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My Notorious Life

Kate Manning

Fiction

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My Notorious Life

BY KATE MANNING

Axie Muldoon, the heroine of this fictive memoir, begins the account of her life with a dramatic description of how she escapes persecution as an infamous 19th century midwife — by faking her own suicide. "They said I'd take my secrets to the grave," she writes. "They should be so lucky." She then tells readers about her "guttersnipe" childhood as the uneducated daughter of impoverished Irish immigrants. Because of her father's death and her mother's accident in a laundry, young Axie, her sister Dutch, and brother Joe are taken to an orphan asylum by Reverend Charles Loring Brace, the (real-life) founder of the Orphan Train movement. This program sent 250,000 orphaned children from Eastern cities to the West between 1853 and 1929. Axie's experiences in the West set the course of her life, as she goes on to make her fortune as a "females' physician," flouting authority, determined to help desperate women, and prevent the abandonment of children.

AN EXCERPT

ONE LATE MARCH DAY With old snow dirty over the grass, Mr. Brace showed up at the Asylum with a great surprise. His bulbous eyes was bright with excitement as he sat us down in the vestibule.

—Good news, he said. —You Muldoons are chosen for our Western Emigration Program. He smiled expectantly.

We stared at him dumb as socks while he conned us.

—Good country families are waiting to take in

friendless city children like yourselves, and give them lovely homes with a warm hearth and ample room to roam. Perhaps you might have a pony or a dog. Your jolly brother here will learn to fish and hunt, while you young ladies will learn to set a fine table, and cook a rich country meal.

Mister Brace was a ridiculous fancy talker and though we never seen a field, now we dreamed of pony-owning.

—To date, three hundred and twenty-seven orphans from this city have settled on farms out West, with new mothers and fathers, and all the trappings of a country life.

—But we don't need no other mother, I informed him. —We already got one. So let's go get her straightaways, and off we will be to the countryside.

Now his eyes got tragic and mournful. They were set deep in his head and ringed around with darkness. —There is something I must tell you, he said, very grave. —Your mother has had to have a serious operation. The nature of her injuries was so severe that the doctors were forced to remove her right arm.

—You cut her arm OFF? I roared.

Dutch shrieked. She put her hand over her mouth in horror.

—Hush now, hush, Brace said. —Had we not taken her to Bellevue when we did, she would surely have died of gangrene.

—It can't be, I cried. In my mind I saw a bloody stump off her shoulder, and my mother's chopped limb lost somewheres. The warm crook of her elbow, the freckles on the wrist, the fingers that soothed my fevers, tossed now, who knows where? It made the bone ache all along the marrow of my own wings. —You cut her arm off, I cried, —you bungstarter of a b*****d.

—Hush now, dear child, Mr. B. said, alarmed. —The doctors saved her.

Now, years later, I'll admit they did save her, but then I said, —You are

a wicked man.

—I hope I am not, poor child. I must tell you, your mother was so grateful that you three were chosen for the Westward Settlement, she gave her consent right away. She asked me to tell you, take care of each other, and remember to say your prayers.

I did not cry nor let the black tar of how I hated him come from my mouth.

—Take comfort in the knowledge that our Lord was poor and suffered terrible mortifications, said Mr. B. seeing our stricken faces. —When they crucified Him, nails went right through His flesh. Yet He rose to live among us and be our Savior.

Dutch was crying now louder than ever at the mention of those nails. She climbed into the Reverend's lap and put her arms around his neck. He soothed her down and failed to notice the fury buckling the space between my eyebrows.

—Why shouldn't we have you three young rascals on the next train to the country? he asked. —Would you like that?

—Oh yes, kind Gentleman! said Dutch, a traitor already. —I can't wait to go on that train!

She did not have to wait long. They came for us not three weeks on. We were at lunch awaiting our applesauce, when here comes Mrs. Reardon trundling down the row of tables, tapping certain orphans on the shoulder.

TAP! —You're going to Illinois, she said.

She comes to Mag, and Tap! —My dear, you're on the train.

Tap! She touched Bulldog Charlie, and the boy next to him. She got to me and said the same. —You're on the train for Illinois. And Tap! —So's your sister.

—We WON'T, I cried. —We ain't no orphans.

—No argument, said she.

—What about our brother? Dutch said.

—He's going to Illinois same as you, said Mrs. Rump. Her backside continued down the line, moving as if she kept a separate animal under her skirts.

I sprang out of my seat to make my stand. —I will not go on no train without our mother. She ain't dead.

—Sit down Miss Muldoon, this instant.

Mrs. Rump was done with me.

Out in the yard later, everybody was talking about Illinois. The big boys, especially, were all for it. —In Illinois they got great gobs of butter in your mouth, three meals a day, said Charlie Bulldog. —Mushmelons lying around just there for you to pick.

At sixteen he was the oldest of us, and when he climbed up on the rain barrel in a pose, one finger in the air, all the orphans gathered round to hear him talk. His dark eyes was restless as minnows, and as he started in speaking all silvertongued about the West, it was like Mr. Brace himself had hypnotized the words into his mouth.

—Alla youse orphans can stay here and be lowlifes and rowdies, but if yiz do stay here, you'll be a beggar livin' offa charity the rest of yer natural days, mark my words. But come West, boys and girls, and you'll soon have servants to tend you, and a fella to open your mouth and put great slices of pumpkin pie right in it. Don't know about you, but I want to be SOMEBODY, and somebody sure don't live here in no Asylum. So come out to the prairie alla ya, for a happier day!

—Hip hip hooray, the orphans cheered, deluded by talk of the West.

That night the matrons gave us each a Bible and a cardboard suitcase. They handed around charity trousers for the boys, dresses for the girls. Dutch tried on her new skirt and twirled herself dizzy whilst I chewed my fingers down to the nerves.

—Sleep now, youngsters, said Mrs. R. —Tomorrow you'll be away on the train.

But I did not sleep. In the shadows of the dormitory girls pulled

pillows over their faces to muffle their sobs. Dutch crawled nervous under the covers beside me and flang her leg over my hip with her long hair tangled in mine so you could not tell whose was whose. Through the night worries crawled on our skin like silverfish along the floorboards.

—Girls! girls, Mrs. R. cried, and rang the morning bell. —Today is the big day!

We lined up and she presented us to a couple called the Dix. Mr. Dix had a face like a small ball of suet and his teeth ratted out over his bottom lip. Mrs. Dix was a fine lady, young and slender, with her brown hair in enormous loops at her ears like some variety of spaniel.

—Please give Mr. and Mrs. Dix a warm welcome, said Mrs. Reardon. —They are the agents from the Children's Aid Society and will be traveling with you.

The little ones clapped and the older boys sniggered at the name Dix.

—Good morning, lads and lasses, said Mr. Dix. —We are in charge of finding you all happy new homes on the prairie, all the way beyond Chicago, Illinois.

I determined to run at the first opportunity, but swiftly in the half darkness they herded the twenty of us into wagons and sent us off, everybody waving, all of us jittery. As we neared the rail yards, motes of soot was thick in the April air, and soon we arrived at a tremendous shed of glass and steel. Beyond, the locomotives waited in the open yards. —Trains! the orphans shouted.

But to me they were not trains. They was fast snakes that swallowed up mice such as ourselves, and deposited only our bones somewheres else. The Dix marched us along into a maze of noise and baggage, all the proper people turning to stare, each one thinking, Oh look at them poor pitiful guttersnipes. It was a decent crowd to get lost in.

—Dutch, I whispered. —We will carry Joe now and run out that door to the street. We can find our way to Mam, they won't never catch us.

—But Axie, she said. —I want to go on the train.

—Train! said Joe. He was keen for it, though at two years of age he had not a clue what the f*** was a train. You never saw a nipper sweet as him. His hair was that dark red of our dad's, the color of rusty blood. A pepper of freckles was across his nose and round cheeks, and his britches was half the time falling off his backside. He had a habit of tilting his head to the side to look at me. Axie? he said my name with his head tipped like that, and then he took my face in his two hands, the knuckles dented. He kissed my cheeks and pressed me nose to nose so the bones of his small forehead butted up against mine, like he was trying to enter into my skull. He did that now, pressing on me, and he cried, —TRAIN, with a wild look of joy on his face.

And so it was that the whims of my sister and brother prevented me from running out the door, brainwashed as they were about prairies and pie. And it must be confessed I was afraid to run, for I had heard too much now from the matrons about how we vagrant children was worse than the pagans of Golconda. If we was left alone on the streets, they said, our childish faces would soon have the long black story of shame and suffering written upon them, a future like hell before us.

They packed us at last onto a train car, me and Dutch together with Joe on our laps. —Goodbye New York, I whispered, and took Joe's little hand to show him how to blow kisses. As the train moved out of the station all us three Muldoons' kisses were feathers drifting out the window into the New York air, over the buildings to find Mam.

The train clanged and chugged, getting up steam. Everybody bounced in their seats, crowding the windows. They were boisterous and singing for an hour. Mr. Dix led us in rounds of Come Ye Sinners Poor and Needy. He loved that infernal song. *God's free bounty glorify . . .*

Soon the Dix passed out a free bounty of apples and gingerbread. We

pressed the crumbs against the seat with our fingers and licked them off so as not to waste any. Dutch's pinky curled as she did it for daintiness came natural to her.

—Axie, said she, —I do like this train.

The wonder in her eyes looking out the window was in every orphan's also. At Spuyten Duyvil we crossed a trestle over the river, such a cold hard ribbon you could not believe it was wet. White sails of ships were moths drowning on the water below.

—What's that! we said, peering out pointing. —What's that? The scenery went by the windows so fast. For the first time we saw hills. We saw streams. Milk cows and beef cows and horses roamed free without fetters. Acres of trees rolled by in green walls. We never knew so many trees was possible. We grew quiet, without vocabulary for the immensity of the land, or for the distance increasing away from the patch of it we knew. What small certainty we had was dusted down now, to just our names and the contents of the satchels we carried in our childish fists. Night fell. The vast blackness out the window erased our past. It was blank as our future. We chugged through a town where the houses and stores were all lit up warm. Was there a window like that somewhere lit for us? It seemed the answer was: fat chance.

Through the long night kids was crying for their mothers. There were infants needing milk, and several others were crawlers, fast as centipedes across the floor. There was a pair of brothers with a juicy vocabulary of curses between them, they were all eff you and eff ess eff. Them two Dix was run ragged chasing down the little ones and shocked out of their drawers at the mayhem and the language. —You are vessels of blasphemy! Mr. Dix blustered. —Your speech is so vile even the farmers won't take you.

I worried, if the farmers would not take us, what then? We'd be left to roam the prairie, carcasses for the ants. Every day, to avoid such a fate, the Dix chastised us for cursing and made us to practice proper words

for a servant, yes ma'am and no ma'am, please and thank you. —Now you will not be savages, they said.

—When will we be there? Dutch plagued me. —Where are we going, Axie?

—Illinois, I said, over and over. To me the place had the sound of ANNOY and ILL but that's not what I told my sister. —Every lady there has a feather hat and a coat of fur. Their dogs is poodles with haircuts like lions, their horses got ribbons in their manes.

—For real? she asked. Her eyeballs moved over the scenery outside the window. They went to the right, then back left again to reload on something new, and this motion gave her a dreamy sort of insane look as she listened to my tales.

—In Illinois you will sleep on a feather bed soft as this eyelash on your cheek. Feel, I said, and blinked my eyelid against her face. —Mam says this is the kiss of a fairy's wing.

—Mam will be in Illinois, said Dutch.

—No she will not.

At this Dutch began to cry again and it was all I could do not to join her, as just then Joe made a sick sound and threw up his dinner. The mess landed at our feet and the reek of it soaked the air. Orphans moved away, holding their noses, jeering remarks. I was left cleaning. —You big lump, Dutch, I said, —get a rag so's you can help me.

—I want Mam, she said, and put her delicate head back against the seat cushion with Joe whimpering at her side.

There I was with the two of them. One useless, the other sick. Knowing Joe, in a minute he'd be bouncing, never better. The boy was a handful. He whined and fretted. His droozle went all over us, and he could not learn to use the privy. We had to hang his drawers out the window to dry, as there was nowheres to wash them. Every minute he was insane to run off. —Get down! he said. But there was no getting down. There was only going forward on the train, the fear and the panic

and the boredom.

For days we traveled, stained and weary, past the date of my thirteenth birthday and further after that. The Dix tried to pass the hours, preoccupied with did we know the Bible? Morning, noon, and night, we sang There's a Rest for the Weary. Mr. Dix moved along the aisle of the train talking about the Lord. —Let us pray!

I prayed for him to stop his effing sermons.

As Dix talked, we three mimicked his expression, top teeth over the bottom lip, like a rat, scrumping up the nose, making a rat-squeak by sucking air through the space between teeth. Charlie the Bulldog saw me do it. He laughed and tried it, teeth exposed, nose wrinkled like he had whiskers. I stuck my tongue out at him. He smirked and stuck up his middle finger so I cocked a snook at him, thumb on the nose and the fingers waggling. The two Dix was happily preaching and did not notice.

—God has smiled on you lucky children, Mr. Dix said. —You will trade the sewer gasses of the city for the fresh breezes of the countryside. Let us sing all together:

From the city's gloom to the country's bloom

Where the fragrant breezes sigh . . .

O children, dear children, happy, young, and pure—

We was not pure, but a raggedy chorus. Passengers from the other cars came to listen with a tear in their eye. —Oh the innocents, they said. Truth is, while the orphans sang, I worried, what would happen? We would be separated. Sold off and parted. They would whip us, feed us like dogs. These thoughts of loneliness came over me like steam from the grates in the street, and like the steam it held a memory of heat that turned damp on the skin, sinking through your clothes into your bones. How I wanted my Mam.

One warm day toward the end of May we were awakened to the feel of slowing. We heard the sharp metal sound of the brakes, the shush of steam. The bell clanged and there was the lurch of the stop. I put my hand out across my sister's shoulders. My brother's head was a damp weight in my lap.

—Illinois! Illinois! The conductor was calling out the name of a town. Half cooked with sleep, I didn't hear it. —Illinois!

—Children! Children! said Mrs. Dix. —Tidy yourselves. She herself was none too fresh. The spaniel-ear hairdo of hers had come loose long ago. She had a bun like a knob of potato now pinned to the back of her head. —Quickly, we must disembark.

—Oh Axie, said Dutch, —this is Illinois?

We peered out the window and saw nothing but a depot in the midst of nowhere. No buildings to speak of, just a sorry wooden rectangle with a door, a window, and a cold chimney. That was the station house. A dirt trail wandered along in front of it. That was the main street in town, called Rockford. There was not all that many rocks to speak of and beyond the one building was only: long grass. We had seen so much of the stuff out the train window, and now we come to find out we traveled all that way for more of it.

Climbing down off that train we was rusty as old people. I set Joe down, and away he ran in the direction of the grass. His fat legs showed in a pale flash below his trouser cuff. —Joe! I called. —Come back! He skipped and twirled. He didn't know to be worried about what Fate lay ahead, dumb and free as a dog. That boy Charlie chased him down and swang him up, so our Joe laughed and laughed. —Here's your brother, Charlie says, and handed him over to me. He and the rest of the Big Boys were all for going to find the plum trees and especially the cows.

—I bet money I could milk one easy, says Charlie, so cocksure and

bawdy, how he described you do it, squeezing his hands in the air. He mooed like a cow and said UDDER and TEAT. Mrs. Dix put her fingers in her ears.

—Enough of that talk now, Mr. Dix said, covering the delicate ears of his wife.

The boys continued anyways, and when Charlie seen me laughing he winked at me and I felt caught, my cheeks red.

Mr. Dix rang his bell. —Children! Children! Line up.

We set off carrying the babies, marching toward the steeple, a white spear down the road. What a sorry raggle-edge group we was with our paper luggage, our shoes with no laces and our faces with no clue where this was on a map. We came to a clump of plain raw buildings that Mrs. Dix said was the town. We grumbled it did not look like no town. We passed a store. It featured a sign tacked to a porch post that read:

Arrival of ORPHANS from New York City
Thursday, May 31st
First Congregational Church
Homes on FARMS are Wanted for
CHILDREN cast FRIENDLESS upon the world
Those desiring to acquire a child please INQUIRE
of the Screening Committee.

We were notorious already. At the church, a crowd of people in country clothes stood around. They stared at us as we came up the road. We climbed the steps and they whispered and pointed, goggle-eyed.

—The New York orphans. Well I'll be, said one fella.

—The poor dears, said a woman, shaking her head like we was lepers.

Joe hid his face and Dutch clamped my hand. That showoff Charlie grinned, waving at all the country people.

Inside the church, up front, was a half circle of chairs. That was

where we would be sold, no doubt. First, however, we were given coffee and biscuits. They had plum jelly, and bits of ham and butter to fatten us and dull our senses. Some of the ladies came to take the babies away, to coo at them, but I was d***ed if I would part with Joe.

—Here, let me hold him for you, says a woman smelling of licorice.

—This is my brother, says I, and clung on.

—He's a little red-haired lamb, she says, sucking a horehound drop.

As soon as the townsfolk had us well stuffed, they brought us to the front and sat us down to be inspected.

—Lookit the queer shoes on that one.

—That's a little oliveskin boy. Are you Eyetalian?

—Are you one a them New York hooligans?

—Lookit her hair.

Their eyes on us were terrible millipedes crawling. One man pulled Mr. Dix aside, asking questions. —Are they able, strong and willing? Or are these all young thieves and hoodlums?

Two big men made Bulldog Charlie stand up. —Show your arms, the bearded one ordered him. Charlie stuck his jaw out and flexed his muscles like a fighter. He grinned right at me, so I seen how he enjoyed to make me squirm. It was then I was approached by a desperate old article with raggly strings of hair circling the bald spot of his head. He paced around where I sat, with Joe on my lap. He circled Dutch.

—You are brother and sisters? he asked.

—Yes sir.

Joe began to whimper.

—Stand, said the b*****d. —Turn around.

I did.

The geezer chewed something as he made the tour of me. His lips were stained brown, his teeth dark in the cracks, and his mouth appeared like it was leaking mud.

—You're a fine young lady, said he. —So's your sister.

He was squinting, sucking his lips. —I want to see about your teeth. Open your mouth, say ahhhh.

The hinge of my jaw was rusty. —Ahh, I said barely, and at that he stuck his stinking finger in my mouth and ran it around the gums.

That SONOFAB****. I bit him, right down through the gristle to the bone.

He roared like an animal. —She's bit me!

—Axie Muldoon, what did you do? Mrs. Dix came rushing over.

—This fiend has gone and bit me! cried the old scoundrel. —That she-devil!

—Let's go Dutchie, I said, carrying Joe. —We're on the train home again.

—Calm down, Mrs. Dix said, soothing me. —We'll find you a nice home.

The church ladies milled about, inspecting us. One of them lifted pieces of Dutch's hair, while some others started gossip about me. —She's wild. Bit a matron at the orphanage, too, they say. Curses like a sailor.

It was a terrible spectacle. Mag was getting sized up by a woman with an eyeglass on a stick. People were at the windows looking in. One lady squeezed the meat of Joe's thigh. A man in farmer overalls touched his hair like it was a curiosity.

Now a dark-bearded gentleman in a waistcoat began talking to Dutch. She smiled up at him from under her lashes. —How old are you? he asked her, with kind eyes.

—Seven, Dutch replied.

—Seven? He beckoned to a petite lady with combs in her pompadour. —I'd like you to meet my wife, he told Dutch. The lady's eyes were the same sky blue miracle color as my sister's. The husband remarked on it. —Why you could be our own child!

The wife smiled. —What is your name?

—Dutch, said she, already forgetting the Muldoon.

—She appears to be just the right age, darling, said the man, as his wife sized up my sister with a faraway look on her sad face.

Joe squirmed in my lap. —Down, he said, and got himself off me. He was making his way back to the biscuits so I had to chase after him. But too late. One of the ladies had him, that same licorice-smelling one who tried to get him before.

—Get down! Joe cried, struggling and reaching for me. —AxieDutch!

—He's a sturdy little fella, said the woman, a blast of odor off her as she handed him over. —Would he like a horehound drop? Would you?

I should've had my guard up, but I was preoccupied about Dutch, left with the gentleman looking her over. Not to mention I had to find the privy. The horehound lady directed me to go outside, around the back of the church.

—I will keep an eye on your little fellow, said she.

It was my mistake to let her.

Outside, I seen the pocky farmer herding Bulldog Charlie toward a team of mules, and watched as he swung himself up onto the wagon seat. When he saw me he lifted his hat, and grinned very contagious. —So long, Ax! he says, and was gone.

So they just take us off like that, then, I thought, in a panic now, and raced back to guard my sister and Joe. But Mrs. Dix snared me and steered me over to a pinched crab of a woman. —Mrs. Hough, said Mrs. D. —I'd like you to meet Axie Muldoon.

—Axie? said Hough. —What kind of a name is that?

—The name my mother gave me.

—You can call me Mother now, she replied with a simper.

—Mrs. Hough has agreed to take you in, said Mrs. Dix. —And your sister and brother have found places too.

—I'll go with them, I said. —It's the three of us Muldoons as a package.

Mrs. D. took me aside. —Please reconsider. It's not easy to place three at once. At least you would all be here in the same town. Otherwise you'll have to travel on to the next location with the others.

The others. These were the ones not chosen. They had to get back on the train and go farther on. —You can choose to stay with Mrs. Hough, Mrs. Dix said, —or come with me on the train in the morning.

I bolted away with this news to my sister where she sat on the lap of the blue-eyed lady, and pulled her by the sleeve. —Let's get out of here. We're going back on the train.

—No, Axie, Dutch said to me, cheery as Christmas. —Mrs. Ambrose will take me home, where I will be their little daughter. The father will buy me a pony.

And then Horehound held up my brother Joe like a prize turkey, showing him off to a ruddy man with a brown mustache. —Meet your son Joe, she says to him.

—He's not your son! I shouted. —You can't have him.

—And who are you? said the ruddy man.

—That's his sister, said Horehound, frowning. —I was thinking . . . Chester—?

—I told you one is all, said her husband. —And the sister's known as a hellion.

Events were transpiring all around me, an avalanche of catastrophe. I looked from Joe to Dutch, back and forth to the adults smiling away. —No, no, no, I said. —You can't take them separate or without me. We are all three Muldoons.

—Trust me, said Mr. Dix. —There's no one here able to take the three of you.

—Let's GO, Dutchie, I said. —Mam said keep us all together.

But Dutch was ready to cry. —My new mama says I shall have a china dolly. Please Axie I ain't going back on that train one more minute.

—Then we are separated! I cried.

A look of honest surprise came on her face. —But maybe you'll get a china doll of your own! Seven years old and bribed away from me. The two Ambroses looked at us, sorrowful again, apologizing. The wife took Dutch by the hand and began whispering poison into her ear. I scowled at her and stuck out my tongue.

—Gracious! the evil kidnapper said.

I tried to drag Dutch off but was distracted by the terrible sight of Horehound heading toward the door with Joe in her arms. —Stop, I cried, torn between them, and scrambled after my brother through the crowd. —Joe Muldoon!

—Oh there you are, said Horehound. She took Joe's hand and made him wave.

—Say bye-bye, she said, in a baby voice. Joe reached his arms for me.

—Joe!

—Now, now, says Horehound, —you'll see him when we bring him to church on Sundays and you'll see him plenty.

—NO! I tried to kick her as she shrieked and pulled Joe away.

—You must do what's right for your brother, said the frazzled Mrs. Dix, while her husband held me back by the shoulders. —Say goodbye now, Axie.

—Joe, I said, panicked. I kissed his forehead, stroked the dark hair off it. He lifted his miniature hand and I grasped it.

—AxieDutch, he said, very tired. But he did not fight when the Horehounds strode out the door and off toward their wagon. I watched as he was handed up onto the bench, and they drove off waving.

—We must be going now ourselves, said that crab Mrs. Hough. —Come with Mother. I threw off her claws in a frenzy and ran back to save Dutch at least. We would get Joe back and get on the train home. But no. There my sister was with those Ambroses, holding their hands.

—Say your farewells, her pretty kidnapper said, looking guilty as the criminal she was. My sister put her arms around me now.

—Stay with me, I whispered, and hung on. They peeled her off. They held me back and led her away. She seemed deranged with confusion, glassy with fright.

—Dutch! But there she was outside already, framed in the doorway. The sunlight glinted off her black hair like a sign she was anointed, then she was gone.

In the doorway of the church I stood with my hand lifted in a stopped wave as my brother and sister was driven away by strangers. Then the crab Mrs. Hough led me toward her sorry-looking wagon though I kicked and twisted out of her grip.

—Get off me, I said, and flailed with my satchel. —I WILL NOT GO.

—Well then I will not take you, said Mrs. Hough, and huffed away.

—You've done it now, said Mrs. Dix.

—You're in a terrible predicament, said her husband. —Your only choice is to come on the train with us to the next town, and see if we can find you a placement.

—I will take the girl, said a voice in a quaver.

We looked at the emptying church, and there sitting quietly coughing in the front pew was a white-haired woman with apple cheeks and hair like spun glass on top of her head. Her name was Henrietta Temple, and she was the Reverend's wife.

—Let this young lady board with me for a time, she said to the Dixes. —If we can't find her a placement here in Rockford, she can ride back with you when you come through this way again.

It was the least miserable of my options, and so I was glad to let the Dix leave without me. They rounded up the four or five unchosen orphans, Mag among them.

—Goodbye Mag, I said. —Write to me.

—I will, she said, but I known she lied for she did not know how.

When she and the Dix was gone I went with trembly old Mrs. Temple around to a white house in back of the church with my little

suitcase in hand. As we went, she was wracked by coughing so it was plain I was farmed out to a consumptive. She showed me to a narrow room by the kitchen, so deluxe with its own bed, a washstand, and white curtains in the one window, made of dotted swiss. It was all just for me.

—You can be our guest here for the time being.

—Maybe you wouldn't mind having my sister and brother here neither, I said, enthusiastic. —We'd all share the one bed, no complaints.

Mrs. Temple's eyes ducked away from me. —We can't take in every orphan that comes our way. As much as I would like to.

—Are your children grown?

Mrs. Temple looked sadly at me. —I always wanted a kitchen full of youngsters. But God had other plans for me.

I wish I'd of known Mrs. Temple during the troubles of her younger days, for I'd have prescribed her raspberry tea and black cohosh root and a regimen with egg whites, and she'd not long have remained barren. She was a kind woman. She patted my knee and gave me lemonade, but she could not take me permanent.

That night in my private room I slept alone for the first time in my born days and wrapped the Mrs. Reverend's white piqué coverlet over my raw thumb and suckled it for comfort. At thirteen years of age, I was no better than a baby, and with the knuckles of my thumb pressed against the taste of dread in my mouth, I fell asleep. ■

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Kate Manning is the author of the critically acclaimed novel "Whitegirl." A former documentary television producer and winner of two Emmy Awards, she has written for the New York Times, Glamour, and More magazine, among other publications. She has taught writing in the English Department at Bard High School Early College and lives with her family in New York City.