

Mary Fleming  
By Renee Yann, RSM

*She holds the coat for me to slide my arms into, the way men used to when I had a name.*

The young woman comes along the extremity of the space where I seem sleeping. She is like an ant measuring the surface of a box. This box is my home, a rectangle of the late morning sun in Suburban Terminal, under the clock with an hour hand stuck at three.

She creeps on tiptoe along the imaginary wall I have layered at the edge of myself, brick by isolating brick. Maybe she is afraid to wake me; maybe she is afraid I am dead. Her fears are well placed. I am as good as dead, I think.

In the distance behind her, the Salvation Army man must be ringing his bell. I see his arm rise and fall several times, but I hear nothing. The wheels of the subway car clack into my sunlit box like huge dominoes crashing in chain reaction.

I see the young woman start at the tumult. She inches in a semi-circle around me, the way I once saw someone capture an escaped budgie. But that was in another life. That was when I was still trying to care. That was when I had a name.

I am nameless now and homeless. I am connectionless. But I still have thoughts. No one cares to touch my thoughts, though. They have become like leper's sores. Sometimes I ooze out through my thoughts into words that are indiscreet. The hard truth I want to say comes out blurred.

Yesterday someone with a train ticket in hand, someone with a place to go, said: "Shut up, crazy woman. You're not making any sense." I had not even known I was speaking.

But I know I am quiet now. This woman circling me need not fear infection from my speech. She pulls the ring of approach a little tighter. She calls to me as if shooting a soft dart toward a bull's eye. "Miss? Are you awake? Would you like a boxed lunch?"

I uncurl myself from my distant epicenter. The woman wrapped around this voice begins to clear. She is a third my age. She is a child to me.

"Yes," I hear myself saying. The words fall with a heavy thump near the perimeter of our not quite tangent worlds. What I mean to say is, "Oh, thank God you've come. I'm starving from hungers I haven't fed in a thousand years!"

I am surprised to realize again that I am unable to say what I mean to say. In another life, I was an articulate person.

"Well, would you come outside", the woman is inviting gently. "They will not let us feed you in here."

I can't remember who "they" are, but I know about them, these people opposed to my nourishment. Are they all the rest of the world besides myself and this woman who thinks I am an escaped bird?

"Outside?", I say. It is another flat, paralyzed word fallen between us. I begin to hope that if I place enough of these heavy words like flagstones, she may be able to walk across the gulf to understand me.

“Yes. Come out to the trunk of the car, please,” she says, turning confidently, naively, into enemy territory.

“Outside.” I remember where it is, I think. But does she know how afraid I am to go out there? Perhaps she thinks that, because I am homeless, the whole outside is my home.

It isn't. Only this measured space under the broken clock. Only the dank corridor that snakes to women's room. Only the first stall. I will not go far enough in to use another. Tomorrow I may have another home, but it will be just as circumscribed. I will be as afraid to leave it I as I am to leave today's.

But today, I trust this woman. I pretend to anyway. Still I reconnoiter all the terrain from here to her car, like a soldier crossing a mine field. On the way, I see the thin man with swollen ankles who sleeps on the bench by the Taco Bell. Though he hides it, I know he works undercover for the FBI, trying to find out my real identity! Every day he yells, “Hey, you!”, thinking I will turn and say, “I beg your pardon, but my name is...”

What is my real name? I think I knew it once.

I follow the woman to her car trunk. It is very cold outside. I cup my hands to protect my fingers. I hunch my shoulders forward. I have only a flannel shirt for a jacket. I know enough to protect myself from the cold. I am not as crazy as they think I am.

As I take the boxed lunch from the woman's hand, a question escapes from inside me without my framing it. “Do you have a coat?”, I ask. The request dribbles across to her like a lifeless worm.

She looks at me blankly. Embarrassment, buried by the landslide of time within me, stirs like a corpse about to rise from the dead. Of course, she has no coat! I can see that her car trunk is filled with only lunches. But to my shock she says, “Yes,” slipping off the coat she is wearing. “I do not need this one. Please take it.”

She holds it for me to slide my arms into, the way men used to when I had a name. It is already warm inside from being near her. This is the closest I have been to human warmth in a long, long time.

"My name is Mary Fleming," she says. "Will you tell me your name?" I think to tell her the truth, this woman who has just given me her warmth inside a coat. My mind shapes the words, "My name is Muriel Thurston."

Yes! That is it! That is my name!

My mind races backward, avoiding the leprous sores where I seep sometimes. "Before my only son died in Vietnam, I was chief librarian at Center City. Perhaps you saw me there when you were a child?" Oh, yes. I can feel it now. I am being reincarnated by her kindness. Although it is all another life, I really lived once! I once had a past, a future. A name!

"My name is Muriel Thurston." That's what I am trying to say. Instead I hear another rock fall between me and this woman. “My name is Mary Fleming,” I am saying, like a parakeet returning the imitation of a phrase.

“Oh, God. No! That's not right! I scream, standing mute and motionless. The woman smiles. "Well, good, Mary. Would you like to come with me to the shelter?"

I do not answer. I turn and begin to walk away. I hear her throwing stepping stones in the space I am re-making between us. "I'll be back tomorrow. Perhaps we can get to know each other better," she is saying.

Slowly, I go back to my home where it is always three o'clock. For some reason, the FBI man has turned into a harmless, homeless person like myself. For some reason, I remember his name is Joe.

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