

Donny Beagle

...in memory of my Great Aunt Mary...
She never betrayed her secret
1908 to 1989

THE BOOTH

a voice was speaking - it was a quiet voice - a sleeping man's voice.

hi there

the woman pressed the receiver against her ear, tossed the tattered cord over her shoulder, out of the way, and let out a long sigh - it's me, she said into the mouthpiece

I seem to dream a lot about you – the voice murmured - it's odd, you'd think I would stop this nonsense after all this time - you would think I could forget you for a while that simple feeling from so long ago - a simple fling

a simple love affair

yes - of course –lovers

they found me in here - in the telephone booth – again - yesterday

how is that cozy little nest of ours – I remember it so clearly - a beautiful hideyhole two lovers crammed together the laughter the love making the promises - the bluffs, the air the warm sea air panting and rising from the beach sand and the boats milling about in the harbour and past the lighthouse - gulls crying, the eagle climbing to the sky overhead and the sea ducks bobbing in the surf - all of it so lovely but not so lovely as you.

it's now deserted - falling apart – unused - forlorn

are we talking about the telephone booth - or you

both I suppose – are you still in that old house – still in England

yes – but Agatha died six years ago – I stayed here

I didn't know

I always meant to get in touch – I wanted to find you, to come to you – and then too much time went by and I just started withering here never stopped trying to forget

..... what's that I'm hearing – I'm hearing something else - what am I hearing

could be the mourning dove - or two - could be the curtains moving in the draft - could be the early bus - could be anything - I guess - you may be hearing the insomniacs at the corner screaming at the kid on his bike ringing the bell like crazy below their bedroom window - or the sound in your head might be the dew falling - or the fog rolling in - or the tide changing.....or my heart beating again

the frayed cord was now a tight figure eight with a life of its own coiling at her ear – the woman shook it off it seemed alive filling half the old booth

or the earth spinning - or time passing – or me talking to myself - will I ever see you again

does it matter

I'm alone – I am sad - yes it matters – I want to be in love again – is that too much to ask

I still have that little knife

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 flashlight

I held the sweet hand that held the flashlight

it was so tight in here

we were warm – you were a perfect fit

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

the best sunset of my life - and I was still holding you when the sun came back up – it brought a brand spanking sparkling new world to light - I wanted to sing

the woman was getting stiff - she squirmed - all that did was shift the stiff parts around until she hurt in new places – do you remember your dreams

of course - they are my reality - how's your sister doing

you mean the other one the cute one

yes - that one – Florence - right

Flo died - ten years after you left

you were a really good martyr - you gave Florence everything she needed and everything you had - you gave me up

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

it's morning ... morning here in jolly old now... I didn't mean that... forgive me

I forgot to tell you I'm getting a puppy dog to love – I'm naming it after you

the connection was dead

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 some nice juicy smileys.”

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 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 path 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 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. When she came to, she emerged from black nothingness into blazing headache, buried in a pile of frantic monkey-things cavorting in her face. The whatevers-they-weres floated above her, lips peeled back against gums and boney fingers pinching and probing.

The world was suddenly far too close for comfort. “Get off!” Mary cried, pushing out with all her limbs and all her might. “What are you doing to me!” The outburst was all she had. She fell back into someone’s arms and closed her eyes.

Mary opened her eyes, her vision cleared and Ranier Tohms stepped into it, focussed his worried eyes on her. “You look like an anteater, actually,” she said.

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, but she liked him in spite of it. The neighbour was harmless, if a little too observant, but he had a good smile and a great big laugh that she liked to hear echoing around the neighbourhood. She liked him in spite of his quirks. Ranier was okay.

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?” Ranier Tohms smiled and laughed.

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

“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, and Ranier smiled and laughed again.

“You gave us a scare. You fell hard,” said another neighbour from further up the block, the self-proclaimed award-winning gardener Mr. Slade. She called him ‘Blossom; he liked that.

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 hurt. Was her noggin cracked wide open? She was afraid to touch back there; it might be wet.) “You’ll have lots and lots of time ahead - years, eons even - to worry about everything, all you want.” Mary tried to get up on an elbow. That wasn’t going to happen. “But worrying’s an ugly habit and a big waste of time.” She raised her voice to the kids and then collapsed back with a grunt of surrender. “Just don’t worry. That’s what I say. Okay?” Her young roadside worriers nodded in unison at her words, and she managed a smile, straight back at her bobble-head friends.

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.

“Little David,” she called out.

“Right here, Aunt Mary!” one of the bobble-heads called back.

“Where are you two going?”

“Down to the bluff. Boarding.”

“Sounds like good fun. Give the booth a bit of a cleanup if you don’t mind. Since you’re there.”

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 not at all when I’m talking to the prettiest, smartest young lady in the whole wide world. Not a bit.” Ginny beamed back at the older woman. Mary loved the young girl’s smile; it was radiant, 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’re like a sack of potatoes.”

“French fried?”

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

“What a lovely day for early-on May, Gordon.”

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

HOSPITALITY

“We need to put a couple of pins in that shattered arm of hers,” the doctor said, lowering a clipboard and looking down over her eyeglasses. “But that will have to wait.” The doctor turned away. “Go home, give us three hours to check her out and at least put a few of those puzzle parts back together 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, he curled up in the crook of his elbow, dropped off into sleep and revisited a familiar moment that lived deep inside him. Gordon drifted back thirty years and re-visited a familiar dream.

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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 – finding him.

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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 further 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," she said.

"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 sorry again," she said. "But forgive me, please, I *am* being nosy, but it comes naturally - fortunately I like that quality, I think it's one of my better 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 our home 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.

“Are you done with me?” he said.

“Almost,” 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! You get to live here, in this bush...come on, I want to show you something.” She waved toward the daylight behind her.

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

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

They sorted out his stuff, put three beer cans in a garbage bag and stuffed a blanket and a box of Cheerios into a backpack. There was also a tiny hand rake that she guessed he used as a 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 blueish there. “Don’t forget your toothbrush. Use the thing while you’ve still got the choppers to rub it against.”

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 bush, he appeared in front of her. “Gordon,” he said.

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

“Gordon, it’s *my* name,” he said around the toothbrush.

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

“It’s okay, I guess.”

It was so easy to follow the woman back to her house. Years later he would still be wondering why he went with her 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 drifted off for a while, 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 deep warmth of the tea and biscuits settling deep inside him.

The young man’s eyes opened.

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

“I’m not a street person.”

“I figured 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.”

He stood but declined the offered hand. “I’m okay, but thanks anyway,” he said.

The dream always ended with Aunt Mary showing him all the parts of the house he could stay in, if he wanted. She told him she would charge him rent, but if he

didn't have the money, he could help her with things around the place. The building and the property were far too big for her to keep up on her own.

She offered her hand again and he held it for a moment this time. He took the hand, but not the room. "I have a place," he said.

She spun him around. "There's a lifetime of work here for someone."

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

"The air is like a tonic here, don't you think?"

"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 suppose the offer could be revived?"

"I have a girlfriend."

The woman didn't speak, but to the youngster it might have looked like she was trying to hide a smile.

"I gave her a ring - I love her a lot, but you've seen my place, right?" He tried to wink. "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!" the woman broke in. "You are so pretty. I am Aunt Mary." The woman got a shy smile from the young lady. "Apparently we don't do handshakes

here.” Mary drew the young lady into her arms, lightly touched the deep red hair and studied the warm chocolate eyes. “Sweetheart, I think I have room for exactly two more people in my old heart, so come on in.”

“Do your parents like him?” Mary asked the girl.

“I think so.”

“Don’t worry, we can work on that.”

And that was that, and *that* was thirty years back.

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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, but it was stuck to the noodles,” he said. He took the towel and pushed it around on his chin and the one, sticky cheek she was 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.

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.”

AN EASTERLY ON THE WAY

Four thousand, six hundred and sixteen miles away from the rickety wheelchair, give or take two or three small English-town blocks, the sun had already found the spot to start its new day here in Marple, or as the locals liked to point out, the exact birthplace of the very smartest of Agatha Christie’s most famous sleuths.

The new morning sun flowed in over a heavily lacquered Oak windowsill and found a lump snoring under layers of quilts and blankets in a loft bed in a grand house on the East block of Chimney Street, and, as if inviting it to enter, the peach white curtains were unfurling and waving a gentle welcome in the first morning air.

Three snorts from the sack and sheets and covers were thrown back. Life is perfect. Why get up? Why even wake up? It’s a wonderful world. Stay put, you silly donkey. All commendable thoughts for a body reluctant to disturb itself, but the moments of bliss were taken from this drowsy man, and he had to rise, a dormant seed had been planted in the aging compost of his heart, and it was already growing. Something had stirred in him overnight.

The man found the photograph under his pile of unmatched socks. It was still there, in the same faded blue Air-Mail envelope it had come in, back when Air Mail was a big thing and the super thin blue envelopes apparently kept the planes from crashing from the weight of the land-mail variety. The tattered edge made it easy to pull out. He focused on the faded image: flat black, like old felt, with a white strip around the curled edges where the years had aged it. He studied the black and white, reliving the time and the moment...he savoured it. A man in a cocked fedora, right arm around a young woman’s waist, standing in the full white sun at the base of a ship’s ramp. You could feel the scorching sun just by glancing at this shot. Tied to the gangway railing was a white board with four words painted on it. GUYS AND GALS HERE - the sign proclaimed, with a big fat sloppy arrow pointing up the ramp.

He blew some dust off the photograph and put his lips to the image. “Shall we?” he said, studying the figure in the mirror. “Well, at least it’s worth a shot.” He puffed up his chest.

“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 on the other side of the panel. He dropped the paperwork on the desk in front of him and stamped it. “...Okay, I think 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 ride out there.” 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.

“Good luck to you, Mister Beagle.”

“Donny Beagle,” the man called back. “And thanks, I think I’ll need it.”

THANKSGIVING

“I can’t believe I’m saying this,” said Gordon. “I would like some brussels sprouts. Would somebody please pass me the brussels sprouts – I’ll trade you for the 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 down. “But the name, I still don’t get that name - he *is* actually a Spaniel.” Lisa lifted the tablecloth and peeked under the table. “Yup, that’s what you are. Right, Beagle?”

“I will fill you in someday, sweetie. But first, here is my toast to all of us, if I may.”

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

“Has he got a blanket?” Mary said.

“Your pillow.”

“Oh my!”

Lisa stuck her tongue out.

Mary tossed a biscuit at her.

Gordon laughed but kept one eye on the serving dish at the other end of the table. “The toast, Aunt Mary?”

Mary stood. “For sure.” She created an important throat clearing sound and pretended to look for paperwork. She picked up Gordon’s table napkin and held it out in front of her. “Okay then. If I’ve learned anything at all over the last several hundred years - no comment needed from you Gordon, thank you very much - it is that a cold Thanksgiving dinner is never an option – nothing to give any thanks for, and always a bad idea. Speeches and long, tedious toasts are for politicians who like cold turkeys. Sorry, but not for this lot”

Gordon reached for the brussels 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 and turned to his wife. “I was so close.”

“Somehow,” Mary raised her glass. “We all ended up as a family, and it just so happened that we all really needed a family. We all know who we will always miss.” Mary blew Gordon a kiss. “And we also send those same thoughts out there to loved ones who just didn’t show up for some reason.” She got a polite snicker. “Bless them. And to Lisa’s family in Amsterdam, I say this.” She waved her good

hand in a greeting. “Hi Johanne. Hello Olivia. We hope you are having fun and enjoying Katy’s visit while you can, because next time we get her all to ourselves.”

Mary sat down quickly and took up her knife and fork.

Lisa laughed. “It’s my fault, I said yes. Katy got me in a weak moment, but now I worry. Amsterdam is a big, scary place for a thirteen-year-old girl.”

“You will have your teenager back soon enough,” Mary said. “In the meantime, enjoy the break.” Her eyes slowly closed and then opened like she was waking from a dream. She shook her head - looked around the room as if she was seeing it for the first time, shook her head again, and smiled.

“I almost forgot something.” Gordon bent over, head and arms venturing under the table, and grunting like he was fighting with something. 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 stunned silence later, Gordon returned from the pantry, moved Mary’s 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 said, as she 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 flashlight. 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.”

“Oh my.”

“It’s Ranier, Aunt Mary, and he’s brought a bottle of Sherry tied up in a gold ribbon. He says the odour of Turkey is getting through his fence and he’s here to collect evidence so he can lodge a complaint.”

“I also need to meet 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.”

“I am sure he is.”

“Come, Ranier,” Mary said as Gordon moved chairs and brought a plate and glass. “Sit with me.”

“I would very much like that. Very much.”

Donny Beagle epilogue

On October 13, 2018, Canadian Thanksgiving Day, a passenger jet flying out of Manchester, England and destined for Vancouver, Canada, encountered a freak storm mid-Atlantic and dropped out of the sky. There were no survivors. No one had a chance. Nirvana Air was an upstart airline specializing in economic, last-minute bookings.

*Nirvana Air’s slogan was: **When You Really Need To Be There Now!***

