

Molly and Me

by

Marion Lewis Besmehn

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*I started putting together family stories
for my one granddaughter, Kristen.*

*By the time I finished I had nine
grandchildren and one great grand-
child: Elias, Gabe, Ashley, Abby, Allie,
Sam, Chase, Cole, and Gavin.*

*I have also come to think of my brother
Billy's grandchildren as my own:
Kristina and Courtney.*

*I hope all my family know how much I
love them.*

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FORWARD

The Dark Side of Story—and a Bright Hope

Story is powerful and can transform us. Yet not all stories transform us in ways that make us bigger.

Marion Besmehn's mother, Molly, possessed the power of story, but she used it to manipulate, to shape the world to her ever-changing whims. In the end, Molly was a prisoner of her own manipulation; as much as she used it to bend the wills of others to hers, her commitment to being the pitiable heroine of a tragedy drew her on (and isolated her) like an addictive drug.

So what are the odds that Marion, the child of such a mother, would be able to emerge whole?

Molly and Me tells us a story of a submissive child who, faced with her mother's overpowering abilities to distort the truth, finds a single path out of that darkness: to resist her mother's false truths and cling to her own. She escapes from her mother's critical pull, marries a good man, and raises a family. As long as Marion is occupied with the challenges of managing a family that moves 18 times in 30 years, her mother is little more than a painful

annoyance. But once Marion's children are grown, Marion has to face the voice of her long dead mother that still lives in her own mind, telling her how dull, weak, and timid she is.

What Marion's skillful collection of interlocking stories shows us is that, when a significant human relationship, or even a life, can't have a happy ending, it's still possible to take control of our perceptions by shaping the story we tell ourselves about our life, by experiencing in story the things that life never gave us, and by transforming a traumatic story into a triumph—if not of happiness, then of wholeness.

With its honesty, humility, and surprising humor, *Molly and Me* leaves this storytelling coach feeling moved, buoyed and cleansed—and inspired to take charge of shaping my own life story into an honest and integrated whole.

Is there really anything more hopeful than that?

Doug Lipman
Story Dynamics



1920

WHISKEY

The clock on the mantle struck seven. The table had been set since five. She had long since taken the kettle off the fire. She looked once more out the window. Still no sign of him. She knew this could not go on much longer. But what could she do? Every time she tried to get to the bottom of what was wrong, he turned from her; and the more he turned from her, the more he turned to drink. Something had come between them. Something that was destroying him physically and mentally and breaking her heart.

When the clock struck eight and she found herself still sitting waiting for him, something inside her snapped. She stood up, walked to the sideboard, opened the bottom cupboard and took out the half bottle of whiskey. As she reached for a glass, she said out aloud, "I'm bloody well fed up! What's good for the gander is good for the goose!"

She poured the whiskey into the glass, then tipped the glass into her mouth. As the amber fire scorched a path down her throat, her whole body shuddered and she let go of the glass in her hand. It fell to the floor and

smashed into bits, just as the door opened and Will walked in.

“What the bloody hell is going on in here?”

Tears filled her eyes as she struggled to gain control. She had taken much too big a gulp of the whiskey, and the effect was worsening. She fell back into the wooden chair. She could not speak. He came to her side, picking up the whiskey bottle as he passed the sideboard.

“How much of the bloody stuff did ye drink?”

Slowly the fire within her began to subside, but something else began to happen. Blood rushed to her cheeks and her eyes blazed. She sat perfectly still and riveted her eyes on him. Disgusted, he turned to put the whiskey bottle away. As he closed the cupboard, the full force of her anger hit him.

“I’m fed up, Will Lewis. I’ll not put up with ye another day. I’ve let it go far too long as it is. Now, I’m puttin’ me foot down. Ye won’t tell me what’s troublin’ ye, so ye’re to go and ye’re to speak to Father Brady!”

“What are ye blabberin’ about, woman? I’ve got nothin’ to say to a priest! Mind yer own business! I’ll *not* go.”

“Ye *will!* As God is me witness, if ye don’t ye’ll not come back in this house! Now, I’m layin’ down the law. I’ll not sit here day in and day out and watch ye kill yourself with drink!”

“Oh, and ye’re a fine one to be talkin’. The kettle callin’ the pot black, is it?”

There was a silence then. After a few moments she spoke.

“Will Lewis, ye know very well I don’t drink. I took that whiskey to give me courage to say what I had to ye. Somethin’s eating at ye and I can’t be still and watch any longer. Now, ye’ll do as ye’re told or there will be bloody *hell* to pay. And I can promise ye that!”

“I’ll not stay in me own house and listen to this rubbish!”

With that, he turned and walked out, slamming the door so hard the window panes rattled as if they’d break. She took a deep breath and immediately got the dustpan and brush. As she bent over sweeping up the broken bits of glass, she said, “Why in God’s name did I drink that vile poison? Dear God, I promise ye, I’ll not touch another drop to me lips, only please, please God, make Will go see Father!”

Father Brady had had a rotten day. It had been raining and he had discovered another leak

in the church roof. He was sure he was coming down with the flu. He ate the cold supper that the widow O'Brian, his housekeeper, had put on the table before she left at three o'clock; he had said his prayers and climbed into bed. It was raining cats and dogs now and it irritated him no end to think of the water he'd have in the church tomorrow morning. He turned over, boxed the pillow, and pulled the eiderdown up to his ears. It made his blood run cold when he thought how tight his parishioners were when it came to money for church repairs. It was like asking brick walls!

“Aye, what will they do when the bricks come tumbling down? That'll show the blighters! It will be too late for 'em to sit up and take notice! Dear God, how can I get through to 'em before it's too late. Oh God, show me what ye want me to do with these bloomin' blighters!”

At midnight there was a terrific pounding on the presbytery door. As Father came to his senses, he could not distinguish the pounding of the door from the pounding in his head. He fumbled to light the candle by his bed. As he got to his feet and put on his dressing gown and slippers, he prayed to be forgiven for what he was about to say to the maniac breaking his door down. He lit the kerosene lamp in the hall and threw open the front door. Will Lewis was

standing in the pouring rain, and Father let him have it.

“Good God, man, are ye trying to wake the dead? I’ve a good mind to send for the police for disturbin’ the peace *and* destruction of property! Just look at the mark ye’ve put on me door! What in God’s name do ye want, and have ye any idea what time it is?”

Will wore a silly grin as the water poured off his head and down his face. Not at all daunted by Father’s upbraiding, he said, “I need to talk to ye, Father. I’m afraid I have had a few whiskies, and to tell ye the truth, I’ve no idea what time it is—as a matter of fact, I’m not at all sure I know what year it is!”

Father’s temper rose to the boiling point as he realized he had been awakened by a drunk.

“Will Lewis, ye’re *drunk*! Go home! And I hope yer wife boxes yer ears. Ye’re a disgrace!”

Will’s mood changed instantly. Suddenly he slumped forward, his right hand shot out to catch the doorjamb to steady himself.

“Right. I don’t blame ye Father, ye’re a good man. I have no business wakin’ ye up in the middle of the night. Well, then. I’ll trouble ye no more.”

“For God’s sake, Will, what’s this all about? This is not like ye—has somethin’ happened?”

“No, no, Father. Go back to bed—I’ll not be troublin’ ye no more.”

Father reached out and grabbed Will’s coat and pulled him inside the door—none too gently.

“Come in, ye old sot. Ye’ll catch yer death and then there’ll be hell to pay.”

Father pulled Will to the leather chair in the parlor and pushed him down. Then he lit the ready fire (thank God for Mrs. O’Brian). As Father stood up and warmed his hands from the fresh flames, he turned. As he stared at the sorry heap in his one good chair he said, “I’d not be wanting to be in yer shoes, Will Lewis, when yer wife finds out ye’ve been traipsing around drunk all hours of the night! Now, get that wet coat off and tell me what this is all about.”

Will fumbled with the brass buttons on his old army overcoat. As the warmth of the fire filled the small room the khaki coat gave off a strong, musty, wet wool smell. Will stood up, none too steady, and let his coat fall. Father caught the coat and put it over the straight back chair in the corner. Will took a couple of steps to the fire to warm himself. Father took a

handkerchief from the pocket of his dressing gown and wiped the water off the leather chair that the coat had left behind. Will stood staring into the flames and spoke in a clear sober voice.

“Father, I don’t think God believes in me any longer.”

Father Brady finished wiping the chair, then draped the wet handkerchief over the fire guard.

“I see. Is this why ye woke me? And what in the name of God do ye want me to do about it in the middle of the night?”

Will sat back down in the leather chair, much to Father’s annoyance. “Well, to tell ye the truth, ye can give me a drop of yer whiskey—seeing as now we’re both wide awake.”

“More whiskey, is it? What do ye take me for, a bloody fool? Ye’re already three sheets to the wind! Stop the bloody nonsense and tell me what’s on ye’re mind before I send ye packin’.”

“Ye’re a hard man, Father. Well then, I’ll come right out and tell ye. I’ve come to the end of me rope. I know it and Mary Anne knows it. I want ye to tell her for me that no man had a better wife. She didn’t deserve the miserable husband she got. She and the children are the only reason I’ve hung on as long as I have.”

“Will Lewis, for God’s sake, that’s the whiskey talkin’. Ye’re not makin’ any sense at all. If I didn’t know ye any better, I’d swear ye were talkin’ of doin’ yerself in!”

“Aye, that I am, Father. And as God is my witness, it’s not the whiskey talkin’. It’s been two years comin’ and if the truth be known, it’s the whiskey that’s kept me goin’ as long as I have.”

“Good God, man, ye can’t be serious! What on earth led up to this?”

“Oh Father, it’s all water under the bridge. The only thing I can’t settle in me mind is Mary Anne and the children.” Will was staring into the fire. A glazed look came into his eyes as if he were a thousand miles away.

For the first time Father was speechless, as it dawned on him the anguish and torment this man was feeling. Finally, Father said, “I think, perhaps, we *both* need a drink.”

Father left the room and a few moments later returned with a full bottle of whiskey and two glasses. He set the bottle and glasses down on the small writing desk under the window. He unscrewed the cap of the whiskey bottle and poured two drinks. He handed one to Will and picked up the other for himself. Will took a huge gulp of the whiskey, leaned back in the chair, closed his eyes, and slowly began to speak.

“Have ye ever murdered anyone, Father? I have! Fair hair. Green eyes. Clean-shaven. So young.”

Will took another drink without opening his eyes.

“The first few months when I got back from the war, I put it out of me mind. I was so relieved to be home—alive—with my wife and family. But slowly I began seeing his face when I closed me eyes. Then I started going over and over in me mind how it happened. Now I wake up thinking I’m the one who should be dead! I’m the one who should be *dead!*”

“So that’s it, is it? How did it happen, Will?”

“How? Oh God, Father.”

Will held his glass out and Father poured more whiskey. Will drained his glass before he spoke.

“We were on patrol and somehow I got separated from me company. I remember thinking I was bloody well lost, when the next thing I know there is a German soldier not five feet in front of me. We surprised the hell out of each other. I shot before I realized I pulled the trigger. The poor bugger was even more lost than me! It turned out there wasn’t another Jerry

within five miles of the area, and the gun he was carrying was worthless. Oh, God, he was only a lad, why did I kill him?"

Father took the desk chair and placed it in front of Will. He sat down and put his hands on Will's shoulders.

"Will, look at me."

Will opened his eyes.

"Now, nothing that I can say or do will bring that man's life back. But I can tell ye this: Ye have got to stop torturing yerself over his death. Ye did what ye had to do. Ye did what any one of us would have done under the same circumstances. Ye were in the middle of a war, Will! Now, thank God, that war is over. Ye have a wife and four children. What would they do without ye? Ye have got to get a grip on yerself. I'm telling ye yer time is not up yet and ye have responsibilities, my boy. Now, I'll not hear any more talk of doin' yerself in, do ye understand? I wish ye had come to me sooner, son. I had no idea what was going on in yer mind. But now that ye've come, we'll see this thing through."

Widow O'Brian arrived at the presbytery at six a.m. the following morning."Now, to fix a nice hot breakfast for Father after he says Mass."

As she turned the key in the lock of the back door of the presbytery, her mind was filled with her duties for the day. As she stepped into the kitchen, her nose was the first to detect something awry. There had been a fire in the fireplace, then damp musty wool enveloped her, and something else—yes, whiskey! Her ears were not nearly as efficient as her nose, so it took a moment for the terrible sound to register. But when it did, it frightened her beyond belief as she had no idea what it could be. She made the sign of the cross and said, “Mother of God, is it the devil’s den I’m in?”

Just then there was a knock at the front door. Widow O’Brian’s head was in a whirl. Never in her born days had she encountered anything like this. She backed out of the kitchen door and down the back steps, and as fast as her legs could carry her, she got herself to the front of the presbytery. She saw Mrs. Lewis standing at the front doorstep. She tried to call from the gate, but she was having trouble breathing. Just then Mary Anne turned and saw the housekeeper. She ran down the steps and put her arms around the old woman’s shoulders, saying, “Mrs. O’Brian, what’s wrong? There, there, now, it’s all right. What’s happened? Is it Father? He’s not at the church.”

“Oh, Mrs. Lewis, I don’t know. There’s terrible goings on in the house!”

“Where’s Father? Have ye seen Father Brady?”

“No, no, I thought he was saying Mass. Somebody or something is in the house! We’ve got to get the police! Oh, they’ve murdered Father Brady in his bed! Mother of God, preserve us!”

“Now, now, Mrs. O’Brian, it’s all right; show me.”

“Oh, dear God, I’ll not step in that house if me life depended on it!”

“All right, wait here. Is the back door open?”

“Aye, I left it gaping wide open!”

Mary Anne ran up the steps and in the back door. She moved quickly through the kitchen and into the parlor. Will was slumped in the leather chair by the fireplace. He was snoring to beat the band. She could not remember when she had seen him sleep so soundly. Father Brady was sitting at the small writing desk with his left cheek flat on the desk top. His right arm was stretched out. He must have hit the whiskey bottle when he moved his arm as it lay on its side, having dumped its contents down the side of the desk and into a huge sopping stain on the rug. The smell of

whiskey was fierce. As Mary Anne stood staring at this unlikely scene, Father's eyes opened and he sat up.

“Mary Anne, ye're here!”

His hand rubbed his face and he mumbled, “I'm such a blithering idiot! God wants me to worry about the bloomin' blighters, not the bloomin' bricks!”

With this, his head fell back down on the desk and his eyes closed. Mary Anne turned and went back out the kitchen and down the steps to Mrs. O'Brian. Tears came to her eyes, but she was smiling and her heart cried, “Dear God, thank ye, thank ye.”

The minute she saw Mrs. O'Brian, she began to laugh, “Mrs. O'Brian, it's all right, it's only my husband, Will and Father Brady. Believe it or not—they've both been doing exactly what they were told to do!”

END OF PREVIEW

Find the rest on Amazon.com

<http://amzn.to/1ygDnKw>

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The stories of my grandmother and great-grandmother are based on facts, what I heard as a child, my research of birth records, whispered secrets in the family and my imagination as a storyteller. The story of my mother and me, is my own experience and I have told the truth as I know it. As Grandma always said, "God give me strength!"