Between Before and After

By Maureen Doyle McQuerry

Prologue

The year my Uncle Stephen committed a miracle, all our lives changed. Of course, at first no one was sure it actually was a miracle; miracles aren't things you see every day, so how could you know? Even after the investigation, our lives kept changing. When a miracle invades, Uncle Stephen says, it sends out roots that reach backwards and forwards in time. It catches people by surprise when they discover that everything they've seen of nature so far is only one part of a system. They forget about the other part, the part running underground.

We were a family of believers. Oh, not in miracles, or God, or anything conventional, except for Uncle Stephen who was on a first name basis with God and taught at a Catholic boy's school. What we believed in was the power of stories, Angus, my mother, and me. My mother, because they got her through, and Angus and me, because we listened right from the start.

The best stories can be just as unpredictable as miracles. They can surprise you, even when you think you know them by heart. So don't expect me to tell you everything right up front; you might not believe it. If there's one thing I've learned, it's that sometimes our minds prevent us from seeing the truth, even when it looks us square in the face. Expectations always get in the way.

Chapter One: Meteorite

San Jose, California -- June 1955

Molly

One Theory of the Universe:

For the most part the adult world and the kid world are separate planets that orbit each other in a predictable pattern. Occasionally one planet wings out of alignment and the two worlds bump causing unexpected debris from one planet to land on the other. Clues to an alien civilization. Just last year in November, an eight-pound meteorite crashed through a roof and landed on a woman in Alabama while she was asleep on a couch. No meteorite blew a hole in our roof, but I was just as surprised by what I held in my hand that morning, an envelope from the adult world.

I'd found it stuck in the bottom of my mother's lingerie drawer under some unmentionables. I was searching for a push up bra to see if it could enhance my minor attributes when I made the discovery. The flap no longer sealed by the yellowed piece of tape. Mom had taken my brother Angus to the dentist, and I was alone. Like any good detective, I didn't hesitate to open it. The fragrance was faint but unmistakable. White Shoulders.

A few black and white snapshots of my mother with my father tumbled out. In one they were seated at a white tablecloth restaurant, holding champagne glasses. Mom was wearing elbow length gloves and a hat with a full rose. Her dress veed off her shoulders and nipped in tightly at the waist. The second showed them at a Chinese restaurant making funny faces. It must have been New Year's Eve because they were wearing shiny paper hats and party blowers

littered the table. In the last one they danced cheek to cheek. Mom wore a gardenia like a star in the red of her hair, her long neck the Milky Way. It made my throat tight to see them that way.

When I tried to stuff the photos back in the envelope, they stuck halfway in. Something more was inside. With one finger I dragged out a tiny ring that just fit over my pinky. It was stiff and pale yellow. I ran my finger over it and held it up to the light. The ring was made of braided hair fine as corn silk! No one in our family had blond hair. I let it rest in the palm of my hand.

With the hair ring came a tiny clipping from a newspaper, nothing more than a headline: *Woodward Closes Its Doors.*

But let me back up and tell the story in order like Uncle Stephen says a beginning writer should. The trouble is knowing where to start. He says start close to the action. But life is made up of so many actions, big and small, that selecting the one that changes everything confuses me. You never know which will matter most in the end. I'll begin with this, a morning last month before the meteorite struck me.

The morning of the butchering. The morning of my decision.

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The phone rang early. Angus was still in his pajamas watching Captain Kangaroo. I'd just dragged myself out of bed after staying up late to work on the script my best friend Debbie and I were writing for an end of the year project. Mom, who was just settling down to work with a cup of coffee, answered it.

Dragging the phone into the laundry room, she closed the door on the cord, which always meant one thing: An adult situation which we weren't supposed to hear. Recently all adult situations involved my dad who was ordered out of the house right after Christmas when he said one too many times, "Bury your past before it buries you."

When Mom stalked out of the laundry room, white-lipped and silent, I made a point of staying out of her trajectory. I poured myself a glass of orange juice and watched as she streaked across the backyard and disappeared into the garden shed.

"What's Mom doing with the clippers?" Angus asked around a mouth of Alphabet cereal as he watched from the sliding glass door.

"Pruning?" That had been Dad's job. He was the gardener; she was not. Now that he was gone, that job, like so many others, would probably fall to me.

I joined him at the window, juice in hand. Mom was striding across the yard, the long-bladed shears clenched in both hands. There was something about the way her hands gripped the black handled blades that made me uneasy like wind ruffling the surface of water.

"I don't feel so good." Angus moved closer.

The carnage began with the rose trellis. Dad and I had picked out the metal frame at the hardware store the summer we moved in. We planted a climbing rose on each side. One rose was red, Mom's favorite color, the other side yellow, which was mine. The two met in the middle in an explosion that looked like a sunset.

She went straight for the blossoms, hacking their ruffled blooms until they dropped into monstrous drifts on the thin green lawn.

Milk sloshed from Angus's bowl and trickled onto my foot. "She's chopping off their heads."

"Decapitation." It wasn't a word I had ever associated with flowers. I checked the clock. Debbie would be here any minute. I couldn't let her see us like this.

Next, she attacked the geraniums, the ones in pots by the door and then the pink striped blooms that massed by the cement porch. Foreheads presses against the cool glass, our breath

made circles of fog on the window as we watched. Like a demented barber, she sheared the long hair-like fronds of the weeping cherry leaving the tree twisted and bald. By this time, the yard was a red and pink wound, and Angus was pressed tight to my side. It was impossible to look away. A few hot tears dripped from my chin, but I scrubbed them away with the heel of my hand.

The doorbell rang. With all my might, I willed Mom to stop.

"Molly?" Angus's voice wavered.

"It's Debbie. Don't say anything about Mom."

I opened the front door just as Mom, small petals caught in her hair like snowflakes, ricocheted through the kitchen and into the living room. The saliva dried in my mouth. Debbie stared. Mom kept going. I held my breath until her bedroom door slammed shut.

"Okay, then." Was all Debbie said. She followed me into the kitchen, and I handed her the script we'd been working on for a final school project.

"I made a few changes."

For Angus, toast and peanut butter solved most things. While I toasted the bread, Debbie thumbed through the pages in silence.

I cut rounds of banana to make a smiling face on the toast and handed it to Angus. Even when I was done, I avoided glancing toward the window hoping Debbie wouldn't notice the damage.

"What happened to your yard?" She ran her tongue over her braces as she stared out the sliding glass door.

"Mom was pruning," Angus said. "At least she didn't pull up our vegetables."

Debbie raised newly plucked eyebrows at me. I thought I knew her every expression. We'd survived Jr. High together and, in a few weeks, we'd finish freshman year. I was the first one she told after Jimmy Schmidt stuck his tongue in her mouth in the backseat of her brother's car. She was there when my dad left. But this time what I saw in her eyes made me flinch.

I was someone to pity, set apart, as strange and vulnerable as a naked person on the stage, an urchin without its shell.

I looked away, but she knew I'd seen it.

"I have to go. Thanks for working on the script." Debbie edged toward the door. "See you at school?"

"Sure," I said.

I turned my dad's phrase over and over in my mind. It suddenly felt less like a metaphor and more like a threat. It called out for action. If Mom couldn't bury her past, we would, Angus and me. We'd bury it by the vegetable rows where the ground was soft from digging. The problem was I'd have to discover it first.

That's when I called Uncle Stephen.

Chapter Two: Hansel & Gretel

San Jose, California -- June 1955

Molly

Uncle Stephen didn't answer my call. I counted ten rings and pictured them echoing through his simple one-bedroom apartment before hanging up. Maybe it was better to leave him out of the equation. He couldn't be objective where Mom was concerned. Her past would be mine to discover and bury.

As far as I could tell, only two things kept my mother grounded to us: my Uncle Stephen and stories. Most nights she still told Angus a bedtime story since he was only nine, the surprise second child when she believed she'd spawned an only. My stories had been over a long time ago, but sometimes I still liked to listen. She'd sit on the foot of Angus's bed after tucking him in, hands folded in her lap. She was a different person then, more approachable, less like a skittish feral cat.

When I didn't feel like being alone or wasn't writing in my journal, I'd creep into Angus's room and curl up on my little brother's bed.

Her two favorite stories were, *Hansel and Gretel* and the one she calls *The Four Horsemen*. *Hansel and Gretel* is in an old book, the only book saved from her childhood. The cover is green and most of the gold lettering has been worn off. Inside are strange and intricate pictures by Arthur Rackham. I kept it on "the shelf of important things" in the bookcase Uncle Stephen made, beside an unbroken sand dollar. Everyone knows how rare those are. It was right next to my writer's journal where I kept track of the things I observed. *The Four Horseman* had no book to hold it. It was my mother's story, and she knew it by heart.

"My father called my mother and her sisters, the four horsemen. They were stair-step sisters, who boarded a boat in Ireland and sailed to New York. The oldest girl was twenty---",

"Tell us about your mother dying." Angus said. The dying part was always a favorite and he preferred to cut right to the action. His cold feet pressed into the small of my back, and I squirmed away.

"When the plague came, the Great Flu of 1918, coffins were stacked chest high in the streets. When they ran out of coffins, there were piles of bodies. My mother, your grandmother was the youngest sister. She was beautiful and good. Not like me.

"You're beautiful!" Angus was always ready to come to Mom's defense.

But I was more intrigued by why she said she wasn't good. I had unconfirmed theories involving sneaking cigarettes and cutting school.

"Do you want me to continue with the story or not?"

We were quiet.

"Your Grandma, died. She was twenty-eight, and had a new baby, my sister Claire. Claire died too." She shook her head, copper hair springing from the confines of useless bobby pins.

"And you were an orphan." Angus added.

"I still had a father and a brother, your Uncle Stephen. We had an Irish wake." She described the wailing, the aunts sweeping in, claiming the furniture and curtains, and then how they rolled up the one good rug that had come all the way from Ireland, and took it away. "We were so poor we had to steal food from the market so we could eat."

"Is that why you weren't good?" Stealing food because you were too poor to eat was in every sad story I'd read. Stealing food to survive didn't make my list of bad behaviors, not even

close. It was a writer's trick. Something she threw in to distract us from the truth. No matter how I prodded and pleaded she never would elaborate, which is something both Uncle Stephen and Ms. Lacy, my freshman English teacher, assured me all good storytellers do.

Will the flu come here Angus wanted to know? And every time he asked, she reassured him that it wouldn't. But how could anyone know about the things that might happen?

I grabbed a handful of covers and yanked them away from Angus who had wrapped himself tight like a mummy. I was sure she was leaving the most interesting part out. My mother, Elaine Fitzgerald Donnelly, had been up to something more. But the story always ended here. No family jokes, no tales about school, no faded black and white photos like in my friends' homes. Beyond that point, my mother's life was a blank.

"And then what happened? Who took care of you and Uncle Stephen?" I asked. If I was ever going to discover her past, I needed more to go on.

"We made do. When all is lost, Molly, things either die or get reinvented. There's no in-between."

"Uncle Stephen says that every story should leave room for miracles."

"Does he?" She arched one eyebrow, brushed her lips across Angus's forehead, and reminded me it was a school night, as if I could forget.

I crossed the hall and shut my bedroom door. Slipping my hand under my pillow, I felt for the envelope.

From the hallway she called out, "There were no miracles recorded."

There may not be miracles, but there were secrets. I had the evidence. And once I had more, I'd get my shovel.

An excerpt from Elaine Fitzgerald Donnelly's Hansel and Gretel

In the dark of night the woodcutter's new wife whispered her plans.

"Unless you desire to watch them grow thin with hunger and then expire, we must lead them into the forest." Her voice, when she wanted, could be honey. "It is the only reasonable choice. It offers a chance. They're strong; they've got their wits about them. Here, they'll have no chances at all."

So bit by bit, against his good judgment, the woodcutter was persuaded, all his arguments chipped away, like flint, by his beautiful new wife. He was a man who had lost his convictions to loneliness. But, at night, when he watched his two children, restless with hunger in their sleep, he was filled with an inconsolable sadness. How would they make do? How would they ever understand, he was leaving them open for a miracle?

Chapter Three: The New Year

Brooklyn, New York -- October 1918

Elaine

Bodies were stacked like cords of wood at the end of Flushing Avenue near the Naval Yard. The morgues were full that fall and there was a shortage of coffins. Elaine touched the mask crumpled in her pocket. Her mother didn't want her out of the house without it tied over her mouth and nose, but after wearing it for an hour, it began to smell funny. Besides, it was almost impossible to tell what another person was thinking when a mask covered both nose and mouth. The mailmen, the streetcar drivers, her teachers, everyone wore them. Elaine had never noticed before just how much the quirk of the mouth told you about someone.

All spring the newspapers had been full of accounts of a new influenza. In Spain they called it La Grippe, but in the States it was called the Spanish flu. No one knew exactly where it originated, some people said Germany, some said Spain, and some people blamed Aspirin tablets. Everyone was scared. This flu was fast and deadly, killing some victims in hours, and by August it had come for New Yorkers.

Elaine tucked the loaf of bread under her arm, crossed the street and tried not to look at the flu's latest victims waiting to be collected by a Red Cross ambulance. If she forced herself to count to 100 by sevens, she could distract herself from that unthinkable pile. But her eyes with a will of their own, persisted in searching out the empty faces. All their peopleness had vanished. What was left was the afterimage: sprawled limbs, faces as empty as masks, and the strange formality of clothing. She grabbed the mask from her pocket and squashed it to her face, breathing fast.

Forgetting the sausages at the butcher's, she ran towards home, her heart outpacing her legs. She skidded around the corner onto Steuben Avenue and stopped short, almost colliding with four little girls jumping rope. Two, were the younger sisters of girls in her class. They turned the ends of the long rope in lazy arcs, while the two smallest girls jumped and sang.

I had a little bird and its name was Enza,

I opened up the window and in-flew-Enza.

Elaine smashed the mask more tightly against her nose and mouth. The faces of the corpses clung like cobwebs as she stumbled towards the three flights of stairs that led into the safety of her family's flat.

Her mother, Anna Fitzgerald, looked up with swollen eyes from where she sat in the over -stuffed reading chair soaking her feet in a tub of Epsom salts. The room smelled of boiling cabbage. Elaine dropped the bread on the table.

"What's wrong?"

"Your Aunt Ellen died." Her mother's voice was flat as newspaper.

Auntie Ellen, her mother's oldest sister who'd taught Elaine to sew. She'd watched her aunt's hands, big and red knuckled after years of cleaning other people's houses, smooth fine cotton as tenderly as if it was silk. Each school year she made Elaine one new dress.

While Elaine had been out running errands, the influenza had slipped into her family's life and invaded their two bedroom flat.

"I saw her last night after work and she was fine," her mother drew a shuddering breath. "Six hours, and Tom said she was blue." Then Anna Fitzgerald buried her head in her arms and sobbed.

She'd never heard her mother cry before, even when she gave birth to baby Claire six months ago. The sound found a hollow place inside Elaine and lodged there. She couldn't move. She had no idea what to do. Pop came in from the bedroom gripping a wailing baby Claire, in his thick -muscled arms. The tattoo of an American flag he got the day he became a citizen glistened with baby drool. Stephen followed with his thumb stuck in his mouth, red eyebrows drawn into a frightened scowl. Pop wandered back and forth between his sobbing wife and thumb-sucking son making comforting noises.

"Make your mother some tea."

Elaine opened the jar of chamomile and heated water on the stove. Everywhere she looked, the faces of corpses haunted their room.

"Take your thumb out of your mouth. You're six, not a baby," she snapped at her brother.

But even yelling at her brother didn't make her feel braver.

Late in the night, she woke to the sound of voices in the main room. She'd crawled into bed with Stephen to help him fall asleep. Next to her he stirred and whimpered. He smelled like pee. She wrinkled her nose and slid out of bed. The first frost had etched the windows, and her toes curled as they met the floor.

"We have to get the children out of the city now." Her mother's voice was tight and sharp.

Pop answered with a deeper rumble saying the flu was everywhere, not just New York. It was a plague of God.

He was good at making pronouncements like that and when he did, Elaine's heart believed him.

Somehow the flu missed them. By early Christmas, the death count had slowed. Her teacher had stopped wearing a mask to school and so had the policeman on the corner. Newspapers declared the epidemic was over. Pop read that in one year, 1918, life expectancy in New York had dropped by twelve years. All that mattered to Elaine was that her own family was one of the lucky ones. They'd escaped, all but Auntie Ellen. Her nightmares of corpses slowly vanished.

Then in January, when Elaine came home from school she found Pop at the stove boiling water. He was working evening shifts that month and should already be gone.

"Where's Mom?"

"Got a migraine. So keep the noise down. I sent Stephen across to the Malloy's so she could get some peace. "

Elaine unwound her scarf. The sprinkling of snow was already melting into the dark blue wool. Just yesterday Patrick Newman had said it matched her eyes. Elaine knew what to do. Her mother had migraines all the time. Keep the room dark. Tea and cold washcloths.

"I can take care of her if you've got to leave."

Her father nodded and Elaine poured the tea in her mother's favorite china cup of blue for-get-me nots and balanced it in one hand as she opened the bedroom door.

"Mom, I'm home. I've brought you some tea."

The curtains were drawn and the room was dim with single light. Her mother moaned her thanks. As Elaine approached the bed she heard a strange whistle. Claire was lying next to her mother.

"You want a cold rag on your forehead?"

What was wrong with Claire? She set the tea on the bedside table and leaned closer. Her mother turned towards her and exhaled a sour cloud. White specks flecked her lips.

“Mom?”

Elaine touched her cheek. The skin was cold and clammy.

She reached for Claire who was still making the same shrill whistle. The baby arched her back as Elaine lifted her. At the base of her throat a hollow deepened with every breath. Bubbles burst on her lips.

“Pop!” With Claire in her arms, Elaine dashed from the room knocking the teacup to the floor.

Later what Elaine remembered were the sounds and the silences: the teacup smashing on the floor, steel-toe work boots pounding into the bedroom. The whistling had stopped. Baby Claire never cried at all.

The new year, 1919, was one month old when the Fitzgerald’s held a wake for two.