front, the older kids and the grown-ups find an open place at the railing to kneel down, and it seems to Bernie that the priest must be saying, "Open wide and say *ahhh*," to make everyone stick out their tongues at him, just like the doctor does. One time, Bernie sticks out his tongue too, just like Emma is doing, and on the walk back to their seats gets a smack on the back of the head for doing it. Bernie finally asks Charley Boy—the brother whose explanations he trusts—what the priest puts on your tongue, and Charley Boy explains it's like a thin piece of cardboard, and you have to let it sit on your tongue until it's soft enough to swallow. If you chew it, you go to Hell. Also, if you eat before Mass, you go to Hell. If you miss confession, you go to Hell. If you eat meat on Fridays, or say bad words, or touch a girl who isn't your sister—the rules are endless, the

outcomes identical. Bernie decides he is going to figure out a way to never have to eat the cardboard.

Thinking about this makes Bernie fidget, and Lillie reflexively reaches out to still him, as she gets up and goes to the pantry stove to put the teakettle on again. Standing is better than sitting anyway, and from the doorway she can see everyone collected at the table. Even Emma is finally sitting down, if only for one minute. Ferd cuts Jeanie's sausage for her and tries to get her to use a fork instead of her fingers. Eleanor describes a recent tennis match to Charley, who chuckles at her description of wiping the court with some braggart who thinks that girls can't play.

"Charley Boy, eat your eggs; they're getting cold."

"I am, Gramal," Charley Boy says, though his plate of congealing eggs begs to differ. He has smuggled a pencil and paper to the table and is diagramming a math problem that's due tomorrow.

Lillie's mind wanders off again, back into the parlor, and burrows once more into the box. Earlier this morning she opens her old diary to the first entry, written just as Ferd is starting to wheedle his way into the fringes of her affection, and laughs out loud at the coincidence that it is dated on another Passion Sunday, eighteen years before. Eighteen years that seem like a heartbeat, and yet here they all are.

The kettle whistles behind her on the stove, and she realizes that chairs are pushing away from the table as breakfast finishes. Charley leans back with a pick in his teeth, and pats his stomach with a sigh, content. "Thank the Lord for that small morsel. Many a poor devil would call it a meal."

