

ALL GOD'S SPARROWS

A Stagecoach Mary Story

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At the sight of the barefoot girl, half hidden by a thicket of chokecherry, Mary called to the horses.

“Whoa, Peter. Hold up there, Paul.” She tightened the reins and slowed the wagon load of timbers for the sisters’ new laundry. They were sore in need after the old washhouse burned, and Mary meant to build the thing herself if she had to.

The horses stopped, the gray stomping in protest. A poof of fine red dust blew into Mary’s face. She sneezed, a mighty sound that knocked her straw hat loose. The gray flicked his ears.

Mary wiped her black shirt sleeve across her face before sizing up the girl. Nine or ten, in a blue calico dress that was clean though too short and far too tight. She cradled a reed basket of eggs against her middle.

“You’re that woman they call Black Mary, aren’t you?” The girl’s voice was steady, her dark eyes curious.

“Mary Fields, young miss, making my rounds.” Mary shifted her wide hips. The plank seat got hard after the drive to the mill near Cascade, despite the rough woolen blanket beneath

her. Beside her, the black dog with the white blaze shifted, too. Had she known how badly rutted this shortcut was, she'd have stuck to the main road. "Oh, these old bones is tired."

"Do you work for the nuns? The ones who run the girls' school?"

"I do. I do whatever the sisters need—haul freight, grow potatoes and carrots—" Mary glanced at the basket in the girl's thin brown arms, and stopped herself from saying "raise chickens and kill 'em." "Boil up a mess a laundry. Them long black skirts they wear gather this dust something awful, I'll tell you."

"Do you have to know how to read to go to school?"

"No, you don't. They'll learn you to read. How old you be?"

"Nine, I think."

With those dark eyes and high cheekbones, her nearly-black hair combed and braided, Mary suspected the child had Indian blood. Blackfeet, likely, in these parts. She squinted, peering through the dense shrubs, and caught sight of a weathered log cabin perched above the creek. In the brush, a sparrow whistled.

"Can your parents read and write?"

"My Pa can, but he's too busy to teach me. He runs range cattle."

Meaning he was a white man. Meaning he'd be away long stretches, leaving this girl home with her mother, whom he might not have bothered to marry, if she was Blackfeet.

A rooster crowed—mid-day, but that figured. Seemed to her in any species, some males like to crow whenever they damn well please.

"Easy, boy," she told the dog, who lowered his head.

“Josie, don’t give the traveler any trouble,” a woman called from behind the wild shrubs. A moment later, she came into view, dark-haired, moving slowly, thick with pregnancy.

“Ma’am,” Mary said. She’d guessed right. Probably a half-breed, maybe twenty-five. “Your girl here being kind to an old lady who mostly talks to herself.”

“Josie, get the bucket and offer our visitor a drink of water.”

Wordlessly, Josie set the basket of eggs at her mother’s feet, then dashed down the path.

“You’re Mary Fields,” the woman said, her voice soft, her eyes lowered.

Mary inclined her head, questioning.

“Everyone knows you,” the woman continued. “You’re that Negro woman who works for the sisters at St. Peter’s Mission. You saved Mother Amadeus’s life when she had pneumonia.”

That had been three months ago, in the spring of 1885, when Mary made the long voyage with a group of Ursuline sisters from Toledo, a pistol hidden in her skirt. First to Chicago, then by rail to St. Paul, and westward through the Dakotas into Montana Territory. The last leg, overland by wagon, brought them to St. Peter’s where, praise the Lord, she’d found Mother Amadeus weak, but alive. Miss Dolly, as Mary and the other servants had called her in the Dunne family home in Toledo, had said just thinking of the fit Mary would throw if she arrived only to find her dead and buried had given her the strength to live.

Mary gazed at the pregnant woman, whose brown fingers worked to ease the pain in her low back. Her eyes were pinched, and the remnants of a bruise clung to her cheekbone.

“You know my name, ma’am, but I don’t know yours.”

“My people call me Wawatseka.” *Pretty woman*. “My husband calls me Annie.”

Josie staggered into view, water sloshing from the bucket. She regained her balance, her

footfalls startling the leghorn trailing her. The hen squawked, flapped its wings, and fled.

Panting heavily, the girl set the bucket down.

Annie lifted the ladle to the stranger. Mary took it in her big hands and drank it dry.

Annie dipped it into the bucket a second time.

“Mama,” Josie said, “it’s true. They are teaching girls now. I bet they have books, and desks, and blackboards and everything.”

Where had the child heard about schools and blackboards, Mary wondered. In the effort to persuade Indians to send their children to school, the nuns and priests had obviously missed this isolated road and family.

“Hush, little sparrow. You know what your Pa said,” Annie replied, and the girl’s face fell. “That tradesman had no right to fill your head with tales.”

“Not that it’s any business of mine,” Mary said as she took the ladle again, “but Josie tells me your husband runs cattle. You got a woman to be with you when your time comes? Your mother or sister, a neighbor?” Though neighbors were scarce. Mary had seen less than a handful of occupied cabins in the ten miles between mission and town.

“My family’s all gone.” Annie ran a hand over her daughter’s head, and the girl leaned against her. “Josie will do for me.”

Mary had tended many pregnant women, back on the farm, then in the households where she’d worked after the War. She knew from the pain on Annie’s face, and the swelling in her hands and ankles, that she was not well. With no one but a child to care for her—and her husband no doubt useless if he could be bothered to stay home—Mary feared for her and the babe.

She drained the ladle and handed it back, shaking her head at the offer of more. “Can you spare a few eggs? Our hens been laying poorly these last weeks—can’t think why—and the sisters sure would like a fresh taste of egg in the morning.” This was a lie—Mary’s hens didn’t dare stop laying—but she didn’t figure God would mind.

Annie agreed readily, and handed up the eggs. Mary wrapped a dozen in her kerchief and tucked the precious cargo beneath the seat. She dug a few coins out of a small buckskin bag. At least Annie would have money for supplies. Mary would get a message to the tradesman to stop by, even if he’d been rudely sent away before.

“Thank you, Miss Mary,” Annie said.

“*Miss Mary.*” Mary Fields had been called a lot of things, but never that. She cackled louder than the hens as she lifted the reins and urged the team into action.

The next day, Mary rode into Cascade for the sisters’ mail and other essentials. One such essential took her to the Horseshoe.

“You out raising hell, Mary?” The barkeeper took the empty clay jug from the only woman he allowed to drink in his saloon.

“Hell still far below us, and a long ways off,” she replied. “Though there’s some that do their best to create it here on earth.”

“That’s the truth,” he said.

“Driving outta the mill, I took a shortcut down an old wagon trail. Terrible road. Spied a sweet homestead above the creek. Like to have me a pretty spot like that someday.”

“Must be Charles Burnham’s place. That son of a gun wants it both ways. Farming’s too much work, so he’s got that Indian woman to prove up his claim while he lives the life of a cowboy, staying out weeks at a time.” The barkeeper set a glass of liquid the color of willow bark in front of her, then refilled her jug.

Mary let out a low rumble. “That satisfy the law?”

He snorted. “Maybe not back East. But the lawmen and agents around here ain’t too particular. Especially when it comes to white men and Indian women.”

That told Mary what she needed to know.

“Doesn’t take long without a working laundry to make us thank the Lord for such comforts, does it, Mary?” The white wimple attached to her black veil and the stiff white collar covering her chest gave Mother Amadeus a stern look that hid a kind heart.

“No, Miss Dolly, it don’t.” Mary couldn’t bring herself to call a white woman at least a dozen years younger “Mother.” At nearly sixty, Mary was older than everyone else at the mission. She wasn’t keen on calling the young Jesuits “Father,” either, so she avoided calling them anything. In truth, she avoided them as much as she could, fearing they would take any opportunity to report her slightest misdeeds to Bishop Brondel in Helena. Mother Amadeus had already run interference more than once, knowing Mary hadn’t caused half the trouble people laid at her feet.

“Now we can finish the dormitory,” Mother Amadeus said. “We can’t keep cramming our pupils into the old log cabins, or their parents will take them home, and that will be the end of their education.”

For the white girls, anyway. Mary expected the Indian parents would be more tolerant of the rough conditions, most of them sleeping on pallets in hide-covered tipis or wooden shacks. They already had twenty settlers' girls and twelve Indian girls boarding. Building supplies and good labor were hard to come by. But Amadeus had promised the bishop a school for girls, and she kept her promises.

Mary hitched Peter and Paul to the wagon and headed out to fetch another load of boards and timbers, the black-and-white dog beside her. Montana Territory didn't look much like the Tennessee hills where she'd been reared. So dry, except along the creeks and the great Missouri. The whispering leaves of a cottonwood or a willow nearly made her weep, and she didn't expect to ever see an oak or beech forest again. But the land bore a soft sheen that hadn't been there just a few weeks ago, and the prairie sage carried a sharp scent, not unpleasant. Patches of tiny white and yellow flowers bloomed where the road carved through a slope.

Mary turned on to the little-used trail. Shorter as the crow flies, but narrow and rutted, it made a hard drive and one she would not take under threatening skies. But she had a yearning to see young Josie, and to check on the girl's mother.

"Whoa, there, Peter," she bellowed as she neared the homestead. The horses slowed and she cocked her head, listening. Land can carry a feeling, if you pay attention.

"Get along with you. Don't be stopping here." A man stepped out of the high grasses on the uphill side of the trail where the wild shrubs were sparse, his britches tucked into tall boots, his face reddened by the sun.

"Horses need water," Mary said, though she'd let the pair drink not far back. No decent man would deny a horse water, no matter how much he despised their driver.

The man stared, deciding. “Pull up yonder, then. I got an old trough, so you don’t have to unhitch ’em.”

If she’d been a white man, he’d have been happy to help her unhitch the pair, and offered her a bucket and ladle as Annie had done. But hard as life could be at times, Mary had never once wished to be a white man.

“Miss Mary, you came back!” Josie’s voice rang out. The girl, again in the blue calico, stood at the break in the brush, bouncing on her bare feet. Then she saw her father. The bouncing stopped, and the narrow shoulders sank.

Mary turned back to Burnham. His blue eyes had narrowed into thin slits. He’d set the butt of his Winchester on the ground, but his fingers tightened around the barrel.

“Mr. Burnham, I bought eggs off your wife last week, and I was hoping to buy a few more. For the sisters.”

“We can’t spare none,” Burnham said. “If you can’t raise enough for ’em, you don’t deserve your keep.”

Mary kept her gaze level. On the seat next to her, the dog growled softly.

“Pa,” Josie said, her voice thin, “the sisters are running a school for girls. I could go, and learn how to read, since you don’t have time to teach me, and how to—”

“You’re not going. I told you once already, and that’s the end of it. Your ma needs you, especially with the baby on the way.”

Mary squinted. Was that a cut on the girl’s face, and a fresh bruise?

“How is Miss Annie?” she asked.

A shadow crossed Burnham's face. "Poorly," he admitted. "But she'll perk up once the baby comes, in a few weeks."

"Let her come to the convent. Some of the sisters are trained nurses. She and Josie will be well taken care of. You can visit, then head out to the range without worrying."

"Say yes, Pa. Maybe I can start at the school. Maybe—"

"I said no. That ain't the place for you." His words slapped the girl as if he'd reached across the road, past the big black woman in the wagon, past the full-chested horses in their harnesses, and struck her. She froze, eyes filled with terror and tears she dared not cry.

He turned to Mary. A vein throbbed in his neck and his nostrils flared. "Can't think why they put up with you, the way you quarrel with the priests and drink like a man."

The heat rose up inside of her. She gathered all her might to shove it back down. She had no trouble letting loose with her temper when it suited her, but she could not do so now. Not if she wanted Annie and Josie in a safe place when the baby came. What sort of man wouldn't want a safe childbed for his wife?

A man who feared losing what little power he had in the world—power over a defenseless young woman and a daughter who longed to learn and be loved.

A man who did not deserve them.

Likely he would punish the girl when Mary left, but nothing good would come of lingering.

"Thank you for offering water for the horses, Mr. Burnham," she said, though he had not offered until she asked, and begrudgingly at that. "If I remember right, this trail cuts down to the creek a ways up. I'll let them drink their fill there. Good day to you."

Mary glanced back at Josie, a pang in her heart. She patted the dog and clucked at the horses, and the wagon moved on.

A few days later, Mary made the trip again. This time, besides the dog, she'd brought one of the younger nuns. "Girl could use a bit of fresh air—she a bit peaked," Mary had told Mother Amadeus when asking if Sister Louisine could accompany her.

Mother Amadeus had given Mary a skeptical look, glancing first at Louisine, the picture of health, then back to Mary before nodding approval. The young nun had grabbed her skirts and clambered into the wagon without waiting for a hand up.

"The farther west we go, the stranger the land becomes," Louisine said now as Mary steered the workhorses out of the mission. "The buttes and gullies, the horizon so far away. The hills dotted with scrub pine. And the mountains—oh my. Their peaks pierce your heart, don't they, so sharp and rugged. As though they want nothing more than to reach the heavens in the hopes of touching the Lord. We should all be reaching like that."

Louisine chatted like a girl headed to a dance, but in truth, she made pleasant company, and if her expressions of delight in discovering her surroundings were fanciful, they brought the older woman satisfaction nonetheless.

At the mill, Mary finished her sandwiches while Louisine visited with the owner's wife inside a white clapboard house. Two small boys ran around the log yard, careful to keep their distance from the black woman who stood taller than their own father and half again as wide.

She leaned against a rock wall and drew on her cigar. The smell of tobacco comforted her, and mingled with the scent of spruce and pine that clung to the air. She kept a close eye on

the millwright and his hired man, making sure they gave the nuns the quality the bishop was paying for. Weren't nobody gonna pass a gnarled timber under her eyes.

"You will send them to the school in a few years, won't you?" Louisine said as she strolled toward the wagon with the mill owner's wife. The youngest boy stopped to pet Mary's dog, while the oldest watched the two men slide in the last timbers.

"I thought the mission schools were for Indian children," the woman said.

"The Jesuits educate ranch boys as well as Indians," Louisine said. "Separately, of course. And the Ursuline sisters have charge of the girls. Your boys will be in good hands."

"We'll see then, in time," the woman said, and thanked the young nun for the visit.

"I do believe it does a woman good to see another woman once in a while." Louisine waved goodbye as Mary pulled the wagon away. "Growing up with three older sisters, and my grandmother and spinster aunt in the house, I would scarce know how to live apart from other women."

Long as they didn't all chatter like Louisine, Mary thought. One tweety bird was fine; spare her the flock.

A mile from the mill, Mary turned the heavy wagon off the main road. Louisine glanced at her but said nothing, wide eyes taking in the wild country.

They reached the low spot where the trail dipped near the creek, its rushing waters hidden by wild roses. "Take a breather, Paul. Slow you down, Peter," Mary shouted. One horse whinnied. Mercifully, Louisine held her tongue.

And there was the girl, at the gap in the thicket, summoned by the wagon's rattle and Mary's calls. As the horses stopped, Annie trod heavily up the path.

“Hello, Miss Mary,” Josie said, then clapped her hand over her mouth at the sight of Louisine in her strange outfit.

“Josie,” Mary said. “Miss Annie. This is Sister Louisine. She’s a city girl, and I’m giving her an eyeful.”

“She surely is,” Louisine said. “What a lovely spot. I can’t get over how varied this country is. Do you know, in Ohio, the forests grow so thick you can hardly push through them? Of course, the trees aren’t like these—they’re hardwood, and in the autumn, when the leaves turn—oh, my.” She clasped her hands to her chest. They were fine and pretty, thanks to the balm she rubbed in them every night. Mary had helped her procure a supply, with an unspoken promise not to tell the other sisters, who would either clamor for their own or chide the novice for her vanity.

Vain she might be, but Mary had noticed the young woman’s sharp gaze settle on Josie’s bruised forearm, and take in Annie’s worn look, her face thinner than when they’d met.

“Mary.” Louisine turned and touched the older woman’s black shirt sleeve, made for a man but just right for her. “Do say we have time to visit.” Not waiting for an answer, she gathered her skirts and jumped down.

Mary kept her smile to herself.

“Is your husband home?” Louisine took Annie’s arm and they started down the path to the cabin.

“No, ma’am, Sister. He runs cattle.”

“I had never heard of open range before coming west. They run loose for months?”

“Yes, ma’am. But he keeps a careful eye on them, riding out and sleeping with the herd.”

Kinder to his cattle than to his womenfolk, Mary thought, as she climbed out of the wagon. Oh, for a young woman's knees. She had little doubt that Burnham's chief worry was thieves, not his cattle's well-being, though even a man as hard as he would know healthy stock fetched a better price than ailing animals.

Josie watched Mary unhitch the team.

"She's a nun, ain't she? Is she a teacher?"

"You don't have to whisper, child," Mary said. "Yes, she is. Now get your bucket and we'll fetch some cold creek water."

The woman and girl filled the trough, then each took a ladle themselves and let the horses drink. Josie showed Mary the garden patch and chicken coop, a rickety structure that looked like a fox could knock it over with his tail. The girl was counting eggs into Mary's basket when Annie and Louisine emerged from the cabin, the nun pausing to finger the pale pink hollyhocks by the door. Her habit swished in the grass, and the chickens clucked as they circled round her.

Mary shot the young nun a look, then counted coins into Josie's hand.

The girl closed her fingers and gazed up with a brightness that had been lacking on Mary's last visit. On the day Charles Burnham had trampled his daughter's hopes.

Mary tucked the eggs into the basket she'd brought along and hitched up the team.

Louisine took Annie's hands. "You're sure you and Josie won't come with us."

"Please, Mama," Josie said, but Annie kept her head down and shook it slowly.

"Then we'll keep you in our prayers, for a safe delivery and confinement."

Confinement, Mary thought. That's a luxury no country woman has, nor most city women, neither.

“I can’t promise to come along the next time Mary picks up a load, but I’ll try.” From her seat beside Mary, Louisine lifted the small cross at the end of the long rosary hanging from her waist. She signed, first in Annie’s direction, the woman signing with her, then Josie’s. The girl’s small brown hand could not follow the movements, weaving like a cowboy after a night in the Horseshoe saloon.

Mary whistled and the dog jumped in. She called to the horses and off they rolled.

It was half a mile or more before the silence broke.

“You sly old woman, you,” Louisine said. “A bird could fly through the gaps between the planks of that cabin. Plenty of fresh water, but it has to be hauled up by hand. She has no women around, and no medical supplies, though she does better at keeping things clean and tidy with next to nothing than most women with a laundry house and hired help. The tradesman did come by, but her husband sent him away.”

“You see what he’s done to the girl.”

“Half-broken her spirit, as well as her cheekbone. The mother, too.” The nun sighed. “I’m no midwife, but I did tend to my sister with both her babies. Annie’s pulses are too fast, and too full. Her feet and ankles are badly swollen. There’s a deep bruise yellowing on her neck, and a fresh one on her wrist. He must have ridden out only a day or two ago.”

“You Peter, Paul. Move a little faster, now,” Mary called roughly. The horses were used to heavy loads, and to their driver, and they kept the same steady pace even as she tightened the reins.

“Tell me, Mary, did you bring me along as nurse, or witness?”

Mary kept her eyes on the trail, and Louisine sighed again.

“The law says a woman belongs to her husband. He can do as he likes. Of course, we don’t know that they are married, but that makes no difference. The law cares even less about Indian women than white women, and that’s not saying much.” She grew quiet, but not for long. “You know my father is a judge, acquainted with Mother Amadeus’s brother, Judge Dunne, and that’s how I came to join her order and accept the invitation to head west.”

Mary knew. She had counted on the young woman’s knowledge of the law, as well as her gentle nature and her natural sympathies toward other women. Not every nun could see past the faces of a different color to the heart that beat beneath the skin, to the soul that longed for the same God they all longed for.

Louisine laid her hand on Mary’s. She bent her head and murmured a prayer, barely audible, though Mary made out the words “courage” and “protection.”

Then the young nun sat back, hands folded in her lap, and on the long drive home, the two women worked out a plan.

A surprise visit from the bishop triggered a flurry of cooking, cleaning, and other chores at St. Peter’s, and kept Mary from driving out the old trail for nearly two weeks. Mother Amadeus was none too pleased with another request for Louisine’s company, until the young nun took her superior aside and spoke in tones Mary could not hear.

Well before they reached the homestead, the two women fell into a heavy-hearted silence. As Mary drove the team around the last curve, Louisine raised her black-robed arm and pointed.

On the hilltop stood a cross, three feet high. Mary peered over the sage to see the second, smaller cross. Though the wood was weathered, the mound of red dirt was newly dug.

A shiver rippled through her, despite the warm day.

She cleared her throat and shouted at the horses. By the time the team had slowed, Charles Burnham stood by the trail, rifle in hand, Josie peering from behind him.

“Please accept our condolences, Mr. Burnham,” Louisine said.

Josie stifled a sob, and Burnham’s Adam’s apple bobbed.

“I’d have brought her to town, or to the sisters, but by the time I got here...” Burnham’s voice broke, then trailed off.

“Annie was alone? With no one but the girl?” Louisine’s voice rose, her face as pale as her collar.

“There weren’t nothing no one could do,” Burnham said, growing louder and defiant. “Not for seizures. Not when a body just won’t wake.”

Symptoms of a not-uncommon complication, Mary knew, and often fatal. But there was no excuse for leaving the woman alone with a child, who watched her mother die. Rage welled up in Mary’s throat. She studied Josie’s face, her eyes red-rimmed, her skin splotchy.

“You and your daughter will be in all the sisters’ prayers,” Louisine said. “Let us share in your burden.”

Burnham’s eyes blazed. “If you mean take my daughter to that mission and fill her mind with foolishness, you turn around and drive right on back.”

“We would be pleased to help you with Josie’s raising, Mr. Burnham,” Louisine said in a soothing tone. “But you would always remain her father.”

“Damn you, women. Get on out of here.” He lifted the rifle and held it with both hands.

On the wagon seat, Mary shifted slightly. Burnham glanced her way. The barrel of the revolver in her lap glinted in the sun.

He raised his chin, eyes wary. “Go ahead. Shoot me. You’ll hang by nightfall.”

“I ain’t worried about hanging,” Mary said. “The good Lord will take care of me. My soul will pass yours, heading the other direction.”

His eyes flashed and he breathed out heavily before lowering the rifle. Sister Louise raised one hand. Then she meted out the justice the two women had devised, anticipating both calamity and resistance. “Mr. Burnham, we will take Josie to the school. You will pay five dollars a month for her keep.” St. Peter’s did not charge tuition or fees, and only those who could were expected to pay for room and board, but Mary and Louise had concluded that requiring a regular donation would be fair, and Mother Amadeus had agreed. Penance.

“She will stay with the sisters until she finishes high school and teacher’s training. You will visit every first Sunday and on Easter. You will say not one harsh word to her about your late wife.”

“And I get what?”

“You save your soul, Mr. Burnham, for God is a harsher judge than the law in some cases.”

His jaw tightened. “Get your things,” he told the girl and she turned and ran toward the cabin.

Mary kept one eye on Burnham’s rifle while Sister Louise recited the details of the school’s curriculum and the opportunities the Ursulines would provide. Josie rushed up the path,

a small bundle in one hand, a reed basket in the other. Mary settled the girl in the wagon between the two women, the dog in back.

She kept her hand on her pistol until they were far out of Burnham's sight.

"You've done a good deed, Mary," Louisine said. "You shall be blest in heaven."

Mary grunted. "The Bible says God watches over the sparrows. But I figure even He can use a little help from time to time."

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Historical note: *Mary Fields, aka Black Mary and Stagecoach Mary, was born in slavery in Tennessee in 1832. She came west in 1885 to nurse Mother Amadeus Dunne, head of the Ursuline Sisters at St. Peter's Mission near Great Falls, Montana. Mary earned a reputation for "the temperament of a grizzly bear," with a soft spot for children, baseball, and flowers. She died in Great Falls on December 5, 1914.*