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# RISE AND FALL OF MARY JACKSON PEALE



WRITTEN BY

## M.G. Crisci

Also by M.G. CRISCI

Call Sign, White Lily

Indiscretion

Papa Cado

Save the Last Dance

Seven Days in Russia

This Little Piggy



ORCA PUBLISHING COMPANY  
Carlsbad, CA 92011

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Designed by Good World Media  
Edited by Raymond and Lucille Mancini Sr.  
Cover Art: "Venetian Mystery" by M.G. Crisci

Manufactured in the United States of America

Library of Congress Control No.  
2009907911

ISBN 97809663360-5-4

*Life should not be a journey to the grave  
With the intention of arriving safely  
in an attractive and well preserved body.  
But rather to skid in sideways,  
chocolate in one hand, martini in the other,  
Body thoroughly used up, totally worn out  
and screaming  
Woo Hoo what a ride.*

# ACT 1





Born and raised in the seaside community of Brighton, England, Mary Jones was the only daughter of a third generation local fisherman named Reilly and his childhood sweetheart, Chloe, the daughter of an innkeeper, who tended to their modest home.

Neither parent was educated in the classical sense—Chloe attended but two years of high school; Reilly took to the seas at the age of 14. Yet each developed a passion for more intellectual pursuits, she, romantic poetry—particularly the verses of Lake poets Longfellow, Wordsworth and Yeats, and he, Italian opera—particularly *La Bohème* (it made him cry) and *The Barber of Seville* (it made him laugh).

When Mary was just three, Chloe took to reading her favorite passages in soft, soothing tones till she fell a-sleep. When Mary was a little older, Chloe would take a break from her mundane, daily tasks and walk hand in hand with her daughter to the Brighton Cliffs. There, overlooking the thundering waves, Chloe would read Wordsworth aloud with the cool mist blowing in their faces.

“Mary, feel the grandeur of nature,” she would urge.

*I wandered lonely as a cloud  
That floats on high o'er Vales and Hills,  
When at once I saw a crowd  
A host of dancing daffodils;  
Along the Lake, beneath the trees,  
Ten thousand dancing in the breeze.*

Reilly had familial rituals also. On days of calm seas and blue skies, Mary would board the family's sole source of income, a modest red, green and white boat named *Gazzo di Fortuna* (the fishing boat of good fortune). Once the nets were in place, Reilly would serenade his daughter. While self-taught, Reilly's voice was strong and proud, his timing surprisingly professional.

Many years later, Mary would recall one particular day. She was about six. While at sea, the salty breezes suddenly turned bone-chilling blustery. Reilly saw his tiny daughter silently shiver and shudder. He wrapped her in a blanket and held her close. His strong frame was warm and comforting to the little child. He noticed how cold Mary's hands were. He turned on his tape recorder and began to sing *Che Gelida Manina*

(How Cold Your Hand is). “Father, what do the words mean?” asked Mary when Reilly had finished his duet with Pavarotti. “The song is about a poor young poet by the name of Rodolfo who meets a beautiful young lady, Mimi, who has been without heat. He notices how cold her hand is and suggests she stay with him, and that he will share what little he has although he is no millionaire.”

“Why do they sing in Italian?”

“Because Italians invented opera,” said Reilly. “Why did they invent opera?” asked Mary innocently.

“That’s for them to know and you to find out. When you get older, maybe you’ll travel to Italy.”

~

The cheery, outgoing Mary soon developed rituals of her own. She reveled in telling tall tales with a delightfully dramatic flair.

“Mum, I saw Edgar again this morning!” said the eight-year-old. Edgar was a 60-foot-long sea horse with sparkling white teeth that lived in the water, a mile down the road from the family’s modest cottage—a product of her vivid imagination.

“And what was he doing?”

“He was chasing some fish into the cove so daddy could catch them in his nets.”

“Was Edgar successful?”

“Absolutely, positively,” said the child, rolling her eyes and waving her hands expressively. “I counted a hundred fish, perhaps more. Daddy’s going to be very happy.”

This particular day, Reilly arrived home two hours earlier than usual. “Chloe, darling, had me one hell of a day. The bass practically jumped into the boat. If I



put any more fish in the hole, *Fortuna* might have sunk. Sold the entire lot to old man Johnson in a heartbeat. How about we celebrate? Take Mary down to the docks for an ice cream after dinner.”

Mary smiled at Chloe, nodding a mature, “I told you so.”

~

Two weeks later, Reilly day again had been bountiful. He had sold his significant catch to a buyer a few towns away. There he was treated to a cup of hot cider by the buyer’s daughter, an attractive thirty-something woman with long, sun-bleached blond hair, blue eyes and a very shapely figure tucked under work overalls. One kindness led to another, the cider morphed into a sexual encounter that Reilly determined was better sex than he had experienced in recent years with Chloe.

It also didn’t help matters that Chloe had also let herself go physically. The fair-haired young bride with apple cheeks and fiery red curly hair was replaced by a plump, rounded pumpkin with a wrinkled wrapper caused by excess exposure to the sun.

Reilly decided it was time to leave for greener pastures. The way he saw it, leaving Chloe with their modest house was payment enough for the fifteen years. So, after fifteen years of marriage, Reilly simply never came home. At first, Chloe thought his boat had sunk and he drowned. But after a week of searching, the townsfolk and the harbor patrol concluded he had just left. Reilly left no note, no forwarding address, no explanation, and most importantly, no money.

When reality set in, Chloe stoically declared, “Mary, we’ll just get on with our lives. May the buggar

rot in hell!” Chloe never spoke of Reilly again. Nor did Mary. It was as though Reilly never existed. A disillusioned Mary developed her own defense mechanism. She never translated another libretto or listened to another opera...until Gianni. And she began to question what she called “the normal order of society.”

~

Life—post Reilly—was particularly hard, in the beginning.

Chloe had a school-age daughter, no savings, and no particular employment skills. Dressed in her Sunday best, she begged and pleaded for the job opening she had found in the local paper. “But, you have absolutely no theatre experience,” countered the skeptical assistant manager.

“I know, I know, but I love Pinter, Beckett,” responded Chloe with a certain fire in her eyes.

The man paused. He had a hunch. Two days later, an excited Chloe began her—and her daughter’s—lifelong love affair with the theatre. She was named part-time gal Friday at the Theatre Royale on New Road in the center of Brighton, generally considered by London critics a regional theatre “of the first rank.”

After overhearing a few disingenuous comments from the actors about the theatre’s hiring a “weathered woman,” Chloe went on a personal restoration frenzy. In a matter of weeks, she lost twenty pounds, restored the original luster to her red hair and generously applied the latest wrinkle-removing moisturizers. The final touch was a low-cut, dark-rose dress that highlighted her generous bosom. The same ac-

tors who had labeled her an old lady were now actively trying to seduce her.

When she had finished her chores, Chloe would watch rehearsals, memorize lines and mimic the lead actress's performances from a distant corner of the theatre lobby near the ladies' room. One day, unbeknownst to Chloe, while the cast took a break from rehearsing a revival of the popular play *Old Times*—a dark, intense comic drama set around a love triangle—the play's youthful director, Martin Thurgood, accidentally stumbled into one of Chloe's imaginary rehearsals. *After the way you've humiliated me, how can you say our time is here and now*, said Chloe in a particularly bitter interpretation of the heroine Anna.

"While your interpretation of Anna is interesting, your delivery seems a touch too melodramatic," volunteered Thurgood unannounced.

Chloe was startled and embarrassed. "I'm sorry. I hope I didn't disturb you."

"There's nothing to be sorry about. You were quite good."

"Really!" said Chloe appearing like a wide eyed teenager.

"Would you like to read for a part?"

"Really!"

"You might be a perfect understudy for the part of Anna."

"Really!"

"Fact is we haven't found the right person yet, and we are a week away from opening night. God forbid if my lead, Nora Pennington, becomes incapacitated. You already seem to know the part, so how about you read right now?"

"Really!"

“Is your vocabulary restricted to the word *really*?” smiled Thurgood.

“I’m sorry. My name is Chloe.”

“Good. Very good, that’s a start. Do you know any multi-syllabic words?”

“Actually, I’m quite well versed. You’ve just taken my breath away. I never imagined...in my wildest dreams.” One hour later, after a brilliant reading, Thurgood offered Chloe the job of understudy...at three times the salary she was making as a girl Friday.

Two hours later, Chloe and Thurgood were in his flat making love. It was the most sharing, tender sex that Chloe had experienced in almost fifteen years. “I had almost forgotten how much I liked sex,” laughed Chloe. “My marriage was like an unforgiving sand-storm in the desert. No matter where I hid, the conditions never improved.”

“Well, we certainly don’t want you to wilt in the sun again,” smiled Thurgood as he returned for round two and three and ...

Somewhere between the sex and conversational chatter, Chloe also managed to obtain Thurgood’s appointment of Mary as his new gal Friday. Thanks to Thurgood, Chloe became a regular fixture in the numerous regional theatres within a 300-kilomtere radius of Brighton. Despite the fact that she was beautiful, spontaneous and well critiqued, Chloe knew she wasn’t destined for the London stage. But the theatre did provide Mary and Chloe a comfortable lifestyle. Fortunately for Chloe, the theatre was about far more than the money. Performing live was about personal fulfillment.

The Thurgood affair ended rather abruptly when he received an offer to direct a revival of Noel Cow-

ard's comedy of manners, *Design for Living*, at the prestigious Theatre Royal, Drury Lane in London's West End. As far as Chloe was concerned that was "two strikes and you're out" for the male species!

Mary wouldn't be far behind regarding her mother's assessment of men.

# 2



AT 14, MARY COULDN'T be described as sexy or seductive in the conventional sense. But her long, curly red hair, dark-green eyes and ever-present smile exuded an understated elegance and self-confidence that attracted the opposite sex like bees to honey. She also had a penchant for tastefully displaying her physical assets through sheer pastel-colored blouses that tended to drive the local boys into a frenzy when she passed.

Of all the boys in school, she was most attracted to a handsome upperclassman with black wavy hair and a cute bum, named Robert (AKA Bobbie) O'Toole. One late spring evening while she and a group of her girlfriends were meandering through the amusement park not far from the water's edge, Bob-

bie and a few of his friends met the girls at the ring-toss tent where for 50 pence one was given five plastic rings to toss at a line of open soda pop bottles. If a ring remained on the bottle neck, the winner got to pick a stuffed animal from the shelf.

Bobbie had seen Mary before but never in this light.

“Mary, how about I try to win you an animal?”

“Why?”

“Because I’d like a prize in return.” The way he looked into her eyes gave her goose bumps.

“What kind of prize?” she laughed, knowing full well.

“Come on...you know...it has to happen sometime.”

All eyes were on Mary. She paused to heighten his anticipation. She nodded yes. She was ready to lose her virginity. But it wouldn’t come cheap! “The deal is you’ve got to get two rings and two stuffed animals.”

“That’s not fair. That’s hard.”

“Life’s not fair,” she laughed. “Besides, think about your prize. That should be motivation enough.” That was that. Mary had made her final offer.

“Okay, okay,” agreed the already aroused young man. After four tosses, he had one bottle neck.

Mary smiled sensuously as she slowly dragged her finger across her mouth. “Real men don’t choke.”

The entire group laughed, all except the determined Bobbie. He tossed his fifth and final ring: it rattled around the bottle for what seemed like an eternity and then came to rest on the neck. Everybody cheered, including Mary. Bobbie took Mary over to the shelf. She picked a stuffed lion and a stuffed

lamb. Bobbie then took Mary's hand and started walking. "Where are we going?"

"You got your prize, I want mine." A smiling Mary turn-ed and waved goodbye to her friends.

Minutes later, Bobbie found a quiet setting surrounded by bushes in the North Laine area, a section of town populated by audaciously clothed prostitutes, spaced-out punks, Goths and lunatics who couldn't care less what their neighbors were doing. As soon as they settled on a patch of grass, Bobbie clumsily went to work, attempting to unbutton Mary's blouse and raise her skirt.

"I imagined we'd get to know each other a bit," said Mary, thinking of preliminary foreplay. This was her first time, and she imagined bells, whistles and romance.

Bobbie was of a different mindset. "Let's just do it. I'm ready." He continued to unbutton her blouse. A button snapped off. "Jesus, Bobbie, take it easy." Moments later he penetrated Mary. After what seemed to Mary to be just a few awkward, uneven, and somewhat painful thrusts, Bobbie moaned and rolled onto the grass. "Mary that was great!"

Mary didn't know exactly how to respond. The man of her dreams was a sexual dud. A selfish lug, who possessed none of the tenderness and sensitivity she had imagined. She hadn't even become aroused, and he was spent. It was an evening Mary would not soon forget.



# 3



ACADEMICALLY, MARY WAS extremely bright. She was awarded a scholarship at the nearby University of Sussex, where she enrolled in the Bachelor of Arts program, majoring in Drama and Cultural Studies, and making the dean's list 11 of 12 semesters prior to graduation. During university, consciously or subconsciously, Mary morphed into a cultural snob, limiting her immediate circle of friends—male and female—to those with an artistic or intellectual leaning.

While proud of her daughter's scholarship and academic achievements, Chloe was concerned about Mary's ability to support herself with such an esoteric degree and that limited circle of friends particularly if,

like her Mum, the proverbial “white knight” didn’t make an appearance.

As time permitted, Mary watched Mum’s theatre rehearsals and attended her plays. Chloe affectionately declared her daughter “a theatre rat.” Mary, like her Mum, became obsessed with the rhythms and circumstances of theatre creation and production. By her final year rolled at Sussex, she had held insightful interpretative conversations—some of her professors called them raging debates—with virtually every producer and director of Mum’s shows.

As she was wont to do on afternoons after class, Mary paid an unannounced visit to Chloe’s rehearsal, only to find she had arrived after the fact. Upon entering her Mum’s dressing room she heard what sounded like a series of soft erotic moans from behind the dressing screen to the right of the mirrored makeup table. Mum was making passionate love with her co-star, a substantially endowed woman named Annabelle Lee Sartre (no relation to Jean Paul). She watched quietly for the better part of a half hour, becoming quite aroused in the process.

“Chloe,” smiled the dark haired, blue eyed Annabelle Lee, “I think we have an audience.” The embarrassed, stark naked Chloe looked at Mary and rushed behind the dressing screen, searching for her clothes.

“Motheerrrr,” chuckled Mary, “if you’re looking for your panties and bra, they’re on the chaise lounge over there.”

“Oh Mary, I’m so sorry...”mumbled Chloe feeling embarrassed that her daughter saw her having sex with another woman.

“Sorry about what? It looked like you were having a smashing good time. I’m only sorry your friend noticed me. I was wondering what you were going to do for an encore.”

“Mary, that’s a dreadful thing to say,” said Chloe.

“Why?” interrupted Chloe’s partner devilishly. “I find that a rather intriguing question! By the way, I’m Annabelle Lee. You have one proud Mum. She’s told me a lot of wonderful things about you. How about we verbally spar over a spot of tea on Main Street?” suggested Annabelle Lee.

Twenty minutes later the girls were eating croissants and jam and washing them down with freshly brewed Kenyan Orange Pekoe tea. Annabelle Lee was not the least bit inhibited. She decided the gender issue should be addressed directly.

“I hope you don’t mind, your mother and I having it on. We’re both trying to find our way.”

“What does that mean?” questioned Mary.

“My husband decided to leave me about the same time Reilly left your Mum. He parting comments made me feel like an obsolete air-raid shelter.” Even Chloe had to smile.

“Right now your Mum and I trying to determine if our feelings are based upon a spiteful rebound or genuine caring. We’re also dealing with the antiquated belief that Lesbian relationships remain one of society’s aberrant behaviors.”

“Mum, how do you feel?”

“I think I love Annabelle Lee.”

“You think?”

“No, I don’t think. I do. Very much, in fact,” said Chloe reaching her hand out to Annabelle Lee.

“At some point, we’d like to get married,” said Annabelle Lee.

Mary was surprised by their depth of commitment. Exchanging affections with another woman was one thing, the desire to become a same-sex marital partner appeared a more complex matter.

Annabelle Lee sensed Mary’s hesitancy. “Don’t be arbitrary or shamelessly judgmental,” she suggested.

“Maybe I should have a go myself,” suggested Mary sarcastically.

“Maybe you should,” responded a dead serious Annabelle Lee.

~

Shortly thereafter, Mary decided to make love to an attractive fellow drama-school classmate and known lesbian, Phoebe Trincas. Mary invited Phoebe out for a drink.

“I’d be delighted,” smiled Phoebe devilishly. “I was starting to think you didn’t notice me.”

Phoebe suggested a gay bar called Macho Maureen’s on Queenstown Lane, which was renowned for its uninhibited patrons and their outrageous behavior. Mary’s initial response was a coy “never in a million years.” Phoebe’s gentle prodding and singular tenacity promised “an experience Mary would not soon forget.”

Maureen’s was more attractive and sophisticated than Mary had expected. A large, mirrored walnut burl bar dominated the center of the room, surrounded by small booths with tall opaque dividers covered with erotic drawings. Each booth had a small

table and two to four red-velvet lounge chairs, depending upon the size of the booth. The bar was tended by two tall, well-groomed, female bartenders who filled orders for a collection of topless waitresses. To keep the clutter to a minimum and add a certain *joie de vive*, there were no stools at the bar, and the background music featured smoky jazz such as Billie Holliday's seductive version of *At the End of An Affair* and Bobby Hackett's steamy trumpet playing *After She's Gone*. At the far end of the bar was a small dimly-lit stage.

By the time the ladies had consumed two Kettle One martinis, Phoebe began a sensuous exploration of Mary under the table. She placed her right hand on Mary's thigh and began a gentle, circular massage. A sense of pure pleasure covered Mary's face.

"Your thong is a mite wet, love," whispered Phoebe softly. Phoebe slithered down the lounge bench and embraced Mary, tenderly nibbling on her ear to enhance her arousal.

"Oh god!" moaned Mary. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing you haven't requested," smiled Phoebe.

They engaged in some sophisticated and tender foreplay until Mary was titillated beyond reproach. Phoebe was everything Bobbie O'Toole was not, thought Mary—experienced, sharing and thoughtful. Phoebe continued to gently explore as Mary had a surge of orgasms.

"I think it's time to go," whispered Phoebe.

"Go where?" asked Mary.

"My place." Twenty minutes later the girls were frolicking in Phoebe's bed, where they made love till 2 a.m. Mary absolutely adored the evening's reverie. The experience convinced her that tender, sensitive

lovmaking with a woman had significant advantages. There was no posturing. No macho insecurities. No faking.

~

Mary was supremely confident the performing arts were her calling. But after appearing in numerous school and local theatrical productions she concluded—like her Mum before he—she was not destined to become a great actress. Despite knowing her lines, she lacked the timing, the flair that great actresses possess. Unlike her Mum, she was not willing to settle for a life of bit parts and second rate productions. She still wanted to be associated and with theatre's *crème de la crème*.

After much soul-searching and professional consultations with people she respected, Mary concluded her destiny was to become THE great theatrical agent who identified and nurtured diamonds in the rough. Admittedly, she had no idea where to start.

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