

# THE REASON FOR TIME



Mary Burns

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## MONDAY, JULY 21, 1919

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THE DIRIGIBLE FELL that fast gusts of pushed out air rustled my skirt around my ankles, and wasn't I across Jackson Boulevard by then, not knowing whether to tilt back my head to look or duck for cover? First the spreading shadow, then the odd shout sprung up from here and there, bunching into a roar when that big silver egg dropped flaming from the sky right onto the Illinois Trust and Savings Bank. And one of the parachutes meant for escape? Didn't that fall flaming too, a candle soon snuffed on the ground barely a block beyond. Others floated through the billows so thick you couldn't see what was attached to them, but you hoped it was someone made it out alive. "Look!" But where to aim your eyes first? *The Wingfoot Express*. Looked so impressive on the ground, it had, over there at the Grant Park field, but knowing how flimsy it turned out to be had me wondering what fools'd wanted to go along for what the papers called a joy ride. No joy for them that day, maybe never again.

The screaming started with the plunging made it more terrifying. A great boiling soup of sound, roar of fire, shattering glass, clanging bells, keening voices, clattering metal. Then an unholy minute, sure not even as long as a minute after the explosion, when them gas tanks fueled the airship went up and I might a been deaf. It was that still I thought I'd been killed, like all them in the bank and the fellows crashed into it. But I was not about to die then, no, not killed, only bleeding, and just a dab

of blood it was on my neck, like something'd bit me. Window glass spitting way across Jackson Boulevard, could a been, and no one caring or even remarking that slight injury or me at all in the crush, as half the bodies in the Loop shoved forward, despite the police hollering at us all to make way for the big-wheeled fire trucks rolling in. The brave ones spilled off the trucks and aimed their ladders up the side of that stricken building, poked their fat hoses into the busted out windows to douse the inferno inside. Above the usual stink of smoke and horse droppings, the throat-catching billows of oily gas and also a singeing, like hair being marcelled in a hot iron.

We could only imagine the terrors. And who were all them yelling in there? The girl with the stained fingers took the envelope my boss Mr. R gave me to deliver, being too proud to go begging himself? Me admiring the lace collar on her shirtwaist, nice and narrow like a delicate frame around the throat of her maybe one of them hollering for help?

First the shock, then the curiosity and the crowd livened with the sort of thrill comes with fright, same as when the *Mauretania* steamed into New York harbor, everyone rushing the decks, and me and my sister Margaret—just girls—getting near lost in the excitement as I might well have become lost on Jackson Boulevard the Monday that July. I am small, I have always been small, and I early learned to make my way how best I could. Still, being closer to the ground than most, I never saw much of the goin's-on at the Illinois Trust and Savings. The man directly in front of me in his summer jacket, sweat bubbling above his starched collar, and all them in straw boaters or fedoras conspired to block my view. A pair of overalled colored boys too, maybe sixteen and just stepped off the northbound train, could a been, exclaiming in their funny voices, “Lawdy me,” just like in the minstrel acts. Then laughing as if they found each other comical. From somewhere in the throng a newsie hollered,

## AIRSHIP CRASHES! BIG SLAUGHTER!

His voice too tweaked by wherever his family'd dragged him from. Bold as brass they tended to be, the newsies. No papers could be printed instant as that.

Just minutes before, I'd waited for that lace-collared correspondent'd come through the wire cage from the grand rotunda with all its marble, and the light shining down through the glass above, throwing patterns over rows of desks with their identical lamps lit, though it was full afternoon. Lamps burning under shades the shape of flowers, prettier than we had at our place. The wire cage around the girls working on their letters and adding the day's receipts. How'd they got out? Or had they? God have mercy on their souls.

What a time, too, it being near five o'clock and people streaming out the office buildings. More and more people crowding into the street, all of them after joining we many already there and seeking what protection we could beneath the shoulders of the big bank buildings. Fair to perishing as the heat of the day pooled into that hour, yet jostling together all the same, claimed by the event, opinions motley as the crowd. How could I leave? The rest thinking the same, no doubt, for we milled around and rumors spread faster than the influenza took Packy the year before. Hundreds dead inside, including the bank president, who was to receive Éamon de Valera that day and wasn't he from our home place, Margaret's and mine, of Ennis, de Valera? And didn't he want money to take back for the new republic? Then came the report that it was not de Valera at all but Mr. Armour himself who'd been inside with the bank president.

“Counting his money!”

“Fried like his bacon!”

“God rest his soul, poor man.”

“What soul? No heart. No soul!”

The crowd talking to itself, searching for reasons. Flying too low over the Loop, the *Wingfoot*'d been, and this to please the photographer who paid the dearest price for his ambition was one theory you could get for free. Another blamed the crew for smoking cigarettes inside the blimp. Like a regular conversation and all, except flattened beneath the haze of the sun and we straw-hatted mortals packed onto Jackson Boulevard like pigs and cattle jammed into the Union Stock Yards to the south. Horns blaring from a few trapped motorcars and just let a horse try to enter. Reporters from all the papers, and photographers with their big cameras popping as they forced in to record the scene.

We wouldn't know the facts of what was unfolding before us until we saw the morning editions, the sober stories chronicling the perished, how many'd died, and who. The very afternoon, the tallest, the closest, one of the ruffians bullied to the front may have seen it all, but the only dead body I glimpsed was slung over the shoulder of a fireman stepping down a ladder propped up against the bricks. One of the flyers, just a heap by then, could a been a suit of clothes coming down, rung by rung, on the shoulder of that courageous fellow.

A rumor whistled through about how the wrecked airship'd landed right on the vault and those at the front were grabbing wads of bills flew out with the window glass. That started more pushing and shoving and I nearly lost my hat, my sister Margaret's hat, truth be told, had the wider brim I'd wanted for later, when my chum Gladys and me'd planned a stroll in the park. Gladys worked for the Cosmo Buttermilk Soap Company in our same building, the grand building she told me about after sickness forced me to quit the catalogue company where we'd met. Gladys usually did all the talking, me being the quiet type, and no doubt'd wanted to spool out another chapter in the romance she imagined with Charles Francis Brown—the artist had a studio on the seventeenth floor of our Marquette.

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On account of the commotion that afternoon, we never did get our stroll. Gladys'd run up to seventeen seeking comfort from Charles Francis, though she claimed she wanted only a view out his window, faced south and west, from where she could see the terrible goin's-on, never imagining that one of the heads under the hats belonged to me, Maeve Curragh. I had to pry off the lid to protect it, but when I found space enough to lift my arms and dig the hatpins out I could see the rim'd already bent in a way not intended. In the circumstances, Margaret would understand, and while she could not fix everything needed fixing, turned out, a hat'd never stumped her.



The papers? They did it somehow, managed to get a story in the last edition.

### **LEAPS FROM BALLOON ABLAZE!**

Headlines standing like inch-high sayers of doom. Newsies shouting it and dressing up the story, praising the heroic firemen and they were heroes.

### **RICH AND POOR ALIKE PERISH!**

yelled those dirty-eared boys had the imaginations, for they couldn't a known yet who'd died. People flocking round at the car stop to grab a sheet still wet with printer's ink, scraps from the morning editions and candy wrappers tamped beneath every kind of shoe. Reports blaring from front pages made a paper wall along the lineup.

### **WILSON IS ILL**

### **KNIT WORKERS STRIKE FOR HIGHER PAY**

### **HOUSE GIVES THE NOD TO HOME LIQUOR STORES**



And there in the upper left box, under *The Very Latest News*, a paragraph telling how the dirigible'd been flying from Comiskey Park to the Loop all day, and hadn't we seen it pass ourselves, from our office on the ninth floor of the Marquette? Heard the motors humming, glimpsed the shadow it made on the tall buildings, and flocked to the windows for the sight. Not much of a story so soon, but enough to report how the airship'd fallen burning and people after drifting through the sky in parachutes. "A gigantic flame shot skyward." This time I knew more than the papers because I'd seen it all, yet didn't it seem more real when you saw it printed? Right there in black and white, and not just me reading it, no. All the big shots mattered to the city'd read the same. Really everyone.

When I squeezed onto the Madison car the conductor watched my nickel drop into the box and asked me what I'd been up to with my hat tilted so, an ostrich feather straying from the crown and my hair nearly undone. But he didn't say it neat like, talking directly to me and waiting an answer. Not that one with the peak pointed down his forehead like his wavy hair's a line of geese he's leading somewhere, the cap pushed up from his face flushed pink on account of the heat flowing in through the windows and from the temperature of passengers filled the facing forward seats, the benches, the standing room. No, not that one. He was regular on the Madison line, this one, a winker and a talker name of Desmond Malloy. I'd been pushed near up to a man saw him one evening and said in voice so loud you couldn't help but hear, "Is it you then, Desmond Malloy? The conductor himself? And how's your old da, lad?" He wasn't a lad no more, the conductor, and said as much to the fella. They continued their blather over my head, about the da and his bum leg had to be taken off, and wasn't it a sorrow for the mother and wasn't he lucky then to have four strapping sons to help their folks, and had he heard the latest from City Hall?

The man got off same stop I did and I stepped down after him, but if Mr. Desmond Malloy took any notice of me, he showed no

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sign of it until the evening of the day of the *Wingfoot Express*. I'd watched him, though. A handsome fella, and kind, too, to help his da, but what got me first was the droll nature of the man. He had a patter same as Uncle Josh in the vaudeville and he laughed at his own jokes same as Uncle Josh, too, using us, the riders as his subject, teasing, and it lightened the journey sometimes felt long at the end of the day and rough when the car jolted to a stop on account of a horse and buggy blocking the rails, or someone running across.

"Don't be shy, you with your feathers all ruffled. And her eyes sparkin' like she's got a new fella," he said to the other passengers, most who didn't hear, others who maybe smiled, because wasn't he going on again, this conductor came to seem our own, often here at the end of the day on the Madison line. Not till he peered down did it became clear he was talking to me.

"Would that be the truth of it, miss?"

In the crammed-to-the-windows car, my face—not the roses and cream some girls had, but fair enough still to blush—broke out in little patches of perspiration commenced to funnel right down to the corners of my mouth, and my instinct was to flick my tongue out to catch the drops since I hadn't the elbow room to dig for the handkerchief in my pocketbook. Sniffing, I said only if he'd seen what I saw, all the destruction and who knows how many killed, his eyes would be sparking too.

"What's that, miss?" he asked, leaning close, face tipped over mine. "The crash and all the destruction? You were there, then? You saw it all? The dirigible of death?"

"Hadn't I just been inside the bank myself?"

It came out as a whisper caused him to lean even closer, his breath a bouquet of tobacco and chewing gum.

"You've had the fright of your life now, haven't you darlin'?" he said. "And you are darlin', but you must have a name." Before I had the chance to tell him I did indeed have a name and it was no business of his, he pulled himself straight up, raised his voice, called out, "Halsted Street. Next stop, Halsted!"

Thousands of workers at the Yards'd walked out on Friday, but they'd walked back in today and those didn't live near could change at this corner for the Halsted line would get them to the Yards. Bodies crushed toward the door, separating the conductor, Desmond Malloy, and me. I watched the shoulders of his dark blue uniform bobbing among, and mostly above, the rest and when I got to the door myself there he stood with a rolled-up *Trib*.

"Have you seen the mornin' news, dear?"

Dear, was it now? And him aiming the paper towards my crooked elbow, poking it into the V it made along my sweaty side, me dipping my head in thanks and, with one hand on my hat, stepping onto the cobblestones slashed by the steel rails. And then, topping it all, didn't he wave at me? I laughed, despite the sad story I had to tell them all at Bridey's that night on West Monroe, up the block where most everyone had yet to learn about the terrible goin's-on downtown.

Oh, yes, I was all the rage, holding court at the back. The rickety assemblage Bridey called a porch, one of them landings on stairs angled down like the pleats of an opened squeeze box, like all the other stairs on that block and all the other blocks, so's you could nail up a clothesline on a house faced one street and connect to a house faced another street altogether. We got used to the sight of the neighbors' union suits, the dishtowels, and bed sheets decorating the alleys. Looking up, you could imagine a stage, really, like the makeshift shows they put on at the athletic clubs and at St. Patrick's Hall.

But that night Bridey's porch made the stage and me the star attraction, puffed up by the attention they were after paying me, the lingering fright, too. Margaret collected pennies from Lucille and Frances—girls also boarding with Bridey—and Mrs. Smith, Bridey's elderly relative from somewhere, not Ireland, put in her share. The two fellas had rooms on the floor below climbed up from where they'd been sitting to catch

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some air. Bridey sent her addled son, John, down the road to fetch a pail of beer. It turned into a party with me the guest of honor describing the whoosh of air and the crash, the minute fell silent, the fire in the sky, and the great lumpy pillows of smoke smothered the sun. Only then did I remember the piece of glass'd flown out and hit me in the neck and put my hand there, irritating the new-formed scab, and didn't fresh blood bubble up and raise a stir, everyone thrilled like they'd been there themselves.

“Did ye see any of the dead then, Maeve?”

Bridey Clancy's the one rented the top floor of a three-flat and made her living from we handed over the weightier half of our weekly pay to sleep in one of her hall rooms—three to start, but then the one she'd managed to divide somehow so's she could cram in another lodger and still have quarters to advertise as “private” on the sign in the parlor window. We had the smallest, Margaret and me. The two of us shared a bed no bigger than the straw pallet where we'd snuggled as children, yet it seemed smaller, Bridey's bed, for while neither of us was big, we had grown into women. Margaret near nineteen and engaged to be married, me the year older.

“God rest their souls,” said Bridey, but her warty eyelids never fell over the staring washed-blue out of respect or nothing. Dark had mercifully taken over, and though the simpery drafts off the lake rarely reached us with any strength to speak of, we did get a whiff, at least, with its reminder of the afternoon downtown. Bridey, she lifted the bottom of her apron and mopped away whatever it was clung to that long black hair she couldn't see to pluck out, then, in her declining years. For Bridey it would be a slow decline, though I heard tell of her death only years after the fact of it.

“Just the poor fellow they carried down. But I told you that, sure.”

“Do you know how many so? Was it hundreds?”

Bridey liked to imagine the worst, as if knowing would make her feel better about her husband got rolled into one of them machines at the steel plant. Could a been that, or something deeper in her character. If we didn't empty our wage packets, on the Saturday she wanted our rent, she predicted a dark road ahead for us, Margaret and me. We'd be condemned to one of them houses with a shaky reputation. We would turn into the type of girl picked up soldiers and such at Dreamland, or loitered at the athletic clubhouses where the rough and fast fellas peeled their eyes for girls who didn't know better. Yes, there were many places—and Bridey'd cited all of them—where a body could drift into a situation would start tears in her mother's eyes. Girls!

Yet she knew we'd last seen our mother near to eight years back, her hugging us and kissing us and knotting her fingers in my tangles, pulling my head back and studying my face as she did when some notion took hold. Searching me as if I were a stranger she'd found by surprise, or the field beyond, and making me promise to look after my sister, and not to forget her or him—our mammy or our da—or Fiona, who'd died since we left, or little Nuala, or our Gran, or Uncle Thomas. All we were leaving behind. She let go my hair to reach in her apron pocket and pull out a boiled sweet for each of us. Then she turned her head and pointed her chin out as if looking off at that field again or some fascinating sight, for wasn't it the best thing that two of her daughters had the vocation? And wouldn't the nuns find more for us to eat than our crippled da?

Girls! After what we'd seen?

We sat outside until the singing started, Margaret and me, though the others went in before, first Bridey, for all she hated to miss anything. There was only so much to tell and I'd told it, and she needed her bed. "How in heaven's name will I ever get any rest, with the image of them poor burning people filling my head?" she asked, accusing me like. Though hadn't it been her wanting the gory details?

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“Do you think it was burnin’ skin you smelled so?”

“I wouldn’t doubt it, then, Mrs. Clancy. That smell, like scorchin’ the hair off a pig. But we’ll learn what’s what when we see the mornin’ editions.”

“You bring one back with you and then we’ll be up to snuff and there might be pictures.”

They all knew me to be mad for the papers and hadn’t Desmond Malloy guessed it, too? Touching the inside of my elbow with that one rolled up, his teeth gleaming as he smiled big. I picked up the *Daily News* most evenings, first searching on the car for one left, only spending my two cents when I had no luck. If Margaret’d stepped out with her Harry, I took it to Thompson’s or one of the other neighborhood lunchrooms and had myself a good read with my supper. Still, I accepted the *Trib* from Desmond Malloy and not just because it was himself offering it. In our life we’d a been fools to refuse what we could get for free, even if it meant saving only a couple a pennies. I did not wonder to myself right off what it might cost me and isn’t it a marvel how we don’t know. How the time we’re in is like the narrow part in an hourglass, where sands from the past gather only to separate and land in different places in the time to come. Or so we thought until that wild-haired scientist fellow—same one stares at me now, from the picture on the wall across from where I lie, on this bed bound to be my last—while that fellow showed how the past can drift into the future and the future dribble into the past, and plenty of sand stalls right there in the middle of the hourglass, like that week in Chicago when everything happened at once.

I certainly took the paper. Why not?

The singing and the fighting combined, your fiddle and your drum, the regular orchestra along this stretch as the men stumbled back from the saloons. Common as the clackety-clack, the screeching of the last cars, the clop of horse hooves, the wailing of babies, angry words dashed out windows, and sometimes hollering, too, before the street settled. Still, we didn’t want to

go in, Margaret and me, for we'd been through the world and all since sucking on those sweets our mammy gave us, and this new thing caused us to marvel at how near Death stands. That batch taken so spectacular, like the big city itself, full of noise, bluster. People from every corner of the earth, skin in every color skin can be, the rhythms of the talk, the words themselves unfamiliar as the mouths spoke them.

Too, with the rest of them gone, I could tell Margaret about the car man gave me the paper. Desmond Malloy. Desmond with that hairline arrowed down over his forehead, eyes green as the moss that furred the stones in the old friary on Mill Street, in the home place, and eyebrows shaped like the friary's arches, that same tumbledown building where we Ennis children played, the daring most of us. Margaret didn't recall the friary as clearly as me, though she'd tagged along and I'd helped her scramble over the stone sill to join the others in the weeds inside.

"A paper, though, Maeve, not the crown jewels. They're terrible flirts, them car men."

Margaret scanned the alley where some animal—could a been a rat, for the rats were big as piglets—scratched for garbage, snuffled and whimpered a little, so maybe a dog not a rat.

"It's the land of the shillelagh and my heart goes back there daily, to the girl I left behind me when we kissed and said... Goodbye..." If not as many Micks here as in Bridgeport and some of the other neighborhoods in the city, them that were let you know it. Yet 'twas no John McCormack crooning down there, and she drifted, Meggsie did, the beginning of a doze. Soon a bottle crashed against the house and someone yelled down for quiet. "Working people need their sleep," said the shouter. That woke her up and she let me steer her in, and she paddled at the basin while I lay on our bed staring at the roses ghosting out from the dark wallpaper, remembering those days when the odd finger of sun fell on the mossy stones of the old Ennis friary. They appeared that soft you wanted to lay your cheek on them.