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# Mary Spillwater

Robert McGowan

**Everyone who's ever known** Dr. Spillwater esteems her the very manifestation of unwavering practicality, an impeccably sensible woman.

Her department chairman, when vexed by difficulty, as department chairs perpetually are, comes to her before all others for wisdom.

Friends and colleagues in critical need seek her advice on delicate private matters, so unerring has her judgment in all previous such instances proven to be.

And Dr. Spillwater has recently, for an unprecedented third time, won the university's Distinguished Teaching Award in recognition of her meticulous devotion—her students regularly excel far beyond the norm—to the chemical engineering classes that have been her charge over the past three decades.

The sapient, the erudite, the dutiful Mary Spillwater.

Dr. Spillwater has now entered into her mid-sixties, aghast on arriving there, dispirited, the loathsome inevitability of hollow retirement chilling her like, as she once melodramatically asserted, a clammy foul mist—the phrase memorable among her colleagues because the saying of it was so uncharacteristic of a woman who is by her nature much averse to flights of gooey lyric metaphor. Dr. Spillwater is not an artist, does not surrender to expressive impulse, and never has been one to poeticize.

More than forty years earlier, the young Mary switched her major to chemical engineering so as to immerse herself in the tangible. She'd begun college as a philosophy major, her ungirlish ambition having been to enter into history as one of the great logicians—Aristotle, Friedrich Frege, Alfred North Whitehead, Mary Spillwater. But after two years of inconclusive speculation concerning the nature of existence and on discovering along the way the futility of pinning down the laws of reason, what with the shocking fallibility of syllogistic thinking and so forth, her yearning for the corporeal had grown urgent. Thus the chemical sciences, in which range of empirical disciplines Mary's intrinsic rationalist bent—at last no longer in thrall to metalogical noetics and other such tomfoolery, as she now thought of it—would prove genuinely useful, in, thank God, practical ways.

Not that Mary is in the least religious. The phrase—thank God—only serves to express emphatically Mary's immense relief at having turned away from the purely notional and toward the real, or toward at least a more steadying version of the real. Mary had never adopted the primitive practice of offering up utterances of pious gratitude to some fantastical first-cause deity. As is clearly understood by even the most novice philosophy student, identifying the cause of the first causer is the familiar and anciently sufficient impediment to affirming the existence of Him who requires said thanks be uttered meekly unto Him, or, of course, Her. Mary early

on grew weary of the whole nettlesome folderol: that interminable, exasperating, and patently futile disputation concerning the god issue. The pertinent fact here is that young Mary disdained religion, scornfully, as a matter of good sense, as was, of course, consistent with her fundamentally sensible nature.

But that was then. Long ago. Before, she'd endured decades in an unremittingly cold relationship with damned chemical engineering—not that Mary is much given to cussing; she isn't. The point here being that she'd become finally pretty much fed up with chemical engineering—and before, she'd entered morose and terrified into her my-time-on-earth-is-nearly-over seventh decade, with now before her the prospect of being soon evicted from the cozy embrace of academe, jettisoned into drear oblivion, which likelihood had kindled in her a certain uncharacteristic desperation.

This was, for Mary, an entirely unfamiliar sensation. It discombobulated her, so that she therefore found herself in a state of discombobulation, a bumpy-jumpy-amusing word that probably has never once been made use of by the dignified, the scholarly, the earnest Dr. Mary Spillwater.

The malady itself—discombobulation, the word repeated here for the plain fun of it, a condition as unlikely, one might have thought, to be suffered by Dr. Spillwater as to have its name spoken by her—was one that poor distressed Mary was pridefully eager to conceal she'd succumbed to. Her horror on imagining anyone might notice she'd done so only intensified—how welcome is this opportunity to set down the word yet again—her discombobulation.

She'd never in her sixty-something years experienced such a failure of inner composure.

Mary was rattled.

She needed solace.

Which she found in religion.

Religion.

Though not in ordinary religion, religion of the sort she'd ages ago so cold-bloodedly cold-shouldered, but in a decidedly unordinary one of her own devising. Or not of a devising, per se, in that the process of devising involves a degree of conscious, purposeful intent. Mary did not, strictly speaking, devise her new religion. She descended uncritically into it.

As into delusion.

And delusion it was.

On waking one morning in her spartan, bare-walled bedroom, Dr. Spillwater was startled to be addressed, in a tone fatherly and commanding, by . . .

. . . she dared not attempt identification.

But she knew.

That she'd been contacted. She felt it. Ecstatically.

Which was, for staid Mary, an altogether new sensation: ecstasy.

And it wasn't a one-time experience. From that first encounter, the enraptured Dr. Mary Spillwater knew she was in touch with . . . She was in touch, is what she knew, and she was disinclined to probe further. It didn't matter. Mary was now in the company of her own superhuman caring entity. She knew not the entity's appearance or the entity's name or history, only that she would be forevermore safe in the entity's infinite regard and protection.

But naturally, certain prescribed rituals are now expected of her. Some of these Dr. Spillwater conducts at home in wary seclusion, at night in curtained darkness, others of a morning. Various sorts of objects must be arranged in potent formations: paperclips set out daily on her desk, cleared of all else, each time in a different complex pattern conveyed to her as she sits there awaiting instructions; fourteen, and precisely fourteen, aspirin tablets are twice per week, each Tuesday and Saturday evening, to be dropped, one every third second exactly, into the toilet, which then may not be flushed until morning; every day between six and seven o'clock a.m., forty-three toothpicks are to be lined up on her kitchen counter, side-by-side at an unvarying one-and-three-quarter-inch distance from each other, measured from the center-point in the width of each toothpick, so to create an overall length, strictly ruled, of six feet, three-and-three-quarter inches, to remain in place undisturbed during the workday and then returned to their plastic container each evening in readiness for arrangement again next morning.

In addition, Mary is regularly to perform certain detailed exercises. These involve primarily clapping, doing so in highly complicated rhythms, in several sessions each morning before rising from her bed. And she'd been provided certain combinations of words, or merely sounds really, without conventional meaning, that she is obligated to repeat aloud in an established uniform sequence while at table before each evening's meal, as in prayer. If, however, she is out to dinner among others, Dr. Spillwater is on such occasions, because her guardian entity is a reasonable and compassionate one, disencumbered of this requirement.

A very great deal depends on Mary's unwavering fidelity to her rituals, a very great deal concerning not only her own well-being, but the well-being of the



world. She therefore, ever the solemnly dutiful Mary Spillwater, carries this body of obligations compliantly upon her aged shoulders as the grave responsibility she knows them to be. And she is honored to bear them.

The obligations that have come to Mary by way of her special new relationship are sometimes distracting at work, though she has been generously granted methods by which both to perform these obligations and yet also to conceal them from others. When on occasion she is, for example, commanded to perform her clapping exercises, she has by humble entreaty been permitted to carry them out in another form, by striking up a silent cadence with her toes: big, middle, little, big, middle, little, the silent rite wholly invisible within her shoes. Not uncommonly, the entity will choose to speak with Dr. Spillwater while she's in conversation with colleagues, in meetings, or even when lecturing before a classroom crowd of students. Needless to say, Mary is hardly allowed to refuse such conversations and so engages in them without outward sign of doing so, cleverly squelching gesture and facial expression, or, should any such movements spontaneously occur, allowing it to be assumed they're but the involuntary twitches of an old-lady professor. And she disguises any insuppressible vocal emissions as coughs or throat clearings, as though in preparation for some sagacious pronouncement.

In her department at the university, Dr. Mary Spillwater is esteemed the consummate academic professional, an eminently shrewd intellect, the very avatar of unwavering practicality.

She's lately won, for an unprecedented third time, the university's Distinguished Teaching Award in recognition of her ardent devotion to the chemical engineering classes that have been her charge for a full three decades.

Her department chair, plagued continually by a vexing gamut of administrative worries, seeks her sage advice above all others'.

And friends in critical need come to her concerning delicate private matters, so unerring has her judgment in all previous such instances proven to be.

