Chapter 1

First Encounters: 'My Life Was Shallow'

'You can't leave the house like that! Go use the pressing iron in that cupboard.' Barely 21 years old, I was being scolded about my only slightly rumpled Indian-print wrap-around skirt by a woman I'd met just a few weeks earlier. Mary Rabagliati was one of the bossiest women I'd ever met, so I meekly complied, not wanting to end up on her bad side; but also slightly offended that she was applying her own high standards for personal appearance to me as part of my training for the International Volunteer Corps of All Together in Dignity/ATD Fourth World.

Mary Rabagliati

Provided courtesy of Paul de St Croix

It didn't occur to me then that when she first joined this anti-poverty movement in the 1960s people struggling with homelessness and stigmatisation had no wish to be seen with middle-class hippies choosing to drop out of society and 'slum it'. Conditions were harsh in the emergency housing camp where Mary lived when she was 21. Assigned a bunk in the barracks for female volunteers, every morning she joined hundreds of other camp residents to queue at a pump for a bucket of water, and to 'slop out' her chamber pot at the very edge of camp, where a reeking latrine pit stood amid a rat-infested moat. Mary agreed with ATD's founder Father Joseph Wresinski that volunteers should defy these unhygienic conditions and be well

groomed – washing from a bucket of water behind the curtain around their bunk bed – because appearances are essential for being taken seriously. And their intentions were very serious indeed: to gain societal recognition of the expertise of people in poverty.

The emergency housing camp where ATD Fourth World was founded

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Later Mary recalled, 'In that terrible place, we got up every day and dressed respectably. Being presentable was a way of showing respect to the families around us.' Wresinski used to tell new volunteers: 'If you want to look a mess, go home. In the middle of miserable poverty, you should look so handsome that people are glad to see you.' I'm sure this message appealed greatly to Mary because the idea of her ever having *wanted* to 'look a mess' is beyond the realms of imagination. Slender and neat, she was always dressed to draw attention not only to her good looks but to the magnetism that made you want to hear what was on her mind.

Although Mary had a commandingly abrasive side, she charmed me from the start. I had been sent from my country, the United States, to spend two years in France at ATD's international centre. Four of us new trainees moved into a group house where Mary was the senior of six Volunteer Corps members already there. On our first evening, we all crowded around the heavy oak dinner table – a cast-off gift from a donor redecorating her second home. As we dined our way through potatoes, chicken, and home-made béchamel sauce (which seemed impossibly fancy to me as an American, but turned out to be the thrifty French housewife's trick to make any meal stretch farther), Mary led us in a round of introductions and an orientation to housework and cooking rotas. I was still trying to remember the French vocabulary for mopping – a convoluted phrase about 'passing a rag' over the floor (which is more or less what they do, not having squeezy sponge-mop technology) – when suddenly Mary decided to ask everyone's birthday. She soon got to me, but I was reluctant to answer, and just said, 'It's in the fall.'

'When in the fall?' Her British tones sounded imperiously posh as she pressed me for a more specific answer.

'September.'

'But it's September now! Which date?'

As everyone stared, I felt incredibly awkward because my birthday was the very next day. In childhood, my birthday fell at the beginning of the school year when friend groups often hadn't formed yet. Between this and my extreme skittishness about calling attention to myself, I had never enjoyed my own birthdays. When I moved in with Mary, I had just travelled 4,000 miles from home. The last thing I wanted was to become the focus of a sudden social obligation for this group of total strangers.

And yet Mary made my 21st birthday a delightful one! When I awoke the next morning, in addition to a breakfast treat of croissants, I found a gift. This was puzzling, given that the bakery was the only shop open at that early hour. But when I shyly unwrapped the small package, I discovered that Mary had generously decided to offer me one of her own possessions, brought back from her recent trip to Kenya. In between meeting with an eccentric philanthropist at the High Commissariat for Refugees and visiting a dynamic community organiser, befriended during the Nairobi World Conference on Women, Mary had made time to shop, price haggling in a crowded marketplace. This was how she got the object she now offered me: a square of batik cloth the colour of amber and sandstone depicting five women in conversation together. (When I look at it now, in the entryway of my flat, the grace and energy of the central woman makes me think of Mary.) After work that evening, Mary invited two English-speaking friends over for dinner, followed by a sing-along. Although I wasn't yet familiar with Irish songs like 'Molly Malone', my family has always loved singing together, so Mary found the best possible way to allay my homesickness.

Me, shortly after I first met Mary, trying to figure out how to be useful during an ATD Fourth World construction project

I met Mary in 1986, and lost her when she died in 1992. In those six years, our conversations made a lasting impact on my own life choices. Later on, I missed her, and often wondered what she would have gone

on to accomplish if she hadn't succumbed to cancer at the age of 50. What I didn't realise was that much of what she actually *did* accomplish was hidden from view. I was astounded in 2016 when I visited ATD's archives and began reading Mary's correspondence, interviews, and reports. I had known that she spent a great deal of time and energy editing or translating other people's writing; but I had no idea that she also made time to do so much writing of her own.

Year in and year out, she wrote volumes, usually late at night after a long day of work, and often in French where she sometimes struggled to find an apt translation for an English turn of phrase, such as when she tried to refer to the 'baby boom' by writing about 'le bombardement de bébés'! As I plodded through cardboard archive boxes, opening folders made of reused scrap paper and noting rust stains radiating from staples, I was rewarded with Mary's wit and obstinacy crackling off the page. Reading her correspondence, my jaw dropped as implausible stories unfolded of run-ins with authority figures and her deft ways of resolving them (at least on most occasions). Using a third-hand typewriter in an unheated shed, she recorded hard-hitting descriptions of dire poverty along with her own insights. For example, she recalled her first arrival at an emergency housing camp in Noisy-le-Grand, where Wresinski was just beginning to develop the anti-poverty movement that would become ATD Fourth World:

> On a dark misty February evening, I got off the bus and walked down the tarmac road. Suddenly the tarmac

Daily life in the emergency housing camp in 1966

Provided courtesy of Margaret Bourgein

> became only a dusty potholed path. The nearest bus stop was hundreds of metres away from the camp. The road stopped, and you had to walk in the dust – or the mud – to a place where everything was filthy. There were rats all over. People were *living* there! I was really shocked. The conditions were indescribably terrible. These people made me realise that my life was shallow, empty, and futile.

Mary's description makes me think of my own shock at deep poverty. I grew up in the 1970s, on a dead-end street three houses long in working-class Oxon Hill, Maryland, just outside Southeast Washington, DC, where every spring the drabness is sprigged with the mustard yellow of rampant forsythia bushes. With the population about 75% Black, I was in the minority as a white kid (occasionally called a 'honky'). A mile from home, not far from the liquor store, was my elementary school. Grandly named Barnaby Manor, the school emblem was an eagle, emblazoned on small sweatshirts. Some of us were white; most of us were Black; and our school colours were blue and gold. All teachers were white except for one.

'One nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.' Every morning, the pledge of allegiance was fluently reeled off by the same childish voices that stumbled awkwardly over read-aloud English lessons, Dick-and-Jane irrelevancies about Johnny Appleseed and Daniel Boone. Until the five days a year of Martin Luther King Week when suddenly brown faces appeared on our mimeographed history hand-outs and we all scrambled for the Burnt Sienna crayon in the Crayola box to copy King's photo while the white teacher retold the story of the Underground Railroad. Just one week; then attention snapped back to 'regular' history as we memorised the order of the Presidents and turned back to the peach-coloured crayon labelled 'Flesh'. At recess, the shout ringing out from the monkey bars was often: 'It's a fight, it's a fight, between a blackie and a white!' That was Barnaby Manor, with no thread of black in the red-white-and-blue we saluted.

When I was 15, concern about racism led me to volunteer in a part of down-town DC that was 100% Black and much poorer than Oxon Hill. All summer, I went every day to a children's soup kitchen called Martha's Table at the intersection of 14th and W Streets. At the time, that was the headlined 'heart of the drug district', abutting the red light district. Commuting about seven miles from my home meant

transferring twice, each time to a filthier bus, lumbering towards seedy strip clubs and peep shows.

> Disembarking each morning, I wince at the sudden stench of sewage and desolation. From the bus stop, past the windowless purple-and-black store-front marked 'Black Chen's Soul Kitchen', I thread my way past bleary men with bloodshot eyes who ask: 'Hey, Blue Eyes, how much you want?' My eyes are green, but that's not where they're looking. Then past 'Jewel's Beauty Salon' comes the vacant lot where four elderly gentlemen sit in folding chairs playing spades. One with yellowed teeth tips a battered hat towards me. From the shroud of a doorway scampers a 5-year-old calling out, 'Hi Danny!', his childish distortion of Diana.
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> 'Hi Tyrell', I smile. Gleefully, he skedaddles ahead, into Martha's Table where he plops down to chomp his way through a grilled cheese sandwich and a storybook. All day long, kids flock in, fishing pennies out of their shoes for the nominal meal fee and wolfing down peanut-butter-and-jelly as fast as I slap sandwiches together. They turn up their noses at donated croissants, not because they are going stale, but because they are unfamiliar. Then at 6 o'clock, I whip out Lysol to clean up and leave, back past hock shops, liquor stores, and a Woolworth's where the windows wear chain mail.
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> As smudges of dusk approach, the children trickle homeward, and the gentle spades players go inside to watch from barred and broken windows the gradual massing of teens on the street corner. Regularly police cars skid up onto the side-walk shouting 'Sasquatch!' to scatter the teens – for a few moments until they drift back together a bit further on.
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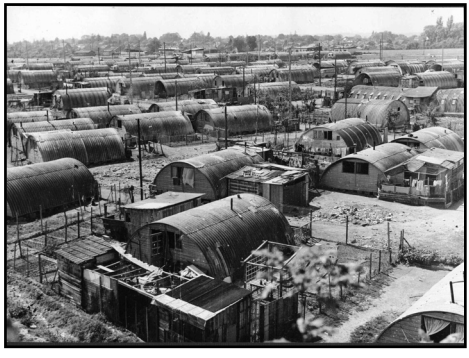
> Excitement one night: as I await my bus – fingers taut against my purse, clutching a strand of home as much as warding off purse-snatchers – just in front of me a police car tears screaming up, in hot pursuit of a red Jaguar, only to crash into a creaky Dodge Dart that was too sluggish to give way to the siren in time. The police aren't hurt – but they are suddenly immobilised in hostile territory. Within seconds, throngs of people materialise to jeer the police. As the first bottle is tossed, the air flares with more sirens. Fire

> ambulances; police reinforcements; an unmarked sedan that has improbably sprouted a siren – all converge on my corner to take some of the unruly crowd into custody. For me, the event ends as a hulking red-white-and-blue Metrobus arrives to carry me homeward, unscathed.

That's the memory that floods back when I read Mary's words: 'These people made me realise that my life was shallow, empty, and futile.' That path of 'shallow futility' was exactly what I feared in an ordinary job, and avoiding it drew me to ATD. Ours is an unusual organisation with a unique approach that can be hard to explain. This was a challenge for Mary too. In 1964, she fumed in a letter home: 'It's very difficult to make these journalists understand anything if they think some other story will sell their paper better!' Her fury was sparked by the first line of a *Daily Mail* profile of her: 'The drunkards and derelict families of the Paris shanty town know her as "our little English friend Mary".' The entire article was meant to compliment her. But the author's paternalistic tang echoed centuries of social engineering designed to 'save the deserving poor' – while damning those considered 'undeserving' with bigotry. As Mary later told another journalist: 'Nothing is said about what the victims of extreme poverty are doing for themselves under impossibly hard conditions. I was struck by their courage and resourcefulness and just what they have to do to simply survive.'

At the age of 20, Mary quit her job as a secretary in an architectural firm to volunteer in the emergency housing camp in Noisy-le-Grand



Most of the camp's Nissen huts housed two families each.

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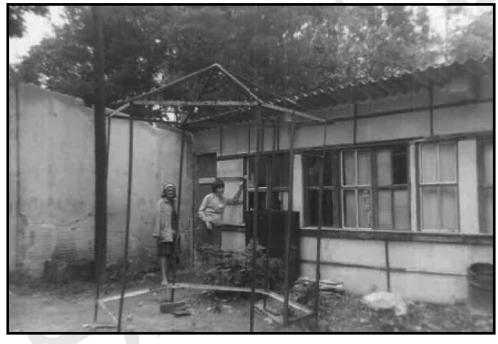
Mary in the 1960s
© Photo by Peter Akehurst

where 280 families lived in bleak squalor. What struck Mary most powerfully was the lives of teenage girls and young mothers. In the mud and without indoor plumbing, chores filled every waking hour, particularly if a girl had younger brothers and sisters. Early marriage, motherhood, and violence further curtailed these girls' horizons. The girls challenged Mary and amused themselves by playing tricks on her – but they also won her lifelong dedication.

The project that led me to Mary's archives was nominally connected to preparing ATD's 60th anniversary, marking the journey of a



The barracks where volunteers slept in bunk beds
Provided courtesy of Margaret Bourgein

group that began with only a French name, the Association 'Aide à Toute Détresse' and eventually became ATD Fourth World, with the original letters reassigned to mean All Together in Dignity. But once I began sifting through Mary's carefully filled notebooks and carbon-copies of her reports on brittle onion-skin paper, it struck me that I was 50, exactly Mary's age when she died. Outliving her made me feel a responsibility to tell her story to those who never met her. At first, the project was straightforward. Hitting on the idea of a draw-my-life video format, I drafted nine scripts and prevailed on an artistic teammate to film his hands painting watercolour backdrops for the narration of Mary's life journey.

Paul Maréchal created all the artwork
for the draw-my-life video series.

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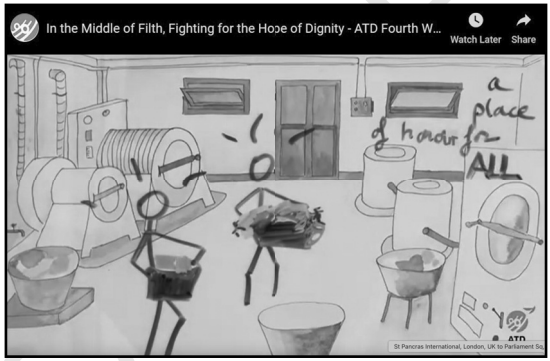

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However, by the time we posted the final video to YouTube two years later, the project felt incomplete. It wasn't that I had spare time on my hands. Living in London, my days were endlessly busy with ATD's Giving Poverty a Voice programme and also my three daughters. My then 15 and 24 year olds were both studying and living at home, and my 27 year old was a short bus-ride away. But in between work, family meals, or traipsing to the library to help print out the kids' homework, memories of Mary kept tugging at me. For instance, this journal entry of hers, on a rainy day walking through the camp, composed of hundreds of repurposed Quonset-hut army barracks (nicknamed 'igloos' by residents because of their shape):

> *24 November 1964*: I hear only faint noises: a child's raised voice; someone chopping wood; a chicken clucking, perhaps