

# **MY DINNER WITH MARY**

**A Play by Coni Koepfinger**

# MY DINNER WITH MARY

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MY DINNER WITH MARY

*Dedicated to  
Mary Tierney  
My dearest friend, mentor, and visionary artist*

MY DINNER WITH MARY

## MY DINNER WITH MARY

*My Dinner with Mary* was first performed in New York at The Player's Club, Gramercy Park. It was produced by Theater for the New City, and streamed live to over 1400 viewers. Directed by Byron C. Saunders and filmed by John David West. Special thanks to producer, Cyndy Marion for her caring support.

### *Cast*

*Mary – Mary Tierney\**

*Mary Ellen – Mary Ellen Ashley\**

*\* Members of AEA*

## MY DINNER WITH MARY

### CAST

MARY

A Broadway actress of great legacy now in her golden years. Has had great fame & fortune on stage and screen. Refuses to quit because of her age. Easily agitated. Now questioning everything. Has a lot of regrets but won't admit to her own feelings.

MARY ELLEN

Her friend, also an actress, has a legacy but not as famous as Mary. Joyful yet tenderly somber, she stays centered always and deadpan. Believes in every word of her ridiculous yet often profound, absurd reasoning.

MY DINNER WITH MARY

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**ACT I**  
**Scene 1**

*The stage is dark. As the lights come up, we see two women, MARY and MARY ELLEN, stand back-to-back in silhouette. Lights come up on Mary who turns and comes downstage, speaking on her cell phone.*

**MARY.** What? No Sara Jane. I cannot watch Little Jerry for you! I told you I have my dinner with Mary Ellen tonight. Ask your mother-in-law to wa... What? Why? She's got an important meeting, ha! Well so do I... I have no idea why I am having dinner with Mary Ellen, but I cannot and will not postpone it. Do you always have a reason for everything? Life is not always about reason. I really don't know, but it's long overdue. What? No, I invited her to dinner. No, I can't reschedule. She will most certainly take offense. It's a miracle she is giving me the time of day now. I mean, come on, all those years I ignored her calls. No! I know I am his grandmother, but I have... And I am trying to... What? No. No. What? 7:30. At Sardis. I don't know... Probably 9:30. I can't imagine more than two hours. Yes, I have to meet with her. Why? Why, I am really not sure why. Because I think I need to meet with her. That's all. Yes, I know that. Yes, dear. I know that too, but for some reason I arranged to meet with her for dinner and she accepted my invitation. Arrggghhh! Fine! Bring Little Jerry to the restaurant. We will get a booth upstairs. No it's fine, fine, no, no, fine. But not before 9:00. (*Calling off.*) Waiter! Waiter! Coffee please. (*Blackout.*)

**Scene 2**

**MARY ELLEN.** Look you. (*A spot comes up center on Mary Ellen as she looks intensely at the audience as if she was putting on makeup in a mirror.*) You cannot back out of this... I don't care if you have cramps, you always have

## MY DINNER WITH MARY

cramps when you think about her, so now you need to go to this dinner with your friend Mary and enjoy yourself. You have the cramps because you are afraid she is going to insult you, to yell at you or worse. I told you a million times, you cannot predict the future based on the past. Besides you need her right now, and you know that. You can't carry this secret into eternity. It's ironic that she invited you, I mean think about it. It's like a sign. Now, put on that pretty little face and get your fanny to Sardis. I wonder if she's still as cute as you are? She used to be jealous of your good looks, remember? (*Winks at herself, then pinches her own cheeks.*) Just look at those pink cheeks. Don't be afraid. This is like a play. Real life and you have to play your part... No matter what, you will come out on top, you always do. God always watches out for you, my dear Mary Ellen, so stop worrying. See that guardian angel on your shoulder? You're a good person. You've never hurt anyone. There is absolutely nothing to be afraid of ... She's just another actress. Yes, she was very famous, but so were you. I mean you both have legacies, and you respect each other as artists. Right? So why shouldn't you be friends again? You used to pal around together. Remember? And she took quite a shine to you. Remember those days at Uta's studio. She used to ask you to walk her poodle and Mary used to get so mad, saying that you were the teacher's pet! Ha! But there were other times too... like when she got locked out of her apartment. She called you. She stayed with you. Those were fun times. I couldn't believe she called me. I felt like a little school girl with a crush. Funny how that ebb never subsides. Okay, enough make-up, let's go. You look beautiful darling! (*Mary Ellen kisses herself in the mirror. Blackout.*)

### Scene 3

*Lights come up on Mary, who is sitting alone at the table downstage. The sound of soft music plays against the clatter of the busy restaurant. Mary answers her cellphone as it rings.*

**MARY.** Hello Sara Jane. Yes. I am here. No, she is not due till 7:30. Because I am always early, I was born early and I will probably die early, well... Jesus God Sara Jane- are you really my daughter? Where's your sense of irony? Yes, yes, you can still bring him. Yes, I love him and he loves me. I know, I know... I



## MY DINNER WITH MARY

love you too. Oh, my gawd, she's here. I see her. Damn she looks good! I didn't even get a chance to put on my lipstick. I gotta go, here she comes... Mary Ellen is coming now. Bye. Bye. (*Enter Mary Ellen. She stands by the table and smiles.*) Well, look at you. I'm not going to give you blocking, sit down. Make yourself miserable.

**MARY ELLEN.** Well nice to see you too Mary. Sorry I'm late. (*She sits.*)

**MARY.** It's 7:33. You're not late.

**MARY ELLEN.** Three minutes.

**MARY.** What's three minutes?

**MARY ELLEN.** Three minutes is... three minutes.

**MARY.** Of course.

**MARY ELLEN.** A person can be dead in three minutes.

**MARY.** Less than that.

**MARY ELLEN.** Have you started checking the obituaries yet? Funny I used to make fun of my parents for that but now I, well I check Facebook, I mean... Who reads the newspapers anymore? But I do check those online legacies...

**MARY.** Okay, no morbidity tonight. I'm off-duty on the subject of death and dying. Please. Every single person lately... (*Mockingly.*) "Have you heard about Billy Stein? He kicked the bucket while he was on vacation, blah, blah, blah. What a waste of money- He always stayed at those lavish hotels.

**MARY ELLEN.** Sure, sure. Let's change it up. You look well.

**MARY.** Do I?

**MARY ELLEN.** Well... yes. What do you mean by that? (*There is extended pause as she smiles*) Okay... So?

**MARY.** So?

**MARY ELLEN.** So, why are we here?

**MARY.** Big question. The question since time began.

**MARY ELLEN.** No. Little question.

**MARY.** What?

**MARY ELLEN.** I wasn't referring to "the big question" of why mankind is here on earth, I meant why are you and I here tonight?

**MARY.** Good question. It is a good question. It is a very good question. In fact, I had been asking myself this question all day. Do you happen to have an answer to that question?

**MARY ELLEN.** Me?

## MY DINNER WITH MARY

**MARY.** Yes, you. Of course, you! I'm certainly not asking the waiter. If there even is a waiter anymore. I asked him to bring the coffee first, I hope you don't mind. If it's cold, I can have him bring you a new one. I don't drink, so booze is out of the question... To be honest, I thought if I ordered coffee, then you would get the hint and maybe you wouldn't want to have wine. You drink white wine, don't you? See I remembered. Nowadays I don't like it when people drink wine with me... It's always the same, they drink, and they either get silly, which will annoy me, or they start whining, which will depress me. Hey, do you think they call it wine because it makes people whine?

**MARY ELLEN.** No.

**MARY.** No?

**MARY ELLEN.** I like wine. A lot.

**MARY.** You like wine.

**MARY ELLEN.** Yes. I'm not an alcoholic and I enjoy a glass of wine now and then. In fact, I used to date a man who owned a vineyard. It's pretty fascinating. I learned a lot about wine.

**MARY.** Well, good for you. Who cares? Have a glass of wine. No one is telling you not to have wine, I just don't want to hear you whining about your stupid problems and laughing your head off at your own not funny jokes... You see where I'm coming from, right? I'm actually sparing us both from a lot of idiotic embarrassment. And it's a huge waste of time.

**MARY ELLEN.** Well, far be it from me to embarrass you.

**MARY.** I wasn't saying you are but...

**MARY ELLEN.** I don't whine and I will try not to laugh.

**MARY.** Really? You can control your laughter onstage and off? You always had a great stage laugh. You were famous for it.

**MARY ELLEN.** What? What are you getting at? I never...

**MARY.** Forget it. This isn't going to work, Mary Ellen. You see I recall things one way and obviously you don't agree. Believe me, I saw it coming.

**MARY ELLEN.** Saw what?

**MARY.** You know what I'm talking about... Forget it. I don't want to talk.

**MARY ELLEN.** No, I really don't. Look, when you called me to come to dinner with you, I thought, wow, she must be thinking about me again. After all these years... Thinking of me. I was touched. I mean, you thought of me at least enough to want to talk about something but if you don't know what it is, I

## MY DINNER WITH MARY

certainly don't. Look it's okay. All these years, especially in the theatre, I mean, we live a million lives in ten years... It drives us all bonkers. I'm a good listener but if you don't really want to talk. Don't. There really isn't anything to say anymore. Right? I mean, why talk? There's nothing to talk about anymore. Right? Thanks for inviting me. You really do look good Mary. I've missed your pretty smile. See you later.

**MARY.** No, you won't see me later. No more second chances, Mary Ellen. This is it! I don't know, I don't know, I don't know anymore. Who can I trust? No one! It's all too complex. People living, dying, talking, not talking, having dinner together, never speaking to each other... Well, they speak, but they really don't say anything. Do they? I mean, we converse but do we create the words of divine magic? Do we? Is there really a way to keep our secrets safe? To protect us from our own desires! We stumble, we fall. We are conditioned to believe what is right and what is wrong. But that in and of itself is terribly wrong. Oh God Mary Ellen, I truly thought you'd be different by now. I so hoped. You know I always admired you. Can you imagine how many years have gone by between us.

Between everyone. How many lost moments of truth. Imagine! I mean we still have our imaginations, don't we? You'd never believe the things I think about. I imagine things like global peace. Or stopping hunger. Or finding a way to house all of the homeless people. Then there's prostitution... Have you heard it's on the rise? Why? Maybe I'm just getting old. But then there's human trafficking, yet psychics are being arrested right here in New York City! How can anyone be arrested for telling someone's future? That is so absurd. The future is the future.

**MARY ELLEN.** Hmmmm, which one is our waiter?

**MARY.** How the heck do I know?

**MARY ELLEN.** You just said that you ordered coffee from someone...

**MARY.** Operative word, "someone". I knew you'd do this to me. Everyone expects me to keep track of every little detail. That's why I don't bother to go out anymore. Too big of a risk. It's like they set me up to fail.

**MARY ELLEN.** I'll be right back. I'm thirsty. (*Exits.*)

**MARY.** (*Shouts after her.*) Your coffee is getting cold. (*To herself.*)

She thinks I look good. That's nice. That's really nice. But this won't last. It never does. The pleasantries will fade, then wham, she'll put you on the spot just like everyone else. She'll ask you to recall things that probably never happened. And you know you cannot lie. You will call her out on it. But there is no way to

## MY DINNER WITH MARY

uncover the truth. I mean seriously, memories are memories (*Pulls out a compact, powders her nose.*) Just ride it out, Mary. Save face. Maybe you should pop the question? Don't be afraid of this. She really won't hurt you. She's a nice person. And you do like her. A lot. You've always liked her. If you want to preserve all of those nice tender feelings within yourself, you've got say nice things. Kind words, sweet language. Don't go off on her like a banshee. That's not you anymore. That was your ego, you are no longer like that. You're a gentle spirit now. Keep your temper and frustration at bay.

**MARY ELLEN.** (*Returns with a drink, sits, takes a sip*) Ahhh, much better. Hits the spot.

**MARY.** Good. So then. Let's do this. Let's talk. You go first. So, you never married huh?

**MARY ELLEN.** No.

**MARY.** Never?

**MARY ELLEN.** Well... Not sure.

**MARY.** Oh for God's sake...

**MARY ELLEN.** What?

**MARY.** It's a simple question.

**MARY ELLEN.** Well, no, it's not.

**MARY.** Do you have a marriage certificate?

**MARY ELLEN.** I doubt it.

**MARY.** My God. Must you complicate everything?

**MARY ELLEN.** But it is complicated. There were a lot of circumstances.

**MARY.** What do you mean?

**MARY ELLEN.** I think I got married as a teenager.

**MARY.** Ya think? So, you must have some recall of the details.

**MARY ELLEN.** There was a lot of partying going on in those days... You know, the summer of love and all that jazz. Flower children. I ran away from home and...

**MARY.** You ran away from home? Miss Goody two shoes. You ran away...

**MARY ELLEN.** Please. Don't broadcast it, you never know who's listening.

**MARY.** Where did you go?

**MARY ELLEN.** Some kind of hippie commune. We were hitch-hiking. This guy picked us up. My girlfriend Donna was upset with her mother for making her wear dress pants to Freshman orientation, she wasn't allowed to wear jeans... So,

## MY DINNER WITH MARY

she said, 'I'm running away from home, wanna come?' And I said, 'Sure.' Then I met this boy with long, blonde, curly hair and it fascinated me.

**MARY.** Come on, you married him because he had nice hair?

**MARY ELLEN.** I was sixteen. Hair means a lot when you're sixteen.

**MARY.** So superficial.

**MARY ELLEN.** Don't tell me you never dated a guy for his looks.

**MARY.** Well...

**MARY ELLEN.** You have slept with and married more gorgeous, leading men than most people can dream about.

**MARY.** Dreaming is overrated.

**MARY ELLEN.** No, it's not! Dreaming is wonderful... You can do whatever you want in a dream and there are no consequences.

**MARY.** But you have no control either.

**MARY ELLEN.** Do you think you've got control in your waking life?

**MARY.** No, of course not. That's why I'd rather be on the stage. So... This guy you married... What ever happened to him?

**MARY ELLEN.** How should I know? I had a ten o'clock curfew.

**MARY.** On your wedding night? You went home.

**MARY ELLEN.** Why sure, you knew my parents, they were very strict.

**MARY.** But you said you ran away from home.

**MARY ELLEN.** I did. But only for the day. It was a wild day. Actually, it got pretty ugly. He brought us home, but on his terms. I wish it had never happened. You know, life is funny... Half the time we do things without thinking or we think about the things that we can't do. And most of the time, we regret both of those choices.

**MARY.** I have no regrets. Not really. Do you?

**MARY ELLEN.** Definitely one. (*Under her breath.*) My times with you.

**MARY.** So, you were saying. About your marriage? Is it legal?

**MARY ELLEN.** I have no idea. All I know is that someone named "Major Tom" performed a group ceremony of some sort and then we were all told to "commence consummation". (*Whispers.*) In other words, there was an orgy.

**MARY.** Orgy!!!!

**MARY ELLEN.** Shhhhh! Please! I remember the music, it was very loud. And I think everyone was really stoned on pot. And I remember the smell. Pot mixed with a chicken BBQ.

## MY DINNER WITH MARY

**MARY.** Jesus! Why did I not know about this?

**MARY ELLEN.** We had somewhat of a limited engagement with our personal friendship.

**MARY.** I wonder why.

**MARY ELLEN.** Do you? Do you really?

**MARY.** No. (*Aside.*) Oh God here it comes.

**MARY ELLEN.** You don't know? (*Aside.*) She has to be lying.

**MARY.** I lost contact with a lot of theatre people after I got married.

**MARY ELLEN.** I'm talking about us. Ever speculate on why we split up?

**MARY.** Yes.

**MARY ELLEN.** And?

**MARY.** I think, I think... Marriage is overrated.

**MARY ELLEN.** You should know. You've had seven.

**MARY.** Whoa! You're keeping track?

**MARY ELLEN.** You're a celeb. Come on. You must have known I followed you. We were like sisters then you just ignored me. After my sister died.

**MARY.** Yes, how is she?

**MARY ELLEN.** Who? My sister?

**MARY.** Yes.

**MARY ELLEN.** She's dead. She was murdered.

**MARY.** Yes. What was her name? I always liked her.

**MARY ELLEN.** Michele Marie.

**MARY.** She was an artist. Right?

**MARY ELLEN.** Yes.

**MARY.** I think it might be harder for an artist to lose an artist.

**MARY ELLEN.** Oh, most definitely.

**MARY.** Mary Ellen, have you ever been in love?

**MARY ELLEN.** In love?

**MARY.** Yes.

**MARY ELLEN.** Like "in love" in love?

**MARY.** Yes.

**MARY ELLEN.** Yes. Yes, I have. Once. Maybe.

**MARY.** Only once?

**MARY ELLEN.** Yes. Have you?

**MARY.** Who were you in love with?

## MY DINNER WITH MARY

**MARY ELLEN.** You go first.

**MARY.** No, you. I invited you here, so it's my call. You go first. Besides I'm treating for dinner.

**MARY ELLEN.** Should we order? I think I need to eat. I'm not feeling so hot...

**MARY.** What? Are you sick? Are you going to get me sick? Did you do a Covid test? Oh God, tell me you're not positive. You could have cancelled; I wouldn't have taken it personally. Seriously, we can reschedule even now. Jesus, I really cannot afford to get sick right now, I have a new show coming up. Let's just forget about it... Just go home, relax. You don't mind if I don't hug you, right? You understand.

**MARY ELLEN.** Relax. I'm not contagious, Mary. Calm down.

**MARY.** How do you know?

**MARY ELLEN.** It's just my ulcers. From stress.

**MARY.** Oh. Sorry.

**MARY ELLEN.** It's okay.

**MARY.** Really, I'm sorry.

**MARY ELLEN.** It's okay. It's not your fault. But it stressed me out, your dinner invitation. Has it really been 34 years? I guess it has. We drifted apart after your Sara Jane was born. I do regret not having a kid.

**MARY.** You don't, I mean, you shouldn't.

**MARY ELLEN.** What?

**MARY.** You could have.

**MARY ELLEN.** I need a drink.

**MARY.** Don't! Especially if you have ulcers. Forget it. Damn it, who the hell am I to tell you what to do. I drank for over twenty years, wasted a lot of time and energy, but I will tell you, it's not worth trying to self-medicate when you're lonely and not getting the parts. Directors can smell the booze on you. Like bloodhounds. They can smell it a mile away. We actors have it way worse than most people. I mean I know what you're going through... We are getting older; we spend a lot of time reflecting. I mean when we're not working, it gets unbearable. I don't know what's worse... Not working or going to auditions. It's so humiliating. They say an actor is only as good as his next job. Or is it his last job? In any case, it can be so demeaning. So, good to see you, Mary Ellen. Are *you* doing anything? Anything exciting? Are you in a show?

## MY DINNER WITH MARY

**MARY ELLEN.** What? (*Still lost in her own thoughts.*) Sorry I was thinking about having a baby. I was pregnant and I just starting to show...

**MARY.** Show? What show? Are you in a show? I know you are still living in New York. You're still involved, right?

**MARY ELLEN.** No. I mean, yes, I'm still involved in New York theatre. Done a few commercials and spots on sit-coms but... You know, if I would have had that baby, I bet my life would have been totally different. I lost it.

**MARY.** Of course it would have, but let's talk about what matters now. Okay, so, what show have you done that I may have heard... Didn't you just do something at *Secondary Stages*?

**MARY ELLEN.** No. They brought in a star.

**MARY.** Oh poppycock. You're a star.

**MARY ELLEN.** Tell my agent that.

**MARY.** Yeah, well... My agent is useless. Last year, she sent me to 7 auditions. That's less than one a month.

**MARY ELLEN.** Who is your agent?

**MARY.** Carrie Frances, CAA.

**MARY ELLEN.** I was considering a change.

**MARY.** Maybe we should start our own agency... Something for "seasoned" artists. Wouldn't that be something?

**MARY ELLEN.** Yes. That would be something. Mary. Stop. Please darlin'. I'm tired of this conversation. Too many unsaid thoughts.

**MARY.** What?

**MARY ELLEN.** Maybe we should order some food?

**MARY.** Oh, now you're hungry.

**MARY ELLEN.** Not really. I don't feel very good about myself these days and I don't need you to make me feel worse. Mary, look, we have both had fulfilling careers. There's no contest here.

**MARY.** You're correct. I did not ask you here to get an update on your resume.

**MARY ELLEN.** Okay then tell me, who were you in love with? Let's revisit that subject. Or not. Look, I know there's something on your mind Mary, spit it out.

**MARY.** Alright, I invited you here because I've been trying to figure out the purpose of my life.

**MARY ELLEN.** How would I know?



## MY DINNER WITH MARY

**MARY.** Oh say anything. Just make something up.

**MARY ELLEN.** You mean like an improv?

**MARY.** Maybe. I need something. It just feels like I'm a hamster on a wheel.

**MARY ELLEN.** First, tell me who you were in love with then I might be able to put something together here. The plot will thicken. Maybe we were both in love with the same person and perhaps that is why we drifted apart. Look, at our age we can make it up, most of our friends are dead so... Who cares!

**MARY.** I guess that would make sense. If there is a way to make sense of it... Is there?

**MARY ELLEN.** What?

**MARY.** I mean, it's so easy when you're in a play. You got your motivation; you know where you are going; you know where you've been... But this, this life stuff, this is unbearable. We are forced off the stage into this unscripted dialogue.

**MARY ELLEN.** Yes. Absolutely. Depressing. I don't want to think about it. Wait! What if they are scripted?

**MARY.** What?

**MARY ELLEN.** I mean, what if there is a way to see your own story, read your own play. I mean every play has playwright, and every playwright has his price. Right?

**MARY.** You mean you want to bribe God?

**MARY ELLEN.** Absolutely.

**MARY.** You are nuts.

**MARY ELLEN.** Absolutely.

**MARY.** Is there something wrong with your head?

**MARY ELLEN.** Absolutely. You see, if we can get God to give us an advanced copy of the script, surely He has an outline or vague idea of what's going to happen to us. Otherwise, we'd be like Didi and Gogo in that silly Beckett play... What's it called?

**MARY.** *Godot.*

**MARY ELLEN.** Go Dough? Oh, oh, yeah... *Godot.*

**MARY.** *Waiting for Godot.* And don't call it silly! It's a masterpiece.

**MARY ELLEN.** Why exactly do you think he got a Pulitzer for that play?

**MARY.** No idea. Maybe because it was good.

**MARY ELLEN.** But what was good about it? I always thought it was confusing.

## MY DINNER WITH MARY

**MARY.** You'd think you'd like *that*. Confusing is your middle name.

**MARY ELLEN.** But it's about nothing. No one ever comes, they just wait.

**MARY.** Exactly the point.

**MARY ELLEN.** Sort of like life.

**MARY.** Yes. Now, let's stop speculating about dramatic masterpieces and talk about us.

**MARY ELLEN.** Why?

**MARY.** We need to change the subject. This is unholy. Unsanitary. Unreal. And it's stupid to pretend we can presume we know what Samuel Beckett was thinking when he wrote that play.

**MARY ELLEN.** Alright then... Let's go back in time. Let's go back to investigating your love life. Now, that's exciting.

**MARY.** Yes, everything seems more alive when you're in love...

**MARY ELLEN.** Absolutely. Think back, I want to hear every detail.

**MARY.** Okay, okay, okay. We were only married a year. I adored him. My beautiful Russian boy. I met as my stage manager.

**MARY ELLEN.** I recall. He was beautiful. Everyone called him "Ivan, the Beautiful", even the rags.

**MARY.** Yes, Ivan, my beautiful Russian comrade. So gentle, so passionate, so fierce in the bed.

**MARY ELLEN.** Yes. I remember.

**MARY.** What?

**MARY ELLEN.** I mean I recall you telling me... Maybe?

**MARY.** I did? I don't recall ever...

**MARY ELLEN.** Or maybe I just imagined it. Quite a charmer. I remember those black olive eyes.

**MARY.** It was his eyes that captured my soul.

**MARY ELLEN.** You have a soul?

**MARY.** Ha, ha, ha. Thanks.

**MARY ELLEN.** Just teasing. Go on... Please.

**MARY.** It was my publicist, Anna Mae Strickles. She thought I should start having some illicit affairs. You know how they do that promotional crap in the Hollywood rags.

**MARY ELLEN.** But you were married!

## MY DINNER WITH MARY

**MARY.** I know. And it was a wonderful marriage. I'm telling you it was purely a career move, they made me do it. They insisted and started manufacturing these "fake affairs" to appease the trash rags...

**MARY ELLEN.** None of them were real?

**MARY.** No. Well, for the most part. What was I supposed to do? I didn't have anything else. You were lucky. You had a lot of tragedy in your life.

**MARY ELLEN.** Did you really say that Mary?

**MARY.** Sorry. But you know what I mean. Then there was my stupid figure problem.

**MARY ELLEN.** You... a figure problem? You were built like a Barbie Doll.

**MARY.** Yeah, you know how Barbies keep their figures? They don't eat. I wasn't allowed to eat anything but kale and cucumbers.

**MARY ELLEN.** Kale and cucumbers?

**MARY.** Negative calories.

**MARY ELLEN.** Yuck. So... all those affairs? They were just media hype?

**MARY.** Of course! I typically don't even like men, you know that. I mean, with my history of abuse, I mean. Everything about that was manufactured fiction. I tried to explain it to Ivan, but he was very jealous. I didn't think he could even get angry. I begged him to forgive me and promised that I would stop them but he said, 'The damage is done.' There was a great silence and then he left. Seven weeks later he sent me a note just before I was going on as Martha in *Virginia Woolf*. I can recall it like it was yesterday. "Mary, I cannot bare this falsehood any longer. It was hard to give you up to your fans but I want, need, must have true love in my life, my dear. Love. Real love. And I believe I have found it again. Thank you for our moments together. I hope you find love again, or at least happiness. I have filed for divorce. Yours truly, Ivan". I heard about his accident, I tried to go see him in the hospital, but I couldn't do it. I tried calling him. I didn't hear a thing until I saw his obituary- I was touring a show in Oslo. They were paying me so well, I couldn't leave...

**MARY ELLEN.** There was never anyone else for you?

**MARY.** No.

**MARY ELLEN.** What about that large Irish fellow with the flaming red hair? I thought he was adorable. You two looked so good together.

**MARY.** Liam Colley? We had nothing. He was paid well to follow me around to get his green card.

## MY DINNER WITH MARY

**MARY ELLEN.** Oh. What about your affair with Sinatra?

**MARY.** Oh please. I wish.

**MARY ELLEN.** John Houston? I read about those wild and crazy escapades. They had to be real.

**MARY.** Define real. Cinematic, not real. Now, it's your turn. Enough about me. I told you my deep dark secret. You have to tell me yours.

**MARY ELLEN.** My heart was broken early on. I think it always will be. I was truly in love... Er, um... with a boy, man, much younger... But who can control fate? Anyhow, when he died in my arms, I thought the universe was punishing me for my "great sin".

**MARY.** Sin? You? Nah!

**MARY ELLEN.** Adultery.

**MARY.** Did you know that he was married?

**MARY ELLEN.** Yes.

**MARY.** I'm sorry.

**MARY ELLEN.** So was I. To be fair, he started it. Right in front of you, your, your friend, our friend. I am so ashamed.

**MARY.** I knew him? This was someone I knew. Who?

**MARY ELLEN.** I am not sure you want to know.

**MARY.** Oh Jesus, Mary and Joseph. Would I ask you if I didn't want to know?

**MARY ELLEN.** Yes.

**MARY.** For God's sake, Mary Ellen, just tell me. Stop being a child. (*Digs in her purse, blows her nose in a tissue, puts it back.*) Who is it? I can't bare this stupid silence. Just tell me. You think I'm going to tell someone?

**MARY ELLEN.** No.

**MARY.** Then please, just tell me. So, you had an affair. So big deal!

**MARY ELLEN.** With a married man.

**MARY.** You said he was a kid. Maybe it was an unhappy marriage.

**MARY ELLEN.** Oh, it was.

**MARY.** He probably married too young. Don't blame yourself. Don't beat yourself up over it.

**MARY ELLEN.** Let's talk about something else. Please.

**MARY.** No! Now I'm really curious.

**MARY ELLEN.** Please. I'd rather not say.

## MY DINNER WITH MARY

**MARY.** Oh okay... Have it your way. (*Mary takes out her cell phone as Mary Ellen takes out a handkerchief. After an extended pause Mary Ellen starts to sniff, as if she's going to cry.*) Don't even start that. Please.

**MARY ELLEN.** Okay. (*Wipes her nose. Blows her nose. Coughs.*) What's the food like here?

**MARY.** Not bad.

**MARY ELLEN.** You're a regular, right?

**MARY.** Yes... Aren't you?

**MARY ELLEN.** Yes, but I never come.

**MARY.** That makes sense.

**MARY ELLEN.** Didn't they use to have your caricature on the wall?

**MARY.** Yes.

**MARY ELLEN.** Where is it now?

**MARY.** How the hell do I know?

**MARY ELLEN.** Mine's still in the bathroom. In the handicapped stall. I called to complain once and they hung up on me. I called back and they apologized and hung up again. I came in and asked to speak to the manager and he apologized and told me they had a new chef and if wanted to try anything on the house, I could be their guest. Well, I was hungry, so I just gave up on complaining.

**MARY.** Yes. They did get a new chef. Yuri Romanoff. He's Russian.

**MARY ELLEN.** Like Ivan.

**MARY.** Yes.

**MARY ELLEN.** He used to cook.

**MARY.** Yes, how'd you know that?

**MARY ELLEN.** You must have told me... Or maybe I imagined it, his being Russian and all.

**MARY.** He was a wonderful culinary artist. Eating dinner with him was a sensual delight. Often, we would cook together. He'd be half-naked. We would slowly sample the delights, hot soup was my favorite, and then...

**MARY ELLEN.** And then...

**MARY.** Well... You know.

**MARY ELLEN.** No, I don't.

**MARY.** Oh Mary Ellen, please! I am trying to be discreet.

**MARY ELLEN.** I know but you lost me.

**MARY.** We moved into bedroom for the main course.

## MY DINNER WITH MARY

**MARY ELLEN.** Oh, you mean that...

**MARY.** Of course! But tell me... I know you had a lot of offers. Everyone took a shine to you. You were adorable and enchanting... Still are. The rags never had a bad thing to say about you- no dirt. It's unnatural. Mary Ellen, you're just like a beacon of light. Just look at you, your face is radiant still.

**MARY ELLEN.** You think so? It's my new makeup, Christian Dior, anti-aging. But it's \$185 a bottle.

**MARY.** Jesus... You pay that? Okay, so, I mean, I'm not stupid. I've been around, I've seen it all... On stage and off. So many scenes... Acts. Lines. And the ones that really seem to make a mark, that make a difference are the ones that come from and go to one thing. One true thing. Right?

**MARY ELLEN.** Sure.

**MARY.** Do you know what I'm talking about?

**MARY ELLEN.** I think so.

**MARY.** I'm talking about love. Unconditional love. Innocent, real love.

**MARY ELLEN.** Yes. Love seems to be the source of it all.

**MARY.** But what is it? Really. They say you can't define love but that's just an excuse. The poets, the playwrights, the composers can. Bah! I think, I mean, I think if we could understand love, try to uncover it at the root - maybe we could be a little better at it. I mean, we are like stones, here to build a better humanity. Aren't we? But we don't. Instead, we watch it crumble. We drive ourselves insane. Fretting over the past or thinking about the future. It's so hard to let it go. But the past doesn't really exist, nor does the future. Nothing does except right now. Still, we just can't seem to stop looking back. It's not easy.

**MARY ELLEN.** Oh, I agree. It's not. And they say human beings can't really love each other... We can love dogs, cats, restaurants, and cars but trying to love another human being seems darn near impossible. Yet, the reality is...

**MARY.** Damn it, Mary Ellen... "I don't want realism, I want magic!"

**MARY ELLEN.** Ah yes! Tennessee Williams. God, how I love him.

**MARY.** Me too, I'm a huge Williams fan but don't let's lose focus here.

**MARY ELLEN.** Me? You're the one running off on the Aristotelian tangent!

**MARY.** Don't change the subject, or I will have to get strict with you.

**MARY ELLEN.** Oh really?

**MARY.** Really.

**MARY ELLEN.** How so?

## MY DINNER WITH MARY

**MARY.** Come on, can we just go back to the topic? Tell me about love.

**MARY ELLEN.** You want me to tell you about love? I'm not even married. I've never had a serious relationship-- what makes you think I know about love?

**MARY.** Why else would we having dinner together her tonight?

**MARY ELLEN.** Oh, only you can answer that.

**MARY.** Really?

**MARY ELLEN.** Well, it makes sense because you invited me ...

**MARY.** So then why did you come?

**MARY ELLEN.** Because you asked me to... Because we were once very close. You and I were like sisters. More that sisters. And I suppose I still have a little bit of that fondness for you in my heart and I was hoping that you might still...

**MARY.** Bullshit!

**MARY ELLEN.** Excuse me? (*Beat*) Look I really can't handle confrontation.

**MARY.** Well, we are never going to get on to ordering dinner if you're going to be confrontational...

**MARY ELLEN.** If I? You're the one that's "Mary Contrary" here tonight. Still, we should order.

**MARY.** I think not. We are not in the courting business these days my dear. Now, be rational. "Mary Contrary." Aww, Ivan used to call me that. How did you know?

**MARY ELLEN.** Maybe we should just call it a night.

**MARY.** No! What kind of night should we call it? A good night? A bad night? *A Night of the Iguana*? Oh my God, Mary Ellen, you were absolutely stunning in that my dear. I envied you in that show... (*Donning an accent*) "Look Ms. Fellowes, if paramour means what I think it means, you're gambling with your front teeth!" I couldn't take my eyes off of you.

**MARY ELLEN.** You saw me? You saw me as Maxine?

**MARY.** Yes, of course. I wouldn't missed it for the world. You should have had that film, Ava Gardner had nothing on you my dear. I was there opening night.

**MARY ELLEN.** I never knew.

**MARY.** I almost came backstage.

**MARY ELLEN.** Well, why didn't you?

**MARY.** Afraid to show my love for you, I guess.

**MARY ELLEN.** What?

## MY DINNER WITH MARY

**MARY.** You heard me.

**MARY ELLEN.** You loved me?

**MARY.** Yep. Still do, I suppose. Okay... Yes, I love you. Not sure why but...

**MARY ELLEN.** Well, that's... I mean... That's very nice. I guess...

**MARY.** Why? Why is it nice?

**MARY ELLEN.** I don't know, it's just... Well, it feels nice. Here, in my heart. I feel a feeling... And it feels nice.

**MARY.** Can you be more specific?

**MARY ELLEN.** Well, maybe. (*Takes a beat. Fans herself. Puts ice down her shirt.*) Why I'm really shocked to learn of this. I mean I had no idea that you even cared I existed. You were such a big star. I mean, for a while there, we were friends when we were both getting started, then your career really took off and I couldn't keep up. I reached out to you... but you... ignored me.

**MARY.** I know, and I feel guilty for that. I wasn't living a real life anymore. And I am sorry that we...

**MARY ELLEN.** No, no please... There's nothing to feel guilty about here. You were so busy.

**MARY.** No. I wasn't that busy.

**MARY ELLEN.** What then?

**MARY.** I ignored you on purpose.

**MARY ELLEN.** Why?

**MARY.** Why not?

**MARY ELLEN.** That's unkind.

**MARY.** Man's inhumanity to man. Dog eat dog. You know. Williams knows, ask him.

**MARY ELLEN.** Really?

**MARY.** Williams. *Iguana*. Huston asked about you. I told them that you busy with your musicals and won't even consider a film. Could have been you with Richard Burton.

**MARY ELLEN.** Why would you intentionally sabotage my career?

**MARY.** Jealous.

**MARY ELLEN.** Of me?

**MARY.** Of course. *Dolly, Music Man, Sweeney Todd*... You got all of glamour roles. I felt bad that you were fading but...



## MY DINNER WITH MARY

**MARY ELLEN.** But I thought you said you loved me. You're not really making sense here. And I refuse to let you make me cry.

**MARY.** Oldest story in the book. Right? We always hurt the ones we love.

**MARY ELLEN.** I don't know what to say. And by the way, *Sweeney Todd* was not a glamour role, but it was the play that changed my life. Anyhow... I'm getting, well, fatigued. Let's just say goodnight.

**MARY.** Nope.

**MARY ELLEN.** What?

**MARY.** I am not going to let you go until you answer my question.

**MARY ELLEN.** You can't keep me here.

**MARY.** I bet I can. You're not going get off that easy, my dear. You think if you can insult me, then I will just let you off the hook...

**MARY ELLEN.** But you can insult me

**MARY.** Of course. It's in my nature.

**MARY ELLEN.** You are such an odd bird. Really. You are so hard to read.

*(Starts to leave)* I think you may need therapy, Mary. Have a good night.

**MARY.** No. I will not have a good night if you leave me right now. You have no idea how much it took for me to say those words. And I have more to say, I put you in my will. Come on, have a heart. I told you I love you and you just get up and walk away.

**MARY ELLEN.** Wait, what?

**MARY.** You heard me.

**MARY ELLEN.** Say that again.

**MARY.** "I love you." I mean, I have no idea what in the world that could possibly mean to you, but something is moving me to say it- right here, right now- to you.

**MARY ELLEN.** You love me?

**MARY.** Yes. Do I stutter?

**MARY ELLEN.** You love me?

**MARY.** Have you looked into getting a hearing aid?

**MARY ELLEN.** You want to, I mean, you're not attracted to me in that way... I mean like romantic...

**MARY.** No! Hell no. What are you nuts? I love you, I'm not in love with you. Besides, I don't even know what love is.

**MARY ELLEN.** Well, then why are you telling me this?

## MY DINNER WITH MARY

**MARY.** I don't know. And then there's the bit about my will .

**MARY ELLEN.** Will? What? You're loaded.

**MARY.** Oh, so now you're going to love me for my money.

**MARY ELLEN.** It's a thought.

**MARY.** How rude!

**MARY ELLEN.** Tell me about your will?

**MARY.** Why should I?

**MARY ELLEN.** Hmmm. Well then what is it? Do you want my forgiveness?

**MARY.** For what?

**MARY ELLEN.** I don't know... Maybe you want me to forgive you for screwing up my career.

**MARY.** I already have it.

**MARY ELLEN.** That's true. You do. How'd you know that?

**MARY.** We are a lot alike... only different. I see a lot of myself in you. That's why I'm leaving you something in my will. I'd keep it all if I could, but you know what they say, "Can't take it with you!" I worked so hard all my life... I missed out on the best part and now I want to have fun.

**MARY ELLEN.** Ha! Why'd you call me?

**MARY.** I trust you. I left you something very special and it's worth a fortune. But in the end... It is useless to think about it in advance. You could go before me. Yes, you could literally spoil my whole plan. Still, that doesn't matter. I mean, it's all information. Bits and bytes stored in our little mental computers. Right? There's nothing more to know even if we learn more, something new, more information... there will always be more information. So, it really doesn't matter. Right?

**MARY ELLEN.** You're right.

**MARY.** Don't just agree with me. Tell what love is! I need to know.

**MARY ELLEN.** Well, I think love is sweet.

**MARY.** Yes. Love is sweet. The way I see it, love is like... like ice cream. You enjoy it. It's sweet. Makes you feel good. Even when you just think about it, you feel good. Mary Ellen, I just wanted to share my ice cream with you.

**MARY ELLEN.** Well, that's very sweet of you.

**MARY.** But what flavor? What's your favorite flavor?

**MARY ELLEN.** What?

## MY DINNER WITH MARY

**MARY.** Everyone has a favorite flavor. I'll bet yours is chocolate. Mine is chocolate. Dark chocolate with almonds. I better yours is the same!

**MARY ELLEN.** Well, to tell you the truth, I don't even like chocolate.

**MARY.** What?

**MARY ELLEN.** I don't.

**MARY.** Can't be.

**MARY ELLEN.** Well, yes, it can. I do not like chocolate.

**MARY.** What about chocolate covered pretzels?

**MARY ELLEN.** Never had one.

**MARY.** Godiva?

**MARY ELLEN.** Never had it.

**MARY.** Fudge?

**MARY ELLEN.** Nope.

**MARY.** Brownies? Chocolate chip cookies? Hot cocoa?

**MARY ELLEN.** Nope. Nope. Nope.

**MARY.** This is unnatural.

**MARY ELLEN.** It's the truth.

**MARY.** Come on. You can be square with me. How did this happen to you?

**MARY ELLEN.** When I was a kid, I started to have allergies. So, my mom asked the doctor and he said, just keep her away from the typical foods and chocolate was one of them.

**MARY.** Really?

**MARY ELLEN.** So, I never had chocolate.

**MARY.** Poor kid.

**MARY ELLEN.** Not really.

**MARY.** What? Your overbearing, domineering mother denied chocolate to you as a child and you're saying you don't care.

**MARY ELLEN.** Nope. And I had a great relationship with my mother. We were best friends. She was sweet as pie.

**MARY.** Did she eat chocolate?

**MARY ELLEN.** Of course.

**MARY.** Oh my God.

**MARY ELLEN.** What?

**MARY.** You are a saint. No wonder I love you.

## MY DINNER WITH MARY

**MARY ELLEN.** No, you are. I can't believe you're remembering me in your will. And I am not sure why you invited to dinner tonight. I almost didn't come because...

**MARY.** The cramps... How are you feeling now?

**MARY ELLEN.** Actually, pretty good.

**MARY.** Good.

**MARY ELLEN.** Yes, I'm glad I came because it proves my theory.

**MARY.** Theory?

**MARY ELLEN.** About love.

**MARY.** You have a theory about love?

**MARY ELLEN.** Yes. I do.

**MARY.** See I knew it. So... Will you share it? Sharing is caring.

**MARY ELLEN.** It is very hard to define love but it's ... like your ice cream. It's in you. And then you share it... You dissolve yourself through your interactions with another person. You expect nothing in return because you know you have given them nothing. Like you're a drop in the ocean, and when you become aware that you are in the ocean... you lose your "dropness". You become the ocean. There's nothing to feel guilty about, there's nothing to want...

**MARY.** Very deep. Deep. Like the ocean.

**MARY ELLEN.** Once you step into the ocean of love, you feel the joy of simply being in it.

**MARY.** Makes sense to me.

**MARY ELLEN.** So, can we order now? I'm getting hungry.

**MARY.** Of course. I'm famished. Waiter? Oh Waiter? You can come over now please!

**MARY ELLEN.** You told him to wait.

**MARY.** Of course. He's a waiter. That's what they do. Don't start on me, Mary Ellen. We have things to discuss now. How would you like to work on new show with me?

**MARY ELLEN.** What's it about?

**MARY.** It's a retelling of Hamlet... The ghost takes revenge on Claudius- puts poison in his ear. Oh Jesus. I'm kidding. Well, I'm told it's a love story. But not your traditional love story.

**MARY ELLEN.** How many characters?

## MY DINNER WITH MARY

**MARY.** Just two. Two women... in a restaurant. And the occasional waiter if he ever shows up.

**MARY ELLEN.** Who's the playwright?

**MARY.** You've never heard of her. She's new to the New York theatre scene... But she's good.

**MARY ELLEN.** It's a woman?

**MARY.** Of course. Now look at your menu, he's coming over.

**MARY ELLEN.** So where is this show going to open?

**MARY.** Helen Hayes Theatre.

**MARY ELLEN.** Helen Hayes Theatre? You're kidding. That use to be the..

**MARY.** Yeah. They reopened it.

**MARY ELLEN.** Yes, I heard that. You know, I played *The Wild Duck* there. When I was just a girl.

**MARY.** Darling you are a wild duck. So, tell me, who was it that stole your heart?

**MARY ELLEN.** I think you know.

**MARY.** I think I know too. I loved him. Our beautiful Russian boy Ivan. It's good to finally know that he died in your arms. (*Beat*) I mean that Mary Ellen.

**MARY ELLEN.** I know you do.

**MARY.** Well, are you going to work on this project with me? It's quite a challenging script.

**MARY ELLEN.** May I read the play before I commit?

**MARY.** No, I mean... Well, it's still in development and... Wait! Are you saying you don't trust my judgment?

**MARY ELLEN.** There is no play, is there, Mary?

**MARY.** There could be!

**MARY ELLEN.** But there's not.

**MARY.** Look... I see a good story right here between us. Two aging actresses, one superstar, one not-so-much. People eat this stuff up. Of that I am certain, why just look at the lives we have led! So, if you're willing to work with me, I think we might have a damn good play... After all, you know they say: "two broken hearts are better than one!"

**MARY ELLEN.** Who says that?

**MARY.** I do, now come on... We've got a lot of work to do if we are going to pitch this project to Second Stage.

## MY DINNER WITH MARY

**MARY ELLEN.** Second Stage? Oh of course, to get The Helen Hayes... *(Beat.)* Okay but on two conditions.

**MARY.** Only two.

**MARY ELLEN.** Yes.

**MARY.** Shoot.

**MARY ELLEN.** I am completely in charge of own story.

**MARY.** Sounds fair. And what's the second condition?

**MARY ELLEN.** I'll tell once the play is finished.

**MARY.** How can I agree to something if I don't know what it is?

**MARY ELLEN.** You will if you want my help with this. Those are my terms.

**MARY.** You drive a hard bargain lady.

**MARY ELLEN.** I know. Now where's the contract?

**MARY.** Contract?

**MARY ELLEN.** Of course. I never work without a contract.

**MARY.** I'll have it drawn up tomorrow.

**MARY ELLEN.** Good. Who's going to write the script?

**MARY.** Don't you worry. I got a playwright in mind. We just tell our stories and see where they connect. There just has to be conflict, struggle, dramatic tension somewhere in our lives... All those damn dramas we did-- all of those lines memorized, and all the endless blocking must have had some influence on us. Right? I mean we must have built up character by now. Right? Come on, look at that menu. Order! And that's an order! Here's our server. Let's celebrate our renewed relationship... my treat. *(To Mary Ellen)* Whatever you like! *(To the, unseen waitress)* Well, hello Brenda. I will have my usual dear, thank you. And yes, more coffee. Put it all on my tab.

**MARY ELLEN.** Oh okay...Yes, please. I will start with the coconut shrimp with the orange marmalade, and cup of the lobster bisque... *(Sighs)* Followed by your garden field greens with golden goddess dressing. Now for my main course I always wanted to try this famous "Booth Burger", medium well, with the pan-seared Brussel sprouts instead of coleslaw, and I'll substitute the fries with a side of today's pasta. And for dessert I will have the Tiramisu. What pretty blue eyes you have, Brenda. That is your name. right? Brenda. Reminds me of my favorite singer. Brenda Lee. Love that voice. *(Sings.)* "Who's sorry now?"

**MARY.** You cannot possibly eat all that... And stop distracting this poor girl. She needs her job, she was once homeless. She stayed with me a while.

## MY DINNER WITH MARY

**MARY ELLEN.** I'm not distracting her, I'm just making friends. I can tell, she's taken a shine to me- that's all. You don't have to be jealous! Maybe she is a fan of mine.

**MARY.** She's sweet kid. Takes acting classes at Stella Adler. Can you imagine? On her salary?

**MARY ELLEN.** Oh, well, maybe we should put her in our show. We can write her in to play my little sister.

**MARY.** I thought you were an only child.

**MARY ELLEN.** I am. But I always wanted a baby sister. Besides we can make up whatever we want... We can tell our life story however we see fit.

**MARY.** Well, we can ask her to read for the role.

**MARY ELLEN.** We can cast her as the waitress taking acting classes at Stella Adler who spent all of her money on the theatre and ending up sleeping in a dumpster. People love hard luck stories. Those rags to riches ones.

**MARY.** So now shall we toast to our new collaboration?

**MARY ELLEN.** Let's make it a Christmas show, *(Singing)* Here you go, "*There's No Place like Homeless for the Holidays.*"

**MARY.** Sounds a bit heartless to me. But whatever. Slainte! *(They toast)* Oh, and by the way, tiramisu is chocolate. I knew you were lying about the chocolate.

**MARY ELLEN.** Oh, I wasn't. And I know what Tiramisu is. Don't question me, I have a plan. *(They toast)* This is going straight to Broadway baby!

**MARY.** To us. *(Blackout.)*

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