



Aunt Mary's Bathtub Gin

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Mary Elizabeth Mudd was born August 23, 1901, a good little Irish-Catholic baby. My Great Aunt Mary never saved the world. She never even made a name for herself in her hometown. She never had children, though I am convinced she wanted them. As women have done for centuries, and still do, Aunt Mary lived in the shadows of life, unseen and unheard but surviving whatever life threw at her. Her legacy is one of a caregiver and bathtub gin!

Not much is known about my Aunt Mary's childhood. Whether she was a happy or unhappy child. In those days, it really didn't matter—especially if you were from a poor family. Aunt Mary survived all the potential threats of being a child in the 1900s: polio, smallpox, tuberculosis, diseases we of today don't give a second thought.

At the "old" age of eighteen, she did what all girls were expected to do: she married. (Many girls were married by the time they were sixteen.) Unfortunately, as is the case with many of us today, the marriage didn't work out and after two years they were separated. Being a good Catholic girl, she never divorced. (Even if she were divorced, a second marriage would never be recognized. She would, in essence, always be "living in sin.") And so, a door was shut.

This was the age of prohibition. Imagine, you couldn't even buy a beer! Many people came up with ways to get around this. Some made "bootleg" in the woods and trucked it in to illegal "speakeasys" (nightclubs to us). Others were more creative, made liquor at home ("bathtub gin") and sold it by the drink ("nipjoints"). Aunt Mary was one of these. Now, some would be horrified, and some would be very righteous and shout how illegal it was, but I think it was pretty gutsy for a woman (and a single woman, at that!) As a consequence of this, Aunt Mary was denied access to her sister. And so, a door was shut.

Aunt Mary never talked about how she spent her life between the thirties and the forties, but I do know that it was during this time that she took on the responsibility of taking care of her mother, my great-grandmother.

World War II had erupted and women were needed to work. Aunt Mary got a “good” job with the Federal government. This was to be temporary though, for by now Aunt Mary was in her forties and when the War ended, and the men came home, Aunt Mary’s job did too. And so, a door was shut.

Sometime in the next five years, she (gasp!) moved in with a man. She no longer even tried to work. She smoked heavily. She drank too much. She took care of the man’s adult son, who had tuberculosis, who lived with them until he went into a sanatorium. She also had her elderly aunt and her aunt’s husband living with them. She loved animals, always having at least one pet. She invariably had time for her great-nieces and nephews. My brothers and I were always comfortable in her home. But, the “important thing” is she drank, smoked, and lived with a man. (Not at all a proper way for a middle aged woman to live in the 1950’s.) For fifteen years she lived with him. Then, he died. She grieved, lived in peace, and was rewarded in some way for all the good she did, RIGHT? WRONG. There is no happy ending here. Since she was not married to him, she had nothing to inherit. The man’s surviving son paid her a visit and threw everything she owned onto the street. Well meaning “friends” took her furniture to “keep” for her. She did not even have social security. (The Federal government did not start withholding social security from their employees until the early 1980’s. Unless you were with them long enough to qualify for Federal retirement, you received nothing.) And so, another door was shut.

Eventually, Aunt Mary received welfare but not before receiving a divorce from her long ago marriage. Wondering why, after all this time, she got a divorce? Even though she had not lived or received any support from her husband in forty years, she could not qualify for any assistance as long as she was married.

Aunt Mary lived, (and survived!) for another twenty years. She was visited often by her great-nieces and nephews; but when she became ill and went into the hospital at 81 years of age, she died, alone. And so, the final door was shut.