

Agatha

JOHN O'HARA

BOTH DOGS had been out. She could tell by the languid way they greeted her and by the fact that Jimmy, the elevator operator, had taken his twenty-five-cent piece off the hall table. Or was it Jimmy? Yes, Jimmy was on mornings this week; Ray was on afternoons and evenings. Jimmy liked dogs, Ray did not. The day was off to a better start when Jimmy took the dogs for their morning walk; it was nicer to start the day with the thought that Jimmy, who liked dogs, had exercised them, and not Ray, who made no attempt to conceal his distaste for the chore. Ray was paid a quarter, just the same as Jimmy, for taking the dogs down to the corner, but Mrs. Child had very good reason to believe that that was *all* he did—take them to the corner, and hurry right back without letting them stop at the curb.

“Good morning, boys,” she said, addressing the dogs. They shook their tails without getting up. “Oh, you’re such spoiled boys, you two. You won’t even rise when a lady enters the room. Muggsy, don’t you *know* that a gentleman *always* stands up when a lady comes in? You *do* know it, too, and you’re not a very good example to your adopted brother, are you? How can I expect Percy to have good manners if you don’t show him how? Percy, don’t you pay a bit of attention to Muggsy and his bad manners.” The dogs raised their heads at the sound of their names, but when she finished speaking they slowly put their heads back on their paws. “Oh, you’re hopeless, the two of you. Really hopeless. I don’t see why I put up with two such uncouth rascals.”

She proceeded to the kitchen door and pushed it open. “Good morning, Mary,” she said.

“Good morning, Mrs. Child,” said the maid. “I heard you running your tub. Will you have toast this morning?”

“Just one slice, please. Maybe two slices, but bring me my coffee first, will you?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“I didn’t see any mail. Was there any?”

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“Got it here on the tray. Which’ll you have? Marmalade, or the blackberry jam?”

“Mary, you’re not cooperating at all. You know perfectly well if you mention marmalade or jam, I’ll *have* marmalade or jam, and I’m trying not to.”

“Oh, if I don’t mention it you’ll ask for it.”

“I’m such a weak, spineless creature. All right, you mean old Mary Moran, you. You know me much too well. I’ll have the blackberry jam. Were there any packages?”

“None so far, but United Parcel don’t usually get here before noontime. That’s the way it works out. Some neighborhoods they only deliver in the afternoon, some in the morning. I guess they have a system.”

“And speaking of other neighborhoods, when am I going to be able to lure you away from Mrs. Brown?”

“Oh—I don’t know about that, Mrs. Child,” said Mary Moran. “Will you have your first cup standing up?”

“No, I’ll wait. I’ll be in the livingroom,” said Mrs. Child.

Mary Moran would have been expensive, and there really wasn’t enough work to keep her busy, but Mrs. Child knew that Mary’s other employer, Mrs. Brown, had been trying to persuade her to give up Mrs. Child and work full-time for her. It did no harm, every once in a while, to remind Mary that she had a full-time job waiting for her with Mrs. Child—and subtly to remind Mary that she had been with Mrs. Child a good two years longer than she had been with Mrs. Brown. There were a lot of things Mary could not do, but in what she could do, or would do, she was flawless. Mrs. Child did not need Mary Moran at all, when you came right down to it. The building provided maid service of a-lick-and-a-promise sort, and you could have all your meals sent up and served by the room-service waiters. But Mary Moran was acquainted with every article of clothing that Mrs. Child possessed; she was a superb laundress of things like lingerie; a quick and careful presser; very handy with needle and thread. She could put together a light meal of soup and salad, and she could do tiny sandwiches and a cheese dip for a small cocktail group. But she would not serve luncheon or pass a tray among cocktail guests; not that she was ever there at cocktail time, but as a matter

of principle she had made it one of her rules that serving was not to be expected of her. She was not very good about taking telephone messages, either; it had taken Mrs. Child two years to discover that Mary was ashamed of her handwriting and spelling. Nevertheless she would have been an excellent personal maid, and Agatha Child never gave up hoping that she could lure—lure was the word—Mary away from the Browns, whoever *they* were beyond the fact that they had a small apartment on Seventy-ninth Street and were away a good deal of the time. It would have been worth the money to have Mary Moran on a full-time basis, not only for the work she did, but because her coming to work full-time would have been an expression of the approval that Agatha Child suspected that Mary withheld.

“We haven’t talked about that for quite some time,” said Agatha Child.

Mary Moran had just brought in the breakfast tray. “What’s that, Mrs. Child?”

“About your coming to work for me full-time.”

Mary Moran smiled. “Well, it suits me, the way it is,” she said.

“You’d make just as much money. And don’t you find it a nuisance, to finish up here and then have to take the bus to Seventy-ninth Street?”

“I usually walk. I enjoy the walk. I get a breath of fresh air.”

“Do you know what I think? I think you have a gentleman friend that you have lunch with. You almost never have lunch here.”

“Well, there may be some truth to that. We have a bite to eat. It’s on the way.”

“Oh, my guess was right? How fascinating. Tell me about him.”

“No, I don’t think I’ll do that.”

“Of course not. It’s none of my business, and I don’t want to appear inquisitive. But of course I’m dying of curiosity. You’ve been with me eight years and this is really the first time we ever got on that subject.”

“Well, you made a good guess for your first try.”

“Is he Catholic?”

“No ma’am.”

"You'd rather not say any more."

"Rather not. It's him and I."

"Yes. Well, I won't badger you any more. I just want to say that I hope he appreciates you, and if you ever feel the need to talk to someone about it—about him."

"Thank you, ma'am."

"Remember, I've been married three times."

"I know that, yes."

"And I'm a lot older than you. Probably fifteen years."

"Not quite. I'll be forty-one."

"Well, almost fifteen years. How did you know my age? Did you see it on my passport?"

"No ma'am. Your scrapbook, where you have that newspaper cutting of when you eloped and all. The big green scrapbook."

"Oh, yes. That's a dead giveaway, isn't it? Well, what difference does it make? Anybody can find out my age if they want to take the trouble. All they have to do is go to the Public Library, and there it is in big headlines, seventeen-year-old heiress and all that tommyrot. Never lived it down. But that's where I can be of help to you, Mary, in case you ever *need* any help."

"They'd never put *me* in the headlines, whatever I did."

"You can be thankful for that," said Agatha Child.

"Will you want me to—changing the subject—will I send the black suit to the dry cleaner's, or do you want to give it another wear?"

"I guess it could stand a cleaning. Whatever you think," said Agatha Child.

"I had a look at it this morning. It's about ready to go."

The day's mail was fattened up by the usual bills and appeals. She put a rubber band around the unopened bills, for forwarding to Mr. Jentzen, who would scrutinize them, make out the appropriate cheques, and send her the cheques for signature. She saw Mr. Jentzen just once a year, at income tax time, when he would deliver his little lecture on her finances, show her where to sign the returns, and have one glass of sherry with her. On these occasions Mr. Jentzen could almost make her feel that he was paying for the sherry and for everything else. Bald, conscientious Mr. Jentzen, who looked like a dark-haired version of the farmer in Grant Wood's "American Gothic," and who in some respects knew her better than any husband or

lover she had ever had, but who politely declined her suggestion that he call her Agatha. "Not even if I call you Eric? It's such a nice name, Eric." And so unlike Mr. Jentzen, she did not add. She could have gone right ahead and called him Eric; she was, after all, at least five years older than he, but she knew that he was afraid of even so slight an intimacy because he was the kind of man who would be afraid to get entangled with a woman who had had three husbands and an undetermined number of gentlemen friends.

It occurred to her now, as she doubled the rubber band about the bills, that her life was full of small defeats at the hands of people who rightfully should have obeyed her automatically. Mary Moran, Eric Jentzen, and Ray the bellboy were three she could name offhand who refused to yield to her wishes. With Ray the bellboy it was a case of attitude rather than outright disobedience; he did what she asked, but so churlishly that his obedience became an act of defiance. Mary Moran, crafty little Irishwoman that she was, was practically an illiterate but she was adroit enough to avoid a showdown on the question of giving up the Browns. And Eric Jentzen used his sexual timidity to keep from losing the arrogated privilege of lecturing her on her extravagances. (It was quite possible that Mr. Jentzen got some sort of mild kick out of that safe intimacy.)

The dogs were now sitting up. "One little piece of toast is all you're going to get," she said. "No, Percy, you must wait till your older stepbrother has his. See there, Muggsy? If you'd taught him better manners he wouldn't be so grabby. One piece is all you're going to get, so don't bother to look at me that way. Down, boys. I said down. *Down*, God damn it! Percy, you scratched me, you son of a bitch. You could cause me all sorts of trouble, explaining a scratch like that. *If* there was anybody I had to explain to." She lit a cigarette and blew smoke in the dogs' muzzles. "Now stay down, and don't interrupt me while I see whose sucker list I'm on today."

Two of the appeals were for theatrical previews at twenty-five dollars a crack. By an amusing coincidence both contained similarly worded personal touches. "Do try to come" was written across the top of the announcements; one was signed with initials, identifiable by going down the list of patronesses; the other was signed "Mary," and didn't mean a damned thing.

Mary. What a crust a woman had, to sign just Mary and expect people to know who Mary was. Agatha Child went through the list and discovered three Marys behind the married names and one Mary who was a Miss. "I'll tell you what you can do, Mary dear. You can invite me to dinner and the benefit and shell out fifty dollars for me and some likely gentleman, and I *will* do-try-to-come." She dropped the announcements in the wastebasket. She immediately retrieved them and went over one of the lists again. Yes, there it was: Mrs. W. B. Harris, the wife of her second husband. What a comedown that would be for Wally, if he should ever learn that she had seen that name, which once she bore, and it had failed to register. True, she had always given the name the full treatment: Wallace Boyd Harris. True, too, there were so many Harrisises. One too many, or two too many, if it came to that, which was how she happened to become Agatha Child. For the second time she dropped the announcements in the wastebasket, but at least they had given her some amusement. Wally Harris, afraid of his own shadow—more accurately, afraid of the shadow of her first husband. Well, it hadn't been a mere shadow; more like a London peasouper that lasted four years. Four dark, miserable years that she could recall in every detail and had succeeded in suspending from her active memory, by sandwiching the whole period in between her first marriage and her third, so that it was worthless even as a wasted segment of her time on earth to cry over. He was an intimate man, Wally, wanting to know everything about everything she did, until there was nothing left to learn except all the things she felt and could not tell him, that no one can tell anyone unless she is asked the right questions, at the right moment, in the right tone of voice, and for the right reason which is love. Finally he had learned just about every fact of her marriage to her first husband and had accidentally discovered a few facts about the man who was to be her third. All that time that he had consumed in pumping her about Johnny Johns, in contemning Johnny Johns, in emulating Johnny Johns—a little of that time, only a little, Wally could more profitably have devoted to the maneuverings of his friend Stanley Child. When the blow fell and there was that tiresome scene that Wally had insisted upon ("I want you to hear everything I say to Stanley"), the thought

kept running through her mind that Wally hated Johnny much more than he did Stanley. Despite the fact that she had been having her affair with Stanley right under his nose, Wally managed to bring up Johnny Johns, whom she had not seen or heard from in five years. "I thought you were all through with that kind of thing when you got rid of that Johns fellow," said Wally.

"I was—to marry you," she said. "Johnny could have been very unpleasant about *you*, don't forget."

"That lightweight," said Wally, unmistakably implying that Johnny was incapable of sustained indignation. Two years later Wally married the present Mrs. Harris, the lady of the patroness list, and immediately started having lunch with Stanley again. By Wally's lights it was all right to resume the friendship with Stanley Child as soon as he remarried, but not before. The friendship in its second phase was stronger than it had ever been, and it did not include the wives. "Wally and I are going over to play Pine Valley . . . Wally got me an invitation to Thomasville. Will you be all right?" At first she was not all right, at all; it was not her idea of fun to sit in a New York apartment while the two big boys, her husband and her ex, went off to play. She was not worried about what they would say about her; Stanley Child was simply not the kind of man who would discuss his wife with another man on any terms, and insensitive though he may have been about many things, Wally Harris would know better than to mention Agatha except when it was unavoidable. No, it was not the fear of their talking about her that annoyed her; it was her growing conviction that she could be the wife of two men and yet remain completely outside their lives, one after the other and the two together. In olden days they might well have fought a duel over her; in the fifth decade of the twentieth century they played golf together and tacitly denied her existence.

It was a dismal record for a girl who had only wanted to be liked, who had only tried to be pleasant to people. She loved Johnny Johns now, today, so many years later, but she had not even believed at the time that she was marrying Johnny for love. He was a screwy boy who would come charging into Canoe Place late Saturday nights, arriving alone and always

leaving with some other boy's girl. Nothing vicious about him; he made no phony promises, and he nursed no hard feelings against the girls who refused to ditch the boys they had come with. To such steadfast types he would say, "Okay, but you don't know what you're missing," and it was as close as he ever came to the surliness of some of the other wolf types. At this point in her reminiscing she smiled.

Canoe Place, a Saturday night after a dance at the Meadow Club. He came and sat down beside her—actually in back of her—pulling up a chair from the next table. "Aggie Todd, I've a bone to pick with you. I hear you said I wasn't a wolf."

"You heard I said you *weren't* a wolf? Were not? Why is that a bone to pick with me?"

"You trying to ruin my reputation?"

"You're getting me all confused," she said.

"Did you or did you not say I was not a wolf?"

"I said you were not," she said.

"That's what I heard. What right have you got to go around saying nice things about me?"

"Huh?"

"The first thing you know, all the mothers and fathers will start approving of me. Then where will I be?"

She was young, and not very quick. "Oh, now I get it," she said. "You glory in a bad reputation, is that it?"

"I sure as hell don't want to turn into a Henny Ramsdell."

"You won't, never fear." This was fun because Henny Ramsdell at that very moment was seated on her left.

"Or a Bucky Clayton." Bucky Clayton was sitting across the table, looking at them and straining an ear to hear what they were saying. "Take a gander at Bucky, trying to read our lips."

"I know," she said.

"Why did you rush to my defense, Aggie?"

"Because I think—well I *don't* think you're a *wolf*."

"Well, one of these days maybe I'll say something nice about you." He was a little more serious, and started to rise.

"Why not now?"

"All right," he said. Then, "No, I guess not. I don't want to turn your head."

"Ah, come on, turn my head, Johnny."

"You really want me to?"

"Yes."

"All right, but you asked for it, Aggie. I think you're the only girl in this whole damn bunch that I give a hoot in hell about."

"Is that true?" she said.

"It's true."

"Scout's honor?"

"Now don't push it. Yes, scout's honor. Come on, let's dance. Mr. Ramsdell, boy, I'm taking your girl away."

"The hell you are," said Henny Ramsdell.

"The hell I'm not," said Johnny. "Come on, Aggie, while you have the chance."

A week later they eloped, and during the next four years all the predictable mishaps of their kind of marriage came to pass. There was, in addition, a handicap that the pessimists had not counted on and the optimists had not foreseen: she was too young for companionship with most of the young wives in her set, and as a wife she was no longer compatible with the unmarried girls who were her contemporaries. It came down to a problem of often not knowing whom to have lunch with, and Johnny, working downtown, was impatiently lacking in an understanding of the problem. "You would never think," she said to Wallace Harris, "that a thing like that would make so much difference, but it does."

Wallace Harris was a bachelor, a few years older than Johnny. "Do you mean to say you're lonely?"

"That's *just* what I'm saying."

"Why don't you have a child?"

"We did. I never saw it."

"Sorry."

She had not been very bright about Wallace Harris. She had had no curiosity about him, and when she drifted into an affair with him she was all but shocked to discover that he had always been promiscuous, that women by the dozen had succumbed, if that was the word, to his availability. It was difficult to believe him as he told her the number and kinds of women who had slept with him, but she could not wholly doubt him since she was now one of that list herself. What made it difficult to believe him was her unthinking acceptance

of the notion that roués had fun, and inevitably were gay; but for Wally there seemed to have been no fun, only a succession of women who used him as much as he used them. As for gaiety, one of his outstanding characteristics was a total lack of it. In this respect, however, she came to understand his success with women: he was so lacking in gaiety that a woman would automatically credit him with discretion and reliability. But poor Wally was essentially nothing more than a well-scrubbed male, who never needed a haircut or a manicure, and would have been far happier without women if the men he liked had been able to do without them too. He would never have been clinically curious about her life with Stanley Child as he had been about Johnny Johns; without asking, he would guess that Stanley's demands on a woman were much like his own—and he would have been right. He understood Stanley, but Johnny Johns was a lightweight . . .

Agatha Child heard herself say, "What? What?"

Mary Moran was standing in the doorway, with the jacket of the black suit over her arm and holding up the skirt. "I didn't mean to startle you, ma'am."

"Oh—I was off somewhere," said Agatha Child. "What is it, Mary?"

"Well, I was wondering if maybe there's a little hole in the skirt we should have rewoven."

"A hole in it? Let me see."

"Right here, ma'am, just back of the knee. You musta caught it on something."

"Yes. I wonder if it'd be worth it. Reweaving is awfully expensive."

"Now if it was a country suit, you wouldn't care so much. But you don't want to go around with a hole in your skirt in the city."

"I forget how much they charged the last time I had something rewoven. I paid four hundred dollars for that suit, when was it, three years ago?"

"You had this three years, that's right. It's a beautiful suit, no doubt about that. I think it's worth getting it rewoven."

"It's too bad you can't wear my clothes. I'd give it to you, then I'd have an excuse to buy myself a new one."

"No, I could never get into this. I was always too big an eater."

"You *could* have a nice figure, if you'd take off about fifteen pounds. You really ought to be ashamed of yourself, Mary. That's all since you've come to work for me."

"Aach, and if they don't like me this way it's too late for me to change."

"Too late? Nonsense. Forty-one. If I gave you a course at Elizabeth Arden, would you go through with it?"

"Me at Elizabeth Arden's? Huh."

"Well, any place."

"Thanks just the same. I got the determination, if I want to starve off the fifteen pounds, but I'd only put it back on again."

"Do as you please," said Agatha Child.

"And what about the suit, ma'am?"

"Have it rewoven, of course. And tell them not to take so long. The last time I think they took over a month."

"That was a big cigarette burn, in your gray."

"You don't have to make excuses for them, Mary. Just tell them what I said."

Mary Moran left, saying no more. If she had stayed longer, said any more, Agatha Child would have fired her. The woman had snubbed her twice within the hour, less than an hour, actually. Agatha, at the thought of time, glanced at the little gold and enamel clock at her side. It was twelve-twenty-two, according to the clock—which obviously had stopped during the night. She reached for the clock to wind it, but it had *not* stopped; the winder took only one full turn. She held the clock to her ear, and it was steadily ticking away. Was it possible that she had been sitting here for an hour and ten minutes? Had she fallen asleep after her coffee and cigarette? She looked for her cigarette. It was not in the ash tray, and yet she remembered having a cigarette, blowing the smoke at the dogs.

Casually, so that Mary Moran would not come in and catch her in the act of looking for the cigarette butt, she bent over to the right and then to the left of her chair. The cigarette was on neither side. She leaned forward, and there it was, having burnt itself out and formed a small crater in the carpet. She *had* been asleep, and once again she had gone to sleep with a cigarette burning, just as she had done while wearing the gray

suit, which Mary Moran knew about, and one other time that the maid did not know about, all within a space of six or eight weeks.

She picked up the cigarette butt and put it in the ash tray. Then she dipped a napkin in the glass of icewater and tried to rub the blackened crater in the carpet so that the burn would not show. This was only partially successful. The crater remained, and some of the piling was permanently blackened.

It was no time to panic; it was a time to face facts, to look at things calmly. She would begin by admitting that this was the fourth, not only the third, time that a cigarette had given her some kind of trouble recently. The third time, fortunately, was in a taxicab. The fourth time—a week ago—was here in the apartment, when she went to the bathroom and found a merry little fire in the tin wastebasket. She extinguished that fire easily by putting the basket under the bathtub tap and letting the water run. The contents of the basket she flushed down the toilet; the scorched basket itself presented a bit of a problem, which she solved by wrapping it in newspapers and taking it down to Madison Avenue and dropping it in the city basket. Mary Moran noticed that the bathroom basket was missing. She noticed everything. “I got tired of it,” Agatha Child told her. “I threw it out with the trash last night.”

“It was kind of pretty,” said Mary Moran.

“Cheap,” said Agatha Child. “I saw a nicer one at Hammacher’s.”

“Oh, one of them with the mirrors all around it?” said Mary. “Mrs. Brown has two of them.”

“Yes. The other basket was here when I took this apartment, and I don’t know why I kept it so long. But yesterday I decided I couldn’t look at it one more day.”

It was the kind of explanation that would satisfy Mary Moran, with her unspoken but unmistakable opinion of Agatha Child as a frivolous woman. The same opinion had made credible the explanation for the burn in the gray suit. “I’m almost sure that it was some awful woman at the cocktail party I went to yesterday. She carried a long cigarette holder, and I noticed her waving it around.”

Explanations were imperative. Agatha Child had heard of some woman who had been asked to leave some apartment-hotel

because she was a fire hazard, falling asleep and setting fire to her bedclothes. It would not do, it would not do at all, to let Mary Moran know that Agatha Child had had any such experiences.

Agatha Child rose and sauntered to the livingroom door, listened, heard Mary Moran humming a tune, which she did when she was busy. Now quickly Agatha Child got a bottle of ink and a fountain pen and went back to her chair. She carefully poured ink on the crater in the carpet, watched it soak in, then sharp and loud she exclaimed, "God damn it! Oh, God damn it."

Mary Moran appeared in the doorway. "Something the matter?"

"Look at the mess I've made. Trying to fill my pen."

"They can get that out."

"I wonder. I know they can get the stain out, but look how deep this is. One of those places where the dogs have chewed the carpet. Boys, you really do try my patience sometimes. Oh, well this was my fault, no use trying to blame the dogs."

Brilliant. Inspired. At the moment of pouring the ink she had not even thought of the dogs and their, or Muggsy's, habit of digging holes in the carpet. It was the kind of inspiration she would not have had if she had not refused to panic. Face facts, look at things calmly.

"Will I phone the rug man?" said Mary Moran.

"Yes, will you, before you leave? And I won't be here this afternoon, Mary. I've just decided to blow myself to a new suit."

"Another black, ma'am?"

"Anything but. This is something for spring," said Agatha Child. "Do you think I'm mad, Mary? I *am* a little mad, aren't I?"