

# **To Be Human**

by Mary Kay Holmes

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Cover by : Caroline DeVita

For questions or more on the author :  
<http://www.marykayholmes.com>

I hope you found peace, I'm not sure I ever will.

xo

## Prologue

The feeling of his hands on my throat was unfamiliar. A strange touch that belonged to someone I'd never met, someone who wished to feel the life squeeze from my body as it absorbed into his calloused fingertips. There was a roughness, a cold-blooded inability to see past the blanket of crimson before him and look into my eyes. He didn't see me. He didn't even see me.

I could sense the veins in my neck trying to break free, tiny bursts of power screaming for survival as if each drop had its own will to live and was not going down without a fight.

I floated above my physical self feeling nothing, I was numb, but my body was still uselessly battling as it wound down.

I had no more fight, no more will. I give up, you fucking beast.

You win.

## Chapter One

“You are an asshole,” my mother flatly tossed at me.

If I had a dollar for every time someone told me this, I would have bought my first house at sixteen. Too bad insults weren’t an actual commodity.

I was a baby who was very generously created by a woman who would never love me, and I flew from the womb screaming without a tear. According to them, my first breath was calculated and intentional, as if I had decided I would give them nothing before I even sucked my first breath.

I was ungrateful, I was insensitive, I was impulsive.

They were stoic, studious, humorless, unimpressed.

We sat at the table for dinner at 5:30 pm sharp daily, but no one spoke. I pushed my casserole or pot roast or spaghetti around my plate and fantasized about living in my beat up vintage car. My grandmother had left me that car and I adored it almost as much as I had her. The backseat was the size of a New York apartment and I could easily see myself existing happily in its embrace. I imagined a life where the people who created me thought I was fun, worthy. A life filled with weekends at the lake and road trips and laughing. Why doesn’t anyone here ever fucking smile?

Sometimes I’d bite my lip, the warm blood oozing along my tongue, so I could feel something for just a glimmer of a moment. I’d excuse myself from the table, toss my plate in the sink, and listen to the deep exhalation of disappointment as I sauntered off and closed the bathroom door. I’d stare. I’d investigate. Somehow I always looked different but felt exactly the same. The same total nothing.

I’d strip down to my bare skin and make the shower water as hot as I could stand it, two degrees below skin melting scald. As soon as I became accustomed to the temperature, I’d push it hotter and hotter until I got dizzy, until my heartbeat in my throat, and I had to shut it off or pass out. The steam swirling around, I’d sit on the edge of the tub and breathe. Breathe in, breathe out. Steam in, steam out.

Everything is temporary. This too would end and one day you will be free, Isabel.

Breathe.

Once they fell asleep I’d wait for the not so subtle rumble of my friend Mateo’s junker in the distance and smile knowing he was there for me. Mateo was always exactly where you needed him, and at the time I didn’t even realize his sacrifices.

Mateo was one of my dearest friends in high school. We would sneak out of our beds in the middle of the night, climbing through windows and running through the dense and sparkly night to the after hours dance club in a strip mall that was open until 4 a.m.

No we weren’t eighteen, and no the bouncers didn’t care. They should have, they just didn’t.

We would dance until we were drenched with sweat, then sit on the curb outside the club, smoking cigarettes and drinking Red Bull, laughing at the adults who’d swarm after their bars closed. They’d pour in, drunk and lost and wanting to connect with the children who had abandoned their family homes for the chance to dance until our legs could take no more. They offered us drugs and alcohol and sex and all we wanted was for them to leave us alone so we could promise each other we’d never end up like them.

All we needed was each other and our shared love of the gleefully free hours between 2 a.m. and 6 a.m. when we could be our true selves. No judgmental eyes infecting us with self doubt and guilt, just endless laughter, relief, and pure joy.

You could always count on Mateo for a good time. His sense of humor was on point, and, like me, he had no problem making a fool of himself to get a laugh. His facial expressions were priceless, and he gave one of the best hugs you'd ever be lucky enough to be surrounded by. His big brown eyes were puppy dog sweet, and did a great job of hiding all the pain he ignored behind them. Life was hard for Mateo, but you'd never guess from the way he shared his peanut butter sandwiches and gum balls like he had an endless supply in his locker.

When he fell asleep in his bed one night with a cigarette in his mouth and set his blanket on fire, he spent the next day at school showing everyone the burn on his chest where the ash streamed through the covers like lava. "I guess I shouldn't smoke while I'm falling asleep anymore," he confessed with a smile on his face and that cute little shoulder shrug he always did. Never mind the bleak home life, the lack of supervision and love, the endless supply of cigarettes in place of food in the fridge. Nothing was a big deal, even his own stupid mistakes, and nothing could make you forget a gross break up or bullshit high school drama like one of Mateo's smiles.

Mateo suddenly fled the earth years later when he shoved an enormous amount of heroin into his veins. He was sad and lost and in pain and all he wanted was to find peace.

We had reconnected online and chatted a bit about the good ol' days. I knew he was having a rough time, I knew he was slowly disappearing into the sand. Every inch of his skin hurt, his brain constantly abused him with delusion and insecurity; he picked fights with scary dudes or jumped in front of cars in twisted plots to acquire painkillers from the emergency room. Mateo was a shadow of his former self, holding his skin and life together with wet scotch tape and a faint belief in a magical spaghetti monster who would surely save him.

I did what I could from miles and miles away, without doing too much. In retrospect, I did absolutely nothing. I listened, I felt sad for him as I sipped wine and worked behind the chat window, I told him I was sorry and I truly meant it.

To this day the guilt still sits, like a cement brick, in the bottom of who I am. I hoped he was free, I hoped he was relieved, and despite the tragic nature of it all I hoped he was happy with his resolution.

Maybe sometimes forcing yourself to fight isn't the right decision. Maybe sometimes just giving into the pain and relinquishing control is better. Maybe some people just aren't made for this life. Maybe thinking that makes me a terrible person.

I'm sorry, Mateo, I really am. I should have done more. I should have, I just didn't.

What do you think it all means?  
I don't know, I don't think anyone does.  
So what keeps you going?  
Music. Art. Kissing...at the very root of it all, that's all there is.

## Chapter Two

I constantly wondered if we would ever have sex again. One day Chris just stopped walking through the door with that flicker in his eye that made my cheeks flush, and our ardent kisses turned to pecks on my forehead and questions like “did you pick anything up for dinner?”

It may have happened all at once but in all likelihood it was a slow decline, unnoticed by compulsively driven humans who had embraced the laziness of binge watching and falling asleep to podcasts while the other stayed up late in the other room. We hadn't become our parents, we'd become something almost worse...roommates?

As I stared at my untrimmed pubic hair in the mirror and realized it had been six months since I'd even considered making a waxing appointment, it occurred to me it'd been at least that long since we'd touched each other in any sort of situation other than a couch snuggle or high five over cereal. I figured I'd call the waxing chick and see if she had any openings soon. Not now, now was too soon and I had that big meeting at work later anyway. Another day...maybe Friday. Maybe. I pulled on my oversized sweatpants, smeared a bright green mask on my face, and took a sip (let's be honest, more of a swig) of my generously poured glass of Malbec.

My phone chimed and up popped a GIF of Tom Hardy winking in a 1960's suit, sent by none other than Jane. I paused before swiping him away, allowing myself just a brief little second to remind myself I hadn't totally lost my ability to desire uncontrollably. Man, if he were here right now I'd rip my pubic hair out with tweezers if I had to. Better yet, maybe he'd do it for me. I shivered at the thought and shot back a swooning bitmoji.

## Chapter Three

“Are you following me?” he stopped in his tracks, turned, and looked me straight in the eye.

My heart stopped. I may have audibly gasped.

“Uh, no, I’m just walking to the class,” I calmly stammered back. Wow, so flustered. I felt a bit like I was spinning with his gaze on me. There was a weird thing happening with my body, I was not totally in control of these strange shoulder shrugs or head shakes I was doing to seem casual and not shocked by his inference. Following him? Psshhh, please. Well, OK, I was definitely guilty of trailing behind him like a lost baby duck, mesmerized by his gait and broad shoulders and backpack covered in stunning black marker drawings. I was trying to sort out if they were part of the bag’s design or some sort of cure for droning classroom boredom. I was slightly jealous of the hairs grazing the back of his neck and had wished I could touch them.

“Really?” he asked sarcastically, head slightly cocked to one side as he perused every inch of me from bottom to top. A sly little smirk crept its way into the corner of his mouth right before he subtly licked his lips. If I didn't know better I'd think I was making him a bit hungry.

“Where are you headed, then?”

Super subtle Irish accent dancing its way through a perfectly sculpted mouth. I had never seen anything quite as enticing as this man’s lips, like rose stained silk begging to be touched. When I was little I had a quilted satin blanket as soft as the inside of puppy ears. I would massage it over my face and lips with my eyes closed, the cool threads like soft fingertips comforting me. I imagined his perfect skin would absolutely outdo the affection I had for that blanky if only I could put my hands on it...

I liked his heavily worn in flannel and the way he bounced a bit when he strolled. He was statuesque, painfully rough and tumble handsome, and somehow keenly aware of the instant power he had over me. The scruff on his face was a few days old and caressed his chiseled jaw with a density unfamiliar to most men in college. He gave the illusion of having just woken up, but the scent of bar soap dancing on the breeze told a different story. He was effortless and his ease made me strangely robotic and awkward in a way I normally wasn't. This guy was definitely taking advantage of his ability to make me blush and stutter, enjoying it just a tad too much.

He pushed a piece of dark chestnut hair back from his forehead, took a deep breath, put his hands in his pockets.

I think he had a tiny splattering of green paint under his eye, right next to that adorable scar on his cheekbone. Yep. Definitely emerald acrylic. It took every bit of impulse control I could muster to keep myself from wiping it off with my thumb.

So maybe I was following him, big deal. I hadn't really thought about what I was doing. I was in a trance that day, marching to a soft drum beating in the back of my head. Keep going, keep going, keep going.

It was the third day of my first semester of college. A year that was stolen out from under me. A year that was meant to be filled with starring roles in theatrical productions and senior pranks and proms and here I was, blindly walking a university campus when I should

be comfortably tucked into an elective class I had earned with junior year AP hell. I never got to take auto body or wood shop and I was actually pretty pissed off about it.

“Sorry, I’m just trying to find my way around,” I flirted, feeling a tiny bit stupid, but summoning a bit of my charm from whatever dark corner it had retreated to. “I didn’t mean to...”

“Yes you did, and it’s OK,” and cue the smile and biting the thumbnail. That goddamn smile. This was the moment that would define the next three years of my midnights and I had no idea how truly screwed I was, both literally and figuratively. What I did know was that I simultaneously felt like I was floating an inch above the earth, and possibly about to throw up. Jesus, look at those hands.

“I’m James. You’re in my history class, right?” he asked as he ran his fingers through his unfairly shiny, wavy hair and tried to read my mind with his grey, maybe green, eyes. Yikes.

“Uh, yeah, I think so. I’m Isabel.” I was still trying to be cool while silently freaking out that I was missing my sociology class somewhere across campus. I didn’t want to look at my watch and risk him thinking I was bored or disinterested, but seriously, I was crapping my pants. This was so much harder than I thought it would be. College, that is, not staring into this guy’s giant, deep, eerily intriguing eyes. My goodness he was making my hands sweaty.

“You’re cute. Good luck finding your class,” he said as he gestured toward the paper in my hand with a subtle chin tilt. A flash of that dangerous smile and he walked away. I swear he peeked back over his shoulder with a glimmer of shiny green glass, but I was already trying to look at my nerdy freshman map and orient myself.

I hoped I didn’t blow that. I hoped there was a back door to my sociology class. I hoped I hadn’t made a colossal mistake by dropping out of high school and starting college a year early.

Don’t overthink it, Isabel, you’ll send yourself to an early grave worrying about things you can’t control. Increasingly shocking you haven’t done it already.

I stood in the center of a bustling swarm of people, lost and found at the same time. I needed so desperately to be saved, and for a brief moment, as I watched him saunter off, I felt less alone. That feeling was worth chasing, and luckily for me, it didn’t take long to catch.

Do you remember that kitten you used to have when we first met?

She was so cute, so sweet.

I remember taking a bath, leaning back on you, and she was sitting on the edge of the tub  
licking the water off my fingertips while we listened to The Pixies.

That was a good day.

Yes it was.

## Chapter Four

“Isabel. Isabel. Isabel!”

I was sitting with my head on my hand staring at a blank wall, slowly waving a photograph of a steamy, windblown Italian model in my hand and wondering if I was hungry or not. I wished I was lying on a beach somewhere with an old school Mai Tai in my hand. Crap, I needed to buy laundry soap on the way home. Did I send that email to the wardrobe girl for tomorrow’s shoot? Ugh, I had to call my mom back, but I really didn’t want to. Yep, I was definitely hungry. I should have a friend with a sailboat, I really needed an ocean breeze on my face at this moment...ground control to Major Tom. Space city, man. Sometimes I get so lost between being asleep and awake I couldn’t even tell what was real anymore. Chris called it “self indulgent fugue-ing” and didn’t understand why anyone would fantasize as much as I did. Maybe if Chris had a boyfriend as mind numbingly dull and humorless as himself, he would sympathize a bit more. Shit, I can be such a bitch sometimes.

“Isabel!”

“Yes, yes, sorry, Bjorn,” I snapped to and looked up. Work face, quick, make a work face. I opened my eyes a little to widely and suddenly needed to sneeze. “Hey, I was thinking we should recast the model for the ‘How to Get Laid Like Gentleman’ piece. The dude they chose looks like he’s twelve,” I threw out in my half an octave higher than normal phone voice.

“If this is your way of getting us to hire Grant again, you’re crazy. We’ve used him twice in the last three months.” Bjorn sat on the edge of my desk and inspected the half eaten protein bar I’d forgotten about earlier.

“But he’s sooooo hot, Bjorn.” I fanned my face with both hands, acting like a preteen fangirl surrounded by boy bands.

“You know he’s gay, right?” Bjorn was now eating the protein bar and reading the email I was composing on my computer.

“Who cares? He was also not very clever and had no concept of sarcasm so I preferred not to talk to him. Gay or not, I just liked to memorize the way his abs looked so I could reimagine them with my tongue on them later...” I made a shocked face and put my hand over my mouth. “Oh yes she did!”

Bjorn chuckled and threw the protein bar wrapper in the trash. Swish.

The first time I met Grant on set he had a brace wrapped around his perfectly sculpted leg so I asked him, gesturing toward his knee, “What happened? Does your knee hurt?”

“No,” he responded with a sly fox smile and cocked eyebrow, “but my face does.”

“I’m sorry? Your face hurts?” I asked, very confused and mildly concerned about his incredibly handsome face. Jiminy Cricket, you could cut glass on his chiseled jaw.

“From looking at you,” he flirted back in a feeble attempt at being witty. “Wait,” he said suddenly, scrunching up his forehead, “I mean my eyes! My EYES hurt from looking at you. Is that right?”

I smiled knowingly. “I think I know what you mean.” I winked back and turned to walk away, rolling my eyes to myself and hating that he fit every male model stereotype. I consoled myself with red vines from the snack table while the make up girl coated him in almond oil.

Bjorn was staring at me while I spaced out.

I yawned for what seemed like minutes and shook myself to wake up. Woof that felt good.

“You are a total creeper, and no we can’t hire Grant again but how ‘bout we find you a new beardy dream lover. You can look through options tomorrow and pass the kid model over to Barb for the sex texting piece she’s working on.” He was putting on my hand lotion and smelling it while he spoke.

“OK, that works. It’s sexting, by the way.” I was rubbing my eyes. Goodbye, mascara, it’s been real while it lasted.

“Dude, you need to get some sleep,” Boss Man Bjorn looked at the photos on my desk and picked up my empty coffee mug. I stared at his cute designer trousers and thought about the boots I’d ordered earlier. I hoped they would fit over my big, I mean fit, calves. Be positive, Isabel. Your new love of rowing and box jumps may be making your legs thicker but you’ll be able to carry an adult human on your back in the zombie apocalypse, and that wins every time. Looking good in skinny jeans and boots will be key when the plague arrives, plus my tanned buff shoulders will look rad in the tattered tanks my end of the world lover will peel off me. Mmmmm, filthy end of the world lover man...

“Oh yeah, totally, no, I mean, I just stayed up too late researching something and I’m a tiny little some exhausted but I’m totally gets enough sleep. Don’t worry.”

He stared at me. With glassy eyes, as if on demand, I fricking yawned.

“Don’t look at me like that, you willed me to do that, goddamn it, Bjorn.” I smiled and rubbed my eyes now filled with gritty mascara chunks. OK, maybe I am tired. I rifled around in my purse for some eye drops as I scrunched my eyes alternately, trying to pretend I wasn’t fighting through the grit.

“You have to stop taking those old lady sleeping pills from the dollar bin. One day you aren’t going to wake up and that would make me very sad,” Bjorn half teased as he flipped his wavy blonde hair and walked out of my office. I swear that man is the only one I have ever met who can rock early 70’s Gregg Allman hair with a trendy flair. Totally unfair.

Go to sleep and never wake up? Now that’s an idea. If I were to die while having an incredibly indulgent and steamy dream about Supermodel Grant, would I get to stay in his arms for eternity? Is that how it works? If so, I was suddenly less afraid of the abyss. I didn’t subscribe to the idea of heaven or anything like it, but naked in bed for eternity sounded like something worth believing in. Let’s space out and think about that one...mmmmm, Grant.

My head snapped up off my chest like a baby nodding off in a high chair.

Wait, excuse me, my pills ain’t cheap, baby. Well, some of them are. Crap, I need fancier sleeping pills. Sleeping pills I can be proud of! Nighttime drugs are the new status symbol for women who want to flee reality and fuck strangers on remote islands that probably don’t actually exist. I should do a photo spread on that in next month’s magazine.

“Top Ten Sleeping Pills to Impress Your Friends.” Full centerfold featuring a woman lying in bed in ecstasy while covered in mounds of pink capsules. Her loosely draped negligee will be just a shade or two darker than the pills so they’ll really pop. Nope, that is just sad and a tad bit creepy. Maybe the pills should be yellow? Yellow makes people happy! Oh, wow, yep, I’m tired.

“I can’t do all this without you! I need three more of you!” Bjorn hollered from the hall as he pressed the button on the espresso machine. True, I was crazy good at my job and Bjorn loved me (humbly pats herself on the back). I guess accidentally sleeping pilling

myself to death would have to wait awhile. Besides, I decided I really needed a kabob from that place on the corner. Insane hummus. Hungry. So very hungry.

I wish I could cry, it seems like if I could it would all come flowing out and I'd actually feel relieved.

What I wouldn't give for a moment of silence.