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About 1,800 words

MY FRIEND MARY

by Sera Bryant

My Mom has a picture on her dressing table, it has been there all my life. Yesterday, it made sense for the first time. See I'm an only child, a long line of sons who are all the only child. We joke about girls being trouble, highly strung, over sensitive and solitary moody things. Girls have their secrets that we boys just don't get. I just never thought of my Mom as being one of them. Silly really, of course she's a girl.

But my best friend Mary she's not girly not like other girls. I have had Mary in my life ever since I fell out of the tree in the park when I was four. Dad still doesn't know how I managed to climb so high without him noticing, he was supposed to be watching me. Mom was taking a walk with Nan to visit granddad's grave. It was just a normal family picnic but as always you take your

eyes off a child for a minute, they get into trouble. I fell a good 6 or 7ft which is far for a four-year-old and like a true boy I fell on the softest bit on me, my head. Mary picked me up and held my hand as we walked back to the family. I still have a faint scar on my head where it had split open. Mary came to the hospital and played with me. Otherwise, I doubt I'd go.

We played for hours Mary doesn't mind playing cars or army. She is not very good at making games up so I tend to do that and she plays along. The best one is tag and Mary is fast, so fast I think even dad would have trouble catching her. It always makes her smile when I trip over trying to get away from her. Mary has a wonderful smile and a laugh that sounds like bird song a high-pitched tweeting that makes all the hairs on my arm stick up and my tummy roll-over, which makes me, laugh too because it tickles.

It makes Mom happy when Mary's around too, you can see she's content, she just sits watching us, Mom pretends she is reading or if we're at home she pretends to wash up or dust but I know she is watching us and listening.

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Well until yesterday anyway. I have a heart problem, I have had it all my life it runs in the family but I have the most severe form so I don't always get to school and yesterday I was sick. My breath was all out of me nanny had said and I looked a little blue mom said. All I knew was I felt floppy and had to keep having a nap which is so annoying when your right in the middle of reading, I'd just got to the point where the characters Jimmy and Rajah were battling an Earth Elemental which is really a kind of huge worm like creature. Thankfully, Mary came in, she stroked my head, and kissed my cheek

“would you like me to read” she asked, I managed a faint nod of my head. She sat on the sofa next to me “turn the book around for me” she added I took a big breath and reached over to the coffee table to turn the book. Mary read for hours I turned the pages and looked at the pictures dreamily in their upside down. We laughed at Rajah and held hands when Jimmy had to battle the Litch.

“You’re getting sick Callum, you need some better pills,” she said as I could barely lift the page.

“I need a new heart really” I said,

“I know, but why does it take so long”

“You have to wait on a list; I’m not the only one”

“But you’re so very sick”

“Don’t worry; it will happen when it happens”

“I know sweetheart,” said Mom, joining the conversation “would you like a drink” she added.

“Yes please. We’ll have some of that nice fizzy orange”

“Well you can have that but I’m having some tea” Mom drinks enough tea to sink a ship especially when I’m at home sick. The heart monitor made that weird beeping sound that it does whenever it wants plugging in.

“What do you want Mary?” I asked as Mom moved my monitor and looked at my oxygen levels with a quizzical muttering sound.

“Yer orange I like the sound of that it’s my favorite color”

“Are you going to drink it all this time?” I tried to give my best mom impression.

“I’ll try” she answered with a smile. Mom came over and helped me sit up straight as mom’s do. Mom came back in with tea and orangeade sat in her chair and looked at her book.

“Mom?” I scowled seeing only one glass of Orangeade

“Yes Callum?”

“you forgot Mary’s”

“Mary who?”

“Oh don’t start that again, you know Mary, my Mary, don’t worry I’ll get it” I said as I stood up, but my head was all woozy and I had to sit back down Mom came over to me.

“Callum I need to talk to you, your dad and I are getting worried”

“Yer I know we are too” I said referring to me and Mary “but I’m at the top of the list now” I added hopefully as I hate upsetting my mom.

“Not about your heart, well yes your heart but also about this Mary business, what I mean to say is that your 10 years old now and it was cute when your 5 and okay when your 7 or 8 but your growing up now and I want you to think about real friends”

“She’s not my girlfriend mom!” I said with as much emphasis as I could muster, Mary laughed which made me laugh and Mom smile.

“Now look I’m trying to be serious with you” she held my hand “you need to say good bye to your imaginary friend, she has helped you a lot and I know it’s hard to be on your own, even your dad had imaginary friends he told me, and I know it’s even harder when you’re in and out of schools, doctors and hospitals. So we’ve let it go but now it’s too much, you’re 10 and its time, please?”

I would have jumped in sooner but I couldn’t get the breath to interrupt her.

“Mom are you crazy, Mary is sat right there” and I pointed “she has been reading to me for the last two hours, you must have heard her”

“Callum there is only you and I here”

“She is right here mom, Mary tell her” but Mom didn’t hear her as my monitors went all bananas flashing and beeping

“Callum please, I’m sorry don’t upset yourself, but one day you’ll have to see sense, you know I’m right”. With that, she left the room, just like when she disagrees with dad.

Girls they always get the last word even if it’s not a word, I looked at Mary.

“What was all that about?” I asked breathless and weary,

“I won’t leave you, I don’t ever leave you” Mary said softly I closed my eyes and slept, when I woke Mary had already gone I could hear mom upstairs crossing the landing from my room to hers, I was feeling a lot better so I wondered up the stairs to see if mom was still unhappy with me. It took me a while, it always takes me a good while to get upstairs, but at least I’m quiet. Mom was sat on the bed looking at the photo, I wondered in and sat next to her I noticed the pile of folded laundry at her feet.

“I’ve never really looked at it properly,” I said,

“I’ve never really told you about it” mom said.

The picture was of my mother with two babies in her arms a sister and a brother you could tell because of the blue and pink blankets each one was tucked into, and the fact they were exactly the same.

“That’s me” she pointed at herself,

“I know that” I laughed, she smiled

“Well that’s you” she added I didn’t say anything I just looked, I had not thought it was me, I’d presumed they were not her babies.

“And that’s Maisy your sister, she died about 3 hours after this photo was taken, she was like you only her heart just couldn’t cope enough. She was born moments after you, all this time has gone by, and you have never asked about this photo, strange isn’t it?”

I smiled and gave her a hug, she left me with the photo and I looked deeply into it, I could see dad’s reflection in a hospital window mom’s tired but happy face, the look of contentment, the special contentment she has with me and Mary, Mary, well is made sense really. The park that we picnic in is near the church, mom’s little walks with Nan to where granddad is buried.

“Mom? Mary, I mean Maisy is she buried in the same churchyard where granddad is?” mom poked her head in the doorway.

“They are in the same plot my love, her name is added on lower down, I guess I never pointed it out, I’ve avoided saying anything for so long, and well... you always seemed to just know. Maybe you did, you might have heard us talking about her, and I guess I just hoped I’d get strong enough to talk to you. I’m sorry it’s taken this long” she came and sat back down

“I’m so sorry; I’m a terrible mom, I was wrong to take so long”,

“It’s okay mom, I was ill, you had your hands full, and I’m always rushing around I don’t give you time to talk to me,”

“You always talk to Mary don’t you” she added with a half-smile

“Yer, but I will talk to you now instead”.

This made her cry but she smiled relived also, I wandered to my room to lie on my bed to think but all I did was cry, cry because I had lost and found my sister, because I had lost my friend to reality, I hadn’t realised how real or unreal we were. Mary came and sat on my bed,

“do you want me to leave?” she asked”,

“No”, I said, “we’ll explain to mom when I’m old enough” and I went to sleep. Mary and I are keeping secrets for now, it’s hard to explain how we exist, but real or unreal is not what you see it’s what you feel, that’s what life is, isn’t it?

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The End