

Mary Annette

The moving van pulled out of the driveway and drove away. He stopped on his front porch to rest. He always found moving stressful. And tiring. He pulled one of the moving boxes over and sat on it. The neighborhood of arts and crafts style homes was alive. Kids were playing down the street. The mailman was dropping his letters and packages into the mailboxes.

A gentle summer wind was blowing, which was a comfort to his sweaty body. He enjoyed the sound the leaves made when the wind whipped through the trees. The dark clouds on the horizon told of a coming storm. The lawn would need this moisture, August would be here eventually, and the grass would cry for moisture.

She was literally the girl next door. She lived at 4283 when he moved into 4281. He was taken with her immediately, her long brown hair, her winning smile. He had to get to know her. He waved to her. She waved back. She came to his porch.

"Hello, there!"

"Hi. I'm your new neighbor." He extended his hand.
"Colby Hendricks. Call me Cole."

"Hi Cole. I'm Mary Annette."

They shook hands. Her hand felt cold in his. It was unusual in this hotter weather, but he postulated she might have just come from her air conditioning. Whatever, her skin was soft and her grip firm but gentle. If that was even possible.

“Nice to meet you. I just baked some zucchini bread; I’ll bring you a loaf.” She smiled and turned to leave.

“Thanks!” He waved to her as she left.

Cole reluctantly began the task of unpacking. Why he needed all this crap, he did not know. He decided to start in the kitchen. He would need the coffee maker soon, if nothing else. He pulled pots and pans and knives and forks from their packaging. He found a pasta maker he hadn’t used in years. There was a box of towels wrapped around some wooden spoons. Why he had thought the spoons needed such insulated packaging, escaped him now.

Finding the coffee maker, he plugged it in to make a pot. Now came the task of finding the coffee itself. Box after box proved unfruitful in this regard. He would need the extra energy the dark brown liquid could impart if he was to proceed in the unpacking. Finally, in the last box he checked, the coffee! He started the pot right away.

There was a knock at the front door. Mary Annette was standing there with a small foil wrapped item in her hands.

“Is that by chance zucchini bread?” Cole smile.

“Tis indeed.” Mary Annette smiled.

"Say, I just put a pot of coffee on. Care to share some zucchini bread and coffee?"

"Coffee yes. Zucchini bread, no. I've had WAY too much of that stuff." She laughed.

Her laugh was the stuff of angels, to his ear. It had a free-spirited lilt to it that was infectious. The way she tilted her head just slightly as she laughed. It was delightful.

"So where have you come from?" She sipped her coffee.

"Indiana. The land of corn." He smiled.

"From the land of corn to the land of rain." She referenced Seattle there.

"Yes. Thankfully you have other things than rain." He took a bite of zucchini bread. "Umm, delicious!"

"Ha, thanks! It's an old family recipe."

After a pause to chew. "Have you always lived here?"

"Yes, all my life." She looked to her house next door. "I'm living with my Dad now. He's getting over an illness and needs help from time to time."

"Sorry to hear that. Do you work?"

"No. Just keeping house and Dad relatively healthy is a full-time job."

"Yes, I see." He scrunched his face in thought. Such a dedicated daughter. She must have a kind heart.

"What's your Dad's story?"

She paused to formulate her response. "He used to be the puppeteer for the puppet theater downtown. They closed it years ago, so he retired."

"That's quite an unusual career there!" More of the zucchini bread made its way into his mouth. He was hungry after the move.

"Not for him. He loved his job." Mary smiled. She was proud of her Dad.

Having finished the bread and coffee, Cole decided to give his guest a tour of the house. He showed her the rooms upstairs first and all the plans he had for remodeling them. The backyard was quite overgrown, he would bring in a landscaper.

"Don't do that! I can get that in shape for you." Mary frowned.

He looked at her backyard and its expertly sculpted gardens. "I bet you could! That's gorgeous over there!"

"Thanks. It's a passion."

"I'd want to pay you."

"No need. I have very little use for money."

Cole thanked his visitor and vowed to get her recipe for the zucchini bread someday. The two parted. Cole fell asleep on his couch, too tired to make up the bed. He felt at home. He felt he would be happy here.

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Weeks passed. His back yard was looking great. Mary Annette had brought it back to glory. It was a feast for the eyes as well as the nostrils. When one bed of flowers started to fade, another bed would start to flower. He decided it was time to thank his gardener.

Cole walked the 10 steps from his door to the neighbor's. He knocked twice and waited. He waited. He waited. He knocked again. Still no response.

He walked around to the back door. Maybe they were in the kitchen or something and couldn't hear his knocking. They were always home it seemed. He knocked on the back door. He waited.

Cole was about to give up when he heard a noise coming from what seemed like the basement. He looked down through one of the basement windows to see a light burning. A closer inspection revealed that Mary Annette and her Dad were in the workroom of the basement. The Dad was working on something. It looked like he was working on Mary Annette herself.

Mary was lying on the workbench and her Dad was ostensibly winding her up or something. The images didn't really make sense. The Dad held a crank in his hand and was turning it into a socket in Mary Annette's back. The scene was one of a clockmaker winding a clock. It didn't make sense.

He decided to wait to ask Mary what that was. It was so weird.

The next day Cole found Mary Annette working in her back garden. Now was his chance.

"Say Mary Annette!" He called to her.

She brightened and stood. "Hi!"

Cole walked over to her. "I wanted to thank you for my back yard. It is a pure joy!"

"Oh, it was nothing."

"No, really. Actually, I wanted to thank you in a more practical way." Cole cleared his throat. This was never easy for him. "Do you think we could go to dinner sometime?"

"You mean like a date?"

"Well, yes." Cole waited for the yes or no.

"My Dad doesn't like me dating."

"Well, that's what your Dad wants. What do you want?"

"Let me think about it."

That was it. The end of the conversation. Cole went back to his house. Mary Annette went back to her planting.

The days flew by and Mary Annette hadn't responded to his suggestion of a date, so Cole assumed that it wasn't in the cards. He worried about a girl that wasn't allowed to date. She was clearly of age. He decided it best to just let it go for now.

He was about to turn in for bed when he heard a knock on his back door. It was Mary Annette.

"Hi."

"Hi." Cole opened the door for her to enter.

"Umm, I just came over to say that if your offer of a date was still open, I think I'd like that."

Cole was delighted. "Sure!" He scratched his head. "When's good for you?"

"Well, they're having a Carnival by the mall this Friday. Do you think we could go there?"

"I don't know why not. It sounds fun!" Cole smiled. "Shall I pick you up at say seven?"

"Better if I pick you up." Mary Annette turned to leave.

"OK." The father again. "Do you know the address?" Cole laughed.

Mary Annette laughed.



Friday came. Mary Annette and Cole visited the mall. A travelling Carnival had setup their booths and rides. There was mayhem everywhere. Kids screamed with glee at every death defying turn of the rides. Barkers invited all to play the games. The smell of frying elephant ears wafted through the entire scene.

"So, I know you have a father, but do you have mother?" Cole had yet to see or hear of her.

"She died in a car accident when I was young."

"Oh, no. Sorry to hear that."

“No worries, it was a long time ago.”

Cole was silent, he hadn't wanted to reopen any old wounds for her. She seemed OK with it, though. He decided to change subjects.

“Is caring for invalids a life's work for you?” Cole was curious, she didn't seem to do much else.

“For now.” Mary pointed to the ring toss booth.
“What's that?”

The couple walked up to the tall skinny man with the dirty jeans behind the ring toss counter.

“Three rings for a dollar.”

“We'll have three then.”

Cole gave the rings to Mary. She tossed the rings with precision. She managed to throw the rings just where they needed to be to remain on the bottles.

“Winner.” The guy scratched his unshaven beard.
“What'll it be.”

“Huh?” Mary Annette was unsure what he meant.

“Pick a prize.” Cole pointed to the stuffed animals displayed on the roof of the booth.

“I'll have the tiger I guess.”

Cole and Mary decided to sit and have a drink.

“You really nailed that ring toss!” Cole had never seen that done before.

“Just beginner’s luck, I guess.” Mary admired her tiger.

“So ...” Cole took a drink. “What’s after your Dad’s illness. I mean, have you ever thought of maybe a career? Or other work?”

“I guess so.” Mary took a drink. “I once thought I wanted to be an architect.”

“Well, you’re already an excellent landscape architect.” Cole was referring to the transformation she had effected in his back yard.

“Yes. But I’m thinking of buildings. See that old hotel across the street?”

“Yes. It’s quite beautiful isn’t it.”

“Agreed. It offers a pleasant aesthetic to the skyline. You can build buildings that will stand and perform well, but I wanted to add some beauty to them.”

Cole nodded in agreement. “Where would we be without some beauty?”

The pair sat in silence, enjoying their beverages. Cole broke their reverie. “Hey! Let’s do the Ferris wheel!”

“Oh, no! It looks so high!”

“C’mon it’ll be fun, I promise!”

Cole bought two tickets for the wheel and soon they were high above the crowds looking at the Seattle downtown silhouette in the fading light.

“It’s so quiet up here.” Mary Annette giggled with delight.

Cole marveled at her innocence. How her father could have kept her so isolated, so controlled seemed somewhat cruel. But then again, her father was a former puppeteer. Maybe he was just used to controlling things.

The wheel started turning again. Mary Annette shrieked with feigned terror as their bench started to swing wildly with the movement. The wheel was fully loaded now so the action wouldn’t stop. Around and around they went. Up and down. Up and down.

The wheel eventually slowed. It was time for their ride to end. Mary threw her arms out wide in celebration of the thrill that they had experienced. She would regret it.

The bench swung by one of the steel struts that made up the structure of the wheel and hit Mary’s arm. The impact made an audible noise that startled Cole. Mary brought her arm immediately back into the bench with them, but something wasn’t right. Her arm was bent in an unusual direction.

Cole tried to help her, but she refused his assistance. Cole grabbed her upper arm for support, but in so doing, revealed what was happening underneath. What Mary was trying to conceal.

Mary's arm was torn open, but what should have been a wound that produced blood simply exposed the inner workings. The gears, and pulleys, and what looked like the twine that puppeteers use. Her arm was mechanical, not biological.

They reached the disembarkation station and Mary jumped out. She ran away.



Cole returned home after their date. He was haunted by what he had seen. The puppeteer's daughter made of puppet parts. His mind went to a very dark place. She had been cold to the touch when he first met her. He had seen the father winding some kind of mechanism in her back. The father guarded her from dating. And now, the arm with the gears and pulleys.

How could the father have made such a sophisticated being? Mary Annette appeared human in every way. What kind of deal had they made with heaven and hell to produce this monster? And then he heard it. Mary Annette was the father's greatest marionette! Was Mary really just a machine? A puppet?

Cole turned the lights out in the house. He wondered if he was in danger. He kept his gaze on the house next door. The father was working in the basement again. Perhaps he was repairing his creation. The sounds of hammers and electric motors whined through the dark.

Cole jumped when he heard the knock on the back door. He stumbled to the door and opened it. Outside was Mary. He froze in fear.

"I need to apologize." Mary bowed her head. "That must have been weird for you."

"Umm ... " Cole was sweating. He couldn't form the words. Was he going to survive, now that he knew the secret?

Mary's eyes were tearing. "I need to tell you something."

Cole trembled as he pulled a chair out from under the kitchen table. Mary sat. He sat.

"I told you about my Mom's accident, right?"

"Umm ..." Cole still was speechless. He looked around the kitchen for a weapon. Something he could use to defend himself.

"Well I was in the car with her when it happened." Mary took off her coat to reveal a stump where her arm had been. "I lost most of my arm." She threw her mangled puppet arm on the table.

Cole stared at the arm on the table. It still presented the wounds inflicted on it by the Ferris wheel, but what was curious was the socket on the end of it. It looked like the one he saw her father winding the other day. It all hung together with leather straps.

"My Dad made me this prosthetic using his knowledge of puppetry. That's what you saw. It works on a spring mechanism. I have to wind it up from time to time, but with the muscles that are left in my upper arm, I can do a lot of work with it."

Light was dawning for Cole. "It's a robotic arm?"

"Kinda. Mostly." She looked to the ground. "Sorry, I was ashamed." Her voice lowered to a whisper. "People have made fun of me all my life."

"Then ... you're human?" A thought was dawning on Cole.

"Last time I checked." Mary smiled sheepishly.

"I thought ..." But it really didn't matter what he had thought.

Mary put her hand on the table. "I have to go." She rose. "My Dad's doing better now."

"You mean go, go?" Cole was unsure of a lot right now.

"Actually, I think you've inspired me to go back to college. You'll be seeing me a lot on the weekends, though. I still need to check up on him."

"Architecture?" Cole marveled at his loss of words. He sounded like a Neanderthal. 'Me want know architecture.' He should be the one apologizing. He had thought the worst of this long-suffering young lady.

"I'm hoping?" She crossed her fingers. She paused, then turned to Cole. "I'm also hoping we can finish our date sometime." Mary leaned in and kissed him on the cheek.

"I love that." It was the best he could think of to say, his relief was so great he giggled a bit.

They hugged.

