

## A Friend of Mine

By Ryan Murphy

**November 21<sup>st</sup>, 1963**

Dallas had been a frenetic buzz of activity for several days, settling now due to the lateness of the hour. Every establishment on Elm and Main was bedecked with American and Texas flags, the streets quiet in anticipation of the day to come. A pair of young women emerged from a shop the next street over. They had bags slung over their shoulders, titles like *Ring of Fire*, *The Beatles*, and *Silver Threads and Golden Needles* sticking out at odd angles. The records were clearly recent purchases. “It’s a real shame they broke up though, you know?” the taller girl said, continuing some unheard conversation. Her hair was a tumbling mass of blond curls. “I get that Dusty wanted to strike out on her own, and luck be with her, but the band was so good together.”

“It is a shame,” the other said, her dark hair pulled back from her pale face in a ponytail. “You’re really gonna have a blast with that Beatles album though. They’ve got a great sound; I can’t believe you haven’t heard them before!” The pale girl’s name was Mary Atwood. Her friend was Sherry Thompson.

“So. Have you talked to James yet?” Sherry asked, shooting an inquisitive look over at her roommate, who was searching her pockets for the apartment key.

“What about?” Mary asked.

“Oh, you know.”

Mary did not know. James was a longtime friend of Sherry’s but not someone of whom Mary was overly fond, especially after he spilled an incredible amount of beer on one of her favorite books (a much-loved, battered copy of *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*) at the most recent of Sherry’s

infamous parties. While it had been an accident, it did nothing to improve Mary's opinion of him.

"Sherry, I've told you a thousand times, I've already..."

"Decided he isn't worth the effort?" Sherry groaned. "No. He said he wanted to make it up to you and you should give him the chance. At least let him come with us to the parade tomorrow?"

Mary shrugged at the proposal. "Fine." Might as well get it over with.

Sherry brightened. "Great! I'll make sure he's with us. Now put on those Beatles. I want to hear what all the fuss is about."

"Right on, Sher. You're in for a treat."

**November 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1963**

With the new day came the crowd, thousands of people lining the streets to see the motorcade. "I called James last night," Sherry told Mary as they pushed their way through the throng, "after you went to bed. He'll meet us at Dealey, and we can find some shade."

"Good," Mary replied, only a little curtly.

Turning a corner, the girls spotted James keeping his vigil across from the book depository. Clad in a black leather jacket, shades resting atop slicked back hair, he was every inch a greaser. "Hey, how's it hangin', girls? You wouldn't believe the crazy folks they got out here today. Some dude passed me earlier covered in smiley faces, and I coulda sworn I saw some nut wearing a helmet and cape over there. Like something out of a comic book." He gestured vaguely towards the depository before noticing the awed expression on Mary's face as she took in the full extent of the crowd. It packed the square end to end, flags furling and unfurling above the heads of the assembled. "I'm not big on crowds myself," he continued, "but with how many people are here today, you can't say Dallas doesn't love President Kennedy." Mary smiled wryly; the president wasn't exactly adored in the city, and she knew he knew it.

She kept quiet and allowed James and Sherry to carry the conversation, which they were more than happy to do.

She was snapped out of her daze as cries of “The parade’s started!” and “They’re coming!” reverberated from the neighboring streets. James pushed his shades onto the bridge of his nose with a dramatic flourish. “Here we go, gals.”

The cheer reached a rousing crescendo as the motorcade turned the corner into the plaza: a white Ford Sedan, followed by another white Ford Sedan, followed at last by the main attraction. The sleek convertible contained a driver, a stony-faced agent, a couple Mary vaguely recognized as the governor and his wife, and the presidential couple in all their youthful glory. Then the first shot rang out.

There was a bang like a firecracker, a burst of gore from the car, and the audience’s cheers turned to screams. At least two more bangs followed, but Mary couldn’t be sure of the source. Her head was spinning. The president was sprawled in Jackie’s lap, her face and cardigan streaked with blood, stunningly red in the harsh sun. Half of the president’s head was missing. What was left of his charming face buried itself in Jackie’s skirts as she pressed her hands to his exposed skull, trying to stem the flow of blood. It was clear this would do no good; President Kennedy wouldn’t survive the day.

Mary’s world stopped spinning to reveal a cop’s face, screaming at her to “Get out, just go! Get him out of here!” Him? Him who? What could they possibly want her to do for the dying president? There had to be secret service here, what was one girl to do about—Then she realized the cop was referring to James, not to Kennedy, and that they really needed to get to a hospital.

**November 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1963**

Mary’s day passed in a daze. Nothing seemed right. The President was dead, officially pronounced half an hour after the bullet shaved away his skull. There were rumors of another shooting

later that same day, and of the arrest of a man named Oswald, an ex-marine suspected of killing Kennedy. C.S. Lewis had died, another of Mary's idols gone, her ruined, beer-soaked copy of his magnum opus a sad reminder of the day's traumas. James, fortunately, was fine; the bloody wound on his face wasn't as bad as it had first looked, just a cut on the cheek from a rogue shard of bullet. A few stitches and he was out of the hospital, sporting a nifty scar and a niftier story. He promptly took Sherry out to lunch, a date Mary opted out of. She didn't need them. She didn't even turn on the TV.

**November 24<sup>th</sup>, 1963**

Mary continued to lay around the apartment, barely speaking to Sherry. She ate her meals cold and drowned herself in blankets, lost in shock. This likely would have continued had James not reached out after an evening date with Sherry. He asked her to go on a walk, his easygoing demeanor replaced with uncharacteristic awkwardness. Not trusting herself to speak or make eye contact, Mary looked at the floor and nodded.

They walked a while in silence, hands in pockets, eyes forward. James glanced over at Mary, then back at the road, then back at Mary, clearly trying to turn her gaze to his. Unwillingly, she complied. His boyish features were marred by a sizeable cut. His eyes softened under the attention, a small weight lifting with the truth of his scar now exposed. "It's not so bad," he said, when she didn't look away. "I'm like Paul Muni in *Scarface*. They could cast me as the next Bond villain." Mary snorted laughter in spite of herself. Whatever her opinion of James, he was good at deflating tension.

She changed the subject. "So are you and my roommate like a...thing now?" she asked.

"Um, yeah, I suppose," he said. "It's a new thing for me, going steady with a chick, but I guess I could get used to it." Apparently at risk of being too sentimental, he added "Plus, she's fine as wine." Mary snorted again, suddenly sorry she'd missed lunch to see how the pair got on as an item.

“I tried to kill a man today.” This was just about the last thing that Mary had expected to hear. She gave James a blank stare, his eyes hardened by confession.

“Wha-what?” she said when speech returned. “Who?”

“Lee Harvey Oswald. The man who murdered President Kennedy. But I got beaten to it.”

Jack Ruby, local tycoon and club owner, had pulled a gun on Oswald as the alleged shooter was being escorted from city lockup to the county jail. Had Mary turned on the television, she’d have witnessed it herself, captured on camera for the eyes of the nation.

James’ eyes welled. Surprising herself, Mary hugged him. He hugged her back. The street was empty, shadows punctuated by the blood-red of the darkening sky. There was a contemplative silence.

James disengaged from the hug and broke the silence, his eyes glazed over. “I, uh, I have something for you,” he said, removing a thin, square object from a bag Mary hadn’t noticed. “By way of apology. Sherry told me you liked the Beatles. Decided you should have this.” *With the Beatles*. The new album at last. She took it. “Hopefully it makes up for the book that I, uh, ruined.”

Mary turned the album over a few times, collecting her words. Eventually she said “I don’t blame you for what you tried to do. Anyone would have wanted to do the same. If the last few days have proven anything, it’s that life is too short for regrets. For you. For me. For anyone.” Her face took on sudden conviction. “It’s late. I need to crash. But I wanted you to know. . .I won’t hold a grudge anymore.” Without another word, she headed for home. James joined her.

*“Leader of a nation for such a precious time*

*Oh, he was a friend of mine.”*

The Byrds, 1965