Chapter 11

Bedbugs in Birmingham and a Prison Visit in Pontoise

In 1963, Mary needed an appendectomy. It was the dead of winter, when the rudimentary conditions in the camp were too harsh for post-operative convalescence. She returned to England for the operation – which Wresinski deemed an opportunity to assign other tasks to her. Several former volunteers were scattered around England. Mary was to recruit as many as possible to return to Noisy-le-Grand. Mary's second assignment was spending six weeks in Birmingham helping a non-profit group while learning from its approach.[1]

In Birmingham, Mary discovered a community of 'back-to-back' houses, cramped early Victorian buildings without hot water. Several households shared one outdoor laundry basin and one outhouse. Each home had just one bedroom, a small living room with a coal fire, a coal cellar, an attic, and a tiny kitchen with a small gas stove. These houses were notorious for bedbugs, attracted by flour in the wallpaper paste.[2] Mary wrote on 7 March 1963:

> Dear Père Joseph,
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> There's so much to do in the kindergarten. Once, the teacher left me alone with the children. I can barely keep order, and they know it, so they were perfect little devils. On top of that, I've caught bedbugs.
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> But don't worry, I'm being spoiled too. My godfather lives nearby. On Saturday night, his son took me to a fancy dress

party. He dressed as a toreador and I as a flamenco dancer. Everyone watched us dance the 'pasodoble'. I loved it!

It's really crazy to work in the depths of poverty when we could be happy doing something else. Is that mean? Although I love the families in Noisy-le-Grand, sometimes I just want to travel the globe. Yet of course I'm as poor as the other volunteers. So to afford it, maybe I'll marry an explorer – just for two or three years, to see the world. It would be impossible to bring a husband to the camp. Anyway I'm happy tonight, and tomorrow is a new adventure.

To study anti-poverty work here, I had great success last week. While visiting the housing officer, I 'borrowed' one of his reports about halfway houses. It's quite interesting. I had copied out most of it when he telephoned to ask if I knew where the report was. I pretended to look and said, 'Bother, I must have taken it by mistake'. I returned it, and began translating what I copied.

I'm visiting several low-income families. One mother is pregnant with her eighth child. One of her sons has been diagnosed with tuberculosis. I'm trying to help her with housework and home organisation – quite a challenge.

The community centre here has family planning. Now that contraceptive pills are legal and free in England, most mothers are thrilled. Husbands dislike condoms, but blame pregnancies on wives. Some men refuse to recognise an unwanted child. All couples should have the chance to plan their families. You told me that the only morally acceptable method is 'natural rhythm'.[3] But the chaos of poverty makes that hard to follow. Besides, if the rhythm method and the pill have the same goal, isn't it hypocritical of Catholics to allow only one? How can any woman organise her life with exhausting pregnancies year after year? It's too easy for priests to preach. For one thing, they're all men, and for another, babies don't wake them at 3 o'clock in the morning.

I'll leave it for now, as you're probably working too hard, as always.

Thinking of you all, Mary

In a letter jam-packed with anecdotes and ideas – like her fantasy about a temporary husband just to finance her travels! – Mary did her

In the camp, babies were born at home.

best to convince Wresinski that overcoming poverty means letting women choose their family size. Although Britain legalised the birth control pill in 1961, it was so new that the Catholic Church had not yet taken a position. In France, where the pill was not yet legal, middle-class society often discussed imposing limits on families in poverty. Outsiders would say of the Noisy-le-Grand camp: 'They should all be sterilised'.[4] Wresinski pointed out that in wealthy families servants provided significant childcare support, while in Noisy-le-Grand, mothers with difficulties managing often lost their children into foster care. This societal control over families in poverty spurred Wresinski to defend their freedom to have large families.

However, Wresinski was also well aware that repeated pregnancies compounded struggles. He noted: 'Whenever a mother in the camp loses her temper with a neighbour, she shouts, 'I hope you get pregnant again!' They consider additional children a burden. They are weighed down by problems. It's not normal to wedge an entire family into a 9- by 15-foot space with nowhere to relax or work on a project.'[5]

On Mary's return from Birmingham, she continued visiting women. Babies were born at home, and Mary once acted as a midwife. She recalled: 'Doctors refused to set foot in the camp because of poor light and the lack of water, to say nothing of dogs everywhere.'[6] Following each birth, Mary brought parents birth registration forms, although couples with irregular immigration status preferred not to fill out the forms.

The daily journal Mary wrote is something asked of all of us in ATD Fourth World's Volunteer Corps: to record our interactions

with people. In the moment, they serve as a place to put all that we have witnessed and to help us reflect. Later they can become tools for supporting individuals understanding their history or for thinking about policy, or for research.

I experience the rawness in this extract from Mary's journal. In amid accounts of a drunken driver crashing in the middle of the camp, seeing a father scavenge for cigarette butts to make new cigarettes, and a circus horse getting loose and galloping crazily through the camp, she also wrote:

> *16 June:* Everyone is talking about the Delauney girl's suicide attempt:
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> 'She slit her wrists so it must have been for love.'
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> 'If everyone with a bad love story killed themselves, there'd be no one left!'
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> 'It's not her fault. Just see how filthy her mother is.'

In 1964, Mary helped sociologist Jean Labbens do research with 50 families in the camp. In his book, about a correlation between insecure housing and weak self-image, he devoted several pages to single mothers:

> Although never married, they usually lived for several years with the father of their children before he died or left. These women may have several passing relationships, and are sometimes accused … [of] having loose morals …

The Noisy-le-Grand camp

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> in the camp, where lone women are looked down on and considered threatening by other women.[7]

Partnered or not, Mary's research showed that a third of these mothers lost their children into state care.[8]

> *25 March:* Social services are placing four of the Barre children in foster care. The whole family brought the girls to the convent. Their little brother cried, and Mrs Barre was holding back tears. Mr Barre came too, although the couple is separated. At the convent, Mrs Barre handed me the paperwork, saying, 'You're faster'. When the nuns told us to leave, the daughters grew very upset. The youngest clung to her mother's skirt and the oldest cried.
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> Heading back to camp, both parents agreed, 'At least they'll have lots of food there. And it's so clean!' But Mrs Barre couldn't hold back tears any longer.

Noting in her journal, 'Women always seem to get the short end of the stick', Mary recorded many agonising situations for women and girls, which included domestic violence, miscarriage, medical malpractice, and seeing their children permanently fostered away from them. A 20-year-old mother of children aged 8 months and 1½ tried to have her third pregnancy aborted illegally, but she died during the procedure.

Activities at the women's centre continued, with Mary noting: 'For once, the summer party we organised was lovely. In the past, women were anxious the food would run out and ate as quickly as possible. But this time, everyone was relaxed and at their most dignified and friendly.'

One young woman in the camp, Mariette Acevedo, was a machine worker whose employer required staff to work in silence, race to the toilet, and do unpaid overtime. Suddenly she was laid off, along with 20 other female machine workers, typists, and stenographers. Although a union helped them try to sue the employer for severance pay, the case dragged on because the company made secretive legal changes to its name. Mariette's sister called her crazy for testifying in court regularly and being seen as an 'unemployable troublemaker'. Mariette said, 'No, the other girls are crazy for protecting that stupid boss. Not me. I won't shut up now!'

Mary tried to help Mrs Legrand when her husband fled the police along with their 13-year-old son, Joël. Mrs Legrand wanted to report this as a kidnapping – but police in two neighbouring towns refused, with one saying: 'Not my jurisdiction'. In Neuilly-Plaisance, the chief said, 'Just wait, he'll probably come home on his own. In the meantime, request a foster family for Joël so we don't evict your whole family because of him. As for your husband, you should throw him out yourself. Unless you do, my hands are tied.' Feeling unable to protect Joël from his father's influence, Mrs Legrand told Mary: 'When the fair came to town, Joël got so drunk he vomited all night. Later, he said proudly, "I got plastered, just like Dad". What will become of him?' Mrs Legrand also recounted her own background to Mary:

> My mother had tuberculosis, so we children were always sent to foster care during holidays. My sisters weren't sent the same place as I was, so I don't know them well. To this day, I'd never ask them for help, even when I need it. When I got married, we lived with my mother-in-law. But the landlord didn't want us and it was really overcrowded. So when we heard Abbé Pierre's broadcast about helping the homeless, we came to Paris. At first, they put us near the Porte de Vanves flea market – terrible, thirty strangers per tent. Here, there's more privacy. But now my husband drinks more because he works clearing out junk. Landladies offer him drink as payment for emptying their cellars. Then he drinks all afternoon. My dream is a two-room flat where my daughters could have their own bedroom, and I'd sleep in the kitchenette.

Such a modest dream – and yet so far removed from her life.

A few weeks later, Mary discovered another shocking situation. She wrote:

> *30 June:* Mrs Delauney has been beaten up. Last night, Jocelyne Vincent invited Mrs Delauney into her igloo with Mr Vincent and three other men. Jocelyne and Mr Vincent both tried to kiss Mrs Delauney. She started kicking and punching. Mr Vincent stole her watch and tried to rape her while the other men watched. Mrs Delauney is proud of having fought him off. Père Joseph is furious with Mr

> Vincent because it's clear he's been pimping out his wife. But when the policeman accused Mrs Delauney of having loose morals, to my surprise, Mr Vincent jumped in to defend her honour. Jocelyne was silent – although whenever the officer addressed her, she gave him her sultriest look until he blushed and stammered. When Jocelyne had to respond, she agreed with everything her husband said.

The following winter, Mary invested a lot of time to support a woman whose teenage son, Gilbert, was arrested with a friend for stealing a radio and cash from their former boss. The friend, Antoine, wrote to Wresinski saying that Gilbert had no visits from his parents. Mary brought this message to Gilbert's mother and step-father. She noted:

> Mr Masson was in a bad mood. Mrs Masson was upset too, saying: 'It's shameful having him in jail! Antoine's parents told everyone, and now you know too!' When she calmed down, she explained that she did try to visit Gilbert twice but in two different prisons, she was told she was in the wrong place. Her letters to Gilbert were returned stamped 'addressee unknown'. When I asked if Gilbert needs a lawyer, she said: 'The court-appointed lawyer is enough. He messed up and has to pay consequences.' But the next morning she came to say she *does* want a good lawyer. She disagreed last night only because her husband was listening. She said:
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> 'He thinks Gilbert belongs in juvenile detention and doesn't want me visiting him. It's because he isn't Gilbert's father. He wants to throw Gilbert into the street. But Gilbert's problems are my husband's fault. He always shouts at the kids. On Gilbert's days off work, my husband yells at him for lounging around. So Gilbert always has to go out, and then he hangs with the wrong crowd. I agree Gilbert needs to learn a lesson, but not in jail.'

Mary drove Mrs Masson to Pontoise to request permission to visit Gilbert. During the drive, Mrs Masson grew increasingly anxious. By the time they reached the Hall of Justice, Mary noted that 'her whole body was trembling'. After receiving the visitor's permit, they queued at the prison gate with many other women. Over two hours, the women spoke about prison conditions. Gradually feeling less shy,

Mrs Masson told the others that this was her first visit and she needed information. She felt better meeting others in her situation. After Mrs Masson visited Gilbert, she and Mary went to a coffee shop where Mrs Masson said:

> Gilbert messed up because he's fed up with the camp. He hates it so much that he wants to take off. That's terrible for a mother to hear. But there's no reasoning with my husband, especially when he's drunk. If I'd known, I wouldn't have married him. But once it's done, you have to stay put. My husband is nice to me; but it's the children who are important. I should leave him. Gilbert can't come home; and I can't leave him in the street. When he's released, I'll pack my bags and leave with the kids.

Mary asked who they could stay with. Mrs Masson's father walked out when she was young. Her mother remarried and had six other children; however, all were removed into state care with Mrs Masson sent to a group home. She told Mary:

> They offered me nursing training. But I was afraid of failing. I regret it. If I were a nurse, I'd have another life. Later, an aunt and uncle took me in. But they made me feel like a foster kid. They lived in the sugar beet region where I worked on a farm. I was proud to earn money, but I never saw a penny; my aunt kept everything. She kept me under lock and key too. I wanted to date, but was never allowed. Finally I ran away and got married. When Gilbert was little, he was sick and got bad medical care. That's when I moved to Paris. He spent a few months in the hospital and I found work as a chambermaid. My husband stayed away and wanted me back home, but I couldn't leave Gilbert. Then I got sick. While I was hospitalised my husband divorced me. He kept our oldest son who I never saw again.

Gilbert left school at age 14 because his mother hadn't known children were allowed to stay at school longer. Now her hope was for her younger children to earn the school-leaving certificate at 15. Mrs Masson was happy to hear Mary suggest that ATD's evening tutoring classes could help. Mary concluded her journal entry: 'Unbeknownst

to her husband, she's saving up to move out of the camp. But whenever a family member gets sick, she uses the money for health care. Just recently, her daughter needed a hernia operation and Mrs Masson had appendicitis.'[9] Another dream – and a plan – were sadly quite out of reach.

Mary was 21 that year, an age at which many women in the camp already had several children. Accompanying them in their struggles with physical hardships, exploitative employers, and abusive relationships must have felt overwhelming to her. I see her dogged commitment to writing as a way for Mary to begin understanding these women's harsh realities. Mary felt they deserved the world's attention.