

Mary Says Goodbye

Mary Tully sat down at the little table by the bureau and started to write the letter to her landlord. She had made something of a snap decision to up and leave, but she did not wish to depart on a sour note. Never let it be said, she felt, that she had not been a good tenant.

Outside, the day was just getting started. It was just after 8.30 and already music was starting to drift up from the street, one storey below. A trumpeter was doing his best to emulate Louis Armstrong with a rendition of "Potato Head Blues". The trolley buses clanged and rumbled, while the fetid air was thick with tarmacadam from the roadworks just down the street, mixed with hot, sweet wafts of Gumbo and Jambalaya from the Cajun restaurant two doors down.

128 Royal Street
New Orleans
7 September 1927

Dear M Legrand, I realise that this will come as a surprise, but I have decided to leave town today. You will not see me again, but I trust that this letter and the payment for my next month's rent, which you will find nearby on the bureau, will ensure that we part on amicable terms. You have always dealt fairly with me and I feel that I owe you this much. In addition, I feel that a word of explanation for my hasty departure will not be amiss.

I have been more than happy in my year and a half in my little apartment, and I remain full of gratitude that you permitted me to live here and to carry out my business on your premises. This has proved a highly satisfactory arrangement for me and, might I add, for my clients, who have been able to forego the potential opprobrium associated with frequenting the larger, better known establishments providing similar services.

Mary got up and went into the kitchen to get some good, hot coffee on the go. She wanted to get this letter right, and for that she'd need the kind of focus only provided by strong coffee. I say it's only provided by this, but of course there are other less respectable means of pepping up a tired body and mind, but Mary didn't care to use these. Sure, she could have. There was more dope and coke kicking around New Orleans than you could shake a silver-topped cane at, but Mary wanted none of it. And if a client seemed like he'd been indulging in a little powdered-pick-me-up, well Mary wouldn't let him over the threshold. More than once

she'd had to holler for assistance to encourage a customer to leave the premises, and M Marc had always obliged. A burly doorman from Marc's Bar, situated right below, would appear and the John would suddenly remember somewhere else he needed to be in a hurry.

While she waited for the coffee to percolate, Mary lit a cigarette and took the smoke down with relish, before slowly exhaling through her nose. Usually while making coffee or fixing a snack in her little kitchen, Mary would hum one of the tunes she'd heard the house band play in Marc's, or just sway and move around the kitchen in time to the jazz coming up from the bar or the street. But somehow she wasn't quite in the mood today. She just wiped the beads of sweat off her forehead with the back of her hand, poured a first cup of coffee and returned to her letter.

Despite the great advantages afforded by your indulging my wish to work from home, certain dissatisfactions have started to arise over recent months. This has not been a sudden thing, and I would stress that it is in no way a complaint about the apartment or yourself. But it would be fair to say that I have become less and less enamored with my line of work. I think at heart that it comes down to a simple desire, no, more than a desire, a need, to be valued and respected at work. I see other women of my age going to work in offices and factories, and I wonder if I might not be happier among their ranks. While, no doubt, some of their male colleagues and especially superiors must from time to time – perhaps rather more often than that, to be realistic – treat these women with less than full respect, they have one advantage over my situation. They have each other, and if they suffer indignity at the hands of brutish men, they can surely turn to each other for succor.

Mary wanted to say what she needed to say just so. She wanted no bad feeling to be left behind when she vanished. She had no bone to pick with M Legrand and she wanted to make sure she was clear about this. Of all the men she had had dealings with since coming to ply her trade in the Big Easy, he stood out for his decent, respectful treatment of her. She was concentrating hard now and doing what she invariably did when concentration was needed. She was chewing on a stray strand of her bobbed blonde hair and massaging her temples with her right fingers and thumb.

And men can be brutes, M Legrand, they surely can. It goes without saying that I do not include M Marc or yourself among the number of such men, but so many, so very many of your sex are not as you and he are. And it is we women who suffer when the animal in these men rises.

In my line of work this can mean the direst consequences. We are so vulnerable that many of us come to consider these consequences a risk that our work obliges us to take if we are not to cease and starve. In this regard I have been far more fortunate than many. I have never suffered physical injury at the hands of a client. But if the close proximity of aid from M Marc has deterred outright assault, it is as if some feel obliged instead to speak to me in ways that will cause injury to my very soul.

One such man paid me a visit last night, and it is now to this unfortunate business that I must turn at last. The man was dressed like a gentleman alright. He had on a fine, new 3-piece suit and a homburg that he wore tilted over one eye as if he thought this made him the height of good taste and sheer swank. And he put this hat up on my hatstand before demanding hangers for his fancy duds, which he took his time over taking off and hanging in my wardrobe as if he was the one who lived here.

Now, to return to my sisters in the more usual lines of work, if a man had spoken to one of them the way this man did to me. Well, you'd have to say that what happened next would probably have been avoided. For a start, they would have had recourse to seeking the solace I mentioned earlier, of maybe crying on the shoulder of one of the other women workers. They would have enjoyed what workers in unions call solidarity. They would not have been alone. Of course another difference between our situations is that they wouldn't have been armed.

Mary steeled herself to live again what she now had to commit to paper. She lit another cigarette and went to the window. It was open as far as it would go, and the perspiration was by now running down Mary's neck and back. The oppressive heat was one aspect of her adopted home city that she would not miss. "C'mon, girl. Let's finish this and go. That train won't wait," Mary breathed to herself.

By now, the great brute had taken up residence in my bed in just his underwear, and now he started making demands of me that I will not dignify by enumerating here. Suffice to say that I was burning with anger when he called me that name that women of my trade have been cursed with for many a day. This was far from the first time I had received this sleight, and I have never borne it cheerfully. But on this occasion, coming as it did on top of this man's arrogance and his foul demands, it led me to make a decision. I would no longer suffer men like him alone. I would seek employment in a normal place of work, where, if a

respectable woman suffers slander and ignominy, she can at least turn to her sisters for fellow feeling.

So it would not be true to say that my anger caused me to lose control. No, while I took those few steps toward my wardrobe, where the beast had hung, along with his fine clothes, a shoulder holster and handgun, I became as calm and sane as any woman ever did once she had made the fateful decision to slay her tormentor. And I can say with all honesty that I remember smiling at the gymnastics his face performed as I pointed the barrel at it and gently squeezed the trigger.

There will certainly be a bill to pay to clean up the mess and replace the bedding, and I do apologise for the trouble to which this will inevitably put you. But I trust that the little extra I am leaving on top of my rent will cover everything. I wish you well, M Legrand. I hope that your next tenant will cause you as little trouble as I believe I have, last night's unfortunate events notwithstanding. And I trust that you will wish me well in my new endeavors, in a new town whose name I will not, for obvious reasons, disclose.

I remain yours as ever

Mary Tully (Miss)