

“Quiet Hour”

Joanne B. Mulcahy

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Rule # 1

No talking whatsoever for the hour between noon and one. Never forget this foundational rule for Quiet Hour. Let time suspend on sticky, sultry summer afternoons in two boxlike brick houses on Flintlock Road, in Pilgrim Gardens, outside Philadelphia, for two intertwined Catholic families. Picture a pair of mothers, circa 1968. Yours wears plaid Bermuda shorts and Bobbie socks or perhaps a Hawaiian muumuu that is all the rage; her best friend, Mary Mealing, sports white shorts and sleeveless shell. Imagine their eagerness for time alone as their combined thirteen children trudge off to their rooms. Know that it is hard work to be quiet, for you each share a room with at least one other shouting, talking, attention-grabbing sibling. For this hour, no stories can be told, no secrets revealed, no plots unfolded for pilfering pennies to purchase sour balls at Woolworth's, no plans hatched for fishing with bread bits in Darby Creek. Be quiet, completely quiet.

Rule #2

Try not to notice how weary the mothers are. Imagine Mary's whites as perfect for an hour of tennis, or at least a spell of coffee drinking and gossip. Ignore that both women are headed for a marathon session in the laundry room. Look past the dark circles ringing their eyes, detritus of five a.m. feedings of the newest arrivals, 6 a.m. ironing of husbands' shirts, and 7, 8, and 9 a.m. timed allotments for shopping at the Acme, preparing Campbell's soup and bologna sandwiches for lunch, tuna casserole for dinner, and a quick sweep through the bathroom with Pine Sol. Forget that your mother is bent with fatigue from her teaching year at a Catholic girls' school. Ignore that Mary's Pall Malls might be more tranquilizer than pleasure. Be very, very quiet.

Rule #3

Read for at least one half of the full Quiet Hour. Remember that the three-month hiatus between Sister Peter Mary and Sister Winifred's classes is a dangerous limbo. Read books that uplift the spirit. Keep handy the red-leather hardback, *Mary Queen of Scots*, which you have already read twice. Read it again. Watch in wonder as the 15-year old bride marries Francis II Valois, the Crown Prince of France. Celebrate when she remarries after his death, choosing the handsome young Lord Danley against everyone's advice. Witness her return to Scotland, caught in the Catholic-Protestant

crossfire. Know that there is still something different about Protestants. Try to figure out why Mary is forced to marry yet a third husband, James Hepburn, Fourth Earl of Bothwell. Remember to ask your sister, Pat, what it means that he “has ravished her and lain with her against her will.” Be amazed at Mary’s steely devotion to her faith, even as she calmly submits her neck to the axe in 1587. Marvel at how she prays for her cousin, Queen Elizabeth, who imprisoned her in the tower for two decades. Wonder what happened to those cool unicorn tapestries Mary made in the tower, but do not ask. Keep the silence.

Rule #4

Fight with your sisters for the books you covet. Hide *The Hidden Staircase* so you can find it each afternoon, awe-struck by Nancy Drew’s fearless ventures into haunted houses and dark alleys. Feel lucky that your mother approves of Nancy Drew books, the blue hardbacks with orange letters you carry from the library each week, since Linda Ruffino’s mother thinks they’re “trash.” Follow Nancy as she tracks her father’s mysterious disappearance, hunts an elusive ghost, shares tea and cake with her beloved housekeeper, Hannah Gruen. Wonder how she gets away with calling this surrogate mother “darling.” Ignore that Nancy, the perfectly coiffed blonde in heeled pumps and sports dresses, is nothing like you – dark hair in a bowl

cut, uniform-clad and too scared to descend the basement stairs to fold the laundry. Years later, when literary critics denounce Nancy as racist and classist, you will side with those who laud her as a plucky early feminist, venturing into unexplored terrain.

Seal in memory this transformative moment from *Quiet Hour*. You sit reading *Wuthering Heights*, seduced by the English moors, glancing up to watch your sister, Pat, across the room. She doesn't see you, sunk into her novel, cat-eye glasses catching the sun's midday rays. Realize for the first time that you are each deliciously alone yet protected and together. No one can touch you, not Susan, Chris, or Nicky, usually clamoring for attention, nor the cries of the new baby, Matthew, nor the hordes of neighborhood kids who will soon arrive to rustle up a kickball team. At the cusp of adulthood, you rest with your sister in synchronous solitude, in the protected limen of your respective stories.

Rule #5

Learn that you can subvert the intention of *Quiet Hour*. Inside a story, the world might turn topsy-turvy. Trust that Pat, as the oldest and smartest, will keep bringing to your summer afternoons stunning new discoveries. Marvel at the revelations of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, at all that the nuns and your parents couldn't teach you. Wonder at Baudelaire's paean to Paris and

the "harlots and hunted" whose pleasures "the vulgar herd can never understand." Find the forbidden and exotic closer to home in Jack Kerouac's wanderings, in the everyday mysticism of Salinger's *Franny and Zooey*. Remember the worlds traveled to in books, how they ignite the fire that will later propel you to real countries with musical languages. Fling open the window on those humid afternoons to let in the dizzying magic of Quiet Hour.

Rule #6

Let go of Quiet Hour. When Mary's husband, Frank Mealing dies suddenly, witness your mother's tear-streaked face, your father's quiet anguish. Watch Mary and her seven fatherless children in the funeral procession at St. Ursula's. Don't imagine such grief will ever strike you. Wonder at how you will live without this family that has melded with your own. Let them go as they depart with their Irish setter, Dandy, Sue's Beatle albums, the jars of lightning bugs you captured with Judy and Buzzy, the Barbie dolls you traded with Karen, and the coloring books you shared as Michael, Barbara, and Bobby's babysitter. Their new house is impossibly far away, a full half-hour drive. Your own family soon moves as well, from your little brick box to an old stone house in a tree-lined neighborhood. Fight tears as you unpack boxes. Skirt the dark edge of impermanence and

loss. Sink back into your book. Know finally why the nuns and your parents tried to cloak you with safe stories, the protection of the spirit. Glimpse, if only for a moment, the holy significance of the “veil of tears,” of literature as a “stay against confusion.”

Find that you cannot relinquish what Quiet Hour means. Take a book to your first waitress job, to read when customers dwindle. In the new stone house, sprawl over your orange bedspread, under the hot pink psychedelic tulips you and Pat have papered over your third floor room. Discourage friends when they invite you out for Pizza. Indulge your latest passion for Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. Let Raskolnikov’s hatchet crack open your world along with the moneylender’s head, hinting at the darkness you have kept at bay. Beg Pat for more advice on books, wishing you could while away a summer hour reading together. Try to ignore that she is moving beyond you, departing in her bell-bottom sailor pants for protests in West Philadelphia and folk music in coffee houses. Grieve as you try to fill the void. Hunger for that feeling of being alone with a book, yet twinned to someone you love, aglow with summer’s luster, suspended in the rapture that we seek, again and again, in a story.

