

Excerpt from *Dorothy, This Side of the Rainbow* by Vincent Begley
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With only a few days remaining before Grace and I sailed for Europe, I had my work cut out for me. I had to see if I could find Richard and Conor.

“Stay in New York. Look for your brothers,” Grace said. Her tone was more than just suggestive.

“That could take weeks, even months. What would I live on?”

Grace proposed an ingenious plan. The money that would have been spent on my passage to and from Europe would be given to me to cover my living expenses in New York. My objections to such a plan were met with vociferous resistance. Grace was very direct with me. The conditions in Eastern Europe were not hanging in the balance waiting for me to arrive and set things straight. She then echoed the same sentiments Aunt Mary had imparted to me when she told me there was only just so much one person can do in the world.

“The future of mankind,” Grace counseled me, “is going to be written by many people. It has to be a collaborative effort if it is to have any impact. You needn’t think you have to be the sole author. Follow your heart. Find your place and write your part in the great drama.”

Grace sailed for Europe without me on March 25th, and I checked into a woman’s boardinghouse on West 21st Street that same afternoon. Since it was too late in the day to do any searching, I decided to explore the Washington Square neighborhood where I had been born. I paid close attention to the pavement beneath my feet. I think I must have taken a dozen pictures of the extant section of cobblestones in the belief that those very blocks of granite had been tap-tap-tapped into place by my father.

How many rushing feet, how many clopping horse hooves, how many twirling carriage wheels, and how many galvanized rubber automobile tires had made contact with the stones my father had labored to put in place? The number was probably incalculable. And that’s the way it should have been because time and progress marched on. Still, I felt a tinge of melancholy wax over me as I stared down at those cobblestones, knowing that the people who traversed those streets never gave a fleeting thought to the men who paved the way for them. To them it was just a street. To me it was a memorial to my father, a testament to his short life in the big city of his dreams.

Had I not been spending so much time looking at the ground below on Astor Place, I’m sure I would have paid closer attention to the sound of a muffled explosion and the clouds of bilious gray and black smoke rising in the air north of me, before I was almost trampled by a throng of people rushing by. From the way they behaved, you would have thought they were rushing to a circus or the fair grounds . . . not to the scene of a fire.

God knows I was not prepared for what I saw. By the time I arrived at the scene, the first of the pump engines had pulled up to the corner of Washington Place and Greene Street, the location of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company. I looked up at a window ledge on the eighth floor and saw what I thought was a bolt of emerald green fabric come flying out. Only when a burst of air unraveled the fabric did I catch the shape of a young woman, her long black hair in flames. She was the first of dozens of young women who escaped the hell inside for certain death on the street below.

People started screaming. Frantic firefighters, who were standing on the top rung of the

ladders that reached up only to the sixth floor, were begging the women not to jump. They ignored the screams and pleas, and holding hands they started coming out the windows in twos and threes. The life-nets were no match for the impact of the falling bodies. The bodies tore right through the ropes, crashing lifeless to the pavement, and some that fell on the glass deadlights set in the sidewalks, crashed through to the basement of the Asch Building.

The high-spirited group that had fought its way to the front was quickly sobered by the sight of dozens of lifeless bodies strewn about the pavement. In less than eighteen minutes the fire was brought under control. When the death toll was tallied, some 146 workers, mostly young immigrant women, had lost their lives in the conflagration that Saturday afternoon, or a few days later in area hospitals.

The wailing sound of the sirens had been replaced by the wails of the onlookers and the survivors who began calling out the names of friends and family members. I took one picture after another, focusing on the living and the dead.

After taking a picture of a charred red shoe with a broken heel, I turned away from one of the blanket-covered bodies and saw one of the fire fighters kneeling beside one of the victims. He was crying. As he turned in my direction I snapped his picture. His smoke-blackened face was streaked with lines. Tears were dripping off the end of his quivering chin. There was an expression of utter helplessness on his face. It caused me to shiver.

The fire fighter turned and began walking away. I called out to him. "Please. Tell me your name."

Over the mournful wail he sobbed. "My name? My name is Richard Cassidy."

TWENTY

Another case of curious coincidence, or was my miraculous reunion with my brother one more example of divine intervention? Whether you side with those who say it was kismet or with those who are more inclined to believe it was serendipitous, I believe Richard and I met at that place and at that time for reasons that defy human understanding. The creative force that was at work at such a catastrophic time did not escape my detection. While Richard and his fellow fire fighters continued the grim task of covering the bodies of those women who had thrown themselves from the burning building, I continued recording the event with my camera.

While I couldn't put the tragic event in perspective at the time, I later believed that the horror that took place on that cold afternoon on March 25, 1911 was a crime against all working people. The huddled masses that fled Europe to come to America were herded together in sweatshops, and forced to do laborious work in conditions that were both unhealthy and dangerous.

Even though the building that housed the Triangle Shirt Waist Factory was billed as fireproof, all the exits were blocked with cartons filled with flammable material. Certainly the steel and concrete could withstand the ravages of a fire, but the innocent occupants of the building were merely kindling . . . tinder for the flames of man's greed, and insatiable appetite to increase his profits, as he decreased . . . even eliminated the value of human life.

It was an emotionally and spiritually draining experience that was etched into my soul. I felt so helpless, wondering what was going to happen after the smoke cleared and after the street was cleaned up. What would remain of the tragedy after the bodies were buried? Was the fire going to be just another small footnote in history, or were we going to learn something from the

senseless tragedy?

I knew what I was going to do. I had every intention of taking my photographs and using them to focus attention on the subject of the glaring problems facing people who worked in the city's sweatshops. It was a fitting challenge because, while my dear friend Grace was touring Eastern Europe learning what it was the emigrant expected to find in America, I was preparing to do something to see that at least some of their dreams came true.

Add to that emotion-draining experience the fact that I had found my brother and you might understand why I was so overwhelmed by it all! Good God! What a terrible beauty life is! What a roller coaster ride we are on. Such adventurous highs and such dramatic lows. It's no wonder the artists of the world often burn themselves out before being called home to spend a restful eternity with their Creator.

With the vision of an older . . . and dare I say, wiser woman, I look upon that moment in my life as a prophetic experience. God had touched me on the shoulder and told me to savor the preciousness of life before the bouquet waned. He also told me that while I might marvel at His wonders and wonder at His marvels, I was neither expected to unravel all of them nor to draw any definitive conclusions from them. I was only being asked to open my heart, use my God-given intelligence, and muster the courage to face an unknown future.

Richard and I had agreed to meet at his firehouse, which was only a short walk from the scene of the fire. After he cleaned the heavy soot and grime from the creases in his face and hands, he greeted me with a great big bear hug. He was the image of my dear father. He had azure blue eyes, a noble nose and a broad Irish grin. He was forty-one years old, but he didn't look a day over thirty. He was the picture of robust health. His strong arms enveloped me, wrapping me with love. The next thing I knew, he was waltzing me around the firehouse.

"This is my sister," he exclaimed as he twirled me around the room, "she dropped in on me from heaven above, and I'll not let her out of my sight again!"

Our journey to Dean Street in Brooklyn was not made in the silence I had experienced on similar journeys. Instead of talking about the tragedy we had just witnessed, Richard and I kept up an animated conversation that was punctuated by frequent outbursts of gay and carefree laughter. We avoided subjects of a serious nature. We knew there would be time for them, but for the moment we wanted to revel in the pure exhilaration of it all.

Richard told me all about his wonderful family. He was the devoted husband of the former Jennifer Lauren Duffy, who had emigrated to Canada from Ireland before coming to America. The two of them had married in the spring of 1897, and in quick succession had six children, five of whom were still alive in 1911. Dotty was their first-born; she was about to turn thirteen when I met her. Next in line was Bernard, a high-spirited boy much like his father. Then came Jane, the dear angel who was buried at Holy Cross Cemetery. After Jane came the twins, Richard and Katherine, and last was the baby, little Mabel.

Dean Street was quiet. Word about the fire had quickly spread to Brooklyn. Even though it was after ten o'clock in the evening, people were still outside, clustered in small groups of four and five, quietly discussing the holocaust.

Jenny and Dotty were sitting on the stoop. They stood when they saw Richard approach. I panicked. "What if my nieces and nephews don't like me?" I caught myself wondering. "Do I say a quick hello and be on my way? Or do I try to gain their love?"

My fears were unwarranted. Once Richard let out with a loud whistle, the front door flew open and out poured his children.

"Poppa!" they cried out. "Poppa's home!"

They surrounded him, pulling and tugging on him.

“Children,” he said, “I have a surprise for you. This is your Aunt Dorothy.”

It only took a second before little Mabel threw her little arms around me. The other children followed Mabel’s cue, giving me kisses that just about melted my heart. Richard put his arm around me. “You’re not a stranger to my children. I’ve spoken to them about you endlessly. In fact, we’ve celebrated your birthday every year. We blow out a candle and make a wish that one day Aunt Dorothy will come home.” Richard’s voice cracked as he spoke. “We won’t have to make that wish anymore.”

Jenny put her arms around me. “I was beginning to think you were a figment of Richard’s wild and wonderful imagination.”

Richard’s house wasn’t the Imperial Hotel and his dining room wasn’t the Harmonia Garden, and no, the late supper menu didn’t include any delicacies, but I wouldn’t have changed anything about that night for all the stuffed oysters in the world. I had found what I was looking for. Or at least I had found part of what I was looking for. I still hadn’t found Conor.

“Did you ever try to locate Conor?” I recall asking after the table had been cleared and we were sitting drinking coffee.

Richard inhaled on his pipe. The smoke spewed forth from his mouth like the discharge from a volcano. There was a contained rage in his eyes.

“I ran away from the reform school the first chance I had to find you and Conor.

“I broke into the home where Conor was living and persuaded one of the younger boys to bring me to him.”

Richard played with his pipe while he told me how he had found Conor sick in bed with fever.

“If he hadn’t been so sick I know he would have followed me. But there was nothing I could do. I couldn’t wait around. I’d surely have gotten caught, and then I’d have been sent back to the reformatory.”

Richard’s voice grew thin. “Conor begged me to come back for him. ‘Promise me you’ll come back,’ he begged. ‘You can count on that’ I promised. But that was the last time I saw him. I kissed him good-bye and pressed a nickel in his hand and told him never to lose it. ‘It’s a sign that we’re still family’ I said.”

“How come you didn’t go back for him?”

“You can thank your Miss Conville for that. She caught me snooping around the Woodrow Home looking for you. She locked me in a closet until the police came and took me away.”

I was flabbergasted. Richard had only been a few yards from me, yet that wicked witch wouldn’t let him see me.

“After they hauled me back to the reformatory,” Richard continued, “my ability to move about was seriously restricted. I was confined to a space not much bigger than a steamer trunk.”

Richard began biting on the end of his pipe as the memory of his cruel confinement came back to him.

“I was fed twice a day. Once in the morning when they gave me a bowl of congealed oatmeal, and then again

at sundown when I was treated to stale bread, a chunk of cheese that had turned green in color and a glass of warm milk that had curdled.

“If that was their way of reforming me,” he added, “they didn’t know they were dealing with a Cassidy. I was not going to be bullied.”

When the officials at the reformatory realized Richard was intractable, they finally relented.

Richard was sent back to live with the rest of the boys on the condition that he follow the rules to the letter of the law.

Richard did not like ultimatums. He challenged the supreme authority by asking the superintendent what he intended to do if he did break the laws.

“I had heard rumors about what happened to boys who openly challenged the superintendent, but being a wanton street kid, I didn’t believe a word.

“The truth, though, was far worse than the rumors.”

The story that Richard recounted still haunts me. He pulled up his trouser legs and lowered his socks to reveal the scars inflicted upon him by two of the reformatory’s so-called disciplinarians “affectionately” nicknamed, Pea Brain and Sod Face. It seems that after Richard threw down the gauntlet, Pea Brain and Sod Face were instructed to take Richard down to the basement where a rat the size of a well-fed house cat ran across Richard’s path. Pea Brain gave it a kick that launched it clear across the room. Sod Face warned my brother what was in store for him if he crossed Pea Brain. Richard told me he tried to mask his fear with some insolence.

“Seeing how you kicked one of your own,” Richard taunted, “I can only imagine what you’d do to a human.”

Richard’s sarcasm didn’t go by unnoticed. In a flash, Pea Brain broke Richard’s wrist and pulled his arm from its socket. The pain was so great Richard passed out only to wake some hours later in shackles. Pea Brain was standing over him wielding a red-hot poker.

“So what will it be?” Pea Brain asked him, his words spewing forth in a foul-smelling cloud of spittle that attacked Richard’s nostrils. “Will you agree to abide by the rules or do we have to make a lasting impression on you?”

“Never,” Richard screamed.

“We’ll see about that,” Pea Brain snarled before he started jabbing at my brother with the hot poker.

Richard told me that Pea Brain and Sod Face burst out in gales of laughter as they proceeded to torture him. Once the poker was cold they started to smack Richard about his head with such forceful blows that he was rendered unconscious.

“I have no idea how long I remained comatose,” Richard told me solemnly. “It might have been only for an hour but I suspect it was for the better part of a day that I lay there before regaining my limited senses.”

He told me he was in a state of intense pain. He saw a malnourished rat sniffing at his feet.

“My body ached and my spirit was nearly ready to surrender to men who gave Lucifer a bad name, when as if in a dream, I saw Momma and Poppa bending over me.”

Richard said he began to cry. His body was deep in the throes of moaning and wailing when he swore he felt Momma’s soothing touch upon his forehead.

During the telling of his horror story I had moved closer to Richard. I sat on the floor at his feet. He rested his hand on my head, and for the briefest of moments the two of us were transported back to the cold, damp alley where we had lived as kids on the lam.

“It’s all over now,” I whispered to Richard as he let out with a wail that came from the deep recesses of his soul.

“I didn’t want to die like a caged animal, Dorothy. I wanted to live. I wanted to find you. I wanted to find Conor. I wanted to find some happiness before I died.”

“You didn’t die, Richard,” I said to him. “You survived and you have a wonderful wife and a family. They’re a living testimony to your courage.”

“I didn’t feel courageous then. I felt beaten and defeated, and I didn’t feel much like goin’ on

livin' after I was unshackled and thrown into solitary for a month. All that I do remember is praying a lot and talkin' a great deal to Momma and Poppa. In time a great comfort came over me. Maybe Pea Brain and Sod Face had broken my body, but they hadn't come close to touching my soul. My heart told me to find a dream and follow it with all my heart. I put my mind to it and swallowed my pride for the time being and minded my manners and became, on the surface at least, the model reform boy.

"When I was released from the reform school I got myself into the Kinkaid Training School.

"The Good Lord showed me his compassion. While I was there I made friends with the men in the fire company down the block from the school.

"In the beginning I just hung around, but before long I was washin' down the horses, rollin' up the hoses and doin' all sorts of odd jobs for the firemen.

"One of the firemen invited me home for dinner one night and not only did I stay for dinner, I stayed with his family for three years. I even wound up marryin' his youngest daughter!"

I smiled. I liked happy endings to stories that started out dark and dreary. My heart swelled with pride to know that my brother, who had so many reasons to be forlorn, grew into a man teeming with exuberance and joy.

Long after we both should have gone to bed, Richard showed me to my room. Before kissing him good night I showed him the nickel he had given me when we were children.

"Not a day has gone by when I didn't take out this nickel and think of you," I whispered.

"Let's hope Conor is looking at his nickel this very minute," Richard added.

"I pray for that."

I was asleep before my head hit the pillow. I had two dreams. A sweet one in which I heard Conor's sweet, angelic voice. And another one about a raging fire where I was standing on the ledge of a building. I was about to jump, but a hand reached out and pulled me back to safety.

The fire was a dream. The hand seemed real.

TWENTY-ONE

Life had taken a pleasant, if unexpected turn. I sent a telegram to Jane Addams asking her to store my belongings in the basement at Hull House until I could riddle what I was going to do next. Richard arranged to have my steamer trunk brought over from the boardinghouse, insisting that I move in with him. I told him I was happy to be a guest, but I was quick to remind him of Ben Franklin's often quoted remark about how fish and relatives begin to smell after three days. He said he enjoyed the smell of rank fish. I told him he had to see a nasal specialist.

Jenny couldn't have been more hospitable. And the children? How precious is the unflinching devotion of a child! How prodigious is the outpouring of sweetness and innocence! To be the beneficiary of such unconditional love was to be blessed. To know that such love was possible stirred my maternal instincts. I had to keep reminding myself that I had chosen the solitary life. That didn't mean there wasn't room in my life for love and friendship. There was. But I had a vocation. I was called to follow my road as a single woman.

God had a plan in mind for me. That he hadn't spelled out the finer details to that plan was beside the point. In the larger scheme of things, I was destined to follow the will of God wherever it led me. So what if motherhood was not part of God's plan for me? Was that to deter me from living life to the fullest? Did it mean my life was not going to have meaning? Not for a

moment!

My determination to do something with my life came when I saw the photographs I had taken on the day of the fire. It suddenly dawned on me that my life was filled with opportunities. The dead women in my photographs no longer had any opportunities. The dead needed someone to speak for them. I decided I would be their voice. The only problem I faced was finding an empathetic ear to listen to a vitriolic condemnation of a society that would have allowed such a travesty to happen. When Richard half-jokingly told me to take my pictures to the mayor's office I responded by proclaiming: "YES! That's exactly what I'll do. And if the Mayor doesn't give me any satisfaction I'll take them to the Governor!"

Richard was surprised by the strength of my convictions. He was not accustomed to dealing with determined, single-minded women who were not afraid to tackle jobs that were deemed beyond the traditional sphere of the contemporary female. I was not the little girl Richard had last seen cowering in an alley. I had grown up to be a singularly independent woman.

I had been blessed with a brain, and by God I was going to use it. I had been given a great heart, and I was not about to let someone tell me what and how to feel. And I also had courage bestowed upon me when I had asked God to give me strength to persevere in the face of adversities. It was now that I suddenly hearkened back to that day long ago when I determined I'd seek for these things, as my companions in Oz had done. But as it had been with them, I suddenly realized I already had these things too. They were all gifts. To have denied any one or any part of them would have been to deny my very existence. I had been empowered by an all-knowing God to leave a fingerprint on the face of this earth. I was not going to shirk my responsibilities. I was going to be a collaborator in re-writing the future history of women.

My dogged persistence eventually won me an audience with Mayor William Gaynor. He had been in the limelight ever since the fire, and he was not anxious to discuss the ramifications of the tragedy with some stranger. However, after camping out in his waiting room and making a general pest of myself, his secretary was glad when the mayor finally, but with great reluctance, agreed to speak with me. The poor man was not prepared for me, especially after I inveighed against the cruel and deliberate practices of those who operated the many sweat shops in the city. After a visceral tirade, I melodramatically placed my photographs, one after the other, in front of the mayor's nose, pointedly asking him how he was going to get to sleep that night if he didn't make the cause of the poor working woman his top priority.

By the time I left the mayor's office, I had his assurance he would persist in his investigation into the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire and do something to see it would never happen again. I'm proud to say that I, Dorothy Cassidy-Gale, the former meek missy, had a small part to play in the mayor's revisions of the local building codes and in the changes in the labor laws. I also played a key role in finding a final resting-place for the victims whose bodies were either unidentified or never claimed by friend or next of kin. Mayor Gaynor made a quick call to one of his assistants and then told me that the City owned a plot in Brooklyn's Evergreen Cemetery. He made another call to the morgue holding the last of the unburied, and arranged that they would be laid to rest with a fitting ceremony.

The burial took place two weeks after the fire. I, along with hundreds of other mourners, stood in the heavy downpour as the eight coffins were unloaded and carried to the long pit that had been dug the day before. At one end of the pit city officials stood under a small tent, protected from the rain. At the other stood the concerned and the curious.

After Monsignor White gave a blessing, Reverend Dr. Morrison presided over an Episcopal service, and finally Rabbi Magnus intoned a Hebrew prayer over coffins with plates inscribed

with the numbers, 46, 50, 61, 95, 103, 115, and 127. An eighth coffin had no number. Inside it were the dismembered fragments of bodies picked up at the scene of the fire.

A male quartet sang “Nearer, My God to Thee” as the last body was lowered into the ground. I wanted to add my voice, but it’s hard to sing when you’re crying.

Richard was surprised at how much I had accomplished in such a short time, and was utterly amazed how I was able to get the attention of the mayor of New York City.

I think his words were, “I’ve been living in this city almost all my life, and I can hardly grab the attention of a street car conductor, and here you arrive with no prior warning and you’re suddenly on a first name basis with the mayor! Momma and Poppa would be amazed at such a turn of events!”