

# Her Name Was Mary Deacon

**Barbara Latham**

I

I thought I knew her: I'd known Mary Deacon all my life.

While she lived, her life seemed as shaped and recognisable as her body. There was containing skin. And laughter. It is much harder to laugh without her beside me.

She had an agent, was working on a script, and funding, at last looked possible – and I am left with “if only” – if only she'd left a definitive statement in a work. We are left with nothing much to hold, aside from a few short films.

Before she died, I accused Mary of indulgence with an unworthy man – of spinning into melodrama and abandoning her judgement.

She said I didn't understand. Then there was the accident.

Now she is dead, I try to comprehend her passion for Trevor. She was one to take some risks. Perhaps that is why she was the film maker and I only an editorial assistant.

When Mary Deacon caught Trevor Bryant with the swing of the bakery door, Eros struck her then and there, she claimed. Few shared this faith and that was before he killed her, pushing his luck on the motor-bike.

She was hurrying in from the rain to Bryants Bakery. It was her latest discovery, and was there buying lamingtons to surprise me. These lamingtons were as good as at the Black Cat Caf of our girlhood, when we helped ourselves to cash for illicit bought cakes.

Her Name was Mary Deacon

Trevor Bryant had no time for cakes or colonial nostalgia but, having borrowed money from his Australian mother, was calling back a farewell at the door when Mary banged into him. He was heading out of London and Mary went with him as far as Reading, then caught the train back home. Trevor Bryant had a woman in Reading and said that was always the way for him, either he had no woman in his life or they arrived in pairs.

Mary gave her heart that night. It made little sense to me.

When our infant class had three Marys, she became 'Mary D' to the teacher and Meridee to me. We went hand in hand to our first day at school and were only separated nine years later when Mrs Deacon returned to Yorkshire with her girls. Mrs Deacon had never been sure of New Zealand. It was her husband's eagerness which first whirled her far away from home, and later claimed him. He died keeping up with young men, mountain climbing on a rescue in the heat, and Mrs Deacon did not forgive New Zealand. Her husband's heart, like her own, she felt, was meant for modest Yorkshire peaks, not for monstrosities of 10,000 feet.

When Mrs Deacon returned to Leeds (where her three older sisters and sensible husbands had remained) Meridee and I wrote each week.

Her presence constituted a considerable part of what I knew as a child and I missed her. Growing up we barely considered appearance. It was only just before the Deacons left that Meridee and I, with spots and developing breasts, grew more self conscious. Meridee's eyebrows thickened and, given the task of plucking them, I stared at her as I'd begun staring at myself. In the farewell photos we both look awkward. Her eyebrows were growing dark while her hair stayed fair. People assumed she dyed one or the other, but that soft blonde did not come from a bottle. And her long hair, which I often brushed, never had a uniformity of colour.

I'm not one for much description – that was a strength of hers and photographs of Meridee's 5'6" can't show what she meant to me.

She was one person I loved easily. Yet I grow less certain I loved well. Was it cowardice, or convention, or something important which kept us from being lovers? I doubt that is the crucial issue. What troubles more is that I did not struggle to know myself and Meridee a little better. It took her death to force me into questions I wish I'd seen while she lived.

Meridee left two notebooks in the flat we shared. I gave these, unread, to her mother. The family say her daughter's death proved too much for her and Mrs Deacon "went peculiar". The sisters Mrs Deacon came back from New Zealand to join are older and look likely to be widowed soon yet all they can say is that she must buck up. They obviously want to shake her to their senses.

While Mr Deacon often had ideas for changes, Mrs Deacon, as a keen gardener, restrained him to two moves in New Zealand. Her often stated view of her husband, before he died and she gave up speaking of him, was that he was too ready to start things he'd never finish. She saw no reason for fresh beginnings – she had more than enough to do with washing, cooking and cleaning for a messy man and children. They were our neighbours when I was born, six months before Meridee, and they remained there until Mr Deacon died.

Good wives and mothers were supposed to stay around the house. Unlike my mother, who was restless and dissatisfied, Mrs Deacon obviously delighted in making a home. While mother didn't thrive until she had a company to run and plenty of colleagues, Mrs Deacon disliked working in an office after her husband died. When Meridee left for college Mrs Deacon risked a big place in the dales and started a Bed and Breakfast.

When I arrived in Europe, Meridee suggested Paris as a place to re-meet. She walked me past sights but my eyes were too glazed from the journey to take in much except her. She has grown into the best of herself, I decided. But I was wrong. Those of us who were wary of Trevor Bryant had to agree Meridee grew even more beautiful for him.

Words do not restore the dead, yet how we fought about the words to use for Mary. Mrs Deacon silenced us by insisting on a formal church service, with a vicar speaking of Mary, although he never knew her. In his eulogy he called her a responsible young woman, good to her mother and with a ready smile – a bright and cheerful life now called to God. Ridiculous, but it was an outlet for our fury at being powerless over death.

Trevor Bryant did not attend. He was out of hospital and being nursed by his mother. He had one broken leg, with a mending gash in his flesh.

He wasn't even with her as she died. He had minor injuries, but when they arrived at the hospital a nurse took him off for X-rays. Mary called out "don't go!" Her wish was loud and clear, though she had been out of it in the ambulance. The brusque nurse replied for Trevor that he'd be back after they'd seen to that leg. By then she had died alone.

She kept her tears for solitude I assumed. And for her diaries.

She must have destroyed earlier notebooks. Would she have burned the two left in our flat had she lived?

2

Mrs Deacon summoned me up to her Yorkshire Bed and Breakfast with its overflowing, well-tended garden and top quality breakfasts. Her sisters insist she'll have to sell the place, if she can't pull up her socks.

I visit Mrs Deacon whenever she asks – she feels Mary's presence when I am around, she says. Once I took for granted an absolute connection with Meridee – a regular pulse with her, a beat that was part of me, but the rhythm gradually changed as we grew.

When we came together as adults we were more separate. Differences from each other took some negotiating.

Now Meridee is a fading presence and sometimes an acute absence.

Before she died Meridee accused me of taking more on myself than was justified. (Trevor Bryant was behind our argument once again.)

She never planned on leaving me laden. It was usually her who returned to disagreements and I assumed we'd revisit this one. But she went off, unexpectedly, on Trevor's bike – April 23 – one week before her mother's birthday. Meridee, Trevor and I intended going up for the actual celebration, but Trevor changed his mind. Apparently Meridee still wanted him to, finally, meet her mother. They never arrived.

Trevor rang me from a Northampton hospital asking me to tell Mary's mother. I was already throwing up and not understanding why.

We complemented each other when it came to editing two short films. Her enthusiasm through the whole process was contagious. And I admired as well as loved her fine judgement over detail and the way she juxtaposed images.

Other aspects of her were more disconcerting, even before Trevor Bryant. Travelling alone I was never a witness to violence, out with Mary we inevitably came across unpleasant scenes, as if she had a nose for them. She was observant but that was not all.

One hot night, as we stretched out in Mrs Deacon's Yorkshire garden, we remembered the day we carried high her bike. Meridee had a bicycle before me, a cast off from an elder sister. Meridee shut her eyes as if returning to the occasion while I pondered its significance. She was the one recalling that it was the end of the week, and we got sweaty carrying the bike, though it wasn't summer. We were wearing cardigans but couldn't stop to take them off – the wheels must never

touch the earth or the snake would leap out. We told details of the powerful snake who might escape and gained a train of followers. As we neared the Deacon house our exhilaration began to wane. We would not give in and wheel it to the shed but didn't want Meridee's sister, Veronica, mocking us.

Meridee laughed at my sexual theory to account for our excitement. "It was spectacle – a moment we could play all out in public – performance art – mostly we played in private."

### 3

Too many tried to say who she was. At the funeral, Meridee's favourite camera woman said, "she'd never have agreed to a fixed camera looking down on her. She objected to being a voyeur on other lives." But Meridee could no longer speak. There was only the poor substitute of talking about her.

Meridee left me unfinished conversations. But in the sharp severance of her death, perhaps she passed on to me something she understood.

I fought off sadness. It was always something to be overcome before Meridee handed it on to me as part of every day.

Merridee once wrote from Leeds, "There is no return to before dad's death. Adults seem to want us to live as if his death hasn't made a huge difference. They bustle as if knowing what-is-what. Poor mother clings to belief that we thrive. She is cut in half herself but desperately wants us to be fine. The aunts have mother back, in a poky place near them, rather as if she's been on an unnecessary shopping spree and brought back children. But at least their sister is where she should be. They have none of mother's gentleness and are discouragingly forthright. No mention is made of dad. They never ask one question about New Zealand and look bored if we tell them."

I cried over birds the cat hadn't quite killed, and wept at sentimental tales, but sadness was not knitted into my bones. It was after Meridee's death that I began to see what she already knew. It was no use to her that, finally, I understood.

If she was sad, Meridee inclined to retreat and emerged when she was ready for laughter. I talked freely to her whenever I was upset and she did not do the same. She just made wry comments once she'd recovered. She had a melancholy streak and was at ease with it. Not that you would

Her Name was Mary Deacon

have heard it mentioned at her death. Mary Deacon became life and brightness incarnate, a paragon of vitality.

Meridee once wrote that she felt at peace when she was sad.

Meridee's sister contacts me less, but for the first year after the accident she'd often ring. I would have said Veronica didn't much like her younger sister. She liked to play a little helpless, whereas Meridee came across as capable and more likely to be the one taking care of others. I got on with Veronica but never really liked her. If she was accused, as a girl, Veronica was instantly an outraged innocent, while Mary managed to stiffen and look guilty even when she wasn't at fault. When Mary was pushed off the diving rock and hurt, and Mr Deacon challenged Veronica, she burst into tears. Mr Deacon gathered Veronica in his arms and kissed her curls, leaving Mary's bleeding leg unattended. I watched in astonishment, I'd seen Veronica's hand reach out to shove my friend. Even Mary, bedazzled by her sister's performance, began to doubt the sensation of being pushed.

It was not surprising to find guilt a preoccupation in Meridee's films. She often spoke of exposure. Although she never used biographical material in her scripts, she was aware a director is revealed – “what of ourselves might be shown up, we can never be certain,” she once said to me. And: “Many live in fear of something being uncovered and live on guard, just in case there is something to hide.”

As far as I know Meridee harboured no particular guilty secret. It was a dread of being found fundamentally unacceptable. She was drawn to others who were wary of what might be seen. She never used people who flirted with the camera, as if they could keep on top of what was on show. If she'd made the feature-length film she was working on, something would have been finished: once a film goes out, the work has an end.

Before Trevor Bryant, making a long film was Meridee's dedicated passion.

A year after Mary's death, Veronica told me, “Mother's heading for dementia. Trust her to go senile early.” When I visited her soon after, Mrs Deacon had baked some very sweet caramel biscuits I'd especially liked as a child but no longer ate, and a cake in the oven which had been forgotten. I smelt it as soon as I walked in. The house was open and Mrs Deacon nowhere in sight. I threw out the burnt remains then found her curled in the garden. “It's warmer here,” she said. She didn't seem too dotty and suggested we walk to the village. When we spotted a water rat by

the pond she asked, “have you seen one eat its young? Land rats do if they are disturbed. I didn’t eat Mary, though I did try to kill her. Did you know she began and ended in blood? I did the gin, hot bath and cod liver oil and bled, you see. I thought it was enough. I couldn’t give anymore. All I longed for was a good night’s sleep and my sisters. I was alone over there, amidst those formidable women, like your mother. Veronica was only six months and full of colic when I knew I’d conceived. I bled and hoped it was the end. Finally I took a stand – no more children, then the doctor said I was already four months pregnant. Mr Deacon called the foetus Mary, as his joke at the puzzle of how she got there. I couldn’t tell him what I’d done. Once I wished death on her with all my heart. What if that was too powerful a spell? Perhaps I loved Mary especially because of that twist in my heart.”

Had Mary ever had any idea of what her mother was telling me?

#### 4

Perhaps we all feel we let her down. But don’t think I’m just a jealous best friend – others were bewildered by Trevor Bryant in Meridee’s life. Perhaps Meridee allowed herself some doubt, although with me she seemed certain that whatever anyone else saw, Trevor Bryant touched her soul.

When I first arrived in England, Mary felt the erotic pulsed too limply in her and she longed for strong desire.

Then she met Trevor Bryant. Her adoration was fine by him, but did he have any idea how serious it was for her?

She flung her heart over an abyss for a man who was not going to catch it – he’d be on his way to Reading.

“If I’ve given all of me, can I walk away and leave so much behind?” she said a week before she died.

It is true that for six months after she met Trevor, Meridee was amazingly happy, although I failed to comprehend how she floated through his comings and goings. She was worth several of him.

My friendship with Meridee was the best of my life, yet I fell below my own aspirations. I was impatient with Trevor from the start, considering him selfish and trivialising of her passion. Irritation got in the way of trying to see what he meant to her.

Her Name was Mary Deacon

He wanted her whenever he visited and that he could not be tied to fidelity seemed fine by her at first. Despite the divorcée in Reading, I'm sure Meridee believed Trevor would, eventually, see how much only she could give him.

What I saw was the old story of a self-centred man coming and going as he pleased, with the woman tipped into predictable anguish every time, yet having given herself, feeling driven to believe her love could redeem.

It was easier to hate Trevor Bryant after he rode recklessly the night of the accident.

But months before that I wished she'd cut him from her life. I walked in unexpectedly one day and caught her in tears. "This isn't just for Trevor," she said too quickly. "Dad abandoned us as well as life, and when Mother started going under I was terrified she'd also go. I could not bear her suffering and couldn't find my own. Something went lumpen and numb in me which Trevor brings alive. You are too ready to assume the sadness is Trevor's fault – it's mine and old. I wish you liked him better."

"He batters your heart and you are grateful," I replied as if certain.

She had convinced herself "this was the real thing". I felt it was delusion, and saw in Trevor that common species of male, terrified of his own heart, constantly wriggling out of being cornered. "How can any of us be confident we've used our hearts fully?" Meridee asked.

"But you are hurt while he rides off unperturbed," I protested.

She let him remove her skin. Whatever she felt for him, became of consequence and utterly compelling, while seduction was only one of the ways Trevor Bryant passed his time. A degree of uncertainty maybe fans a flame, but Meridee was burning up. How could I approve of a man who seemed flimsy as well as fickle, when I was not the one who loved him?

Trevor seemed to slip this way and that, and was bound not to take seriously enough the way she loved him. She was totally in the grip of it. He neither met her desire with equal commitment, nor was he honourable enough to acknowledge it and say a decent goodbye. She could not walk away. "What if it is the truest love of my life?" she asked.

He understood she could not resist the strength of her own longing and that his casualness would be forgiven. I could hardly bear to be a witness. He killed her driving recklessly, although the police in the end dropped charges. He cut in too finely between a silver Jaguar and a van.

He didn't ever face Mary's family, he never met Mrs Deacon, though he did contact Veronica.



I visited him twice while he was immobile at his mother's; I needed to hear all the particulars of her death. Then, suddenly, he left for Australia.

5

I read Mary's diaries to eavesdrop on my daughter. Her conversations with herself are too unlike the exchanges she had with me. I long to hear her voice. All I have are her words about the man she called 'Te'.

- Forgiveness – a theme lurking in my work. If only self misgiving could be neatly tied to specific omissions and weakness. How readily it slips to something bottomless.
- What might be shut down in me that I barely recognise I have lost?
- Rain – Te and the smell of his black leather as we made contact.
- Given this has never happened before, it's odd I can be unequivocal that this is love struck.
- How did other lovers fail to uncover all this?
- He stands to leave and is transformed – a still life in my doorway – details heightened and fixed. Will I ever forget those raised brown buttons – the camel and maroon stripes? How is it Te has such impact?
- Te gives me so much of myself – fingers turn into delicate instruments – vibrations from touching hairs on him, go straight to my womb.
- Did I have choice over giving in to this?
- Thought I understood lust but had few inklings before Te.
- Can it only be seven months since I walked into him?
- The wonders of his body continue – still aching for him.
- Astride Te as he sits at my desk – folded into his neck and gentleness, and over a sexual high wire.
- Sadness back. Is it facing another Christmas without heat, the smell of the sea and the magic of father setting up our tent beside a tree for us to decorate with paper chains?
- This pain is my own. There is no escape. This lay in waiting. I found no way into it before Te.
- Through him I am into blood-black congealed corners of my own heart, from which there is no bolting away.
- Still cold – still grey – still astonishing under a duvet with Te.

- Here for mother's birthday, father hovers closer now Te has rekindled old memories – I remember the smell of his head and the feel of strong arms lifting me high – his laughter as we slid in mud trying to push the stuck van.
- Buried bits fly around a shaken kaleidoscope – refusing to settle until they have been relived.
- Should I be this confident that suffering was already there? What if Te is driving me through virgin territory and not a recycle?
- Father let go his hold on life and us – it is written in stone-lettering on a grave we could never visit. We left it a world away. Having abandoned myself to Te, I tumble in old abandonments.
- “Women always come in pairs,” Te says. What if he is dead to romance unless he dances between two? Who would prefer a lover who is half alive but can be called “faithful”?
- Giving in to Eros is not the same as accepting everything Te gets up to.
- I want no false vows against his nature, but...
- He might bring less of himself if I try pinning his butterfly wings and I might find myself re-clothed in old protection if he proves too unreliable.
- Fingers hold the weight of his head in my lap and feel his springy hair. I needed to find this.
- Te meets me fully – then wants to go. This is longing such as I've never known. And sorrow.
- Watching the mobility in his limbs as he leapt at the frisbee brought tears. I ached for him all picnic.
- Te does not want any responsibility for what his sexual engagement with me has unleashed. After sex he is more and more quickly guarded. What we have will easily diminish if either of us grows cautious.
- His urge to fly off after exposure can, now, be relied on. He will leave again and again. Even if we were living in the same house, he would need escape. And he plans to go Australia.
- Not only the good generates passion. Can I be sure this is not the energy of destruction?
- Watching him ride down the street on the new bike with my chest lurching to go after him.
- Can we create a shared shape to inhabit which suits both?
- Love binds me to him, while he wriggles from any confinement.

- If only I could discuss all this fully with Susannah, but her mind is too fixed against him.
  - Is the pain he stirs because he touched more than anyone before, or a by product of his carelessness of me?
  - I have avoided exposure to male power to seduce and move on, was it wilful to find it with Te?
  - Open to him even a little and I am flung wide. My power is to bolt the door and keep from temptation to reconsider.
  - I might squirm protest at Te, yet submit back to accepting desire for him matters.
  - I could declare myself impervious to him, but that lie is not a power worth having. It's only pride.
  - If I'd not fallen for Te, I might still feel shut out from half my heart.
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- Is there a way left out of feeling? There must be ways to adjust other than growing indifferent.
  - I love to watch each second of his leaving – too absorbed for any torment till he's gone.
  - Te's hair too short for my fingers to get in but still the delicious spring of close crop beneath lips. I could not find all this before.
  - Te wants my ardour but what of being caught himself in the seriousness of passion?
  - Have I expected a great love from a man who can only flit?
  - Perhaps for Te this is "just lust", which he finds easy. In this we are mismatched. My craving to touch every bit of his skin is not extraordinary to him. For me, sinking myself in his flesh and discovering my own, is a wonder.
  - Whenever I hold out, he dedicates himself to draw me, to reopen every cell to wanting before going on his way.
  - Te slides with ease to keep his options unconfined by love as I am.
  - He shakes me yet remains lightly touched. I face the indignity of imbalance while he rides off unconcerned. Whether I like this or not, Te is the one I have been able to love.

## 6

On his return from Australia, Trevor Bryant came up to Yorkshire to see me. He talked incessantly the first day. Poor boy.

"I did care about your daughter you know. Still do.

Her Name was Mary Deacon

Sorry I couldn't make it up to the funeral. I was still flat and immobile. Of course I feel terrible – who wouldn't – even if I hadn't loved her. It was grim enough without Susannah's conviction I was entirely to blame. Didn't she read the police report? Or not understand about oil on roads?

Don't think I didn't value my luck in having Mary fall for me. But she was looking for her big chance in life to love. I was that for her, she said. I wasn't in search of one great passion to fix me beside a wife. I was set on roaming Australia. When we met I had plans to get further away from a doting mother and return to where I grew up. One woman making demands out of her big-hearted love for me was more than enough.

Mary sought a soul mate. I told her I wasn't equal to her passion and she said she realised that too late.

She made me feel as though I was low down some karma cycle and not up to her.

I saw her as superior. Some days I felt a worm, though even if I'd tried harder to give her what she deserved, she wouldn't have been satisfied for long. Mary wouldn't have liked being stuck with me at breakfast for years. She wasn't after the mundane, only high drama. It made her fully alive.

What is it with females? They corner the emotional market, not that Mary used easy tears as mother does, tell you women are from Venus, men are from Mars, yet behave as if any decent specimen would, of course, come from the same planet as themselves. If I hadn't been on the run from mother's soft blackmail, keeping away from being swallowed whole, could I have behaved differently?

I was good at escape. Mary wanted everything joined up: her heart, her soul, and me. Things came together for her, but I liked compartments.

When my plans fell into place I was heading for the outback.

Mary asked for one last weekend before I went. I tried to persuade her it might be torture but she insisted.

I really didn't want her upsetting herself over my going. But Mary was adamant about getting out of the flat and away from Susannah, and didn't care where we went. On the motorway she started sobbing.

I panicked she might fall off and decided to get off the road and find a café.

I might not have seen the spill anyway. It was small and in the lane I was moving into. But I half turned to touch Mary, wanting to comfort. Perhaps I took my eyes off the road. I didn't know what else to do.

When Mary gave vent to full intensity it was quite something. In other situations I took it as a gift, if a scary one.

Of course I wasn't irrelevant but what did Mary want of me?"

Trevor Bryant wants to come up again. Or so he says. But I'm not sure I can give anyone the reassurance I can't find for myself.

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