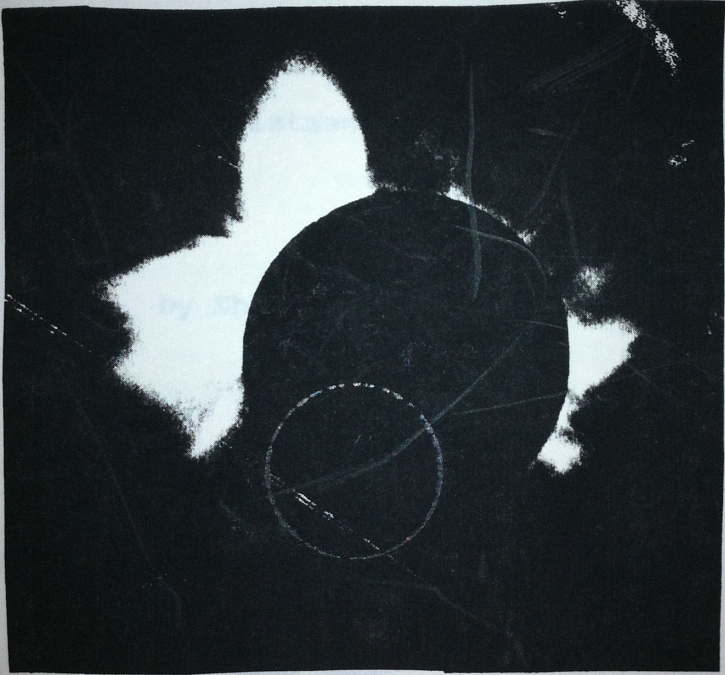


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MARY.

a Christmas story.



by Shaun A. de Waal.

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Introduction.

The idea for this story came to me in the Christmas of 1991. I started the story, but never finished it. It has taken me over six months to put it into its present form.

However, the story really seemed to tell itself and demand its own changes. It provides a message of hope in times that do not seem to offer such hope. It is also based firmly upon my experience that there is no death, as well as that we are as limited as we perceive ourselves to be.

THE AUTHOR.

It was the beginning of December, the rush period before Christmas and Mary Kelly was out shopping for Christmas presents. The streets were crowded with shoppers, people rushing about like crazy. It was so bad, that Mary had been pushed and bumped at least twenty times in half a block.

"One last present for my Mom", Mary thought, turning into Marcells Department Store.

The crowds in the store seemed to be worse than outside and Mary regretted turning in, but she was too tired to back out and decided she might as well buy at the store, as anywhere else.

She found a beautiful scarf, that she thought her mother might like and took it to the payment counter.

The lady there ignored her.

"Excuse me", Mary said.

The lady turned and looked at her sullenly.

"Yes."

"I'd like to buy this scarf, how much is it?" Mary asked.

"You can't buy that", the counter lady said.

"But why not? I found it over there and look, it has a price tag!"

"That line has been withdrawn, it was not supposed to be there. You will just have to choose something else" said the counter lady. And so saying, she snatched the scarf from Mary's grasp.

What with all the bother, the heat and the tiredness, Mary saw red and started shouting. The gist of it was that the counter lady was supposed to provide a service, she was rude, Mary would never shop there again, etc, etc.

Within a few minutes Mary was out on the street.

She was fuming! This was all so unfair! She had had it! She wasn't going to take it any longer!

Mary strode forward, pushing people out of the way, elbowing people and determined to get to her car and home. As she walked, she felt a pain begin to start in the region of her heart. It became swiftly more intense and with a groan she slid to her knees, before falling on the pavement and blacking out.

Around her people continued to move unconcerned, ignoring her except for a few interested in her handbag and parcels, which soon disappeared.

Mary no longer cared, she was not there and did not see the newspaper article, which said:

"Christmas shopper, overcome by heat, dies of a heart attack."

Instead Mary was only conscious of travelling along a corridor of light. She was moving swiftly towards a very bright light. It dazzled her eyes just to look at it.

It did not take long before she reached the light, and she saw that it was not light at all, but a place more beautiful than she could have imagined. There were wonderful grass planes, woods, streams and mountains. It was like something she had dreamed of going to when she was a small child.

"I must be dreaming", she thought.

"No Mary, you are not", said a voice.

Mary turned to see who had spoken to her and there standing by her side was an oldish looking man, with snow white hair. He reminded her of Einstein.

He spoke again. "You want to know who I am and where you are?"

Mary nodded.

"Well, Mary, your time to live on earth has come to an end. I am someone who has always watched over you and tried to assist you from time to time."

"But I can't be dead!" Mary almost screamed, "There is so much I still have to do. Who will take care of George and Michael?"

Tears started forming in Marys' eyes, as she thought of her sons at home, with no-one to care for them. They were only two

and three years old! Her husband had vanished many years ago, to heaven knows where and her parents were dead.

"I am sorry Mary" said the man, "your time on earth is up and it cannot be changed. George and Michael will be looked after."

"Where?" Mary exclaimed, "In a home? I have seen some of those. They are awful! There must be something I can do? Please is there no-one I can talk to? Can something not be arranged?"

Mary broke down and sobbed uncontrollably.

The man put his arm around Mary and said:

"Mary, I can't promise anything, but perhaps there is one chance. Hold on here, while I go and speak to someone."

As Mary looked up, blinking the tears from her eyes, she saw him walking away across the grass, seeming to vanish very quickly into the distance.

It seemed an eternity as she waited for him to come back. When he did, he was holding an envelope in his hand.

"Mary," he said, "I don't know if you are aware of it, but life is determined by oneself. Ones actions and thought determine

whether we live or die. Unfortunately, as it stands, your time is up. However, it has been agreed that you can become like a guardian angel watching over your children and helping them. However, we would like to be sure that you have the necessary abilities for the job. To test that we would like to give you a small assignment and if you can carry that out successfully, we will know you are right for the job. Are you willing to try?"

Although disappointed that she would not be able to return, Mary still felt some hope rising.. At least she would be able to watch over her children to ensure that they were safe.

" What will it involve?" asked Mary.

" The instructions are in this envelope," said the man, "When you open the envelope, it will be like opening a door and you will be taken to the place of your assignment. The assignment involves warning some people who are in great danger. All the details are here. Will you go and help them?"

"Of course I will go," Mary answered, " But how will I be able to communicate?"

" When you go, you will be able to be seen and heard." the man replied and further added, " I am sorry to give you so few details and be so brief, but I have another urgent matter to

attend to. Don't worry though, everything you need is there in the envelope."

Saying this he handed it to her and started turning to go. Mary waited no longer, she quickly opened the envelope.

As she did so, there was a blinding flash of light and Mary lost consciousness.

She regained consciousness to find herself lying on a dirt road. It was dusk and in the semi-darkness it was difficult to see much. She could make out that she was on a small hill and down below lights from what she supposed must be a small village, twinkled.

For a moment she panicked.

"What do I do now?" she thought.

She almost felt like crying again, but then she remembered the envelope and noticed that she was holding a piece of paper in her hand. Eagerly, she tried to look at what was written on the paper, but it was too dark.

There was no other choice. She would have to go to the village, find some light and read it there.

What a strange situation to be in!

Slowly she started walking down to the village, picking her way carefully over the unknown territory. Fortunately it was not a long way and she was soon on the outskirts of the village.

This was how she saw it: It was small, with square almost squat shaped buildings. They looked as though they had no roofs, but Mary realised that the roofs must be flat. The village was obviously very poor. There was no proper lighting. Such lighting as there was, was through lamp light, which flowed from doors and windowless windows.

At the other end of the village, from where she was standing, was a very well lighted place where people were going in and out, chatting noisily. From the actions of the people, Mary guessed that it must be a bar or Inn of sorts.

Mary moved towards the inn, stopping before a lighted window to try and read the piece of paper.

On the paper were instructions which said that she would find the people she was looking for at the far end of the village, in a

cave and she was given their names, as well as additional details. She must warn them and then go to the top of the hill. It stated she could try to warn others as well, but this couple it was vital to warn.

Mary moved forward again, relieved at being allowed to get on with what she had come to do. As she moved forward a rough hand grabbed at her.

The man was beginning to say "Now what have we here?" but a look of surprise crossed his face, as his hand went right through her and he fell flat on his face.

Delighted that she had escaped, Mary swiftly moved from house to house in the village, trying to warn people. Most however thought her mad, or someone saying evil things and chased her away. They could not believe that such a thing could happen.

In the end she found that she was near the end of the village, but could not see any sign of a cave.

Walking carefully on into the darkness, she kept looking around for some sign of the cave, but to no avail. Finally as she was about to give up, she heard a sound.

"Baaaaaa, baaaaa."

She heard it again and tried moving towards the sound and as she did, she saw a faint flickering of light.

It was a cave!

Moving faster now, she scrambled up rocks, towards the cave. As she came to the entrance an astonishing sight greeted her.

There seemed to be animals everywhere. Cows, donkeys and sheep were there, but no people could she see.

She moved forward among the animals into the cave and saw at last at the back of the cave two people. One was a strong, bearded man, looking very much like a shepherd, who was rising to his feet as he caught sight of her. At his feet sat a slender woman, looking very young, her face bent over an infant and softened with lines of love. Her radiant black hair, hung forward across her face, brushing against the infant, who seemed to be trying to catch hold of it.

"Who are you?" the man said. He appeared to be tense.

"My name is Mary".

The man looked at her in surprise, then quizzically.

" I know that your name is Joseph and that your wife is named Mary. I have come to give you a warning. The man who controls this area is planning to kill all the children soon. You must take your wife and child and flee to a safe place, where you must remain until someone else like me comes to talk to you again."

"Where do you come from that I should believe you?" Joseph said looking doubtful.

" I was told to tell you, if you were doubtful, to remember the prayer that you said in your heart, after you heard that the baby was due. You were full of doubts and you knew not what to do. So you prayed and from that prayer came an answer that has guided you to today, because for answer you have been visited before, by those such as I. "

Joy lit the mans face. "I understand", he said , "I will do as you ask."

"Do so quickly, for time is short." Mary replied.

With that she turned and walked out of the cave. The man followed and stood looking as she climbed the hill further to the top.

There the white haired man, was waiting.

"We can go now Mary" he said extending his arm to her. She took his arm, and as she did, the scene started to fade.

They were in the beautiful fields again.

" Mary, there is someone who would like to meet you."

A figure was coming into view from the distance. He was a tall bearded man who seemed to radiate majesty, great love and grace.

Mary thought that she knew him, but could not seem to place who he was or where she knew him from.

As he came closer, she recognised him and rushed forward.

"It is you, isn't it? It is?"

"Yes Mary, it is" said the man.

Mary then said, " I have waited so long to find you, but I never did find you where I looked."

"You have not found me, because I am not to be found in any form or set place, but I am in all people and they in me. I am known

under many names and guises, yet wherever you look, I am there. I was in Bethlehem and I am with all newborn children. By going to that cave, you met and saved me. So now, I am letting you go home to your children, because what you have experienced, is the true meaning of Christmas."

"But I don't want to leave you, now I have found you."

" You won't. Look in your heart, I am there."

The scene faded and Mary found herself on the pavement surrounded by medics.

Later at home, after answering the umpteenth call to say that the paper was wrong, she had not died, Mary gathered, her children around her and told them the story of her journey. Hugging them she ended by saying:

" I know that what he said to me before I came back was true."

And high in the night sky, a small star seemed to twinkle a message of confirmation and reply.

THE END.