

THE SEVEN CHAIRS

By Lois Lowry

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IT OCCURRED for the first time in 1928, in a hospital in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. No one noticed except a sleepy maintenance man shoving a push broom down the hall, past the nursery, at three a.m. He was startled by it and drew a quick breath. But since he had fallen slightly behind in his work and still had the whole OB/GYN floor to do before he could take a cigarette break, he looked away. He nudged a gum wrapper loose from the leg of a chair by the hall window with his broom bristles, and continued methodically on without saying a word. Within the hour he had forgotten it entirely.

Two days later, a nurse named Jean Vargas in Tampa noticed it.

“Did you see that?” Her hands were full—she was preparing bottles for the newborns—and she gestured toward a bassinet with her head.

“What? You mean Gonzales? I just changed her. She’s asleep?” Victoria Patterson, RN, glanced down at dark-haired Baby Girl Gonzales, who lay on her back with one chubby hand nestled beneath her chin. Her eyes were closed.

“Is she okay? You sure?”

Victoria nodded and picked up a newborn labeled Baby Boy O’Brien. She headed for the changing area. “She’s fine. Why?”

“I thought she...” Nurse Vargas hesitated. She didn’t know how to describe what she had thought. Maybe she had imagined it. *Surely* she had imagined it. Maybe she had a migraine coming on; sometimes those caused visual distortions—a shimmering in her peripheral vision. She would take an aspirin, she decided, first chance she had.

“No. Never mind. It was nothing.” She turned back to what she was doing and chuckled slightly at her own imagination. For a moment she had thought she had seen, out of the corner of her eye, Baby Girl Gonzales float upward and hover in the air briefly before descending again into the bassinet.

Actually, she had seen exactly that. It happened everywhere, that year, but was so fleeting, so momentary, that it went unnoticed by sleep-deprived parents. It was baby girls, always. Little Betsy or Caroline would, without warning, ascend briefly from the padded floor of a playpen, then blink in surprise, giggling, as she plopped back down beside her stuffed bunny. High chairs presented a problem, and sometimes Judy or Peggy, chin smeared with oatmeal, would whimper as she attempted liftoff but was thwarted by her own dimpled knees against the underside of the tray.

Gradually, though, as toddlers, they forgot. Their attention turned to walking, talking, allergies, tantrums, and potty training. Perhaps in their dreams they remembered and re-experienced the wonder and exhilaration of hovering above their own sedentary, diapered lives. But they were earthbound now. There was so much else to do, to learn. The astonishing moments of brief soaring became fragile memories buried deeper and deeper until, like recollections of birth itself, they were too deeply hidden to call back.



Except for Mary Katherine Maguire.

Mary Katherine was a piece of work. That's what her exasperated mother, a housewife in Lowell, Massachusetts, always said about her third child. The first two Maguire children were fun-loving, freckled-faced sons named Michael and James. They were baseball card collectors, altar boys, and Cub Scouts. They had dirty fingernails and skinned knees most of the time. Their mother loved the boys but she had yearned for—had *prayed* for—a little girl with curls and a sweet disposition. What she got, instead, was Mary Katherine.

MK, as she came to be known, did not take no for an answer. Before she could talk, she pouted and stamped her feet if things didn't go her way. Later, with an increasing vocabulary, she argued. Incessantly. She argued with her brothers, who ignored her; with her mother, who tried to reason with her; with her father, who punished her; and with her teachers, the Sisters of Notre Dame. The sisters hid their feelings (they actually admired Mary Katherine greatly—"She has a spirit to her, doesn't she?" one said at dinner one evening) behind stern faces and tried to direct the child's fervor and passion toward good works.

None of them noticed that MK had an astounding talent. It was the same one that all infant girls had once had and had forgotten. Only MK remembered. She practiced.

Alone in her bedroom, supposedly doing her homework (she complained that her brothers were a distraction; she needed to be by herself), she would will herself airborne. It was easy for her now, after so much rehearsal. She could lift off and within seconds be gazing down at her spelling book.

Always adventurous, she tried variations. She tried closing her eyes and hovering blind. (It took a moment to get her balance, but she could do it, though she decided it was dull. The fun was in looking down.) She tried circling but found that returning to her chair was difficult if she ended up facing the wrong direction. She needed, MK decided, to work on her form. She had a distinct feeling—a sureness—that she could propel herself to greater altitudes and greater distances. To the ceiling, watching out for a head bump, of course. Over to the corner of the room, above her bed. To the window. Through the window! All of that was possible, MK felt. But for now she would concentrate on perfecting her liftoff, making it smooth and silent, keeping a level altitude (tilting was awkward, and made her a little dizzy), and landing back in the chair neatly and without mussing her clothes.

Mary Katherine did not feel guilty or secretive about her peculiar skill. It was not like her brother Michael's nose-picking habit, which he had taken to doing furtively to avoid his mother's outraged slap. It was not like her father, who now and then announced that he needed to check the mileage (or tires, or battery) on the car and disappeared into the garage, where they all knew he was smoking a forbidden cigarette.

It was, for MK, more like a pleasurable, solitary hobby. Like elderly Mrs. Kuzminski next door, who played the piano in the afternoons. Everyone could hear her, especially in summer when the windows were open, and she played pretty well. But if you happened to be there, maybe visiting in her kitchen, and asked her to play something, she said no. It was something she preferred to do alone.

Or the way MK's Aunt Eunice played solitaire. She never played when anyone else was there, though she left the cards on the table if you visited, and you knew that the instant you left she would move the red jack onto the black queen.

Sometimes, though, at her desk, at school, it amused MK to ascend slightly. Not far enough for anyone to notice. Maybe an inch or two. Once, on a hot spring day, she had pulled the skirt of her St. Pius uniform loose and fanned herself with it when Sister was looking the other way. Then she lifted off just a tiny bit, during arithmetic.

And once, just for a private laugh, she had done it during confession. There, in the tiny closed space, murmuring to Father O'Connor about how she had sassed her mother on Thursday, stolen a quarter from her brother James on Friday, and argued with Sister Annunciata on Monday and Tuesday—well, actually every day, Father—MK had willed herself upward. First an inch, then another and another, until she was quite high, and if he had peered through the grill (she peered, herself, and could see that he wasn't even looking in her direction) Father O'Connor would have been surprised to see that his eyes were suddenly level with MK's hips instead of the top of her unruly brown hair! She let herself down in time to hear her penance and his suggestion that she be kinder to Sister Annunciata, who was getting old and nervous and needed special consideration.

She had always thought of it, this special skill she had, as *rising*. At age two, in her crib, barely verbal, she had said to herself, "Rise!" as she lifted her pajamaed self into the air for a gleeful moment. Now, in fifth grade, she knew that she didn't need to say the command, but it helped, somehow, to describe it to herself. "Rising now," she would whisper toward her desk, as if apologizing to her spelling book that she would be briefly unavailable.

When MK was twelve, in seventh grade, she discovered that in some cases she did not need, actually, to separate herself from the chair. She could, astonishingly, will the chair itself to rise *with* her. This was more comfortable than a chairless rise, and less frightening. Sometimes, chairless, she felt slightly dizzy and faint, looking down; but with a firm chair seat beneath her, she was more secure at great heights. This was important because by now she was occasionally, at night when no one could see, leaving her bedroom through the open window, and sometimes found herself rising to startling altitudes from which she could look down at rooftops.

This was not true, however, of every chair. Most were firmly rooted and stayed so while MK hovered over them. The blue upholstered chair in the Maguire living room never budged, though often, when she was alone at home, MK rose from it and examined the ceiling light fixture from above (there was a dead moth inside the square frosted glass below the bulb). The blue chair simply didn't move.

She tested chairs everywhere for years and determined, eventually, that there were only seven chairs—no more—that could rise.

One was the wooden desk chair in her bedroom; she could ride it up, through the window (she and the chair had to turn and go horizontally, leaving the house) and into the night. It became her most-used rising chair.

A metal folding chair in the church basement had the power, but she disliked it. It looked exactly like ninety-nine other folding chairs and was hard to find, especially when they were stored.

The third was in the basement of the Maguire house. It was a dusty dining room chair with a broken leg that her father had always intended to fix. MK could rise easily with it despite the broken leg, but the basement was boring and smelled moldy, and she was nervous about spiders.

The fourth chair was at her school, in the music room. She tested it secretly once when she was early for band practice and the room was empty. The chair rose without hesitation. But the school was a dangerous location: too many people everywhere, and Sister Charlotte, the principal, was ill tempered. MK had had several encounters with Sister Charlotte and didn't want to press her luck, so she put the music room chair out of her mind.

Chair five she happened on by pure chance. (Or was it? She would wonder for years.) MK's Great-Aunt Helen was visiting from Cleveland, and her parents were desperate to entertain the elderly woman during her three days with them. They took her all the way to Boston one evening to the symphony, which she enjoyed, and one afternoon the whole family watched Michael and James play soccer, but it was clear that Aunt Helen was bored by that. Finally, on the last day of her visit, a Saturday, Mrs. Maguire suggested a trip to the antique store on Pawtucket Street. MK went along.

Great-Aunt Helen was a lover of antiques. She examined every china teacup, each picture frame, soap dish, lace tablecloth, and old photograph in the shop. MK became bored. She wandered off through a curtained doorway into a larger room in back. This was actually an old attached barn, where horsehair settees and pine armoires stood side by side with desks and chests in the dim light. In a cobwebbed corner she found a small mahogany chair with carved legs and a frayed maroon velvet seat.

MK was looking only for a place to rest and wait. She didn't even think about rising. But the instant she sat down on the somewhat lumpy seat of the chair, she knew she had happened on something special.

Always before, she had initiated the rising—had commanded her little desk chair to leave the ground, had sometimes argued it into the air. But this small chair had its own strong will. It *wanted* to rise. It was as if it had waited for years for Mary Katherine Maguire. She was barely settled when it took off, almost toppling her in its eagerness. Perched on the chair, she explored the rafters of the barn (hornets' nest; squirrel droppings) and skimmed the tops of the tall chests. She stubbed her toe on the brass finial of an eighteenth-century clock as she glided past. Suddenly, hearing voices approaching from the front room of the shop, MK ordered the chair to the floor and it obeyed, returning her to the corner where they had found each other.

Driving back home with her mother and great-aunt, MK counted the blocks to Pawtucket Street, decided that it was a walkable distance, and vowed to visit the fifth chair again as soon as she could.

Chairs six and seven, which she identified a few days later, were unremarkable. They were in the waiting room of the orthodontist's office, fake leather, side by side. Testing them while she waited to have her braces tightened, MK felt their possibilities. They could rise. But there was no place to go—just an acoustic tile ceiling—and nothing to look down on except a stack of *Highlights for Children*.

And that was it. Seven chairs.

Two weeks after her Aunt Helen's visit, at her first opportunity, MK walked the fourteen blocks to Pawtucket Street, only to find that the fifth chair was gone.

The proprietor of the antique store, when she asked him, wrinkled his forehead. "Which one?" he asked. MK pointed to the corner of the barn.

"Oh. Yeah. That one. Guy came in, wanted it shipped. Lemme look:" He went to a stack of papers on his desk, rifled through them, and then showed her the invoice.

Paris. The fifth one ended up in France.



Time passed. MK thought less often about rising. There were so many other things to think about during her adolescent years. At fifteen she shrieked and squealed at the sound of Frank Sinatra's voice, along with all of her friends. At sixteen she briefly considered the possibility of running off to marry Anthony LaPaglia, who had graduated from St. Benedict's, joined the U.S. Navy, and was going to the war in the Pacific so she might never see him again and her heart would break. But Anthony didn't

answer her letters. Neither did Frank Sinatra. Eventually she put them both out of her mind and reconsidered her future.

The sisters at St. Pius were delighted when MK, at seventeen, confided in them that she felt a calling. A vocation. Ancient Sister Annunciata, with whom she had argued so often, enveloped her in a hug so enthusiastic and prolonged that MK almost suffocated in the thick black cloth of the billowy habit. But she came up for air, entered her postulancy, tried to stop arguing and learn obedience, and eventually took her final vows. She became a teaching sister. Her specialty was French.

By 1962 Sister Mary Katherine (for she had been permitted to keep her baptismal name) was middle-aged. She wore bifocals, and had minor stomach problems from time to time. She avoided rich desserts. Most evenings she busied herself with reading, or correcting papers. Her life was orderly and ordinary, except for one thing.

Occasionally now, alone in her room, she willed herself upward into the air, simply hovering slightly above her bed in her nightgown in order to enjoy the buoyant air beneath her instead of the scratchy, overstarved bed linens.

She knew by now, having read of past saints and sisters such as Teresa of Avila, and seventeenth-century Maria Villani, that what she practiced was called levitation. Sister Mary Katherine didn't much care. *A word is a word is a word*, she told herself with a shrug. In her mind, she still thought of it as "rising."

But now when she rose, she began to feel part of a larger community. Not the Carmelites of Saint Teresa, or Sister Maria Villani's Dominicans. Not her own order, either, or the great body of Christians across the earth. Not the unbaptized of Africa, those poor heathens she was supposed to pray for (and did): Not Democrats or Girl Scouts or the League of Women Voters. Those were all perfectly good groups, of course, she said to herself primly. But this—what she felt part of—was a collection of people yearning for something, something they had once had, something they had forgotten. It puzzled her.

Then, one morning, quite to her surprise, she was called in by Mother Superior and told that she was to go to France the following week. She was handed a plane ticket with her name on it, and given a passport and instructions. It was not newsworthy, just a brief trip—she would be gone only five days—to attend a meeting of French scholars. Sister Mary Katherine had written, after all, a definitive paper on Francois de Salignac

de la Mothe Fenelon. It had attracted a bit of attention and brought some prestige to her teaching order. And so, dutifully, she packed her bag and went.

On her first day in Paris, still slightly jet-lagged and preparing her thoughts for the next day's conference, Sister Mary Katherine took a walk. She walked with her head lowered slightly, practicing humility; Mother Superior had suggested that she do this, along with biting her tongue if she felt inclined to argue.

Quite unexpectedly, for she was not following a map or a guide, she found herself in front of a Gothic cathedral. The massive wooden doors were open, and she noticed a group of tourists wearing sturdy shoes, with a guide speaking German to them, just leaving. Quietly, she entered the vast, silent space, with its vaulted ceiling. The stone floor was dappled by colored light from stained-glass windows. Surprisingly, there was no one inside. Perhaps, she thought, it was the time when tourists stopped for lunch, or to rest. As for clergy—well, most of the religious leaders in the world seemed to be in Rome at the moment, for an important meeting convened by Pope John XXIII.

(With permission of her Mother Superior, Sister Mary Katherine had submitted a formal request, actually, asking if she might attend the Second Vatican Council. Such an important meeting would surely affect her and her fellow sisters, and their futures. But her letter hadn't even gotten a polite reply. It was met with silence.)

She dipped her fingers in the basin of holy water and made the familiar sign of the cross on her habit, then ventured farther down the center aisle.

At the same time, from an undistinguished door on the other side of the great cathedral, two priests entered. It was their job to close the front doors and adjust the small sign that told tourists to return after two p.m. They started down the lengthy expanse, grumbling to each other about the task: it was a nuisance; there should be a cleaning person available to handle it; we have better things to do than housekeeping chores like this. They were disgruntled because they had not been sent to Rome. It looked as if stupid Brazil was going to win the World Cup. And they had both had a great deal of wine with lunch.

They frowned when they saw Sister Mary Katherine. One priest rolled his eyes, recognizing her habit as that from an American order. *Mon dieu. Ces Americains!* They hurried forward to tell her she must leave.

She didn't argue. She simply ignored them. Her attention had been drawn, quite suddenly, to something in a shadowy corner of a small chapel on her left. The light was very dim in the windowless recess. Brushing past the pair of priests, she moved toward the chapel, waited until her eyes adjusted, and then gave a gasp of recognition.

It was the fifth chair.

Sister Mary Katherine sat down.

"Madame! It is not permitted!" one priest called in an indignant voice.

She rose.

"Stop at once!" shouted the other, furiously. "*Vous arrêtez-vous! Immédiatement!*"

She rose higher. Slowly, silently, she drifted with dignity from the chapel, then swooped into the nave and past the priests, who stood rigid with outrage. She could have tapped their silly little hats off with her foot if it had occurred to her. But her mind, and her spirit, were elsewhere. She continued to ascend. Finally, at a great height, hovering peacefully aloft in the light from the arched windows, she could feel, again, the familiar sense of being part of a great body of humans in all parts of the world.

They were all female. They were remembering. They were beginning to rise and to soar.