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**Opening Extract from...**

# **Our Story Begins**

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Published by Bloomsbury

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## *In the Garden of the North American Martyrs*

When she was young, Mary saw a brilliant and original man lose his job because he had expressed ideas that were offensive to the trustees of the college where they both taught. She shared his views but did not sign the protest petition. She was, after all, on trial herself—as a teacher, as a woman, as an interpreter of history.

Mary watched herself. Before giving a lecture she wrote it out in full, using the arguments and often the words of other, approved writers so she would not by chance say something scandalous. Her own thoughts she kept to herself, and the words for them grew faint as time went on; without quite disappearing they shrank to remote, nervous points, like birds flying away.

When the department turned into a hive of cliques, Mary went about her business and pretended not to know that people hated one another. To avoid seeming bland she let herself become eccentric in harmless ways. She took up bowling, which she learned to love, and founded the Brandon College chapter of a society dedicated to restoring the good name of Richard III. She memorized comedy routines from records and jokes from books; people groaned when she rattled them off, but she didn't let that stop her, and after a time the groans became the point of the jokes. They were a kind of tribute to Mary's willingness to expose herself.

In fact no one at the college was safer than Mary, for she was making herself into something institutional, like a custom or a mascot—part of the college's idea of itself.

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Now and then she wondered whether she had been too careful. The things she said and wrote seemed flat to her, pulpy, as though someone else had squeezed the juice out of them. And once, while talking with a senior professor, Mary saw herself reflected in a window: she was leaning toward him and had her head turned so that her ear was right in front of his moving mouth. The sight disgusted her. Years later, when she had to get a hearing aid, Mary suspected that her deafness was a result of always trying to catch everything anyone said.

In the second half of Mary's fifteenth year at Brandon the president called a meeting of all faculty and students to announce that the college was bankrupt and would not open its gates again. He was every bit as much surprised as they were; the report from the trustees had reached his desk only that morning. It seemed that Brandon's financial manager had speculated in some kind of futures and lost everything. The president wanted to deliver the news in person before it reached the papers. He wept openly and so did the students and teachers, with only a few exceptions—some cynical upperclassmen who claimed to despise the education they'd received.

Mary could not rid her mind of the word "speculate." It meant "to guess," in terms of money "to gamble." How could a man gamble a college? Why would he want to do that, and how could it be that no one stopped him? It seemed to belong to another time; Mary thought of a drunken plantation owner gaming away his slaves.

She applied for jobs and got an offer from a new experimental college in Oregon. It was her only offer, so she took it. The college was in one building. Bells rang all the time, lockers lined the hallways, and at every corner stood a buzzing water fountain. The student newspaper came out twice a month on mimeograph paper that felt wet. The library, which was next to the band room, had no librarian and few books. "We are a work in progress," the provost was fond of saying, cheerfully.

The countryside was beautiful, though, and Mary might have enjoyed it if the rain hadn't caused her so much trouble. There was something wrong with her lungs that the doctors could neither agree upon nor cure; whatever it was, the dampness made it worse. On

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rainy days, condensation formed in Mary's hearing aid and shorted it out. She began to dread talking with people, never knowing when she'd have to take out her control box and slap it against her leg.

It rained nearly every day. When it wasn't raining it was getting ready to rain, or clearing. The ground glistened under the grass, and the light had a yellow undertone that flared up during storms.

There was water in Mary's basement. Her walls sweated, and she found toadstools growing behind the refrigerator. She felt as though she were rusting out, like one of those old cars people thereabouts kept in their front yards, propped up on pieces of wood. Mary knew that everyone was dying, but it did seem to her that she was dying faster than most.

She continued to look for another job, without success. Then, in the fall of her third year in Oregon, she got a letter from a woman named Louise who'd once taught at Brandon. Louise had scored a great success with a book on Benedict Arnold and was now on the faculty of a famous college in upstate New York. She said that one of her colleagues would be retiring at the end of the year and asked if Mary might be interested in the position.

The letter surprised Mary. Louise thought of herself as a great historian and of almost everyone else as useless; Mary had not known that she felt differently about her. Moreover, enthusiasm for other people's causes did not come easily to Louise, who had a way of sucking in her breath when familiar names were mentioned, as though she knew things that friendship kept her from disclosing.

Mary expected nothing but sent a résumé and a copy of her book. Shortly afterward Louise called to say that the search committee, of which she was chair, had decided to grant Mary an interview in early November. "Now don't get your hopes *too* high," Louise said.

"Oh, no," Mary said, but thought: *Why shouldn't I hope?* They wouldn't go to the bother and expense of bringing her to the college if they weren't serious. And she was certain the interview would go well. She would make them like her, or at least give them no cause to dislike her.

She read about the area with a strange sense of familiarity, as if the

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land and its history were already known to her. And when her plane left Portland and climbed easterly into the clouds, Mary felt like she was going home. The feeling stayed with her, growing stronger when they landed. She tried to describe it to Louise as they left the airport at Syracuse and drove toward the college, an hour or so away. "It's like déjà vu," she said.

"Déjà vu is a hoax," Louise said. "It's just a chemical imbalance of some kind."

"Maybe so," Mary said, "but I still have this sensation."

"Don't get serious on me," Louise said. "That's not your long suit. Just be your funny, wisecracking old self. Now tell me—honestly—how do I look?"

It was night, too dark to see Louise's face well, but in the airport she had seemed gaunt and pale and intense. She reminded Mary of a description in the book she'd been reading, of how Iroquois warriors gave themselves visions by fasting. She had that kind of look about her. But she wouldn't want to hear that. "You look wonderful," Mary said.

"There's a reason," Louise said. "I've taken a lover. My concentration has improved, my energy level is up, and I've lost ten pounds. I'm also getting some color in my cheeks, though that could be the weather. I recommend the experience highly. But you probably disapprove."

Mary didn't know what to say. She said that she was sure Louise knew best, but that didn't seem to be enough. "Marriage is a great institution," she added, "but who wants to live in an institution?"

Louise groaned. "I know you," she said, "and I know that right now you're thinking *But what about Ted? What about the children?* The fact is, Mary, they aren't taking it well at all. Ted has become a nag." She handed Mary her purse. "Be a good girl and light me a cigarette, will you? I know I told you I quit, but this whole thing has been very hard on me, very hard, and I'm afraid I've started again."

They were in the hills now, heading north on a narrow road. Tall trees arched above them. As they topped a rise Mary saw the forest all

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around, deep black under the plum-colored sky. There were a few lights and these only made the darkness seem greater.

“Ted has succeeded in completely alienating the children from me,” Louise was saying. “There is no reasoning with any of them. In fact, they refuse to discuss the matter at all, which is very ironic because over the years I have tried to instill in them a willingness to see things from the other person’s point of view. If they could just *meet* Jonathan I know they’d feel differently. But they won’t hear of it. Jonathan,” she said, “is my lover.”

“I see,” Mary said.

Coming around a curve they caught two deer in the headlights. Mary could see them tense as the car went by. “Deer,” she said.

“I don’t know,” Louise said, “I just don’t know. I do my best, and it never seems to be enough. But that’s enough about me—let’s talk about you. What did you think of my latest book?” She squawked and beat her palms on the steering wheel. “Seriously, though, what about you? It must have been a real shockeroo when good old Brandon folded.”

“It was hard. Things haven’t been good, but they’ll be a lot better if I get this job.”

“At least you have work,” Louise said. “You should look at it from the bright side.”

“I try.”

“You seem so gloomy. I hope you’re not worrying about the interview, or the class. Worrying won’t do you a bit of good. Look on this as a vacation.”

“Class? What class?”

“The class you’re supposed to give tomorrow, after the interview. Didn’t I tell you? *Mea culpa*, hon, *mea maxima culpa*. I’ve been uncharacteristically forgetful lately.”

“But what will I do?”

“Relax,” Louise said. “Just pick a subject and wing it.”

“Wing it?”

“You know, open your mouth and see what comes out. Extemporize.”

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“But I always work from a prepared lecture.”

“All right. I’ll tell you what. Last year I wrote an article on the Marshall Plan that I got bored with and never published. You can read that.”

Parroting what Louise had written seemed wrong to Mary, at first; then it occurred to her that she’d been doing the same kind of thing for many years, and that this was no time to get scruples.

“Here we are,” Louise said, and pulled into a circular drive with several cabins grouped around it. In two of the cabins lights were on; smoke drifted straight up from the chimneys. “The college is another two miles thataway.” Louise pointed down the road. “I’d invite you to stay at my house, but I’m spending the night with Jonathan and Ted is not good company these days. You would hardly recognize him.”

She took Mary’s bags from the trunk and carried them up the steps of a darkened cabin. “Look,” she said, “they’ve laid a fire for you. All you have to do is light it.” She stood in the middle of the room with her arms crossed and watched as Mary held a match under the kindling. “There,” she said. “You’ll be snugaroo in no time. I’d love to stay and chew the fat but I really must run. You just get a good night’s sleep, and I’ll see you in the morning.”

Mary stood in the doorway and waved as Louise, spraying gravel, pulled out of the drive. She filled her lungs, to taste the air: it was tart and clear. She could see the stars in their figurations, and the vague streams of light that ran among the stars.

She still felt uneasy about reading Louise’s work as her own. It would be her first complete act of plagiarism. It would surely change her. It would make her less—how much less, she didn’t know. But what else could she do? She certainly couldn’t “wing it.” Words might fail her, and then what? Mary had a dread of silence. When she thought of silence she thought of drowning, as if it were a kind of water she could not swim in.

“I want this job,” she said, and settled deep into her coat. It was cashmere and Mary hadn’t worn it since moving to Oregon, because people there thought you were pretentious if you had on anything but

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a Pendleton shirt or, of course, rain gear. She rubbed her cheek against the upturned collar and thought of a silver moon shining through bare black branches, a white house with green shutters, red leaves falling in a hard blue sky.

Louise woke her a few hours later. She was sitting on the edge of the bed, pushing at Mary's shoulder and snuffling loudly. When Mary asked her what was wrong she said, "I want your opinion on something. It's very important. Do you think I'm womanly?"

Mary sat up. "Louise, can this wait?"

"No."

"Womanly?"

Louise nodded.

"You are very beautiful," Mary said, "and you know how to present yourself."

Louise stood and paced the room. "That son of a bitch," she said. She came back and stood over Mary. "Let's suppose someone said I have no sense of humor. Would you agree or disagree?"

"In some things you do. I mean, yes, you have a good sense of humor."

"What do you mean, 'in some things'? What kind of things?"

"Well, if you heard that someone had been killed in an unusual way, like by an exploding cigar, you'd think that was funny."

Louise laughed.

"That's what I mean," Mary said.

Louise went on laughing. "Oh, Lordy," she said. "Now it's my turn to say something about you." She sat down beside Mary.

"Please," Mary said.

"Just one thing," Louise said.

Mary waited.

"You're trembling," Louise said. "I was just going to say—oh, forget it. Listen, do you mind if I sleep on the couch? I'm all in."

"Go ahead."

"Sure it's okay? You've got a big day tomorrow." She fell back on



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the sofa and kicked off her shoes. “I was just going to say, you should use some liner on those eyebrows of yours. They sort of disappear and the effect is disconcerting.”

Neither of them slept. Louise chain-smoked cigarettes and Mary watched the coals burn down. When it was light enough that they could see each other, Louise got up. “I’ll send a student for you,” she said. “Good luck.”

The college looked just like colleges are supposed to look. Roger, the student assigned to show Mary around, explained that it was an exact copy of a college in England, right down to the gargoyles and stained-glass windows. It looked so much like a college that moviemakers sometimes used it as a set. *Andy Hardy Goes to College* had been filmed there, and every fall they had an Andy Hardy Goes to College Day, with raccoon coats and goldfish-swallowing contests.

Above the door of the Founder’s Building was a Latin motto that, roughly translated, meant “God helps those who help themselves.” As Roger recited the names of illustrious graduates Mary was struck by the extent to which they had taken this precept to heart. They had helped themselves to railroads, mines, armies, and states, to empires of finance with outposts all over the world.

Roger took Mary to the chapel and showed her a plaque bearing the names of all the alumni who had been killed in battle, going back to the Civil War. There weren’t many names. Here too, apparently, the graduates had helped themselves. “Oh yes,” Roger said as they were leaving, “I forgot to tell you. The communion rail comes from some church in Europe where Charlemagne used to go.”

They went to the gymnasium, and the two hockey rinks, and the library, where Mary inspected the card catalog as if she’d turn down this job if they didn’t have the right books. “We have a little more time,” Roger said as they went outside. “Would you like to see the power plant?”

Mary wanted to keep busy until the last minute, so she agreed.

Roger led her into the depths of the service building, explaining

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things about the machine they were about to see, evidently the most advanced in the country. "People think the college is really old-fashioned," he said, "but it isn't. They let girls come here now, and some of the teachers are women. In fact, there's a statute that says they have to interview at least one woman for each opening. There it is."

They were standing on an iron catwalk above the biggest machine Mary had ever beheld. Roger, who was majoring in earth sciences, said it had been built from a design pioneered by a professor in his department. Where before he had been gabby, Roger now became reverent. It was clear that for him this machine was the soul of the college, that indeed the purpose of the college was to provide outlets for the machine. Together they leaned against the railing and watched it hum.

Mary arrived at the committee room exactly on time for her interview, but the room was empty. Her book was on the table, along with a water pitcher and some glasses. She sat down and picked up the book. The binding cracked as she opened it. The pages were smooth, clean, unread. Mary turned to the first chapter, which began, "It is generally believed that . . ." *How dull*, she thought.

Nearly twenty minutes later Louise came in with several men. "Sorry we're late," she said. "We don't have much time so we'd better get started." She introduced Mary to the committee, but with one exception the names and faces did not stay together. The exception was Dr. Howells, the department chairman, who had a porous blue nose and terrible teeth.

A shiny-faced man to Dr. Howells's right spoke first. "So," he said, "I understand you once taught at Brandon College."

"It was a shame that Brandon had to close," said a young man with a pipe in his mouth. "There is a place for schools like Brandon." As he talked the pipe wagged up and down.

"Now you're in Oregon," Dr. Howells said. "I've never been there. How do you like it?"

"Not very much," Mary said.

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“Is that right?” Dr. Howells leaned toward her. “I thought everyone liked Oregon. I hear it’s very green.”

“That’s true,” Mary said.

“I suppose it rains a lot,” he said.

“Nearly every day.”

“I wouldn’t like that,” he said, shaking his head. “I like it dry. Of course it snows here, and you have your rain now and then, but it’s a *dry* rain. Have you ever been to Utah? There’s a state for you. Bryce Canyon. The Mormon Tabernacle Choir.”

“Dr. Howells was brought up in Utah,” said the young man with the pipe.

“It was a different place altogether in those days,” Dr. Howells said. “Mrs. Howells and I have always talked about going back when I retire, but now I’m not so sure.”

“We’re a little short on time,” Louise said.

“And here I’ve been going on and on,” Dr. Howells said. “Before we wind things up, is there anything you want to tell us?”

“Yes. I think you should give me the job.” Mary laughed when she said this, but no one laughed back, or even looked at her. They all looked away. Mary understood then that they were not really considering her for the position. She’d been brought here to satisfy a rule. She had no hope.

The men gathered their papers and shook hands with Mary and told her how much they were looking forward to her class. “I can’t get enough of the Marshall Plan,” Dr. Howells said.

“Sorry about that,” Louise said when they were alone. “I didn’t think it would be so bad. That was a real bitcheroo.”

“Tell me something,” Mary said. “You already know who you’re going to hire, don’t you?”

Louise nodded.

“Then why did you bring me here?”

When Louise began to explain about the statute, Mary interrupted. “I know all that. But why me? Why did you pick *me*?”

Louise walked to the window and spoke with her back to Mary. “Things haven’t been going very well for old Louise,” she said. “I’ve

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been unhappy, and I thought you might cheer me up. You used to be so funny, and I was sure you'd enjoy the trip—it didn't cost you anything, and it's pretty this time of year with the leaves and everything. Mary, you don't know the things my parents did to me. And Ted is no barrel of laughs either. Or Jonathan, the son of a bitch. I deserve some love and friendship but I don't get any at all." She turned and looked at her watch. "It's almost time for your class. We'd better go."

"I would rather not give it. After all, there's not much point, is there?"

"But you *have* to give it. That's part of the interview." Louise handed her a folder. "All you have to do is read this. It isn't much, considering all the money we've laid out to get you here."

Mary followed Louise down the hall to the lecture room. The professors were sitting in the front row with their legs crossed. They smiled and nodded at Mary. Behind them the room was full of students, some of whom had spilled over into the aisles. One of the professors adjusted the microphone to Mary's height, crouching down as he went to the podium and back as though he'd prefer not to be seen.

Louise called the room to order, then introduced Mary and gave the subject of the lecture. But Mary had decided to wing it after all. She came to the podium unsure of what she would say; sure only that she would rather die than read Louise's article. The sun poured through the stained glass onto the people around her, painting their faces. Thick streams of smoke from the young professor's pipe drifted through a circle of red light at Mary's feet, turning crimson and twisting like flames.

"I wonder how many of you know," she began, "that we are in the Long House, the ancient domain of the Five Nations of the Iroquois."

Two professors looked at each other.

"The Iroquois were without pity," Mary said. "They hunted people down with clubs and arrows and spears and nets, and blowguns made from elder stalks. They tortured their captives, sparing no one, not even the little children. They took scalps and practiced cannibalism and slavery. Because they had no pity they became powerful, so powerful that no other tribe dared to oppose them. They made the other

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tribes pay tribute, and when they had nothing more to pay the Iroquois attacked them.”

Several of the professors began to whisper. Dr. Howells was saying something to Louise, who was shaking her head.

“In one of their raids,” Mary said, “they captured two Jesuit priests, Jean de Brébeuf and Gabriel Lalement. They covered Lalement with pitch and set him on fire in front of Brébeuf. When Brébeuf rebuked them they cut off his lips and put a burning iron down his throat. They hung a collar of red-hot hatchets around his neck and poured boiling water over his head. When he continued to preach to them they cut strips of flesh from his body and ate them before his eyes. While he was still alive they scalped him and cut open his breast and drank his blood. Later, their chief tore out Brébeuf’s heart and ate it, but just before he did this Brébeuf spoke to them one last time. He said—”

“That’s enough!” yelled Dr. Howells, jumping to his feet. Louise stopped shaking her head. Her eyes were perfectly round.

Mary had come to the end of her facts. She did not know what Brébeuf had said. Silence rose up around her; just when she thought she would go under and be lost in it she heard someone whistling in the hallway outside, trilling the notes like a bird, like many birds.

“Mend your lives,” she said. “You have deceived yourselves in the pride of your hearts and the strength of your arms. Though you soar aloft like the eagle, though your nest is set among the stars, thence I will bring you down, says the Lord. Turn from power to love. Be kind. Do justice. Walk humbly.”

Louise was waving her arms. “Mary!” she shouted.

But Mary had more to say, much more. She waved back at Louise, then turned off her hearing aid so that she would not be distracted again.