

# THE EAST HAMPTON STAR

SHINES FOR ALL

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## “The Maid for the Maids” A Memoir by Mary Ellen Rooney

It's early summer in 1954 and I am home in Bridgehampton from my sophomore year at St. Lawrence University. It's too early to begin waiting tables for the summer. I have worked at most of the posh places in East Hampton: the Hunting Inn, the Hedges Inn, the 1770 House, and the Sea Spray Inn. Later these places of employment would include the Southampton Bath and Tennis Club, and a riotous session on the oceanfront during a big hurricane.

I have no money and need some, particularly since I am secretly investigating a junior year abroad in England, Ireland, or Scotland. I have not discussed this with my parents because it could cause alarm and they might discourage me from pursuing the idea. When one is planning a new untried adventure one is very vulnerable to negativity.

Based on my childhood I often say to someone considering one that “I never tell anyone where I am going until after I get back.”

I know that if I do decide to attend university abroad in the fall I will need to have my own money to pay for passage. I am a small-town girl and don't even know how one gets across the Atlantic to the British Isles.

So, with no money and nothing to do, my mother suggests I go to Southampton to see our friend Marguerite Guyer, who is running an employment agency. I love Marguerite. She is one of the most amusing storytellers alive and I have spent many very happy times just listening to her tales. There were a few people like that during my early years who probably are responsible for my almost physical need to tell stories.

At any rate, Marguerite looks through her files and Rolodex and says there really isn't anything. Except then she says, “Oh, you probably wouldn't be interested in this, Mary Ellen. Madame Balsan, the former Duchess of Marlborough, needs a maid for her maids. It pays a weekly salary and is just in the mornings from 9 until noon. They would pay your bus fare from Bridgehampton to Southampton.”

“I can clean and I like the hours, especially a regular paycheck for the summer,” I say. I think it was \$45 or \$65 a week. Thus I go over to the huge shingled manse on Ox Pasture Road and get myself hired. Madame's chauffeur will pick me up at the bus stop in Southampton — same bus stop that is there now — and drive me to the house.

“It's a very interesting story,” Marguerite says. “English royalty. Her mother forced her to marry an English duke. She wrote a book called ‘The Glitter and the Gold.’ ”

What did I know then? I was only 19. I finally read the book this year, 2015 (60 years later) amid all the excitement about Downton Abbey.

I see that I have a story that warrants telling. It's about Southampton during another time. I have been writing about what it was like to live in my ancestral eastern Long Island during World War II, and now there is this little tale that could only have taken place while growing up in a place like Southampton.

It was a long time ago, but what I remember is that each morning, dressed in Bermuda shorts and carrying rubber gloves, I boarded the bus in Bridgehampton across from the Candy Kitchen and traveled to Southampton, where I was met by Madame Balsan's chauffeur, a charming guy named Marshall.

He drives me in the Mercedes to the large, shingled home in the wealthy section of Southampton near the famous Irving Inn, where the very rich gathered in the evenings during that time.

At the household, the head housekeeper, a Frenchwoman named Marie, meets me. My name immediately becomes “La Jeune Fille.” That's okay. I am a French minor at St. Lawrence.

First, I am to clean the quarters of the cooks, Mr. and Mrs. Billy. Then I am to report to Marie for some ironing. Mr. and Mrs. Billy are very tidy and easy to clean for. I like to iron and there is quite a bit of hand-embroidered linen to be done. However, Marie checks on her jeune fille often. Before leaving I am to do the chauffeur's quarters

over the garage, and he will take me to the bus stop at noon.

The job is not too hard, and quite interesting actually. Time passes and apparently I am doing well as I am gradually being advanced into the main house. Eventually, I am instructed to clean Col. Balsan's room and bathroom. We don't say much but his presence is kindly.

Madame Balsan has a full-time secretary from England. She is also calm and pleasant. The cleaning goes on, the ironing continues, and soon my summer table-waiting jobs open up. When I arrive home at noon, I prepare to drive over to the Sea Spray in East Hampton to work cocktails and dinner. It's a tough schedule but I am only 19 and can certainly handle it.

I am saving all the money I can because an acceptance at the University of Edinburgh has just come through and I haven't discussed it with my parents yet. Our family isn't good at that kind of planning and I am often sent to my school principal or someone wiser to discuss serious matters. Sometimes my father puts these advanced family decisions before his Council of Elders at the local bar in Bridgehampton. There he will meet with his cronies who include a very heavy farmer who has been to college, and the local newspaper editor, who drinks a lot. I have known him to come home triumphant with a family decision after such conferences.

I am generally a very busy bee this summer, while regaling my friends at the beach with tales from the Duchess of Marlborough's household. It's a unique situation and people are quite intrigued. That's still my favorite thing to do — tell tales to willing audiences about the crazy life I am living. You could say I learned the trade from being around people like Marguerite Guyer and other friends of my mother's who love nothing better than to gather and tell amusing stories. It's not really gossip, just a love of storytelling.

I really had one here. My status in Madame Balsan's household improved at a nice pace. I felt I had really arrived when I

was allowed to do Madame's room. She had a gorgeous marble bathroom and a whole wall of cashmere sweater sets with the most gorgeous variety of jeweled decorative fronts. I can still see them. The biggest deal was dragging a very heavy bedspread that I think might have had gold threads in it over to the bed and setting it on the bed straight.

I learned how to dampen a cloth and run it over the linen sheets to remove wrinkles. I use the system today on a wrinkled duvet. The chauffeur was very sweet to me and, if I finished a few minutes early before bus time, he let me sit on the couch, put my feet up, and read a paper before bus time. I did that quite often.

By the end of the summer I had decided to go to Edinburgh. I went into New York to the Student Travel Association and bought a steamship ticket to sail on the New Amsterdam to another Southampton in early September.

My parents freaked out but eventually calmed down since I had money and had already bought the ticket. Preparations had begun. A secondhand steamer trunk was purchased at Wally Lee's in Southampton. My mother also bought me two new dresses at the fashionable Paula Tara's in Riverhead. I still remember those two dresses. I also bought a new coat that was quite chic.

My father, having visited his Council of Elders with this exciting news, arranged for a state trooper to drive me into New York City to board the ship.

Madame Balsan had royal guests in late August. There was a very wheezy, heavy-footed Duke. I don't remember exactly who he was but I was given his room to do.

If her former husband the Duke of Marlborough was anything like this duke I could see why she was with the gentle, charming Colonel Balsan.

There was also a young Lord Charles visiting with his parents. A huge dinner party had been planned. At this point I think Maria had quite taken to her *jeune fille* and decided to give her an exceptional treat. The *jeune fille* would be allowed to see the dinner table setting.

Marie took me by the hand down to the main dining room, which I had never visited before, and I beheld the dining table. There were many plates with real gold on them. There was crystal everywhere and at least three sparkling glasses at each place setting. Then she took me to the huge pantry to see the dessert settings. I must say it was impressive, yet there was something about the notion that this was my reward for being there for the summer.

Still, I was really going to Duchess of Marlborough country next year. Funds were very tight and it was entirely possible that I would need work while there. A letter of recommendation wouldn't hurt. I approached Madame's secretary, who said she would see what she could do.

An exit conference was arranged with Madame. It was the first time I would meet

her in person. Wearing the Bermuda shorts, I sat in her boudoir. She was such a gorgeous, graceful creature. I told her about my plans to attend the University of Edinburgh, a place I had never been before. I would study 17th-century English literature. She was quite interested and wished me well. Then she handed me the letter of recommendation that read: "Mary Ellen Thiele has been in my domestic employ for three months. She is sober, reliable, and a good worker. Signed Mme. Consuelo Vanderbilt Marlborough Balsan."

I thanked her, shook hands, and as I was leaving she said, "You know my dear, over there people do a lot more for a lot less!"

I guess she had been on to my little end-of-shift rests with a newspaper in the chauffeur's quarters all along. I doubt that anyone had ever worked for her wearing Bermuda shorts before. I wish I had kept that letter. Today it would probably be a collector's item. Instead, I will settle for telling the story.

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Mary Ellen Rooney's work has appeared in *Newsday*, the *United Nations Journal*, and women's anthologies, among other places. She has worked as an English teaching fellow for the Soros Foundation in the Czech Republic, in Kyrgyzstan for the United Nations, been a licensed falconer, and traveled with Jean-Michel Cousteau. She is working on a multimedia memoir called "Flyway Stories" that will be released soon.