

Mary's Story

There are four main characters in this story: **Mary** (~40 years old), her mother **Sarah** (~70), **Margaret** (~70), who becomes Mary's surrogate mother and **Ben** (~40), the suicide hot-line operator. Mary and Ben are next-door neighbors. Ben is a volunteer that takes calls in the comfort of his own home. However, when Mary talks to Ben on the phone, they don't recognise each others' voices.

Mary, is all alone in the world. Her father died 10 years ago in a car accident that also put her mother Sarah in a wheelchair. Two years ago, Sarah, was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, and things went downhill from there. Mary decided to move in with her mother to care for her. To not have to put her in a home. She had to quit her job, give up her apartment. She had to sacrifice.

Mary is no angel. She does this to finally get close to her mother, a mother that she believes never cared much for her in the first place. A mother that was always too busy with her own career. A mother she's repeatedly wished would have died in the place of her father. This is the last chance for them to reconcile, Mary figures. A chance worth taking, even to a steep price.

The first few weeks go spectacularly well. Sarah is much less strict than she was when Mary was young and it used to drive her mad. The first weeks show them sides of each other that they hadn't seen before. A good time that passes quickly.

Then, the illness gets the upper hand, and Sarah changes for the worse. The disease makes her confused, the confusion makes her scared and the fear makes her angry and she takes it all out on Mary. Because she is the only one around. Mary gets blamed for not taking care of her properly, for forgetting things or hiding things or messing with her mind. But most importantly, she is definitely not Sarah's daughter. Sarah is "alone," waiting for a daughter that will never come, because she is already there.

Sarah is hospitalised after refusing to eat for some time, and dies shortly after. And there is Mary, in a waiting room for the terminally ill resounding with the silence from the turned-off heartbeat monitor and the tubes that no-one is breathing through anymore. The loss hits her unexpectedly hard.

Having said goodbye to her mother and informed the hospital staff that her mother's passed, Mary leaves the ward. But just as she is going through the door, suppos-

edly for the last time, she hears the voice of an old woman. "Karen?" Looking around, Mary sees an old lady that's just dropped her canes on the floor. Mary, hastens to assist her, and here is the story's first real turning point. Margaret, the old woman, is another Alzheimer patient, but still sharp and alive. Mary walks Margaret back to her room, and they strike up a conversation.

Margaret tells Mary of her daughter **Karen**, who was supposed to visit today. Margaret's been longing to go to the park for many days now, while it is still warm outside, but it looks like it will not happen. Mary offers her assistance, and the two of them spend a lovely day in the park.

A day later, Mary calls a suicide hot-line. Maybe because she wants to be talked down from taking her life. Or just because she wants someone to miss her when she's gone. She has her mother's pain killers with the red warning label and some alcohol. The voice of the guy at the other end of the line is nice. He listens patiently, asking questions. But mostly, he is a living breathing person that she connects to. To turn her mind to the positives, he asks her if she hasn't had a good thing happen to her lately, and Mary tells him about Margaret. Mary and the phone operator strike a deal that she will go back and see the old woman again and then call him back and report in a week. He gives her the number to his phone so she can bypass the switch.

Mary goes back to visit Margaret. It turns out that Margaret and her daughter are working their way through old photo albums, a couple of pages every visit. The room's only shelf has six sturdy albums with old black-and-white pictures, over-saturated old colour photographs, and obvious digital printouts. Margaret and Karen started from the beginning and are working their way to the present. Karen is reluctant to move on, Margaret complains, as if Margaret's life would be somehow linked to whether there were photos still to talk about.

Mary calls back to the guy on the hot-line to report. She is proud and happy, and he encourages her. He tells her that he hopes that she will never call again.

Mary visits Margaret more and more frequently. Margaret is now slowly slipping away and starts confusing Mary for Karen. She points at the albums and asks Mary to tell her the stories of her life for her as she can no longer remember them herself. And all of a sudden, Mary finds herself in the middle of telling Margaret the most exquisite lies about the life that she wished she had. And Margaret nods as if she remembered, and pats her reassuringly.

Every year, the family goes on vacation in some old cottage by a lake near a pine forest, Mary can tell from browsing the albums. They take a picture every year, standing in the

same spot. The children grow older. The parents too. Mary looks at the photos and lets her fantasies roam free. And Margaret nods as if she remembered, and pats her reassuringly.

Mary is now calling Ben, the guy on the hot-line regularly. Ben is acting very unprofessionally, and there is an obvious chemistry between them. Gradually, he starts talking about himself.

Mary's life is now centered around two things: visiting Margaret and then calling Ben to report.

One day as Mary is paying her usual visit and is highly involved in telling a story from some pictures in one of the albums, two strangers barge in. This is Karen—Margaret's actual daughter—and her husband **Alex**. Mary recognises them from the pictures. Who are you and what are you doing here?, Karen demands to know. Mary quickly excuses herself.

Going home from the hospital Mary reflects on the past weeks and what she's been up to. Instead of taking control over her life and clearing out Sarah's apartment, she's been spending all her time at the hospital lying her ass off to a confused Alzheimer's patient. She's been clinging to Margaret instead of getting over Sarah's death.

And out come the pills again, and the alcohol. She proceeds to call Ben for the last time, to give the last report.

Mary is sad and crying. She is ashamed over what she's done and shame hurts a lot. Ben is trying to console her. Finally, she calms down.

At this point, someone rings Ben's door bell. He excuses himself and goes to the door. A woman (Karen) is standing outside asking for a Mary Watson. He realises that's his neighbor's name, and points to the door just opposite and then hurries back to the phone.

Ben gets back on the phone and they speak for about 5 seconds before Mary's door bell rings, and it is now that Ben starts suspecting what we've known from the start. Mary puts the phone down and opens the door.

And there is Karen, who's tracked her down easily by asking the people at the hospital. Mary starts apologising, but is interrupted by Karen suddenly hugging her.

Karen explains that Margaret just passed and that she's talked to the nurses at the ward and that they told her how often Mary visited her mother and how much attention and help she's given her. Karen's been too busy and also too afraid to visit Margaret, and she is so thankful that someone's been there in her stead.

Mary tries to explain that she's been lying to Margaret all the time, but Karen brushes that off. "My mother had Alzheimer's, who cares if you told her stories that weren't true!?" Memories are what controls whether something is true or false, not if something actually did or did not happen. The important thing is you were there and gave her good memories about her life.

They hug again, and Karen asks if she can take Mary out to dinner to thank her at some point. She gives Mary a picture of Margaret from one of the albums, her phone number, and leaves.

Mary goes back and picks up the phone, but there is no one there. She call Ben's number on speed-dial, but there is no answer. After five signals, her door bell rings again, and she hangs up the phone. She opens her door to the man outside, the neighbor she's seen before many times, and now it clicks for her too. Ben is Ben. That Ben.

They embrace.

Mary shows Ben the picture of Margaret, and they go to put it in a frame. Looking at the walls for the first time in a long while, Mary realises that there are no pictures anywhere. Sarah stowed those away when she was frustrated by not being able to remember who these people were. And when Ben and Mary start digging through the boxes for a picture frame for Margaret's picture, they come across a box with Mary's mother's photo albums. Pictures of Sarah hugging Mary tight. Sarah smiling at her on the jetty by the lake where they used to go every year for vacation. Fishing trips. Sarah crying at Mary's wedding.

Maybe Karen was right. Maybe memories really are what control whether something is true or false. And if so, she's been a prisoner to hers—or her lack of them. She points Ben to a picture of a happy family and and begins to tell.

End of story.