



mary
day

A SHORT STORY

David-Matthew Barnes

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by David-Matthew Barnes

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Mary Day

Her name was Mary Day.

I kissed her once in the parking lot of the all you can eat buffet right next to the used tire store on the boulevard. I'm pretty sure if she was still alive, me and Mary Day would've fallen in love. Hell, I probably would've married her.

She was a sweet, light-haired woman with a great smile. Sure, she was kind of messed up, but it wasn't really her fault. A lot of people tried to break her. At least that's what she told me. And I believed her. I just don't know why.

Until that day we kissed, I hadn't known the affections of a woman in quite some time. I wasn't bad looking. I kept my face shaved and my body clean. I knew if I tried hard enough, some lonely gal would feel sorry for me. She might even take me in. But I never did make the effort. I got used to eating microwaved dinners in front of the television night after night. Work kept me busy. Until I lost my job. Once that happened, I figured I was destined to spend the rest of my life alone.

I'd been on my own for almost two years; since my wife left me for a married man she met at the grocery store. Apparently, they fell in love in the cereal aisle. Two weeks after we signed the divorce papers, my car died. I scraped together enough to buy a used piece of junk that barely made it out of the driveway. No woman wanted to be seen riding around town in that car, driven by a down on his luck unemployed fool. Imagine my surprise when someone went and stole the stupid thing. Now I was bound to spend the rest of my life getting from place to place on a city bus.

Lately, nothing in my life seemed to work right. I was frustrated because the pieces wouldn't fit, no matter how I tried. I was down to my last twenty dollars and the few bits of hope I was clinging to. Dejected after another failed job interview, I hopped off the bus on my way home and strolled into the beckoning restaurant. I needed some comfort. I needed an excuse not to return to my empty, quiet house. It was bad enough foreclosure was looming, but the silence I lived in made my life seem all the more tragic.

I knew Mary Day was sad, just like me. No happy person had eyes like Mary Day. They were a pale shade of blue. When I first saw them, they made me remember my grandmother's flower boxes, her blue hydrangeas, her warm voice I hadn't heard for fourteen years. Just looking into Mary Day's eyes made you feel so much you wanted to cry. Even if crying wasn't your thing. She made me miss stuff I didn't even know I was missing. That's why I followed her outside the greasy restaurant and into the falling rain.

Drops hit the back of my neck the second I stepped out onto the broken sidewalk. It was one of those days when you wish you were still a kid, kicked back on the sofa, eating a bowl of mac and cheese and watching cartoons; just waiting for your mama to come home and make you some fish sticks and tater tots for dinner. I wanted to be indoors, looking at the coming storm through a window. I wanted to be eleven again. My hometown was gray and wet but I was hopeful. Like I finally had a chance at something big coming my way. I was keeping an eye out for it—that one good thing that could turn it all around. I knew it existed—the spark I couldn't see. But by then, I'd lost sight of most everything.

Mary Day stormed out of the restaurant swearing up a storm. She ripped off her black ruffled apron and threw it on the ground. She stomped on it like it was on fire, smothering it to death with the heels of her black rubber-soled shoes. I didn't have the heart to tell her she had a

big snag in her nylons. Her white skin peeked through the torn hose like a secret fighting to get out and wreck the world.

She looked strange, standing there in her chocolate brown waitress uniform, still steaming after her asshole of a boss called her out in front of everybody for grabbing the last basket of dinner rolls from the kitchen. Guess she was supposed to restock their supply with fresh ones. There were rules and she knew better. If she couldn't follow them, well, she knew what the consequences were. Mary Day told the short, bald man exactly where he could stick his dinner rolls and walked out the door. I followed, mostly because of that flicker of hope burning me from the inside out, but also because I liked Mary Day. I liked being around her. I realized this in only the few minutes I'd known her.

I felt bad because the rain was hitting her hard, like she'd done something wrong and was being punished. Her nametag was crooked and one of the black buttons on the front of her uniform was missing. The makeup around her eyes was smeared, but that didn't matter. She was still beautiful. I worried she was cold since the material looked thin. The dress had short sleeves and didn't even cover her knees. I didn't have my jacket with me or else I would've offered it to her.

She must've known I was standing there staring at her, my hands in my pockets like a dumb fool. She turned to me, huffing and wild-eyed. "You got a light I could use?" she asked. Her voice wasn't as sweet as it was a few minutes ago when she'd sidled up next to my table with a pitcher in hand, asking me, "You want some more iced tea, darlin'?" I drank three glasses even though I wasn't thirsty. I just liked having her leaning in close to me. She smelled like cinnamon and sugar. One whiff and I was reminded of how hungry I was.

"My name's Curtis," I said when she asked what I wanted to eat. My choices were the buffet or a fried chicken dinner plate. "And I'm starving."

She smiled, took my menu, tucked a pencil behind her ear and said, "Honey, aren't we all?"

Ten minutes later we were standing face-to-face beneath dark shifting clouds in the almost-empty parking lot. There was a big rig in the distance. No doubt the driver was either asleep or sitting in a booth inside drinking another cup of coffee. The day was disappearing fast.

"I don't smoke," I said. I dropped my eyes and stared at a cement parking block like I was ashamed I'd finally found some willpower. "I quit two weeks ago. And it's raining. How're you gonna smoke in the rain, Mary Day?"

"No, I mean a flashlight." She was frustrated. I knew it wasn't my fault. "I think my car battery is dead. I was gonna ask you to check it for me... under the hood... but we need a flashlight."

"How do you know?" She looked confused by my question. "You haven't even started your car. How did you know the battery's dead?"

She put both hands on her hips and shot me a look. "The car hasn't started in three days," she said, as if I were supposed to know this. "Nobody seems to want to give me a jump. No one gives a shit."

I took a step towards Mary Day. "I would," I said. "But I don't have a car." She gave me a second glance and decided, "You don't have much, do you?"

END OF PREVIEW