An excerpt from “Mrs. Somebody Somebody”

By Tracy Winn

Hub Hosiery Mill, 1947

Lucy Mattsen was nobody—like all the women I worked with—until the day the baby fell out the window. It was break time at the mill. Us girls from Knitting leaned on the railing over the North Canal, airing out our armpits and sharing smokes. The baby was bare except for diapers. It fell like a bomb in the newsreels.

Where we were, the mill wall ran straight down to the water like a brick cliff, with the baby’s apartment building doing the same on the other side. Lowell is like that with canals, one for every mill, dirty water running alongside the dirty streets, or under them. Nothing like those romantic canals in the posters for Holland, where flowers reflect in the water and there’s a blue-eyed man behind every boat wheel.

Ever since lunch, a spring rain had fallen. Then a wind came up and the sun came out and glittered off the slate roofs on the neighboring blocks of company housing. That day Lowell looked good the way used-up brick towns can when the light’s right. In the sparkle, the cockeyed look of the old buildings—how the shutters had peeled and loosened and fallen away—wasn’t so noticeable. With everything shining, who cared if things didn’t line up quite right anymore. The wet bricks and slate gleamed so hard under the blue sky, you could ignore the sad look of fences missing pickets—how nothing had been fixed up for years. Weather had polished the WPA walkway. Beyond our cigarette smoke, the air looked as clean as if the smokestacks along the Merrimack River had held their breath.

We’d been talking about men. I was as man-crazy as a girl could be. I elbowed Katie O’Neill, the strapping redhead, and pointed at the maintenance man stacking wood pallets down in the side lot. “You like those knotty arms?”

She wrinkled her nose and said, “He’s too short for my taste.”

“You’ll like him better when he bends over.”

She said, “Naw, I don’t care about his ass. I like men big. I got no use for the pretty little ones.” She jutted her pale elbow onto the railing and sank her chin into her hand—a dreamy boozer leaning on a bar. “I like to have to reach to get my arms around a man’s neck.”

“They call that ‘dancing cheek to tie-clip.’” Lucy Mattsen, the new girl with the Southern accent, chimed in.

I said, “Am I the only one who likes the shape of that fellow?” He tossed the pallets into a pile as if they weighed nothing more than playing cards.

Lucy scrunched up her face. She didn't have much going for her except her teeth, which were all hers and very white. She was a sad sack, but with a little makeup, I thought, she could have passed for pretty. She said, "He isn't my type at all."

Katie O'Neill said to Lucy, "I'd say you like your men in wheelchairs."

Lucy's face went red as meat. Mr. O'Connor, the floor boss, had her pushing him in his wheelchair between the bays of us knitters as if he couldn't manage. Lucy was floor girl in Knitting, which is where you started if you were like me and didn't have family at the mill to bring you in. She moved the trucks of bobbins along, hauled empty trucks to pick up the done jobs, and swept up the lint and clippings, which were everywhere, like the fur off some dark beast.

Katie said, "O'Connor can roll his own self around. He's got you thinking he's a vet or something and needs help, but blood sugar took his legs."

I was a knitter in O'Connor's room. He tried that stunt on every new girl, and Lucy was the very first to go for it without wanting special treatment in return. Wearing some cast-off brown sweater and lace-up shoes, she wheeled him and his ripe nose around the bays of that big room as if it was the least he could expect. She'd rest under the one working fan to cool herself. Her hair hung lopsided, bent up on one side, flat on the other—she slept on it wet, anyone could see. Someone said she was a nun who ran away.

Lucy said, "I don't like him, but I don't mind giving him a hand." Her words came out slow and round. She let a cigarette hang off her lower lip, trying to make her soft face look tough. She said, "Seems like if someone has no legs, no matter how he lost them, he could use a little help." Then she asked, "Who's got a light?"

I couldn't say as I knew any nuns who smoked. I pulled a pack of matches out of my apron pocket.

That's when we saw the baby. At first, it was like someone had thrown a whole chicken out the window on the other side of the canal. The body dropping there just couldn't be a baby. The splash it made was strangely satisfying. Something had been finished, sewn up, and you could say, There, well, that's done with. The window screen, which had twirled and twisted in the air, landed with a splash a little farther along. Next to me, Sophie Robicheau flung her hands up over her eyes. The baby bobbed up in the brown water, flailing, face down.

That open window just sat there in the sparkling wet brick wall, gaping like a dumb mouth, while we waited for someone to come.

Maria Sarzana—she was a mother—elbowed her way to the front of the platform and started to take off her apron. Maria's got a bum foot. I looked in the water. Rubber pants floating, the pale baby in them, bottom up. It had an air bubble in its dydees.

Until I saw Maria getting ready to go after him, it didn't cross my mind that we could do anything. I couldn't swim, but I said, "Maybe I should go."

Pulling at her shoe, Maria said, "Who are you fooling, Stella? You might break a nail."

Lucy'd already gotten over the railing by then. She hung on to it with one hand and ripped her shoes off with the other. She'd shed the sweater, and her arms—too thin and white—poked out of her work apron. Her big eyes found mine and didn't let go as she handed me her shoes and stepped out into the air, all business. She held her nose. Her hair, which had been hanging like spaniel ears, flew up. Two stories she fell, feet first—her apron flapping up in her face. Who knew if it was deep enough. I held tight to her shoes.

Katie O'Neill said, "Gaah," and leaned over, looking.

Lucy came out of the splash swimming as if she'd had lessons. My skin crawled with the idea of being in that water. She crossed the canal in six or seven strokes. We didn't cheer when she got to the baby, because we couldn't see if it was all right. She flipped it over and swam on her side, dragging it with the current, kicking like mad to keep it up.

All of Packing & Shipping rushed out and crowded farther along the edge of the canal, so when she climbed out, we couldn't see anything but the backs of a bunch of bent-over folks in aprons. No one made a sound—you could have heard a mouse piss on cotton. Lucy was doing something in the midst of them, on the ground. Since she'd jumped, each breath I'd breathed was one that the baby hadn't taken. My arms got to feeling icy; goose bumps came up over them and went away again. I hung on to Lucy's shoes. Sophie Robicheau began to sniffle and pray in French.

The man who'd had my attention straightening pallets sauntered out from the side lot to see what was going on. In the end, we'd all know his name and wish we didn't, but right then, standing by the others, he was just surprisingly short, not anything like what I'd thought.

A murmur started out there by Packing & Shipping. Lucy Mattsen had saved that baby. She and his air-trapping rubber pants. Noe Hathaway, the head fixer, a little walnut of a man, came out of the crowd carrying the baby under his arm like a sports trophy. The mill owner, Mr. William Burroughs, Jr., son of Hub Mills' founder, put his jacket around Lucy and led her inside by the arm.

In the doorway behind us, Mr. O'Connor clapped his hands, "That will be all, ladies." He let his voice slide on "lay-dees," so you'd do anything to shut him up.

Knitting is no work for anyone who needs variety. I watched the mouth of my machine—with its needles going up and down, around and around, casting the tube of one more black sock—and thanked that baby for giving us something different to think about.