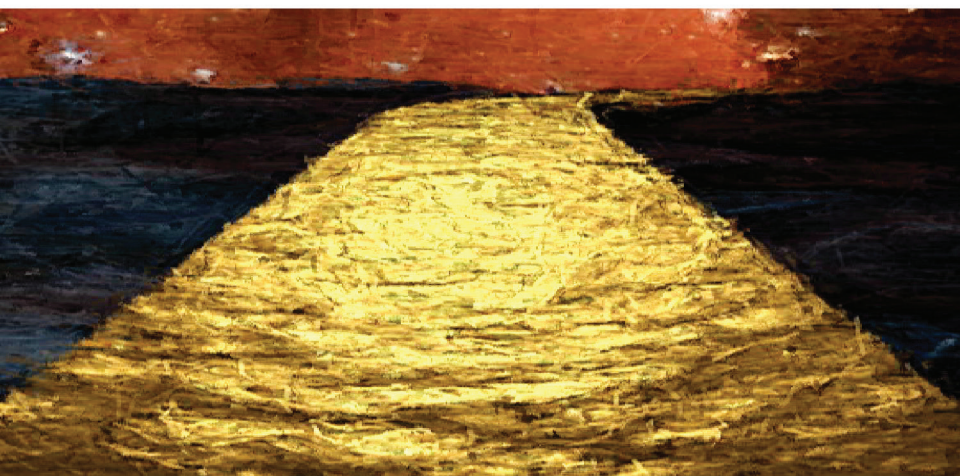


# DEATH BY JOY

AN ESCORTED JOURNEY



j.m. cribb

# Chapter 11



## Work

Sam Lutfiyya was a big man in girth, in heart, and in the music industry. He was soft-spoken, preferring to operate away from the glare. Yet, like the professional percussionist he was, Sam set the tempo for Music Services International, one of North America's largest music contracting companies. From its modest office in Winnipeg, MSI assembled orchestras for theatrical productions in North America and abroad. Major productions—*The Phantom of the Opera*, *Ragtime*, *Cats*, *Fiddler on the Roof*—were outfitted with just the right mixture of musical talent by Sam and his team. One of those team members was Mary.

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She was the secretary/receptionist. Nominally. Actually, according to Sam, she wasn't very good at it. But that didn't matter to him for Mary's brilliance lay in befriending everyone, striking a spark in them all. In an industry where timelines reign and egocentrics rankle, Mary's talents were a treasure.

"In the course of the day," Sam explained, "Mary would have dozens of conversations, that would last anywhere from thirty seconds to ten minutes, with people in the industry who worked with us. Mary created unique relationships with these people, becoming their confidant, advisor, counsellor, and sometimes even healer. It was a flow that worked brilliantly. I really think this was Mary's calling.

"When she first came to work here, I did try to temper her approach so it wasn't, 'Hi cutie, how you doing?' or 'Hey baby!' or 'We live in hope and I love you,' or, when she had to put someone on hold, 'Let me kindly put you in the quiet meditation booth; sorry we don't have any music but we'll let you calmly contemplate goodness.' I failed miserably. Indeed, I realized it was a positive and wonderful thing that was occurring. It was genuine, with the purity of Mary's essence

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coming through. It would enhance our conversations with these folks after Mary passed them through.”

There was only one person Sam could remember whom Mary found disagreeable. According to Sam, the fellow was particularly belligerent, way off base, and accusatory of something that was very small and silly. Mary was polite but stern with him. About a year after that incident Sam had further business with the man and things were in a much better place. Mary was so happy, saying that she had really prayed hard for him.



One afternoon Sam was sitting in the easy chair beside Mary’s bed, holding her hand. They were chatting in the carefree fashion of friends, no hint of the formality that might be expected between employer and employee. The topic was food, a subject dear to both, and at some point Mary honed in on her love for bagels. New York bagels, to be precise.

Without missing a beat, Sam picked up the phone

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and dialled Louis St. Louis—Sir Louis to Sam and Mary—in New York City. Sir Louis, a musician and composer known for his original music in the film version of *Grease* and for his gospel rendition of the score for a stage production of *Jesus Christ Superstar*, was, apparently, a purveyor of fine bagels.

“I’m sitting here with Mary,” Sam explained to Sir Louis, “and she’s out of bagels.” “Oh my God!” was Sir Louis’s reply, clearly audible from the phone. “If you’re able to send some, that would be a thing of unbelievable niceness,” said Sam. “Fantastic. Would you like to speak with Maid Marian?”

What followed was Mary’s side of her conversation with Sir Louis, highlighting the unique relationships Mary had created with those who dealt with MSI. “Oh Sir Louis, you’re too cute.” “Well, you never called me a great girl, you always called me a maid.” “Hey baby, I haven’t been a maid for years. I haven’t been a maiden either.” “I sound good because I choose to sound good; it’s a choice, baby.” “Bagels with any kind of herbs in them, I’m good. But not grass.” “I am great, honey, I am.” “Listen I love you. Take care of yourself and don’t let yourself get sad

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or depressed in any way.” “I’ve been doing really heavy-duty prayers for *Jesus Christ Superstar*.” “I love you madly. Bye, baby.”

Two days later, Richard Hurst, co-founder with Sam of MSI, walked through the door and, swirling with the scent of garlic and onions, delivered a box of twenty-four bagels from H&H Bagels in New York City. They’d arrived at the office by courier an hour earlier.



Sitting across from Sam, at the foot of the bed, Kristen Blodgette was massaging Mary’s legs and feet. Kristen had a rare, unexpected day off from her busy schedule as musical supervisor for a national tour of *Cats* and an upcoming stage production of *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*. That morning she’d flown from New York City with one of her dogs to visit Mary whom she’d never met in person but had come to know over the telephone.

For Kristen to have spent five hours in an airplane

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to connect with Mary face to face is a testament to the special relationships Mary had fostered at work. Kristen explained to me that evening before leaving to catch her return flight, “I would call to speak with Sam, and I would get Mary. Now it so happens that *Cats* has been quite a challenge at times and I would call all frustrated to speak with Sam — never upset with Sam, just frustrated in general — and Mary would say, ‘How are you, love?’ She would disarm me with her joy.

“Mary has affected a lot of people that she has only spoken with on the phone; I mean, I was only a voice to her. Yet I would change the pattern of my day from having spoken with her.”

Earlier that day, Sam gone, and Marielle having stopped by to visit, the three women were deep in conversation.

“I think you must have had one foot in the other world your whole life,” said Kristen. “I don’t think it works that one becomes ill and then is quickly invited to transgress between worlds. I think that your toes must’ve always been wiggling in the other world.”

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“I think I’ve always been afraid,” said Mary, “not particularly to die but, you know, Kristen, I have never walked on a beach by myself; I have never walked in a forest by myself, as my dear friend Marielle knows. I’ve never been anywhere by myself, I’ve always been afraid. You know, I’ve always tried to be kind and I’ve always tried to be gentle with people.” “But it went beyond that,” interjected Kristen. “I think that you are a spiritual master of some sort.” “Oh, I appreciate that,” said Mary, “but I think you’re as dippy as they come. But I love you.”

As the laughter faded, Mary’s point embedded itself like a hook: she did not see herself in an exalted state. She was, in her own words, “just a typist/receptionist living in Winnipeg. I am not a mystic. I am simply having extraordinary experiences, all wrapped in love, that have been gifted to me.”



Mary’s humility was the welcome mat that attracted people to her door and into her heart. All strata of

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people were drawn to her selfless, non-judgemental ways. She simply loved everyone, Broadway musical directors and Winnipeg street prostitutes alike.

When the Zografos first moved onto Furby Street, there were prostitutes working the main intersection not sixty metres away. As construction workers were hammering and sawing inside the house, Mary went out to talk to one of the young women who had stationed herself on the corner closest to the house. Mary learned that her name was Pamela and asked what had brought her to the area. “You know what I’m doing here,” said Pamela. Mary replied, “Yes, I do and I would prefer you didn’t do that here as I have young girls and I don’t want them hassled.” Pamela agreed, “All right, I won’t.”

Mary invited her in for a cup of tea. She introduced Pamela to the construction workers, one of whom took Mary aside and asked, “Do you know what she is?” Mary replied, “Yes, she’s a woman who’s trying to earn a living.” “I know, but she’s a hooker.” “Well,” said Mary, “she’s a very nice hooker and she is going to have some tea with us.” “My wife wouldn’t like that,” he said. “It’s all right,” said Mary, “it’s good tea.”

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When Pamela was leaving, she commented to Mary that no one had ever invited her in just for a cup of tea. Mary told Pamela that she was welcome to come for tea anytime she wanted. As long as Alex, her husband, was not home alone.