

Pretty
Marys

all in a

Row

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GWENDOLYN KISTE

PRETTY MARYS ALL IN A ROW

by GWENDOLYN KISTE

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chapter one

THE TWO COLLEGE KIDS SCREAM, AND THE SOUND FILLS MY EARS LIKE sweet music.

The melody ricochets off the slick leather interior, and the baby-faced driver gapes at the rearview mirror, gapes at me, the ghost in their midst. His gaze anywhere but the road, he looks ready to twist the wheel and thrust us straight into the nearest tree. Personally, I wouldn't care if we did crash—it would certainly break up the monotony of the evening—but it's liable to make a terrible mess for these two. Twisted metal and twisted bones. Ugly stuff.

Fortunately for them, he only quivers and keeps screaming and presses harder on the gas pedal as if that will be enough to outrun me, as if I'm not a passenger too. In the shadows of the backseat, his goateed pal crawls against the door and claws at the lock, his eyes covered with one hand, mouth drooping open, a deep and bottomless well. He wanted a make-out session, but I guess I've never kissed quite the way the boys like.

The air glints with their screams, a gray smoke only I can see. Smiling, I part my lips and quaff their fear like fine wine.

And I was worried tonight would be boring. Haunting is an imperfect science, after all, and this pair of stragglers was the best I could do—clueless fools out for a weekend joyride in daddy's borrowed Lexus. But they're better than I expected, the tune of their terror brimming with the elegance of Glenn Miller, the wink-and-nudge charm of Frank Sinatra, the indelible class of Bobby Darin. They taste of bygone summer evenings and peach cake with a dollop of whipped cream on top, so sweet it makes my teeth ache.

"Thank you," I say and turn toward the darkness. I don't need them to stop the car, which is good since they're still screaming and wouldn't hear my request even if I hollered it. To escape, I simply close my eyes, and the sharp crack of night whips around me. When I look again, the hapless boys are gone, their car vanished around the bend, and I'm alone.

The highway, my forever companion, is a trimming of black satin before me, and I stand perfectly still at the center of it, the soles of my heels resting on the solid yellow lines. I should go home now. I've gotten what I came for. But I'm still restless.

And I'm still hungry.

The constellations wink above me, and I start walking. There are no houses here, only a narrow shoulder and a ribbon of potholed asphalt no one's bothered to repair in twenty years.

Overhead, the spruce trees huddle together, and sap drips from the cusps of the branches like fresh tears. It must be spring now, though I can't be sure. Ghosts have no way of telling time, no tally marks etched in the woodwork to track our days. There are no appointments to keep except to be here on this highway to meet the darkness when it calls. And that could happen any night of any season.

I hesitate and tip my head back to the sky. A cab of so-called men, buzzed with whiskey and soda, is coming my way. My mouth waters, and each of my fingers curves into talons. Even from a quarter mile off, they blister through my blood. They'll be such easy pickings. The best are the ones who never see it coming. And why would they see it coming? Here I am, smiling in the gloom, arrayed in satin and pearls as fancy as a daydream at midnight. It's a flawless disguise.

The pickup truck rounds the bend, and I nearly levitate off the ground with excitement.

"Hey, baby," sing-songs one of them, a greasy fellow half-hanging out the backseat window. "How much?"

Too much, I want to reply, but their wolf whistles and deep-throated cackles would drown out anything I have to say. They aren't what I hoped for. Up close, they taste of ash and iron, so I turn away and let them pass. And I don't look back. There's no point. What's behind is gone, and what's gone is as good as dead.

Not that anything, even the past, is as dead as me.

Still, it's a pity they didn't stop. Those drunken dupes long for an unforgettable night, and that's exactly what I can offer. Of course, I could catch up with them if I liked. I drift back toward them, ready to materialize in the bed of their truck—that would really get them, me taking over what's theirs—but behind me, someone else stops. A dinged-up red station wagon with a frill of rust around

the bumper. My heart quickens, and I clasp my fingers in front of me, a ladylike flourish, but it's only to keep my hands from shaking.

The passenger door flicks open, and the console light illuminates a familiar face.

"Hi, Rhee." David smiles at me. "Need a ride?"

Always, I think, but I say nothing. He shouldn't be here. He should be at home, away from ghosts and lonely highways, and I should wait on the road for a more suitable driver, someone I'll be eager to terrorize.

I gulp down a heavy breath, ready to tell him to go. But David smiles again, and I know it's hopeless to argue.

Hands still quivering, I slide inside the passenger seat. It's not slick leather like the college boys' car. The upholstery is stained and worn as an old burlap sack. A sea of matchbooks decorates the interior, the small, folded covers in neon and pastel and bold colors, the stench of sulfur lingering lightly on the air. I laugh to myself. David doesn't even smoke and never has, but he collects these souvenirs everywhere he goes, which isn't many places. A seedy bar at the county line or an old Italian restaurant downtown. Any nostalgic locale that still believes in smoking jackets and smoke-filled rooms and femme fatales always in need of a light.

As I settle in for the ride, the matchbooks should crinkle beneath me, but I weigh less than air, so the detritus never notices I'm here.

But David notices. With a steady hand, he reaches over me and closes the door.

"Where to?" he asks, but he already knows. We've got three miles ahead of us. No more. No less.

The highway smears past the windows, briars and weeping trees and abandoned storage sheds all meaningless inkblots in the night.

David's fingers curl around the wheel, and he glances over at me in the darkness.

"It's been a while," he says. I wonder how long a "while" is, but tonight, I'd rather not ask. "How are you and your sisters?"

I hold in a rueful laugh. They're not my sisters, not really, though I don't correct him.

"We're the same as always," I say, not looking at him. "And how are you?"

He hesitates. "All right," he says, but the tremor at the end of his voice tells the truth. That's one thing David and I share: home isn't always where you

want to be. I don't know much about his life away from this road, except for the collage of crooked pictures affixed to his dashboard with strips of yellowed tape. He doesn't glance at them much, so neither do I. I try to pretend that there is nothing else. It's just me and him and the highway.

We've taken this path together a thousand times. Every trip is different.

Some evenings, he tells me jokes, silly wordplay that makes me laugh.

Some evenings, he describes the waking world beyond here. It almost makes me grateful I'm dead.

Some evenings, we say nothing. We sit back and retread the same stretch of road, listening to the whir of the asphalt beneath us as if it's the sweetest lullaby.

Some evenings, he doesn't come at all. And that's okay. I'm not always here either. He doesn't know when I'll appear, and I don't know when he will. That makes nights like this even better.

The rusted spires of the fence emerge in the distance, and my throat tightens with disappointment. That metal border is as far as I can go. Tonight's ride is over. It never lasts as long I hope.

David guides the car to the shoulder, and the engine cuts out. I gaze at the sign that hangs over us.

Resurrection Cemetery.

They say this is my final resting place. I'm not so sure. I've paced up and down the green manicured rows a hundred times, around crooked obelisks and between crumbling mausoleums. I've never found a tombstone that looks like mine. Not that I remember my own name anymore, but I'm confident if I saw it again, I'd recognize it like an old friend.

In the meantime, Resurrection Mary is as good as any other moniker. At least, it's got a pleasing rhythm to it. Of course, it's not as pleasing as Rhee, but not everybody knows my nickname. I wouldn't even want them to.

From far away, my home pulls at me, drawing me back to where I belong—not the highway and not the grave but somewhere claustrophobic and confining and worse. I steady my hands in my lap and do my best to ignore the gentle call of my sisters. I'm not ready. I haven't even taken my evening stroll through the cemetery yet. David exits the car and comes around to my door to open it. I don't need his assistance—I can slip through anything at will—but he's always doing his best imitation of a gentleman. And with my candy-sweet smiles and tailored satin, I'm doing my best imitation of a lady.

Outside, the moonlight blurs his face, and for a moment, he looks the same

as the night we met, back when he was an eighteen-year-old out hot-rodding for the weekend and I was the same ghost looking for a ride.

“You okay?” He tips up his chin, and the years return. The shadows reveal the deep grooves around his eyes and the sunspots speckling his cheeks. Peaks and valleys, the topography of a life. He ages, but I do not, and we both envy the other for it.

I step out of the car, and he reaches for my hand, but his fingers slip clean through me. This should be no surprise to either of us, but we’re fools to the marrow. There’s always an instant we both believe this time will be different. This time, he’ll reach out, and I’ll be there, whole and real, not a ghost but a girl, as common as dust. And together, we’ll leave this place behind for good and all.

But I never change, and somehow, our shared sliver of hope makes it all so much worse.

He smiles at me, a beaten expression that twists like barb wire in my chest. I can’t bear any of this, the charade of it all. Before I can stop myself, I ask the one question I should keep to myself.

“How’s your wife?”

His face goes gray, and he steps back as if I spit fire at him.

“She’s fine,” he says at last.

“And your daughter?” I glance at the dashboard and the pocket-size photograph taped haphazardly to the space closest to the steering wheel, closest to his heart. There she is with that cherubic face, all ruddy cheeks and sprightly cowlicks. She looks like his wife. She looks a little like me too.

“Abby’s well,” he says.

The breeze turns cold, and we linger together at the edge of the cemetery fence. Remorse blossoms in my belly like cancer. I shouldn’t have asked. This would have been a nice night if I hadn’t asked. But sometimes, speaking it aloud is the only way we remember what’s true. My feet heavy as granite, I pace through the gates of the cemetery. David follows. Out in the late-night nip of spring, we wander in silence between the headstones.

The tug of my home becomes an all-out pull, and I know that I can’t resist it much longer. I want a choice in where I go—and when—but that’s not how this works.

David must recognize the look on my face, the defeat drifting behind my eyes, because he shoves his hands in his pockets as if to say goodbye.

“Great to see you, Rhee,” he says. “It’s always great to see you.”

I inhale and taste the air between us, as potent and bitter as heartbreak. “You too,” I say.

With his head down, David shuffles back to the car. I wait until the engine rumbles to life and he disappears around the corner. Then I close my eyes. All alone, my body rises up and collapses in on itself like the paper folds of an origami lotus.

The concrete and cemetery fall away, and I dissolve, a sugar cube in hot tea. For an instant, I’m trapped between the highway and home, the here and there, in a darkness that’s all encompassing—I’m completely lost, completely gone, even less than the ghost I usually am.

I should be afraid of this part, but instead, I float in the ether, nearly slumbering in my calm. This is the only moment I ever feel truly alone. Or truly safe. There’s nothing here, which means there’s nothing to hurt me. I wonder if this is what death feels like. It must be nice to rest, to never worry about haunting or family or boys that grow old while you stay young. It must be nice for nothing to matter.

But tonight, not even the darkness offers comfort. My breath catches, and I realize I shouldn’t have given thanks for being alone. Because for once, I’m not. Something draws closer to me, a hazy outline that’s almost iridescent in the shadows. It twists and gleams, and its presence is cold, even colder than the dead—and that’s something I’m an expert in. I can’t see a face, but a voice boils like blood in my ears.

Pretty Mary. Pretty, pretty Mary.

Every muscle in my body returns to me, no longer dissolved into nothing. I’m liquid and free-flowing, flying and falling all in the same moment. My lips struggle to form the syllables for *hello* or *who are you* or *what do you want*, but no sound comes out. I’m voiceless and empty and paralyzed in the presence of this invader.

I want to scream, but I don’t have time. As effortlessly as it descended, the voice is gone, evaporating like summer rain on concrete, and I’m alone on the steps of a house I wish I didn’t recognize.

Welcome home, back to my very own prison.

chapter two

THE WORLD WHIRLS AROUND ME, AND I COVER MY FACE WITH BOTH hands to block it out. It always takes a moment for the nausea of travel to dissipate.

“Normal motion sickness,” my sisters say, as if anything about us qualifies as normal.

But I don't need to glimpse the sagging facade in front of me to know what it looks like. I could shut my eyes forever and still see this place. It's seared into the backs of my eyelids. A dilapidated house on a lonely lane in the middle of nowhere. I'm standing on the back stoop, the trim around the windows the shade of old urine, the faded stonework as dejected as first love.

Except on our evening journeys, we can't leave this place. It's our sanctuary and our cage, wrapped into one.

I hesitate and listen again for the voice, but it's retreated back to whatever sovereignty it calls home. Or maybe it was never there at all. Maybe what I heard was only the echo of the wind. Nature can be quite the trickster. An inadequate lie to tell myself, but it's the best I can do.

My hands unsteady, I move toward the door, but the hinges creak open first.

“You're late.” From the other side, a sentient tangle of greenery emerges in the doorway. Beneath thick vines of poison ivy, two eyes glare out at me.

I smile back. “Good evening, Mistress Mary.”

Even after all these years, she's a fearsome sight to behold. Bloodroot and foxglove and wolf's bane billow to the floor like a chiffon debutante gown. Thorns are peppered all over her body, the perfect accents to complete the ensemble. Everything about her is poisoned and dangerous. In this house, we are nothing if not treacherous.

“Dinner's almost ready.” A bloom of wisteria parts, and she thrusts a bundle of fancy silverware at me. “It's your turn to set the table.”