The Gilded Cage of Woman

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GREENLEAF
BOOK GROUP PRESS

The Intimate Memoir of Margaret Bryan (1757–1836)

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Published by Greenleaf Book Group Press
Austin, Texas
www.gbgpress.com

Distributed by Greenleaf Book Group

For ordering information or special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact Greenleaf Book Group at PO Box 91869, Austin, TX 78709, 512.891.6100.

Design and composition by Greenleaf Book Group and Kim Lance
Cover design by Greenleaf Book Group and Kim Lance
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Publisher's Cataloging-in-Publication data is available.

Print ISBN: 979-8-88645-206-8

eBook ISBN: 979-8-88645-207-5

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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

First Edition

Dedicated to my own dear uncle Eric Walker, who was often bemused as to why his Nannie lived in a laborer's cottage but spoke fluent French. This curiosity eventually led us to the remarkable and long forgotten story of Margaret Bryan.

Bryan House, London
September 2, 1826

Dear Harriet Emma,

You are but a little girl, and I have only met you once, but you stole my heart the minute I laid eyes on you. I can still smell the sweetness of your hair from the lock I hold in my hand. I am not sure what the world has told you about me. Not that it matters, as I wish you to remember me in my own words, which you will only read long after I have departed from this earthly world to reunite with my heavenly Creator.

I have decided, arrogantly or otherwise, that the story of my life may be worthy of some memorialisation to you, to perhaps change the lens in which you live your own. It is my hope that my story might inspire you to continue to challenge the political establishment, to allow women greater access to higher education, and for the world to ultimately embrace the idea of women having a fairer share of occupational pursuits beyond fashion, music, and needlepoint.

I trust you will use discretion in whom you share this work with, as it may offend and expose many. It is my hope that by leaving this manuscript in trust for many years that most characters mentioned will have also passed into the afterlife. It is certainly not my intent to cause damage or injury to anyone. My sole intent, rather, is to explain how difficult my personal and professional life has been, simply due to my sex and the cruel confinements this binary and arguably random assignment has put upon me. I wish with all my heart as you read this that you have enjoyed much greater freedoms in your own life to pursue the passions that spring from your heart and that you have suffered less than I in your pursuit of them.

Tout d'amour,
Mamie

1

IT WAS AN OPPRESSIVELY HOT JULY DAY in 1767 when we wound our way through the twisted lanes of London, from St. Luke's Church in Finsbury to the bustle of Fleet Street. I was ten years old. We had just left Sunday services, so the streets were noisy and lined with people entertaining themselves as a distraction from the sweltering heat. The overwhelming smells of the city had also become more pungent, as the horse dung almost boiled against the streets beneath us. With St. Paul's Cathedral just behind us, I briefly spotted two circus clowns, both perched on wooden stilts, sparring with each other. I momentarily stopped to watch the two swaying in the wind, wondering who might meet their demise first. "Margaret, come. Don't get distracted, my love. I have a surprise for you," my very old great-grandmaman, whom everybody in the world called Mamie, beckoned to me.

I shuddered, turned obediently, and squeezed her hand as we pressed on. Whilst I loved the excitement of the city, I always had the good sense to be somewhat afraid of its peculiarities as well.

"There, Margaret, just up ahead, the building with the big oak door; that is where your surprise awaits," she quietly said as she was rooting in the pockets of her old-fashioned skirt for what I assumed was a key. Finally successful, she inserted the ancient object into the keyhole and pushed gently on the beautiful oak door.

The first thing I felt once inside the enormous room was the blinding light from the windows above, which must have been at least twenty feet high in the air.

I squinted and raised my forearm over my eyes, trying to look up at the vast ceiling. I could see nothing at first, but the sound, the sound

was deafening: *tick-tock*, *tick-tock*. I remember so vividly the pounding in my chest.

When my eyes had somewhat adjusted to the light, I held my breath as multiple time-measuring pieces came into visual clarity, chiming in harmony like the piano I had been taught to play. Except the music in this room felt like the entire world heard in unison. *Tick-tock*, *tick-tock*.

"Margaret, your uncle is a world-renowned clockmaker and mathematician. He has made clocks for nearly every royal court on the Continent. Look at this long case over here," I faintly heard her say, as I put my hand on my chest to indicate that I was having trouble breathing.

Now turning to look at me, Mamie suddenly changed her tone. "Oh, Margaret, I am so sorry; you can't breathe. I always forget how delicate your little lungs are. I should never have brought you down here in this oppressive heat. Sit down for a moment, my love, and rest. Let me see if I can find you some water." I could always hear a hint of Mamie's Irish accent in her voice when she got agitated.

As she helped me onto a nearby stool, the room began to spin like a planet on its axis, and I closed my eyes and just listened to the chiming: *tick-tock*, *tick-tock*. I am not sure how long I indulged in the moment, but when Mamie finally came back with a glass of water, she stopped about three feet short of me and slowly put her hand to her mouth.

"My God, Margaret, my God in heaven, I think you have the gift. I have always felt it, known it, since you were a little girl," she said, moving her fingers across her lips slowly, as the words were still coming out of her mouth. She didn't say anything else for at least a minute, but just stared at me, until she very quietly whispered, "Margaret, I think you understand the music of mathematics. Oh, my love, you need to understand from whence you came."

Tap, *tap*, *tap*, my brain continued. *Tap*, *tap*, *tap*, as I heard the clocks synchronising, not knowing whether to be flattered or afraid.

"Let us go home; you are not well," she then said. "I will explain, but not today. I will say this today, though: You are of Huguenot descent

and come from a long line of mathematicians, mathematical instrument makers, and clockmakers. I have always thought one's sex didn't matter in the understanding of such concepts, but you are now proof that it is so."

2

MAMIE PULLED THE GREAT OAK DOOR shut and locked it behind her, checking it at least twice. She then shoved the ancient key deep into her skirt pocket, and we started to make our way to my uncle Samuel's home, where Mamie also lived. We walked in complete silence, holding hands. I felt that she was gathering her thoughts and I should be respectful, but I couldn't stand the suspense. Even though I still felt poorly, I finally broke the silence.

"Mamie, what is a Huguenot?"

She stopped on the footpath and turned to smile at me. "Margaret, you bear your papa's patience level as well. Thank goodness they won't let you be a mariner of the sea, as I am certain we would never hear from you again. Let me try and explain a little bit," she said, turning around again to continue walking. "But I really want you to take the time to understand the entire history of our family. Our relatives came from the European Continent, specifically Northern France, nearly two hundred years ago and practised a different kind of Christianity than that sanctioned by the King of France at the time, who was a Roman Catholic. The Huguenot religion is based more on a direct relationship to God than with an organised church. It was the desire of the French king, though, to be loyal to the Catholic Church in Italy and have all his subjects practise Catholicism in deference to the pope." She then stopped to look down at me. "The pope is sort of like Italy's king. So, all those of any other religion in France who refused to convert were subject to dreadful circumstances, including imprisonment and death. Sometimes they even moved a soldier into your house to watch over you."

I shuddered at the thought.

"Many succumbed to the king's demands, understandably, just to try to stay alive. Our relatives, however, flatly refused. They were very fortunate, though, as their men had been educated in advanced mathematics at Le Leuven University."

"Why just the men, Mamie? Why aren't girls allowed a proper education like that?"

Mamie sighed. "That is just the way it is, Margaret, but it doesn't mean you can't try. Ironically, it was a woman who would get them and all of us out of the sordid mess eventually. Elizabeth I, then the Queen of England, welcomed our relatives to her shores, as men with highly sought-after mathematical skills, to advance British innovation capabilities. They left everything they owned behind, though, and many died on the ships trying to cross the English Channel."

"Don't tell me that, Mamie. Papa goes to and fro from there all the time, and it was not that long ago."

"Shhh, I am not finished. You are a precocious little one," she admonished me before continuing. "That very valuable mathematical blood now runs in your veins, Margaret. I am sure I have seen that today. Let this be our little secret for now, though. I will tell you all about the mathematicians who came before you on another day, but today let's celebrate the Sabbath with our family and all the blessings this great country we call England has given us." She kissed the top of my head and gently squeezed my hand, and then we pressed on. You never really walked with Mamie; it was more like an efficient trot. Legs, she'd told me, were the primary mode of transportation in Ireland, so I just tried to keep up with her and breathe, all at the same time.

I already knew Mamie was the historian of the family. She was born Elizabeth Thompson in Dublin, Ireland, in 1683. Her mother died in childbirth, and she was raised by her father, Francis Thompson. She came to London at the tender age of sixteen by an arranged marriage to a London clockmaker called Richard Bryan.

WHEN WE ARRIVED BACK AT my uncle's house a few minutes later, Bryan House on Golden Lane was filled with the smells of roast beef and Yorkshire puddings. My papa met us at the door with a big embrace.

"Margaret, whatever has your mamie had you up to this afternoon?" he said, kissing her on both cheeks at the same time. "Your maman has been so worried. You really shouldn't be out in this heat."

"We went for a walk in the park, William. Can't I spend a little time with my granddaughter without menacing enquiry?" she said, bristling at him.

"Mamie, please, stop," Papa said. "We only have one child, and she is a girl with health issues. Her maman was only concerned for her well-being."

"Her lungs will be fine, but don't look past her brain, William. She is beautiful, but she is also very clever. She comes with the mathematical blood; I have seen that myself," Mamie responded, bristling at him again, and then barreled full steam ahead into the kitchen to help with the Sabbath meal's preparation.

3

The next time I visited Bryan House on Golden Lane, Mamie called me to her room as promised, and specifically to her bed, closing the door behind her. The bed was already littered with at least one hundred pieces of paper, all lying on top of the worn patchwork quilt with the morning newspaper.

"From top to bottom," she said. "Six generations of mathematicians, instrument makers, astronomers, and clockmakers, some of whom worked for Christopher Wren himself. They would have been founding members of the Royal Society if they hadn't died in the Great Plague."

She had records of them all in some sort of order, which, after brief observation, I am quite certain only she understood.

"So, it started with the Thompsons from the Continent, then my husband, then your grandfather, then your uncle . . ." Her voice then dropped off as she started to touch all the papers, as if it had all happened yesterday.

"Mamie, we must write all this down. I would like my own children someday to understand from 'whence they came.' Can you help me organise this in some sort of timeline?" I asked, already looking for dates on the fragile, almost burned-looking pieces of paper. "Mamie, can I ask you why my papa never wanted to be a clockmaker?" I continued trying to arrange the papers on the bed, now putting them in order by the brownness of the colour of them.

It was the birthright of my papa, William Bryan, to become a Freeman of the Worshipful Company of Clockmakers. Unlike my uncle Samuel, though, he had no interest in clockmaking nor in hobnobbing with royalty and the privileged gentry, either, although I would not learn all that until much later.

Mamie simply answered, "Even as a little boy, your papa used to spend hours at the docks of the Thames, watching the boats come in and out, always asking where they were coming from, where they were going, or how long it took to get there or back."

It was indeed my papa's dream to see the world, particularly the vast new world of the American colonies. He became a mariner when he was only thirteen. Whilst he didn't have my uncle Samuel's clockmaking talents, he was a keen astronomer and mathematician, having received much of the same training from his papa that his brother had. On board the ship, Papa was often head mariner. His primary responsibility was to carefully monitor the ship's position against its desired course, plotting the night sky against the crude trading maps of the day and then triangulating them with known physical markers on land or at sea. Papa once told Mamie he so loved the adventure of the sea that he would never ask a woman to marry him and thus burden her with such a lonely life. "My only wife will ever be the sea, so you need to pester someone else about more grandbabies," he used to tease her.

Of all the exotic ports of call Papa visited during his mariner lifetime, it was in a tiny town in Suffolk that he finally succumbed to his heart when he spotted the most beautiful woman he had ever seen: Jane Laurent, my maman. She had long, shiny black hair and dark skin. They were both twenty-three years old. She was as smitten with him as he with her, and they married in secret less than a week later. Like Papa, my maman was also of Huguenot descent. After they married, they lived in a thatched cottage by the sea in Ipswich. It is there, in that cottage, that I was born in 1757 and where I lived until I was three years old. We then moved back to London so Maman and I could be closer to Papa's family whilst he was at sea.

Whilst we all worried about Papa when he was away, we welcomed the well-rehearsed traditions of his returns: As soon as we got word what day Papa's ship was due in port, Maman began preparing the French feast. We would start baking the bread and the pastries first, and then she

would cure the meat in a French herb that she could only buy at a special shop in the Spitalfields. Then, when the day finally arrived, we would go to the docks to wait, sometimes for hours at a time. I used to count the portholes in the ships to amuse myself and try to make an equation to guess how many portholes there were simply by the apparent length of the ship. Next, I would count them for real to see how far off I was, taking notes to readjust the assumptions to the original equation.

When Maman would finally spot the flag of Papa's ship coming into port, we would make our way down to the docks. "William, William," she would shout as loudly as her soft voice would allow, waving both hands in the air as she anxiously scanned the crowd of sailors looking for Papa's familiar face coming down the gangway. When we eventually found him, Papa would scoop me up into his arms and carry me on his shoulders, telling me that I could fly all the way home.

We would sit around the enormous kitchen table and eat for days. I always sat on Papa's lap in *his* chair in front of the roaring fire. Papa would tell stories of his latest adventure and smoke his pipe. We often asked Mamie, Grandpapa, and my uncle's family to join in as well. I remember 'overhearing' my uncle Samuel once telling Maman at one of these feasts how much better her cooking was than my auntie Anne's. I often reminded Maman of that as she was preparing those meals, and she always answered by saying, "Shhh, Margaret, that isn't nice." I will admit, I was terribly proud of her. There was never a scrap left at the end of those magnificent French meals.

Papa also always brought me a little present from whatever strange or familiar place he had just returned from. I still have many of those presents to this day, although I have now forgotten where many of them came from. There is one particularly precious one, though, that is never far from my side, whether that be around my neck or in my pocket. It is a silver locket he bought for me in the Spanish Americas. He gave it to me on my twelfth birthday with a lock of Maman's hair inside it.

In 1770, tragedy struck though and upended my entire world. When I was only thirteen years old, my papa died of consumption, perhaps better known as tuberculosis. It was the most feared disease of the time, and arguably still is. I recently read it now kills one in every eight people in Britain. We still to this day have very little information about what causes it. But its spread has certainly been getting worse, as large amounts of people have started to move to the cities from the country. This could not be truer than in London, where people are starting to live on top of one another. The 'consumption death' is a horrible one to witness, with wretched coughing filled with dark-coloured blood and a general wasting away of the body cavity. I could hardly bear to be around Papa at the end and see him in such a wretched state of pain. Within days, my grandpapa John Bryan was dead of the same disease. I couldn't eat nor sleep for days. Mamie came over to our house to sleep in my bed with me for at least a week and help take care of Maman. The entire family was in bits.

"Maman, what will we do, where will we live? What will become of us without Papa?" I cried, crawling for the first time in bed with her since Papa's death, but Maman just wept and shook her head.

"Ma chérie, I do not know. I do not even know if I'll have the will to live without your papa to take care of us." It was at that exact moment that the sun began to set in her bedroom, and a blinding light entered the room through a small gap in the heavy draperies. It was only then that I really saw Maman's face since Papa's passing. It looked tired for the first time, like stone—hard and pitted. She then just said, "Please, let us just rest for a while." I climbed out of her bed and kissed her forehead, trying to hide my tears. I then closed her bedroom door behind me so she could go back to sleep.

4

MAMAN RARELY LEFT HER BED AFTER my papa died. I took care of her like *I* was the maman with a sick child. I pulled a cot into her room so I could sleep with her, hear her wake, and give her more medicine. I knew the medicine was potent, as it put her back to sleep immediately and smelled horrible in the sticky, brown bottle. I propped her up with enough pillows so at least she could read the newspaper or a book if I was doing something else. I also surrounded her bedroom with things that reminded her of Papa, including dragging his chair all the way up the stairs by myself. I always touched Papa's pocket watch that she kept on the bedstand when I sat on the bed with her. Somehow, I thought it magically gave me more strength.

Papa, we miss you; we love you so.

I fed and bathed Maman every day and attempted to keep the rest of the house going at the same time. It certainly felt like a lot of responsibility for being only thirteen years old, but what was I going to do? My only saving grace in that dreadful time was my auntie Anne and Mamie, who came often to check on us. Auntie Anne was better than Mamie at it; I think maybe the Irish culture is just different. Mamie just never had a lot of time for people feeling sorry for themselves.

"Jane, you can't go on like this. You need to get out of bed in the morning and get out for a good walk. Why don't you come and stay with us for a while, and I can help you get back on your feet?" my auntie Anne said to Maman. But it was clear she was no longer in control of her own body, or perhaps her own mind, anymore.

"Please, Anne, you don't understand. It's not of my will to be like this. I really can't get out of bed." Then Maman started to cry and my

aunt wrapped her arms around her and held her like her own child. The tears started to well in my own eyes just watching, as I just didn't know how long we could cope like this.

Then, one late afternoon on a cold autumn day, I tried to wake Maman to take her medicine, but she wouldn't move, not even a stir. At first, I feared she was dead. I took the vanity mirror off the chest of drawers and pressed it against her mouth. I saw she still had breath and kissed her forehead. My chest tightening, I knew I had to go for help, but it was snowing and starting to get dark. I reached for my woolen coat and pulled on my boots, then fought the front door not to blow me flat on my back just to get out onto the street. Ordinarily I would have found my way quite easily to my uncle's house, but it quickly became unfamiliar territory with the snow, the wind, and the darkening sky. *Travel east, Margaret; follow the sun, Papa said. Look at the sky, follow your instincts.* By the grace of God, my cousin William found me about halfway there, and we were all safe and sound in my uncle's home before nightfall.

Maman and I would now call Bryan House on Golden Lane our home as well. Inside the safety and comfort of Bryan House on Golden Lane, Auntie Anne and I took care of Maman together. We alternated bathing her and feeding her. Well, we tried to feed her. Whatever medicine they gave her to help her sleep also took away her desire to eat. This made me especially sad, as it made me remember and miss those beautiful French feasts with Papa and the rest of the family even more. "Pastries—anyone for more French pastries," I could hear her saying.

Maman also liked me to read to her often, particularly when she was feeling lonely, and always in French. "Ma chérie, would you sit and read to me for a little while?" she whispered one afternoon, reaching for my hand after pretending to eat the middle of a jam sandwich.

"Judge a man by his questions, rather than his answers"—Voltaire was her favourite. Maman was far more complicated than many people—particularly Mamie—ever gave her credit for. It was one of the reasons my papa fell in love with her: the rebellious French spirit of hers

that fed off the words of the infamous liberal philosopher. They would read Voltaire together for hours upon his returns from the sea.

Despite the constant worry about Maman, Bryan House on Golden Lane was otherwise filled with laughter and love, which made me feel very much alive. As an only child who now lived with her aunt and uncle and their entire family, it felt a bit as if I'd died and gone to heaven. Not to disparage Papa's memory, but I now had six siblings to play with, and I was big sister to baby Thomas, who was only one year old.

"Baa, baa, black sheep, have you any wool? Yes, merry have I, three bags full," I used to sing to him, and tickle his tummy, which always made him giggle. Thomas was also learning to walk at the time. He would make me hold each of his tiny hands in the air as he tried to get his footing, wandering all over Bryan House on Golden Lane for hours 'discovering,' until I couldn't straighten my back upright.

As well as my new extended family, my uncle also had young clockmaking apprentices who worked for him littered about the house and his clockmaking shop at any given time, at first a bit older than me and then, over time, a bit younger than me. At Mamie's encouragement, we would often 'quietly listen in,' when my uncle was giving them their maths lessons in his clockmaking shop. We would secretly walk down to the shop together holding hands and would then quietly sneak in the back door.

The minute I was inside, I felt a bit like what I think Maman felt like when she took her medicine: at *peace*, I suppose is the word. *Tick-tock*, *tick-tock*—that was my medicine. The music of mathematics: *tick-tock, tick-tock*. I breathed it in and then swallowed it every time I walked into that room. That is, before I got to the smells of the wood chips and the disgusting varnish that made my eyes water.

When I say Mamie and I would 'quietly listen in,' that never implied with my uncle's permission. 'Quietly listening in' usually meant hiding like mouses behind the very large oak bookcase at the back of the room. It was one such day, after we thought my uncle had gone home, when I was alone in the clockmaking shop with Mamie. I was fingering the

pendulum of his latest masterpiece when we heard the front door open. Looking up, startled, I saw it was my uncle. "Margaret, you must stop this, and Mamie, you need to stop encouraging her," my uncle said, annoyed. "What can you do with all this knowledge? This is a man's profession! Margaret, you should be going to dances and socialising with people your own age. Your mother would be so angry with me if she thought I'd offered any encouragement."

I put down the beautiful pendulum and looked up at him. "Uncle, you've never encouraged me, not once, not ever, so there's no need to worry Maman," I said softly, tears welling up in my eyes. Reaching for Mamie's hand, I headed for the back door. Mamie started to say something, and I just put my index finger to my lips. Whatever dreams she allowed me to believe, I didn't want to upset Maman in any way. However unwell she was, her only remaining mortal wish was for me to get married and to have a family.

Mamie did vow to protect us if my uncle ever got really cross. Mamie was bold by any measure, but particularly for a woman, like she was just too old to let anybody tell her what she could and couldn't do. As much as to say, *I changed your nappy a hundred years ago, so you don't get to supervise me*. She would secretly 'borrow' my uncle's books from his library to help me practise my maths and astronomy lessons in her room. She understood more of the maths than she ever let on to the men in her life: father, husband, son, or grandson. She could always point me in the right direction whenever I got stuck—often when I had assumed she was asleep. A long finger would just come out from under the patchwork quilt and turn to another page and point. I used to hide the maths books under her bed, not mine, in case we ever got caught. It was all a secret game that belonged only to Mamie and me, and it was nothing short of magical.

Mamie and I spent so much time together alone, particularly in her bedroom and in secret at the clockmaking shop, that my cousins probably thought I monopolised her time, but I am not sure that is fair. Nobody ever said anything to me, anyway. I knew everybody else was

feeling sorry for me, so I suppose I just took advantage of the opportunity. Mamie also told me more than once that I was her favourite, but I kept that to myself. "Shhh, that isn't nice," I heard Maman say.

Mamie was indeed a character. Not only was she always up to mischief when it came to trying to advance my mathematical education, she was constantly playing pranks on everyone in the house. We all were fair game. She once told me that when she was a little girl growing up in Ireland, she took the family chickens from the coop and put them one by one in the neighbour's barn so her papa couldn't find them. When it was finally discovered what she had been up to, given away by the fact that she was covered in mud from head to toe, the neighbour didn't want to give the chickens back. When her papa finally shamed the man into admitting to what was rightfully his, he then had to carry the fowls back to his own coop himself. Mamie said he was so cross with her that she wasn't allowed to leave the house for nearly a month. She also told me she couldn't eat chicken anymore, as the whole event had left an unpleasant taste in her mouth. She could be hysterical, but she had little shame. I didn't have the nerve to ask her why the same philosophy didn't apply to eggs as well. Perhaps it was only a dead chicken that was now considered offensive.

In addition to completing my astronomy and maths lessons behind her bedroom door, we also eventually rewrote the entire family diary together from all her disorganised notes. I did finally figure out her order for the notes, divided first by how much she loved the person and second by how successful their career had been. Once I had the 'guide,' it was now obvious why her husband, Richard Bryan, was always at the top of the pile. I should mention how much in love they were. Richard Bryan left all his money to Mamie when he died, which is still very unusual in British society.

That diary holds so many lovely stories about my family and all its rich history. I cherish it to this day, still wrapped carefully in a piece of Mamie's patchwork quilt, but it is the Elizabeth Thompson and Richard

Bryan love story I always read when I am feeling a little melancholy. Even though it is a beautiful love story in its entirety, my favourite part actually reminds me of Mamie's sense of humour. As proud as she was of her mathematical and clockmaking Thompson ancestors, her arranged marriage to her beloved husband, Richard Bryan, who was a perfect stranger to her, was transacted in the currency of sheep. Her father, Francis Thompson, while having a birthright to the Freedom of the Worshipful Company of Clockmakers, chose a different occupation. He was a successful merchant trader in Irish wool, working in the Huguenot community of Dublin in the late seventeenth century. But when the 1699 British Woolen Act passed in parliament, forbidding the prospective export of Irish wool outside of Ireland, the entire industry collapsed overnight. It is then that Francis Thompson arranged for his beautiful and educated sixteen-year-old daughter's hand in marriage in exchange for his freedom into the Worshipful Company of Drapers, allowing him to freely trade wool on English soil. "Sheep, dreadful, smelly sheep, is what brought my love to me. Can you imagine?" I remember Mamie laughing out loud, telling me the entire sordid sheep story in perfect French, as I desperately tried to write everything down.

5

As the years passed at Bryan House on Golden Lane, I became resolved regarding my future of a traditional life of marriage and children. I simply wasn't interested if it meant I couldn't do something useful with the mathematical education I'd been quietly amassing over the years, hiding in the cobwebs of my uncle's business. Admittedly, Mamie was my sole advocate, but somehow with her encouragement, all seemed possible, despite not having a clear path nor destination to aspire to—except, perhaps, to become one of my uncle's clockmaking apprentices, which seemed unthinkable at the time, given his apparent feelings about even my very presence in his shop.

Then, one bitterly cold day in January of 1776, my world, or at the least the sacred dreams within it, fell apart. I crept into Mamie's room, as I often did to pray with her, and closed the door behind me. The air was still, which seemed odd.

"Mamie," I whispered, "Mamie, are you awake?" There was no response. My chest began to tighten, and my heart began to pound. "Mamie," I said louder, trembling as I reached for the mirror on her bed table. I pressed the mirror against her mouth—no breath. Once, twice, thrice, no breath. I put down the mirror and started to cry. I didn't tell anyone else for a little while. I had already closed the door, and Auntie Anne always acted like somewhat of a guard at Mamie's door when we were in there together. Instead, I just cried and cried for what felt like hours, with her hands—those long fingers that used to point to the right page in the maths book—entwined with mine.

I remember at one point reaching for the diary, also on her bed table, and finding her name written inside. I picked up the quill and started to

write inside, *Died peacefully, January 21, 1776, ninety-three years old* in dark black ink as a tear dropped to the page and smeared the moment. I finally tucked the diary into my skirts, brushed the tears off my face, and then slowly opened the door to find Auntie Anne to break the news. I was inconsolable for weeks.

With Mamie now gone, despite all my prior dreams, I suddenly felt my day of reckoning was now inevitable. I assumed at some point a suitable husband and an 'attached life' would be chosen for me, even if I didn't actively participate in the process of being acquired by 'one or it.' Then, seemingly to seal my fate, another tragedy struck. After her own heartache and failing health, in the spring of 1777, Maman developed dropsy. It was clear she was in unimaginable pain. A vile yellowish fluid took over her entire being, distorting her beautiful French body into an unrecognisable version of its former self.

"Mamie," I prayed on my knees, holding Maman's hand, "please take Maman; she doesn't want to be here. She is in a lot of pain. Please take her to Papa soon."

Mamie didn't take long to hear me, as Maman's battle to be in the kingdom of heaven was swiftly won. The last thing she said to me was "Margaret, you will marry a good man and have lots of babies, won't you? I could only ever have you. That would make your papa and I very proud."

I didn't say a word. *I am not sure I can tell her that, honestly.* I just squeezed her hand, elephant tears falling from my eyes onto the bedclothes, and nodded my head. She then closed her eyes for the last time. There was a deafening silence when she was finally at peace, finally with my papa. I saw that heavenly reunion for myself. I was just twenty years old, though, and I had no idea who or what was in store for me now.

6

"My lady, your uncle wishes to see you in the drawing room. There's a young gentleman waiting."

Looking up at the servant, annoyed to have been interrupted in the middle of trying to replicate a mathematical theorem, I replied, "Yes, of course, just give me a minute." *Not another one. How do I put a stop to this?* Whenever I was summoned to appear before these potential suitors, I pinned my hair back tightly in a bun and tried to look as uninterested as indeed I was. I certainly had no intention of providing even an ounce of encouragement to the other side.

"My apologies," I said, curtseying before my uncle as I entered the drawing room.

"My dear Margaret, no apologies necessary. Please welcome Francois Dubois Esquire," my uncle replied, politely gesturing for me to sit down. "He will be joining us for dinner tonight, and I thought you might enjoy his company privately for a few hours beforehand. Perhaps you could play the piano for him."

I started to feel anxiety. I'd never been left alone in the presence of any of these 'potential husbands' before. I instinctively looked at my aunt for a signal of relief and wasn't pleased with the result. She was clearly avoiding eye contact with me entirely.

"Yes, of course, it would be my pleasure to entertain Mr. DuBois with the piano before dinner," I almost announced, lacking any enthusiasm whatsoever. They then left us in the drawing room, and I played the piano for two hours without interruption, until the same summoning servant let us know that we were now expected in the dining room. Mr. DuBois honestly never said a word the entire time. There could be no matter of doubt, though, that the music had been deafening by design.

In all fairness, Mr. DuBois turned out to be a lovely man when he was finally able to present himself at dinner. He was just never intended to be *my* lovely man and that needed to be made clear. Admittedly, I had not been at my best, banging on the piano, but I was furious that all of this had obviously gone on behind my back. *What century does my uncle think we live in?* The formal meal was then only filled with the indigestion of the uncomfortable conversation that was inevitably to follow.

After the dinner finally concluded, my uncle and Mr. Dubois went into the library to have a drink, and I heard Mr. Dubois leaving about an hour later. My aunt and I were doing needlepoint in the drawing room, hardly looking at each other, let alone speaking to each other, when a servant finally broke the deafening silence.

"My lady, your uncle wishes to speak with you in the drawing room privately."

Be strong, Margaret, I thought, taking in all the breath I could ingest. I'd hardly had a chance to sit down when my uncle launched into speech.

"Margaret, your aunt and I have been thinking about your future. I know you enjoy your mathematics and your books, but you need to start thinking about your future and a marriage to a husband of some means. We think that man is Mr. DuBois. You seemed to have a compatible nature tonight, and he has a very promising career ahead of him. I think it is a fine match."

"A fine match?" I spat at him. "How do you match something before you know what colour it is? I will have no part in this medieval practise of complete ignorance." I immediately walked out of the room to try and find my aunt, which I eventually did, in tears, in her bedroom.

"Were you really a party to this?" I cried out to her. "I just lost Mamie and now Maman, and now I am to be sold to the highest bidder?"

"No, Margaret, that is not what is happening here. I never—no—he is a kind man, but I understand why you are upset. I cannot comprehend what it would be like to marry a man you didn't love with all your

heart. Your uncle and I married without either of our parents' permission, underage and in secret. Let me deal with this issue of Mr. DuBois on my own with your uncle. He will not force you into anything, I promise you. I would not stand for that, but what will you do with your life? I mean, are you not interested in getting married at all?"

I softened, now realising she was as upset as I was. "Auntie, Mamie told me that I had the intellect to be a mathematician, an astronomer, and even a clockmaker, or all three, just like the six generations of men that preceded me. She told me I have their gift and that my sex doesn't matter in my ability to study and comprehend advanced mathematics. So that is what I want. This world will not let me do that and have a traditional family because I am a woman."

"Margaret, sometimes I worry Mamie put too many unrealistic ideas into your head."

"That may be true, but they are now there, and they have no place else to go. So, if I must choose, I choose to have an occupation studying advanced mathematics and this mysterious concept we casually refer to as the movement of time and space. That is what I am passionate about; that it is what runs in my blood and my bones, as much as my religion does. Please understand it is not my intent to be disrespectful, but it is my intent to be heard. If you can hear me, I desperately need your help. You are the only person on earth who could get my uncle to consider making me a proper clockmaking apprentice."

She looked solemn but eventually spoke. "Well, your uncle has never been able to say no to Mamie about anything. Let me talk to him, and we will pray to her in the meantime." She turned around and closed the door behind her.

After my aunt had left the room, I sat on her bed and stared at myself in the mirrored bureau. I had said it out loud now. I knew my aunt was telling my uncle of my decision, in that very moment. I also knew he was going to be livid with me. I thought about Papa and then Maman. Certainly at least she would be equally as furious, given what I had

implicitly agreed to on her deathbed. I slowly knelt to the floor, put my elbows on the bed, and began to pray to Mamie.

"Mamie, are you awake? Mamie, I may have gone too far. I need your help. This isn't a game anymore. This is my life. Show me the way—show me the way to get them to understand why I must do this."

My uncle was indeed livid with me, beyond even what I thought might be a reasonable punishment for what I will admit was rude, whatever the circumstances might have been to justify it. He wouldn't speak to me or be in the same room as me for weeks. He would pass me in the hallway, bristling as if I were an unwanted ghost occupying space in *his* house.

"Margaret, he will soften," my aunt assured me. "He will come around. It is just going to take some time."

"Is she qualified or not, Samuel?" I overheard my aunt asking my uncle in the kitchen a few weeks later. "If Thomas or any of your other sons showed a tenth of the interest in your business that Margaret does, you'd be doing cartwheels. Why does her sex have to matter so much? She's clearly got a natural inclination for the subject matter, and she's practically your daughter. Give her a chance, for heaven's sake!"

"It is not that straightforward, Anne. We have a responsibility to secure a future for her. We will not be here to take care of her forever," I heard my uncle respond. I was now officially in no man's land, no pun intended. I just sort of shuffled through the house without purpose for weeks, waiting for whatever was going to happen to finally happen.

Without warning, though, things started to tilt my way. Looking for my uncle in what appeared to be a drunken stupor, a colleague of his accidentally found me buried in one of my uncle's physics books. Puzzled, he started to say something to me, when he was suddenly interrupted by the parlour maid, who was clearly agitated.

"Sir," she said, "Mr. Bryan is in the drawing room. Pardon me, my lady. Please, sir, let me take you to him." The two then turned their backs to me and left the room.

The incident may have been missed entirely from my story but for the man's voice becoming so loud that I could now hear him bellowing from the drawing room. I opened the library door quietly to get a better position.

"Samuel, why do you allow that odd niece of yours access to your library and all your expensive books? She's 'vixen-like' and only likely to mix up your filing system, and anyway, there's no point. Any man with half a brain knows women are incapable of understanding such complex subjects as advanced mathematics and physics."

I wanted to barge in and tell him right then and there that the only man whom I knew with half a brain was him, but of course, I did not.

"What's wrong with you, John?" I then heard my uncle shout. "I will not tolerate my niece being referred to with such vile and disrespectful language. You know what Margaret's been through. It would serve you well to stop drinking, at least during the light of day. You need to leave, now." I heard the front door open, shut loudly, then nothing.

On one level, the man's comments didn't really bother me. I already knew what he said to be ridiculous, simply through observing how frustrated my uncle became with his apprentices' inability to grasp even the most basic of mathematical concepts—concepts that I would digest and be capable of replicating after a single afternoon's lesson. Quietly crying, I put the book back on the shelf, *in the exact place it was supposed to be*, and went upstairs to my bedroom.

About an hour later, I heard a knock on the door.

"Margaret, your uncle wishes to speak to you in his library," I heard my aunt say from the other side of the door.

Well, I didn't know if this was good news or bad news, but at least it was news. I knew I needed to pull myself together regardless and face whatever consequences were coming my way.

"Coming," I answered, using the bottom of my skirts to dry my tears.

When I arrived in the drawing room, my uncle was in his chair in front of the fire smoking his pipe. He again launched into speech, which

initially was so startling I almost lost my composure. I quickly sat down and straightened up to look directly at him. He didn't seem to notice.

"Margaret, I need to apologise for my behaviour these past few weeks. Your decision to discard Mr. DuBois so casually was disrespectful to both of us. I now understand that you were trying to make a point to stop this fruitless effort of trying to find you a suitable husband, as your aunt has informed me of your decision to alternatively pursue an occupation."

I suddenly felt my heart begin to pound. *Where is this going? Could it be he's changed his mind?*

"I will tell you that I don't agree with it nor understand it, but I do now respect it. With my complete support, I am offering you a full clockmaking apprenticeship, which you are free to begin immediately."

Oh, Mamie, you heard me. I started to cry uncontrollably. I knew I was making my uncle uncomfortable again, as he got a bit twitchy, and I thought I may have even seen a tear starting to form in his eye. Fortunately for both of us, my aunt was now in the room, embracing me with a full-body assault.

"Thank you, Uncle. Thank you, Uncle. I will be the best clockmaking apprentice ever born" was all I could get out.

This made him laugh out loud and say, "I am sure you will be, Margaret."

I then made him put it in writing and sign it, for fear of a future reversal. "You have to sign here, Uncle, on this piece of paper," I said, handing him the quill pen, which made him laugh even louder and give me an awkward embrace.

About the Author

JAYNE WAS BORN IN ENGLAND and immigrated to the United States with her family as a child. She holds a bachelor of science in engineering from North Carolina State University and an MBA from Harvard Business School.

After earning her MBA, she worked as a strategy consultant for Bain & Company and then held various C-suite leadership positions at Dunkin' Brands, Gulf Oil, Planet Fitness, and Alex and Ani. While at Alex and Ani, she had the privilege of partnering with First Lady Michelle Obama on the 'Let Girls Learn' campaign. It was here she developed her passion for raising awareness for women's lack of access to higher education and education in general. Jayne was a teaching fellow at Harvard Business School before she penned *The Gilded Cage of Woman*.

Jayne and her uncle rediscovered the lost story of Margaret Bryan when they were working on an ancestry project together. An eighteenth-century relation and trailblazer in the education of women in the sciences, who found *her* path when there was no path for *her*.