

Donny Beagle

...in memory of my Great Aunt Mary...

She never betrayed her secret

1908 to 1989

THE BOOTH

A voice was speaking; a sleepy man's voice. It was a lovely, warm, quiet voice.

The woman pressed the receiver against her ear, tossed the tattered cord over her shoulder, out of the way - almost right out of the booth - and let out a long sigh.

"It's me," she said into the mouthpiece.

"Hi, it's me too."

"Why do you sound so odd? Are you speaking in italics again?" the woman asked.

"You told me, years ago, that I was the only person you'd ever met that could speak in italics. I was kind of proud of that. Kind of Disney-like. Maybe that's what you're hearing."

"Yes, I remember. Those were the times when I found you especially difficult to read - drove me batty trying to figure you out."

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now i can only dream about you

there you go with your italics it makes you sound like you're feeling
sorry for yourself you dream a lot do you

*so far only when im asleep it's odd youd think I would give it up
stop the nonsense all about a fling*

a love affair a proper affair is multiple simple flings strung together

a love affair yes of course

lovers in love

yes that would also follow

they found me in here in the telephone booth again yesterday

*i remember that tiny cubicle so clearly a beautiful hideyhole for two
lovebirds two very young and slim lovebirds remember those days
coo cooing together in our little nest complete with dicey telephone
service you were literally my first squeeze*

your out of service sign was a wonderful touch

except for that one nosey jerk he got an earful

he got an eyeful poor kid

*love making in a callbox with a phone promises made on the edge of
the high bluffs the air the hot summer sea air running and
panting on the beach sand and back to the booth boats milling about
in the harbour in and out past the lighthouse gulls crying the eagle
soaring in the sky overhead its shadow chasing us as we ran hand in
hand through the tall grass those polite ducks bobbing in the surf
never bumping or swearing at each others tiny chest waves all of it so
lovely but none of it so lovely as you close but not quite*

it's now deserted falling apart unused forlorn

sad are we talking about the telephone booth or you

both i suppose are you still in that old house still in england jolly
and old

bonnie died six years ago i stayed here where would i go

i don't know

*i always meant to get back to you somehow in touch i wanted to
find you to come see you rekindle an old flame maybe or at least drink
some wine and relive the old times together but then time just flew
away with me and i started to wither inside and out but never stopped
trying to forget us failing of course couldn't bury us i tried*

what's that im hearing something from your side what am i hearing

*could be the mourning dove or the two of them having a lovers spat
could be the draft dusting the curtains could be the early work bus
could be a thousand million things anything you name the universe is
endless i suppose you may be hearing the daft insomniacs at the
corner screaming at the kid on his bike ringing the bell like a crazy fool
below their bedroom window or the sound in your head might be the
dew forming in the stein of ale i left outside last night or the fog seeping
in through the cracks in this place i need to repair the tide changing
maybe my heart beating a few more times one can only hope*

or the earth spinning or time passing away or me talking to myself
will i ever see you again

something tells me not

how can you say that

i am older and tired maybe than you

have a coffee

*maybe a gallon of tea did we really sail on the santa rosa through the
panama canal*

yes we danced together in the plaza under the brilliant tropical stars
remember the family that took us home for dinner like we were strays

*mister and missus sanchez with the kids i almost got to play one of
their guitars they filled us up with their own food and drink and song
and then drove us back to our waiting ship topped us up with romance
and rhythm and ready for more*

the most beautiful people i have ever seen in my entire life do you
remember the kids sang goodbye to us and blew kisses

*yes i do all five the little guy with the flute was a killer he threw a
clay cup*

and his older sister the quiet one with the eyes and the boyfriend do
you think the children stayed happy

i hope they got rich and took their parents around the world

Sometimes i wish we had missed the boat and stayed there forever
they would have got very tired of us but no one would ever have
found us

*do you remember the knife we used when we made all those crazy
promises i still have it right here*

she looked down at her right elbow resting on the worn shelf just under
the coin return tray her fingers traced the carved lines i held the
candle

i thought it was a flashlight

it was so tight in here

we were warm we were a perfect fit

we were very very warm indeed you held me while the sun went down

*the best sunset of my life i was still holding you when the sun came
back up it brought a brand spanking sparkling new world to my eyes
i wanted to sing*

you did remember the eagle almost fell from the sky im getting
stiff she squirmed all that did was shift the stiff parts around until
she hurt in new places do you remember your dreams

only the pleasant ones they are my reality hows your sister doing

you mean the other one the cute one

yes that one florence

flo died ten years after you left

*you were a perfect martyr you gave your sister everything she needed
and everything you had you gave up for her like me you let me go*

i am so sorry she peeled the receiver from her hand good night then
and put it back in its cradle just as she heard

here's an idea...

but she cut in i forgot to tell you I'm getting a puppy dog I'm
naming it after you

*poor creature are you making all this up me and everything
hallucinating tripping intoxicated*

she started to answer but the connection was dead

the severed cord dangled from her shoulder

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Mary lifted her head and looked down to the choppy water through a
gap in the Salal and Scrub Oak. A troller was rounding the point, hitting
the open sea and attacking the wave caps with the gusto and zeal built
into these little vessels. Mary knew the boat, the skipper and the
deckhand, and knew they would be out past the fifty-fathom line, off
Cape Scott, for the next three weeks; day and night hunting for the

Salmon and hauling them in when they found the sweet spot. “Be safe, little boat,” She muttered, and rested her head on her hands on the shelf under the telephone. “Be safe and catch a lot of big juicy Salmons. Then bring them straight home.”

Getting out of the booth was easier said than done. She felt like a clam being pried from its shell as she struggled to free herself...or that plumber that came by to fix a leak, got stuck instead in the vanity, tried to squirm out and yelled at her as his pants fell off. The last time she looked, the tap was still leaking, and the bathroom floor was still wet.

Mary finally popped out of the old shell of peeling paint and shattered, foggy glass and waved at Margrete Finch, the community jogger - always on a run of some kind. Margrete slowed and waved back tactfully, trying her best not to stare at the neighbour who spent more time than what seemed natural chatting away on a dead phone in a derelict telephone booth. “What’s the harm?” she mused, as she disappeared around the bend and out of view. “It’s a gorgeous day in May. Leave the old girl with her memories.”

CRACK OF DAWN

Mary clawed at the handrail, pulled it straight off the post, and went down with a loud crack. She barely had time to cry “look out!” before hitting the sidewalk, the crumbled hunk of rotten wood still gripped in her hand.

One moment she was falling; the next she was at the Parksville circus with her mother. “Help us! Please!” someone was screaming. A crowd had gathered. She was the child lying on her back, covered in a tipped wagon load of screaming and hooting monkeys. She was being poked and pulled at by the panicking animals. She fought to get up. The crowd of show-goers filled the scene. There were stuffed animals and discarded candy floss sticks everywhere - the dark space under the gallery stands

was littered with the debris. “Whoever was driving that wagon should be locked up!” she heard her mother yell beside her.

When she opened her eyes, Mary’s vision had cleared and Ranier Tohms was focusing his worried eyes on her.

“You look more like an anteater than a monkey...actually,” she said.

“Thank you for noticing,” he said. “I shaved this morning.”

Ranier was her neighbour. They shared the back yard fence, and he spent a lot of time peeking through the gaps in the planks. It was weird, and he was odd, without a doubt. But the neighbour was harmless, if a little too observant, and he had a good strong smile and a great big laugh that echoed around the neighbourhood. She loved that laugh; it was a wide-open greeting to the world around him. It was like when the ice cream truck turned onto her block and she heard the bell. All are welcome, it said to anyone who heard it. Step right up and get a treat. Ranier was a real treat.

Mary always guessed that her borderline nutty neighbour would help her if she needed - she somehow knew he would be there - she practically counted on it. “And here you are,” Mary said to him. “And that’s what your entire face looks like without the gaps.”

Ranier Tohms laughed. “You make me smile,” he said.

Her voice was coming back. “Anyone *not* here?” she called out. “Speak up!”

“Stella Crane and Mister Toledo took their affair to Spain for awhile,” came from the back of the growing pack.

“Perhaps for the best,” Mary said to Rainer. “We can all use a break from that.”

“You gave us a scare. You fell hard,” said another neighbour from farther up the block, the self-proclaimed award-winning gardener Mr. Slade. She called him ‘Blossom; he liked that. Slade smelled like peat moss, but he’d grown on her and he was nice.

She noticed the kids standing back a little, already bored with the event, clutching their skateboards. The young girl was rolling the wheels casually along her fingers. “Yeah, we were worried for you,” she chimed in.

“You’re far too young to worry about anything, Ginny.” (God, her head really hurt. Was her skull cracked wide open? She was afraid to touch back there; it might be wet.) “Worrying is your parents’ job right now – you’ll get your turn soon enough when you grow up. Don’t rush it; it just makes you look worried all the time, and then you worry about that, looking so worried all the time. If you start, it goes on for ever and ever.”

Ranier bunched up the towel he was handed and lowered Mary’s head back on to it. “Be calm, Mary,” he said. “You’ve hurt yourself.”

Mary caught the hovering eye of another neighbour. “Hi there, Stanley.” Stan was in a class all his own. He was the street’s reigning intellectual. She called him ‘Smarty Pants’, and he also liked his given name.” She tried to wave, but her hand reached only as far as her face instead, where a good-sized bump pulsed hot against her palm. It felt purple. Stan would know why bruises were hot and purple.

“Little David,” she called out.

“Right here, Aunt Mary!” one of the bobbleheads called back.

“Where are you two going?”

“Down to the bluff. Boarding.”

“Sounds like good fun. Can you guys give the booth a once over if you don’t mind, since you’re there?...and watch out for broken glass and those blueish lizards.”

David grinned widely. “Sure will!”

“And look after your little sissy.”

David’s grin dimmed. “Really?”

“For me. Okay?”

David shuffled.

“Does it hurt, Aunt Mary?” The little sister, Ginny, dropped her board on the sidewalk, got a foot on it, ready to go.

“Some, but it hardly hurts at all when I’m talking to the prettiest, smartest young lady in the whole wide world.” Ginny beamed back at the older woman. Mary loved the young girl’s smile, it was radiant, she basked in the glow; it made her feel young again just being near it.

A man appeared at the top of the steps.

“Aunt Mary!”

“Down here, Gordon.”

“Come on, let’s get you inside,” Gordon said as he joined the group at the base of the steps. He dropped his arm. “Take this.” And he hoisted Mary up from the ground. “You feel like a sack of potatoes.”

“French fries? Yum.”

“More like mashed.” Gordon lifted her back into the house and slid her off his shoulder onto the couch. “Stay put. I’m calling the ambulance.”

“I was with my mother,” she said.

“Lucky you.” He waved his free hand at her. “I’m on the phone.”

HOSPITALITY

“We need to wrap up that head like a gypsy,” the doctor said, lowering a clipboard and looking down over her eyeglasses. “She also needs a couple of pins put in that shattered arm, but that will have to wait.” The doctor turned away. “Go home, give us three hours to check her out, observe her, take her apart, put her back together, and put a bow on her for you.”

Gordon returned at twenty-to-seven and was told to wait on the bench in the waiting area. The bench was stainless steel - no cushions or padding of any kind - that wouldn’t be sanitary. There were complications, he was told; not life-threatening but serious enough to keep the medical staff gainfully employed for a few more hours, tidying her up.

After one and a half hours and an almost lukewarm spaghetti dinner from the vending machine, Gordon curled up in the crook of his elbow, dropped off to sleep and drifted back thirty years. When he got there, Gordon separated the old, tattered curtains that were always hanging before his dreaming self, waiting for him, concealing his most fragile memories - his most valuable possessions. He pushed through the curtains and smelled ocean.

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A woman walks up to a shady hole in the bushes, pushes aside some bramble branches with a cane tip and peers into the dark hollow beyond.

A boy freezes like a rabbit sensing the fox.

The woman stops, pulls off her head scarf, and draws in a deep breath. “Aw, the sweet sea air at a tide change, can’t get enough of it.” Her eyes adjust. She smiles.

He doesn’t move. He waits. At least, that’s how he remembers the meeting. A stranger tracking him down.

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“I’m letting my eyes adjust,” she said. “I can’t see you yet - you have time to run away if you want to.” She pushed farther in. “Are you doing drugs in there?”

The boy found his voice. “No, are you doing drinking out there?”

He watched the woman’s head swivel like the light beam on Forney’s Rock, seeking him out.

He tried to shrink.

“Where does your family live?” she asked.

“They don’t...anymore.”

“I am so sorry.” She looked right at him. “Ah, there you are.”

“It’s okay, they were ancient.”

“Like me?”

“You don’t sound old at all, and I don’t think ancient people paint flowers on their boots.”

“You might be surprised. What about my cane? What do you think of that?”

“It just makes you *look* old. I think maybe you’re pretending to be old.”

“What happened?”

“My parents? They died of old age, Dad three years after Mum.”

“When did your Mum die?”

“Three years before Dad.”

“Were your parents as difficult to talk to as you are?”

“Were you always this nosy?” He was trapped. “I don’t like talking about them now, that’s all.”

“I am truly sorry, once again,” she said. “But forgive me, please, I *am* being nosy, but it comes naturally. I like that quality; I think it’s one of my strongest features.”

The woman was now fully inside the hollow with him. “Why are you here, instead of your old home?” she asked.

“My uncle rented the house out. I could have had the basement if I wanted, but no thanks, Uncle Asshole.”

“Is Asshole *really* your uncle’s name.”

“Yes.”

The woman laughed.

“I was adopted,” he said. He didn’t get a response. “Are you done with me yet?”

“I hope not.” She picked something off her sweater and studied it for a moment, then brought it up to her face and took a long deep breath. “Coastal wild rose, you can taste the salty air coming off it.” She

caressed her cheek with the soft petals. “And my God - lucky you - you get to live here in this magnificent bush. So lush. So magical. So odoriferous.” She waved toward the daylight behind her. “Come on, I want to show you something.”

“I should tidy up here,” he said. “If I’m going out.”

“May I?” She saw him pause. “Help? I mean?”

They sorted out his stuff, put three empty juice bottles in a garbage bag and stuffed a blanket and a damp box of Cheerios into a backpack. There was also a tiny hand rake that she guessed passed for a household vacuum cleaner.

The boy arranged the pack on his back. “I have to take everything, every time. This place is full of jerks.”

The lady nodded seriously.

“What’s your name?” The boy asked.

“Everyone calls me Aunt Mary.”

“Why?”

“Beats me.” She poked and stirred the tip of her cane in a pile of leaves and roots by her feet. There was something blue there. “Don’t forget your toothbrush. Use the thing while you’ve still got something to rub it on.”

He stuck the brush in his mouth where it hung out the corner like a popsicle stick.

“Let’s go.” Aunt Mary pushed out of the hollow and waited.

After some shuffling in the brambles, he appeared in front of her. “Gordon,” he said. “Gordon is my name.”

She cocked her head. “You’re bigger and more grown up than I figured.”

“Maybe people who live in bushes seem older when they crawl out into the light,” he said around the toothbrush. “Larger than life.”

“Gordon,” she said slowly, as if deep in thought. “You know, Gordon, I can not imagine you with any other name. Gordon...” The woman reached out to touch his face, thought better of it, and pulled her hand back to her chest. “Gordon.” She repeated the name slowly. “Perfect.”

“It’s okay, I guess.”

Mary turned and started back through the long grass. “Better than Shorty Bushwacker,” she said over her shoulder.

Gordon followed the crazy lady.

It was so easy to follow Aunt Mary back to her house. Years later he would wonder why he went with her, so willingly, to the old two-story on the corner of Readyboat and Bluff Road, and although the mystery was never solved in his head, in time it became clear in his heart.

He might have even drifted off while he was there in that old house; but that was easy to blame on the crackle and glow of the small driftwood fire smoldering behind the iron grate in the corner, and the warmth of the sweet tea and butter biscuits settling and working their magic deep inside him.

The young man’s eyes opened. He must have been awfully tired; he shook his head and straightened up in the chair.

‘Aunt Mary’ was lifting the small brass tray from his lap. “Just crumbs left. Good,” she said.

“I’m not a street person.”

“I know that,” the woman said. “You are a respectable bramble-bush person.”

“You think it’s funny?”

“Yes.” She stood up. “Please...” she said and held out her hand. “I’ll show you and your toothbrush around the old place...watch your step.”

Gordon stood but declined the offered hand. “I’m okay, I don’t need help to stand on my own. But thank you anyway...Aunt Mary.”

“I’m not offering charity, God forbid such a thing,” she said. “I will over-charge you lots of rent and board if you like, but if you don’t have the money handy at any time you can help me with things around the place. This building and the property are far too big for me to keep up on my own. Without help I will lose it all.”

She offered her hand again and he held it for a moment this time. He took the hand, but not the room. “I’m sorry. I have my own place,” he said.

She spun him around. “There’s a lifetime of work here for someone.”

Gordon thanked Aunt Mary for the tea and biscuits, picked up his pack and bags and stepped out into the early evening.

“The air is like a tonic here, don’t you think?” she said.

“I do.”

Three months later, Gordon was back at her door. “Does the offer still stand?”

“What offer?”

“The handyman for board thing. And a place for my toothbrush – I got a new one.”

“Well, in that case, I suppose the offer could be revived?”

“I have a girlfriend.”

Mary’s jaw dropped. “A new toothbrush *and* a girlfriend?”

“I gave her a ring - I love her a lot, but you’ve seen my place, right?” he said, she nodded. “No matter how I arrange the furniture, there’s just not enough room for the two of us.”

“Is she nice?”

“My girl? You tell me.” He stepped away from the door opening and returned.

“Lisa, this is...”

“Oh my!” Mary broke in. “You are so pretty. So lovely.” The woman got a shy smile from the girl. “And so sweet on top of it all...I’m sorry, we’re not crazy about handshakes around here.” She caught Gordon’s eye. “So we will have to hug, instead.” Mary drew the young lady into her arms, lightly touched the deep red hair and studied the warm chocolate eyes. “Lovely Lisa, I think I have room for exactly two more people in my old heart, so come on in - you can bring him in with you, if you want.”

“Do your parents like him?” Mary asked the girl as they entered the house.

“I think so.”

“Don’t worry, we can work on that.”

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Someone was shaking him.

Have some water,” a tired-looking nurse said. “It’s on the house.” She lowered a tiny paper cup to his face. “Your aunt is ready to go home.”

“What time is it?”

“Time to go.”

The nurse handed him a hunk of towel and pointed to the corner of her mouth. “Spaghetti sauce?”

“I’m not sure, it was stuck to the noodles in the bag.” he said. “Wasn’t I supposed to eat it?” He took the towel and pushed it around on his chin and the one sticky cheek she was now pointing at.

Fifteen minutes later, Gordon wrestled his broken-up aunt into a broken-down wheelchair and the hospital doors slid open. “Just bring it back when you have a chance,” the nurse said as she tossed him a blanket, closed the doors on the couple, and forced an exhausted smile through the glass.

“She was talking about the wheelchair. Right?” Mary said, as they started out.

Gordon pushed, Aunt Mary held on, and they started down Billy Goat Lane in the dead, dark quiet; the only sound the chair wheels crunching on old pavement and the wash and hiss of the sea scrubbing the base of the bluff.

“Do you remember when we first met?” He bent over and smiled in the dark. “I said you were pretending to be old?”

“Careful now.”

“Well, you’re not pretending anymore.”

“Just push.”

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WAKE UP CALL

Four thousand, six hundred and sixteen miles away from the rickety wheelchair, give or take two or three small English-town blocks, the sun has already found a spot to start its new day. This place is Marple, or as the locals like to tell themselves and anyone else who will listen - this is *The Marple*...the quaintest, most perfect English hamlet in the British Isles, and the birthplace of the smartest of Agatha Christie’s famous sleuths.

Marples are a proud lot.

As dawn breaks, the new morning sun flows in over a heavily lacquered Oak windowsill and finds a body, snoring, under layers of quilts and blankets in a loft, in a grand house, on the East block of Chimney Street; and as if inviting the new day in, the peach-white curtains are swaying softly to the gentle rhythm of a breathtaking morning.

There is peace in this room. This peace is not surprising; this is, after all... *The Marple*. But the tranquility is soon broken as the sleeper awakes, sheets are pulled back and duvets are cast aside. Pillows and cushions fly out from the mountain of bedding and tumble from the foothill lumps onto the hardwood floor. A befuddled man wrestles through the linen and duck feathers to the surface and sits straight up. He surveys the chaos around him - he shakes his semi-conscious head and forces his eyes open all the way. He can’t figure out why he is troubled; someone was just speaking to him.

The man finds the photograph in a bottom drawer under a pile of orphaned socks. It’s still there, in the same faded blue air-mail envelope it had come in, back when airmail was a big thing and the super thin,

lighter blue envelopes presumably kept the planes from falling out of the sky. The tattered border makes it easy to pull the contents free of the envelope. He caresses the backing - flat black, like old felt - and runs a finger around the curled edges where the years have aged it. He focuses on the faded image, studies the black and white, relives the time and the moment. He savours it all; a figure in a cocked fedora, right arm around a woman's waist, standing in the full white sun at the base of a ship's ramp. He can feel the scorching sun just by glancing at this ancient image. Tied to the gangway railing is a white board with four words painted on it. GUYS AND GALS HERE the sign proclaims with a big fat sloppy arrow pointing up the ramp.

The couple is laughing at something. The woman is looking up at her partner, one hand holding her floppy sun hat on her head; the other on its way to his face. Forty-five years later, the man can't remember what the joke was, but the deep grey come-hither eyes and saucy laugh are unforgettable. The memory is solid, and painful.

He blows dust off the photograph and puts his lips to the image. "Shall we dance?" he says, shuffling awkwardly across the worn floor to the framed mirror leaning against the wall next to the hanging closet. He studies the specimen looking back at him. "Hey, it's worth a shot." He puffs up his chest and turns to get a profile look - the new angle doesn't improve anything. "Wonder what you look like now?" he whispers, exhales and deflates. "She told you once you were dashing; now you're just haberdashing. But what's to lose, Donny Beagle. Even more hair?" He laughs. "Well, it won't kill me to find out."

AIR BEAGLE

"What's the purpose of your trip?" The customs officer said.

"I have to make a connection."

“I don’t see a connection here. – you’re direct to Vancouver, Canada.” The man behind the plexiglass looked up at the very tired looking man with the pleading eyes on the other side of the panel. He dropped the paperwork on the desk in front of him and stamped it. “...Okay, I’m not sure *why* I get it, but I get it,” he said, and pushed the ticket back to the waiting passenger.

“Don’t forget your hat.” The officer gave him a friendly smile. “Nice old thing you got there so hang on to it - apparently it’s going to be a rough crossing.” He waved the next passenger over but turned before taking the offered paperwork. He watched the man trotting down the ramp. “Hey!” he called, knocking on his plastic barrier at the same time.

The man stopped and looked back. His shoulders sagged and he made a step back.

“Mister Beagle,” the officer said, pointing to the end of his stainless-steel counter. “You forgot something.”

“Donny Beagle, please,” the older man said as he picked up his bag. “But sometimes Donny to my friends.”

“Good luck to you, Donny, and have a happy Thanksgiving over there in the colony.”

“Thanks, you are an extremely nice fellow, a rarity these days, but I believe I’ll need more than your kindness and good wishes to pull this off.”

The officer waved a victory sign through his shield. “Give your gal my best wishes, Donny. Now get on your flight.” The officer turned back to his next customer.

THANKSGIVING

“I can’t believe I’m saying this,” said Gordon. “But I would really enjoy some Brussels sprouts. Would somebody please pass me the Brussels sprouts. I’ll trade for this gravy and some mashed potatoes.”

“Where’s our new puppy?” Mary said.

Lisa pointed down, beside her chair, and put a finger to her lips. “I can’t believe he’s sleeping. What a good little puppy he is,” she said, voice lowered. “But the name, I still don’t get that name, Aunt Mary - he is *actually* a Spaniel.” Lisa lifted the tablecloth and peeked under the table. “Yup, that’s what you are. You’re a gorgeous baby Spaniel dog. Right, Little Beagle?”

Mary smiled. “The name just came to me.”

A squeak came from under the table on Lisa’s side.

“Has he got a blanket?”

“Your best pillow.”

“Oh my!”

Lisa stuck her tongue out.

Mary tossed a butter biscuit at her.

Lisa passed the biscuit to Gordon, who put it in his mouth, but kept one eye on the serving dish at the other end of the table. “The toast, Aunt Mary?” he said through the mouthful.

Mary stood.

“Don’t be nervous.” Gordon said. “Deep breaths.”

“I’m waiting for you to swallow.”

Mary created an important throat clearing sound and pretended to look for paperwork. She picked up Gordon’s table napkin instead and held it out in front of her. “Okay then. If I’ve learned anything at all over the last several hundred years or so - no comment needed from you

Gordon, thank you very much - it is that a cold Thanksgiving dinner is never an option – it leaves a bad impression, not to mention a terrible memory and a bad taste if it ever actually gets served and eaten. It's no wonder they call it going cold turkey - it's just about the worst thing anyone can voluntarily inflict on themselves, next to long speeches. The mere thought of these horrors makes me shiver to my core."

Gordon grunted like a caveman. "Short Speech Good - Cold Turkey Bad." He reached for the sprouts.

"However," Mary said, staring down Gordon and his move on the veggie bowl. "I will say one thing."

Gordon withdrew his hand, leaned back in his chair, pinched two fingers together in the air and turned to his wife. "I was this close."

"Somehow," Mary raised her glass. "We three ended up as a family, a growing one at that, and it just so happened that we all really needed family. But we all miss someone as well." She pointed to a set of framed photographs on the fireplace mantle. "Here's to Gordon's parents, Reg and Sarah, and the wonderful job they did with their baby boy. And also, tips of the hat to Uncle Asshole living in the old basement and Auntie Gwendolyn who lives far enough away to remain one of my favourites." Mary blew Gordon a kiss. "And then there are Lisa's parents and her brother Pieter, all displayed prominently on the hutch over there where they can be studied and admired, and even touched, by those entering and leaving our kitchen."

We also send our warmest thoughts out there to loved ones who just didn't show up here for some reason." She got a polite snicker. "Bless them. And to Lisa's family in Amsterdam, I say this." She raised her good hand stiffly in a royal-like greeting. "Hi Johanne. Hello Olivia and Pieter. We hope you are having fun and enjoying Katy's visit while you can, because next time around we get her all to ourselves." She paused. "We love you to pieces - we have to - you gave us Lisa, and Lisa gave us

Katy. You have brought us so much joy and we thank you a million times over - I feel like I've lived and gone to heaven."

Mary sat down suddenly and took up her knife and fork. "Just one more thing." She put the cutlery back down. "I heard a rumour our Lisa is pregnant and that you, Gordon, are responsible."

Gordon lowered his head to the table. "But didn't we just have a teenager?" He pulled a laughing Lisa closer to him and spun his empty plate on the table in front of him; and as the china rocked on the old pine surface, a silence settled comfortably on the occupants of the room...like a sigh in a hammock.

"It feels like there's a dozen people at this table." Gordon watched as his plate settled on the tabletop. "It's a little spooky." Lisa was playing footsie with the puppy and Mary was listening to the silence with her eyes closed. "A long, long time ago," she said, her eyes still closed, "a man and I went on a sea adventure, and at a stop in one exotic port we spent an evening with a local family. It was the most wonderful night of my life. The food, the dancing...the playing with the kids and naming the stars and planets over our heads. These people were the most generous and beautiful I had ever met, until now... until this night." Mary's eyes popped back open.

"Nice thoughts, Aunt Mary. Very nice," Gordon said. "Oh, and I almost forgot something." He bent over, head and arms venturing under the table, and grunted like he was fighting with something. Little Beagle was yipping in excitement.

"In the pantry," Lisa said, banging on the tabletop to get his attention. "It's in the pantry, goofy. It's not under the table. The *dog* is under the table."

A few minutes of patient silence later, Gordon returned from the pantry, moved a plate to one side, and placed a piece of old looking, but polished, piece of wood in front of Mary.

“This is...”

“I know exactly what it is.” Mary laid her hand on it.

“I got this out before they tore the booth apart.”

“Oh my...”

“Lisa fixed it up for you.”

“Katy did the sanding,”

“She did a beautiful job of it too.” Mary rubbed the polished surface against her cheek.

“Are those initials?” Gordon said.

“Yes.” Mary turned the specimen so Lisa could see it. “MM, big slash, and DB.”

Lisa leaned forward and touched the polished surface.

“Mary MacKenzie.” Mary moved Lisa’s fingertip. “Donny Beagle.” She held the plank against her side, closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

“I remember the knife he used - I held the candle. It was a lifetime ago.”

There was a loud knock at the front door. Lisa went to answer it and returned.

“Who is it, dear,” Mary said.

“You will never guess.”

“How many guesses do I get?”

“It’s Ranier, and he’s brought a bottle of ‘expensive’ Champagne tied up in a gold ribbon. He says the odour of roast turkey is getting through

his fence and he's here to collect evidence so he can lodge a proper complaint."

"I also need to meet the famous Little Beagle," he said, appearing at the dining room doorway and looking about.

"Well...?" Lisa was pulling up the tablecloth on her side. "He is a real treasure." A wet, little black nose poked out from the shadow. "And an instant curiosity."

Ranier got on his knees and gently took the tiny nose between his fingertips. A moment later a yip erupted and a bright red tongue rolled out and licked the hand. "He surely is a wonder," the guest said. "We must make a doorway in our fence, Mary. Open up the border."

"Come, neighbour," Mary said as Gordon moved chairs and brought a plate and glass. "Sit with me."

"Don't mind if I do," Ranier said, making a show of tucking a napkin into his shirt collar and then rubbing his hands together. "I have been looking forward to this all day." He laughed his glorious laugh, then waited while his stunned audience got it and joined in. "Okay, now, who's hiding the Brussels sprouts? I am ravenous!"

"Okay Gord, sweetie," Lisa said. "Since you're already up. Get carving while it's still warm."

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"Good night." Gordon was looking up at Mary from the base of the stairs; the little dog nestled in the crook of his right arm.

"Please," she said. "Thank Lisa for me - for everything. The cleanup - doing it all. I'm just too tired out for some reason."

"Oh, come on, we loved it. The whole night was fun. Lisa and I really enjoyed ourselves - and so did Ranier, obviously." Gordon laughed. "Our neighbour rolling around on the kitchen floor wrestling the puppy for a thigh was a golden memory in the making."

There was a pause as the dog squirmed and whined a bit.

“Anything you need?” Gordon asked.

“Just one thing,” Mary hesitated. “Would you kids mind if the puppy slept with me on my bed tonight?” She came down a step. “I can’t explain; it’s just that...”

Before she could end the sentence, Gordon was pressing Little Beagle into her arms. “I think the dog is actually purring now,” he chuckled. “Remarkable creature.”

“I think I may have had a bit too much of the bubbly - you should get to bed, yourself.”

But the man didn’t move. “There has been something on my mind,” he said, his eyes fixed on the woman holding the little dog.

“What’s going on?” she coaxed.

He didn’t answer her.

“Was it the Brussels sprouts? Do you need a bucket?”

“No,” he laughed. “After all the fuss, I didn’t get any. Once Ranier got a hold of the bowl and that was the end of it.”

Mary patted the stair beside her. “Come and sit down...” She waited. He sat. She turned his head to face her and locked her eyes on his. She held him like that; she didn’t let him look away. “Okay, this is all my fault; this is way overdue.” She released Gordon and nodded. “Here, take the dog.”

Mary climbed the stairs and disappeared for minute. When she came back down, she was carrying a large, brown shopping bag which she handed to Gordon and then sat back down beside him.

“Give me back the dog. There’s an old album in the bag. There is one photograph missing.”

“I have so many questions.”

Mary looked away, as if in search of words. “Do you remember how old you were when we met in the bushes.”

“Not really.”

“Well, I was not too much older than that when I had you. Your birth-father’s name was Donny Beagle,” she said. “He was dashing.”

“What happened to him?”

“Last night my heart spoke to me...he’s gone.”

“Did you ever talk to him?” Gordon asked. “Over all the years?”

“Not in the traditional sense...are you going to cry?”

Gordon wiped a finger across a cheek and held it up to Mary. “I guess not. You know...when my folks told me, I was surprised, but my heart didn’t skip a beat. I never missed having a father because I had a real mum and dad. They were the best.”

“Did he know about me?”

“Donny Beagle? No. You went straight to your parents and your real life.”

“What about *your* life, Mary?”

“I loved my sister and this home, and I had my album. It was boring and nice and beautiful. Maybe I was waiting for you.”

Mary gently stroked Gordon’s hair. “I drove the beautiful man away - I thought I was doing something good and I was doing something bad. It was unkind.” She lifted his head up to look in his eyes. “Because he never knew about you, he never knew I gave you up.” She touched his forehead with her lips and rubbed the kiss in with her thumbs as she spoke. “And there, in a bitter nutshell, is my Mary screw-up tale; badly

written but hopefully unfinished with a fun chapter or two remaining. I suppose some would say it was a sad tale, but I would disagree. The characters have saved it.”

Little Beagle was now squirming in the clutches of his mistress. “I’m running out of hands here,” she laughed. “A pin in one arm, a dog in the other - as they say.”

“Nobody says that.” Gordon stood up, lifting Mary and Little Beagle with him. “I’m looking forward to the next chapter.”

“And more characters.” Mary shifted the puppy up until she and Little Beagle were touching, nose to nose. “Are we intoxicated, doggy?” Little Beagle licked her face wildly.

“Good night,” Gordon said, as Little Beagle yawned impatiently, tightened his grip on Mary’s shoulder, and got carried up the stairs.

“I’ll cut the hole in the fence in the morning,” Gordon called after her.

“Ranier will like that; it will make the man laugh, and the timing couldn’t be better...the rest of us will be around here, somewhere, doing something with the dog, if you need us.”

Mary stopped at the landing and turned. Gordon looked up. She had her hand on her heart. Or was it just the puppy she was holding?

The end