

## Brink of Existence

When I woke, the other side of the mattress was empty. I stretched my fingers out, trying to find Mary's warm little body but felt only cold sheets. She must have gotten up again. Mary had gotten a cold a while ago and woke up constantly throughout the night. Opening my eyes, there was enough light to see her. She stood by the sink getting a cup of water. Our little one room house had two small mattresses, a sink for bathing and cleaning, a round table with four chairs, a stack of blankets near our homemade furnace, and a shelf of worn out clothes.

Mary slowly made her way back to the straw mattress we shared. I gave her a smile and she crawled back into bed. I wrapped my arm around her petite shoulders and kissed her forehead. We probably needed to wake up soon, but she needed rest to get better.

It was the year of 1934, during the Great Depression in Chicago. The past few years hit our family extremely hard. Mother had left us, taking most of our money with her. The little money we had left started to run out, and we did whatever we had to do to eat each day. Will, my older brother, and I dropped out of school and had gotten jobs. We needed enough money to pay for rent, as well as food. Mother had left us when I was only in eighth grade, Will in ninth and little Mary could barely form words at the time.

Father was an accountant during the day. His friendship with his boss was the only thing that secured his job; a job that barely paid. He began boxing at least three times a week to make ends meet. Any extra money helped. But he got little sleep and barely functioned, because of the physical drain and abuse.

I heard Father slowly pull himself up in the bed nearby. I watched as he rubbed his sore, tired muscles. It was time for work. I lightly shook Mary.

“Wake up Mary. It’s time to get up,” I croaked.

“But Becca, I’m tired,” she managed to say, in between yawns.

She turned and murmured some words I couldn’t understand. I just let her sleep until I was done getting ready. I splashed some water onto my face and pulled my coarse, brown hair back. I took out a half a loaf of bread for breakfast. I sliced it into four thin pieces. This would have to last each of us until dinner.

“Mary, you need to wake up right now,” I said sternly.

She had a violent coughing fit, which had been occurring a lot lately and eventually rolled out of bed. Will was up and grabbed a piece of bread. He gave me a nod, and Mary a kiss on the forehead.

“I will see you two tonight,” he muttered and walked out into the crisp fall air.

Father was getting dressed, and Mary sat nibbling on the bread. I pulled another layer of clothing onto myself and stuffed the bread into my pocket.

“Mary, it’s time to go.”

She scrambled to grab her clothes and pull back her hair. When she was finished, I grabbed her small hand and pulled her outside. It was a three mile walk to the first house. The mansions we cleaned were in the wealthier part of town far from where we lived. The residents had more money than they knew what to do with. It was the only reason we had jobs.

We walked up the steps of a beautiful home. Although it was fall, the house was surrounded by wonderful smelling flowers and perfectly green grass. From the porch, I scanned the neighborhood. Neat rows of houses lined the street. Every house had perfect green grass. All

of the houses were manicured by a large staff of people, who were on the edge of existence. Us included. Birds were singing and the sun was shining. Even the air smelled clean.

“I wish I could live here,” Mary mumbled.

I nodded. We could only dream. We stood at the doorstep and knocked. I could hear footsteps inside, quickly running to the door. Their son, James, who was one year older than me, always answered.

The door opened, but it wasn't James. It was a nanny.

“You are not needed today. James is sick. Come back next week,” a short, stubby old woman said before slamming the door.

I looked at Mary. What if James gave her Tuberculosis?

“Now what?” she sighed.

“Next house,” I said and grabbed her tiny hand.

We walked to the next beautiful castle-like mansion. This one bigger than before. It was white and tall like I imagined the White House. Once inside, Mary started dusting, and I started on one of the four bathrooms. After about three hours, we had one level sparkling clean. Mary and I sat together on the bathroom floor, eating our slice of bread.

“Is James gonna die?” Mary asked.

“He can afford a doctor. He will probably be fine.”

Mary nodded and continued to nibble on her bread.

“Alright Mary, we need to pick up the pace. This bathroom has to get done.”

We wouldn't get paid if we didn't finish in time. Sometimes the residents didn't pay us if we worked too slow, but we were lucky to have the job.

Four hours had passed and we had finally cleaned the entire house. On our way out, I found the money waiting for us on the table. All of it would have to go towards paying rent. It wasn't enough for dinner.

After some time walking from the house, we neared the busy market. It was halfway between the wealthy neighborhood and ours. Mary and I quietly walked down the empty alley leading to the market. Mary skipped ahead of me, kicking rocks ahead towards the busy street. Occupied people were going in all directions. The noise was unbearable. We would have to steal something to eat. I hated doing this with Mary, but it was the only option we had.

“Hey, Mary. I need you to talk with that employee over there okay? Don't let him see me remember?”

“I know. I know,” she nodded and walked over to the man.

Her sunken cheeks and ratty clothes couldn't hide her bright blue eyes. She started babbling about something and made sure his gaze didn't land on me. The man chuckled and handed her a chunk of stale bread from the basket going to the garbage. I smiled and quickly darted over to the bin of potatoes. I stuffed three big ones into my pockets. I started to reach for one more when someone took hold of my arm. I turned around slowly.

It was Mary, tugging at me with her tiny hand, “Rebecca, we need to go,” she whispered.

She pointed toward the police officer that had just entered the store. I was terrified and froze with fear. Mary seized my arm and pulled me between the aisles and out of the market. We ran as fast as we could. We didn't stop running. That police officer had been hunting me down for months. When our little house came into view Mary slowed and began coughing.

“Hopefully, Will makes it home alright,” Mary had whispered.

“And Father. He has to leave in a few hours for his boxing match,” I replied.

“All we have for dinner is a slice of bread and potatoes,” Mary sighed.

I knew our supper wasn't much. I pulled Mary into our house. While I started to make dinner, Mary sat on the straw mattress.

“Rebecca,” she whined, “I feel sick.”

She hugged her knees and rocked back and forth. I continued to boil the potatoes.

“Just drink some water. You're probably just dehydrated.” I said, trying to convince myself more than her.

She had a fever. Her face was flushed, but she was shivering. I grabbed a towel and dipped it in water. I also grabbed the warmest blankets I could find. I wrapped her up in the blankets and draped the wet towel over her forehead.

“It's okay Mar.” I smiled and kissed her forehead.

I knew it was not.

“Becca? Can you sing to me?”

I sighed and nodded. I had gone back to making dinner and started to sing an old lullaby. It was the song Mother sang to me. She left a year after Mary was born, and I did my best to fill the role of the mother for our family.

“Let's eat some of the sausage I bought yesterday.” I said.

“Really?! You said we should wait until tomorrow after Father wins his match.”

“Well, let's finish it off tonight before it goes bad.” I smiled at her.

“Oh, I haven't had meat in so long.”

I continued to sing, cook, and clean the dishes. Suddenly, the door swung open.

“Will!” squealed Mary.

Will ran over to her and engulfed her into a hug.

“What is that amazing smell?” Will started to tickle the tiny girl, and she started to giggle and cough.

“Becca is making stew with the sausage!” she said after calming from her fit.

“I’m going to cut wood,” he said, smiling.

I mixed together the stew, still singing the lullaby. The door opened again, and I turned to see Father. He always looked tired, but he had a dreadful look on his face. Father walked to the small mattress and collapsed. I scooped up a cup of stew and set it on the bed next to him. He wearily pulled his body up and began to eat the stew.

“Thank you, Becca,” he said.

I could only nod and started to hand out stew to Will and Mary.

“Father? Can we come to the match? I wanna see you win.” Mary pleaded.

I knew Father would say yes. He looked at Mary’s puppy-like eyes and then back up to me. I nodded. He sighed and nodded.

“That would be fine. Will can stay home and finish the chores. We leave in half an hour.”

Mary started to squeal. While she was yipping, she started to cough, hard. I could see on her sleeve, small drops of blood. I recognized that as a sign of Tuberculosis. I swallowed the lump in my throat and fought back tears. She was so young and innocent, with her rosy cheeks, auburn hair and freckles. She looked like Mother. She happily ate her stew while we all watched her.

I started to clean up the dishes, while Mary got dressed in her best and only dress. I didn’t want her to go so she could rest. I didn’t want anyone to go. I wanted Father to get paid. I wanted Mother to come home. I wanted to go back to school.

However, I couldn't handle the idea of leaving her home while ill. I happily sang an old nursery rhyme to take my mind off everything and looked for my dress, the one Mother left for me. Father was getting in his boxing trunks and Will was washing laundry. I had grabbed the tattered blue dress, and Mary had her bright yellow one on already. My old one. It was too big on her and hung loose.

"Father? Are you ready?" I asked.

He only nodded reluctantly, probably nervous. I would be too. He never did well in his fights, but he got paid, win or lose. I grabbed our lucky blanket. He grabbed his gloves and we headed out into the night. The city was like a different world at night. It was quiet and peaceful. I could spot every star in the sky.

Mary and I had a secret safe spot underneath the bleachers whenever we went to Father's matches. We were shielded from the loud rough people and could be alone. We always tried to find food that fell.

The building approached and I spotted the flights of stairs. I had completely forgotten all about those treacherous stairs.

"Mary, are you sure you want to do this? That is a lot of stairs," I tried to convince her.

"Of course! I would never miss Father's match," she squealed. I sighed and took her hand.

After the two flights of stairs, Mary was completely out of breath. She heaved and coughed. I noticed another drop of blood. Bringing her was a mistake.

Father needed to get ready. We gave him a kiss good luck and hugged him goodbye. Mary grabbed my hand and pulled me to our special spot. Under the bleachers was like our secret world. When Mary and I were under the bleachers, everything was okay.

I laid out the blanket, and we started to look for Father out in the ring. Rows of cheering crowds filled the auditorium. Father stood across from his opponent. My breathing picked up pace, Mary cuddled up next to me on the ground. His opponent was huge. The referee started to exchange the rules with the men, and then backed away.

A few long seconds passed before the bell chimed, starting the fight. Father and the man started to circle each other. Mary and I started to cheer.

“Mary! Close your eyes!” I commanded the girl, not taking my eyes off the match.

Father had taken a blow to the head and was losing his balance. I couldn't watch, but my eyes were glued to Father. Mary hadn't taken her eyes off either. Father let out an anguished roar. No one heard or cared above the raucous of the crowd. Father returned with a hard hit to the stomach. The man smirked at the blow.

The man narrowed his eyes, focusing in on Father, and threw a giant fist. He hit Father square above his left eyebrow. Blood gushed and ran into his eyes. Father stumbled back and tried to wipe away the blood, struggling to see. I started to scream again, feeling my insides spill out. I looked down at Mary. She was suddenly fast asleep. All the excitement had probably worn her out.

The man cornered Father and swung. His glove missed Father, but barely. Father slowly moved around the ring. The man was stalking him like a lion and Father was the wounded animal. The man pulled his fist back and took one final swing to his temple. Father's legs wilted and he fell forward, hitting his face hard on the mat, arms at his sides. He lay motionless on the mat floor.

I gave Mary a quick kiss on the cheek and ran. I couldn't stop choking on my tears. Father had been carried out of the ring by two large men and set on the floor while the next fight

started. I pushed and shoved my way to behind the ring. Through rows and rows of noisy people who could care less about me or my situation. I spotted Father lying on the floor. A nurse was bandaging his bloody forehead.

“Is this your Father?” she asked.

I nodded.

“He’s going to be okay. He just needs a few days to rest. If he fights anymore, he will not be okay next time.” She gave me a small squeeze and hurried off.

I kneeled down by Father. His eyes started to move and then his eyelids fluttered open. I started to hug him.

Father gave me a weak smile. I grabbed ahold of his arm.

“We need to get you home.” I said.

Father looked around.

“Mary?” he slurred.

I had almost forgotten I had left her sleeping. Panic started to build up.

“I’ll be right back.” I gave Father a kiss on the cheek and hurried to the bleachers.

Mary was still laying in the spot I had left her. I knelt down beside her and gave her a small shake.

“Mary. It’s time to go.” I said softly.

I rolled her over and immediately noticed. Her perfect little lips were dark blue. Her body wasn’t radiating its usual heat. Her normally rosy freckled cheeks were tinted purple. It was all my fault. I laid my ear to her chest and listened for a heartbeat. I screamed as loud as I could. No one in the bleachers or in the rest of this cold, ruthless world heard me.

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