

On a sunny afternoon in late August, 1801, a few miles north of London, three-year old Mary Godwin held her father's hand as they walked through the gates of St. Pancras Churchyard. They were on their way to visit her mother's grave in a cemetery as familiar to Mary as her own home. She and her father, William, came here almost every day. The churchyard was more like a pasture than a burial ground. The grass grew in uneven clumps; old gravestones lay toppled on the ground, and only a low rail separated the grounds from the open countryside.

William Godwin did not think it was odd to teach his small daughter to read from her mother's tombstone. And Mary was eager to learn anything her father had to teach. In her eyes, he was "greater, and wiser, and better . . . than any other being." He was also all she had left.

She began by tracing each letter with her fingers: "Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin." Except for the "Wollstonecraft" this name was the same as hers: MARY GODWIN. One dead. One alive. This gravestone could be her own. This fact never left her, her strange proximity to death. She yearned to be reunited with her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, the woman she had never really known, but loved all the same.

Mary Godwin had been born on August 30, 1797, at the end of a month when a comet had burned through the London skies. People all over England had speculated about its meaning. A happy omen, her parents had thought. They could not know that Wollstonecraft would die of childbirth fever ten days later, leaving behind a daughter so small and weak it seemed likely she would soon join her mother. But under the care of Wollstonecraft's dear friend, Maria Reveley, Mary gradually grew stronger, and by the time she was a month old, though still undersized, she howled at all hours of the day and night. Her sweet-tempered half-sister, three-year old Fanny, Wollstonecraft's illegitimate child by another man, tried to calm her tears, but there was nothing anyone could do. Mary would not be soothed.

Godwin asked his friend William Nicholson, an expert in physiognomy, to measure Mary's cranium and facial features, but the baby shrieked through the entire examination, leading an exasperated Nicholson to report, "The mouth was too much employed to be well observed." However, he told Godwin he saw evidence of "considerable memory and intelligence" as well as a "quick sensibility." The only potential negative, Nicholson said, noting her screams, was that she could be "petulant in resistance."

Godwin, Fanny, and Mary lived at No. 29, the Polygon, a semi-circular block of tall Georgian homes in Somers Town, about two miles from St. Paul's. The Polygon has long since been torn down, and though a plaque on Werrington Street says that the Godwins once lived here, it is an act of the imagination to picture them in today's Somers Town. Abandoned buildings, chain link fences, and foreclosure signs have replaced the shops, rose gardens, and cow sheds of Mary's childhood. In the early 1800s, her home was deep in the country. A dirt path led through a white turnstile into Clarendon Square where thirty-two terraced buildings had been constructed as an early experiment in suburban living. No. 29 had a large parlor with a marble mantelpiece where Godwin received guests and where Mary and Fanny learned to be quiet during grown up conversations. The family ate their suppers upstairs in the dining room and could stand outside on a wrought iron balcony to gaze out over the wild heaths, Hampstead and Highgate. From her bedroom window on the top floor, Mary could see the River Fleet and the narrow lane that led to her mother's grave.

Spacious and elegant, these homes were affordable because they were far from the fashionable west end, but for the Godwins and many like them, Somers Town was the ideal compromise, a modern realtor's truism: the tranquility of a small town within walking distance of the city, an "outleap" of London, as one contemporary called such developments. When Mary

was old enough, she and Fanny toured the square with their nurse, gazing in the plate glass windows of the apothecary, the toymaker, the mercers, the haberdashery, the saddler, and the milliners. Sometimes, they were allowed to pick out a ribbon, or drink a frothy syllabub, a delicious whipped cream confection, at the teashop. A muffin seller whose nickname was the Mayor of Garratt circled the square, pushing his cart and ringing a hand bell. Watchmakers and goldsmiths hunched over worktables, hammering precious metals, or examining pocket watches with a magnifying glass. These men were refugees from the French Revolution, and if the girls were lucky, one might look up and salute them with a little bow, or say *bonjour* through the open door, an exotic experience.

Godwin adhered to a routine that to his daughters seemed carved in stone, as unwavering as the steady tick of the clock. A renowned political philosopher and novelist, Godwin did not allow any interruptions when he was writing; ideas came first in the Godwin household. He worked until one, lunched, and then read to the girls.

Together they enjoyed Perrault's *Mother Goose* and La Fontaine's *Fables*. On special days, Godwin chose the book their mother had written for Fanny before she died.

Wollstonecraft's warm chatty style made it seem as though she were actually in the room: "When you were hungry, you began to cry," she said, addressing Fanny directly, "You were seven months without teeth, always sucking. But after you got one, you began to gnaw a crust of bread. It was not long before another came pop. At ten months you had four pretty white teeth, and you used to bite me. Poor mamma!"

Reminders of this loving mother were everywhere: from the portrait that hung in Godwin's study to the books that lined the shelves. For both Mary and Fanny, this only made her loss harder to bear. Godwin did his best to honor his dead wife, but he was not well suited for the

education of small children. He had been a bachelor for most of his life, marrying Mary Wollstonecraft when he was forty-one. Where Wollstonecraft had been passionate and impulsive, Godwin was stiff and constrained. Raised by stern Calvinists, he could be excruciatingly reserved and was stingy with both time and money, carefully parceling out his hours to avoid losing any work time.

In the late afternoons, distinguished men and women flocked to pay him tribute. Many of Godwin's visitors were eager to meet Wollstonecraft's children, particularly Mary who, as the daughter of two such intellectual heavyweights, seemed destined for fame. She had grown used to hearing a hush when she entered the room, an intake of breath, as though she were a great dignitary; they pointed to her fine reddish hair, her large light eyes – how like her mother, they said -- how wonderful the first Mary had been, how wise and brave, how loving; a genius and a beautiful woman, too. Surely, her daughter would follow in her footsteps.

Brown haired and scarred by a bout with chicken pox, Fanny receded into the background during these events. She knew that she came second to Mary. When Godwin married Wollstonecraft, he had adopted Fanny, who was the daughter of Gilbert Imlay, Wollstonecraft's previous lover. Godwin loved Fanny, but he adored his "own" daughter, describing Mary as "quick," "pretty," and "considerably superior" to Fanny who was "slow and "prone to indolence." If anyone had pointed this out to him – his obvious favoritism – he would have said he was simply stating the truth; all evidence pointed to little Mary's superiority, an observation that had the added benefit of demonstrating his superiority over Imlay. To his credit, Godwin had never thought less of Wollstonecraft for her affair – it had occurred long before he met her -- but he was not above being jealous of the passion she had felt for Imlay.

Godwin's infatuation notwithstanding, young Mary did strike others as an unusual child. Delicate, with pale almost unearthly skin, coppery curls, enormous eyes, and a tiny mouth, she had entered the world in such a tragic fashion that sorrow trailed behind her like the train of a wedding dress. When visitors talked to her, they were impressed by what seemed to be her preternatural intelligence. George Taylor, one of Godwin's fans, called on the widower two times during the first year of Mary's life. On the first visit, although he enjoyed playing with baby Mary, he did not notice anything out of the ordinary. It was on his second visit that he was startled when it seemed the nine month old "knew me instantly and stretched out her arms." How could she have remembered him?

One of little Mary's particular devotees was the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who first visited the Polygon in the winter of 1799 when he was twenty-seven years old and Mary was two. An admirer of Godwin, but even more so of Wollstonecraft, the young poet was lonely, estranged from his wife and living apart from his own family. When he came to dinner, he stayed long past the girls' bedtime, keeping the Godwins up late with his stories.

To the girls, he was like a magical creature from *Mother Goose*. With a dimpled chin, a pudgy face, long messy hair, bushy eyebrows and astonishingly red lips, Coleridge was a spellbinding storyteller. Even the pedantic Godwin was content to sit and listen to him.

Coleridge, though, was startled by the stillness of his audience. Godwin had trained his daughters to be perfectly behaved in company, too well behaved, Coleridge thought. Even Mary, who was far more free-spirited than her sister, could be silent for hours in the presence of guests, hardly even fidgeting. Later, Mary would say that though her father loved her, he was a stern taskmaster and rarely affectionate. In one of her fictional portraits of a father and daughter based on her own relationship with Godwin, she writes:

[My father] never caressed me; if ever he stroked my head or drew me on his knee, I felt a mingled alarm and delight difficult to describe. Yet, strange to say, my father loved me almost to idolatry; and I knew this and repaid his affection with enthusiastic fondness, notwithstanding his reserve and my awe.

Godwin's coldness was harming his daughters, Coleridge thought. Fanny and Mary should be more like his own little boy, three-year old Hartley, who was rarely quiet and never still. He rode the wind like a bird, Coleridge said, "using the air of the breezes as skipping-ropes." Initially, Godwin was impressed by the proud father's description of this young free spirit, but changed his mind when he actually met Hartley, who, as Coleridge remembered it, "gave the philosopher such a rap on the shins with a ninepin that Gobwin [as Hartley called him] in huge pain lectured [Coleridge's wife] on his boisterousness."

However, Godwin had enough respect for the poet to allow his friend to try to enliven his daughters. Although Coleridge was the author of somber poems such as "Dejection: An Ode," and "The Ancient Mariner," he liked jokes of all kinds and had a vast repertoire of tricks. He loved ghost stories and knew quantities of nursery rhymes. "I pun, conundrumize, listen and dance," he once said to a friend. He made his fingers gallop like horses or "fly like stags pursued by the staghounds" – a trick he immortalized in a letter to Wordsworth where he tells his fellow poet how to make his hands do "the hop, trot and gallop" of hexameter lines.

Few could resist Coleridge's charm and Fanny and Mary were no exception. The poet was a thrilling departure from anyone they had ever met. When he sat in their front parlor, anything might happen: a witch might tumble down the chimney; a spectre might float by. He

spilled wine on the carpet and, instead of frowning as he did when the girls made such mistakes, Godwin actually laughed. Although some physical ailment always troubled the poet -- his head ached, his throat was sore, his eye infected, his stomach churned -- these ailments did not stop him from devoting himself to the Godwin girls.

Tapping into his enormous capacity *to be* fascinated, a talent which drew people to him, Coleridge bestowed on the girls, even Mary who could barely remember her first visit with the great poet, the feeling they were delightful and their ideas worth listening to. He called them forward, and although Fanny resisted this, Mary loved the sensation of coming out from behind a curtain, of being pushed on stage in a house where her father ruled supreme. For her, and all the Godwins, it was a sad day when Coleridge left to rejoin his family in the Lake Country in 1802. But within a few weeks Mary and Fanny settled back into the comforts of the nursery and their quiet routine, and it was only Godwin who continued to suffer. Restless and lonely, he wanted to remarry, to find a wife to share his life, his bed, and the burden of raising his two daughters. Coleridge had made it clear to him that they needed more than he could provide. They needed a mother's touch.

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