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BE CAREFUL AROUND MARY ALICE

by *Elsie A. Schmied*

It all started at my sister Mary Alice's house last year. My husband was kidding William, her husband, about his predictability.

"I'll bet Mary Alice knows exactly what you're going to do before you do. You probably obey all the laws, pay every cent of income tax you owe, and wouldn't think of cheating on your wife, even when your sexy neighbor flirts with you. I've seen that Amy, she's something."

William reddened at the thought and started to protest. His medium brown hair, cut every three weeks, was parted to the side, every hair in place. He kept his weight at an even 170, just right for his six-foot height, and even his casual clothes were smooth and unwrinkled. William believed in a place for everything and everything in its place, and expected Mary Alice to do the same. Frankly, William was stodgy.

I remember once Mary Alice called me complaining about him.

"I'm so bored, I don't know what to do. He always wears his brown suit on Monday and Wednesday, and his blue suit the rest of the week. On Saturday he cuts the grass and trims the hedges. Every Sunday he goes bowling after church."

Her voice dropped slightly and she continued in a half-embarrassed way, "And on Sunday nights he makes love to me for about five minutes, then rolls over and goes to sleep. Every night he sits in his chair in front of the television and watches sports: football games in autumn, basketball games in winter, hockey games in season, and even track and field. And he doesn't like it if I watch his TV during the day. Sometimes I could scream."

While she was talking, I was thinking about the two of them. Where William was controlled and organized, Mary Alice was adventuresome. Full of fun in company, blond, curly-headed and with big baby-blue eyes, and the temper of a redhead, she was a half foot shorter than William, soft and cuddly, and in a constant battle with the bathroom scale. She hated to plan, preferring to act on the spur of the moment. Yet despite all their differences, Mary Alice and William got along fine, except for TV.

"I just adore sitcoms," she went on. "Sometimes I go next door to the Sharples and watch with Eunice, but you know William, he likes to have me at home, so I don't indulge very often."

I murmured some sympathetic clucking sounds and didn't think much more about it. I never dreamed what would happen next.

We were over at their place a couple of weeks before Christmas, firming up our plans for the holidays, when Mary Alice went over to where William was sitting.

"You know what I want this year, hon?" she asked. "I'd

really like to have my very own television set so I can watch my programs while you watch yours, and maybe the soaps during the day. Please?"

William was silent for awhile. Then he said, "I'd rather have you in here with me. I'm afraid that people will say we don't get along. People talk so much, you know."

"It isn't that. I'm just tired of all those games and sports. I'd like to watch something else. Come on. It's Christmas."

They dropped the subject and we finished our plans before having coffee and cake. Mary Alice makes the most luscious Black Forest Cake.

She called me a couple of days later. "William finally gave in after he checked with some of the other men at work. I guess their wives feel the same way. He said they put a small set in the bedroom, so he'll get me one and we can hook it up to the cable, too."

Mary Alice was ecstatic. "I'm telling you I smothered him with kisses until he gave an embarrassed laugh and shrugged me off. 'It's only a TV,' he said."

Later on she told me that as soon as the television set was installed in the bedroom, she switched it on and watched soap operas all afternoon. "All My Children," "One Life to Live," followed by "General Hospital," took up much of the afternoon. After Oprah and her guests finished talking about runaway teens, it was time to start dinner. By the time William came home from work, she said she was bleary-eyed, but happy. She started to tell William about the soaps, but he wanted it quiet at the table, so they ate dinner and she washed the dishes quickly so she could get back to her programs.

"By ten o'clock when we normally get ready for bed, I had seen four comedies and a murder mystery. I wanted to watch the news and then the late show, but I turned the set off when William came to bed. It was a good day."

The next time I called her, Mary Alice had a routine of her own: an hour for housework, watch the morning shows, lunch, the afternoon shows, dinner, the evening shows, and sometimes she crept out of bed when William was asleep and watched the late shows on the living room TV. But she didn't do that very often after William awoke one night and missed her. On Saturday she shopped for groceries.

I ran into her at the supermarket a few months later; Mary Alice looked like she had gained ten pounds, her hair needed shaping, and we hadn't seen her in ages. She told me that if the telephone rang when she was watching one of her programs, she let it ring. Finally, after William complained that she wasn't answering the telephone, she persuaded him to buy an answering machine. She also bought a dishwasher.

One day an electrical storm hit our town with thunder

and lightning, great booms of noise that shook the house, knocking out the power. I dashed around the house, shutting windows and wiping up the water that had rained in. I was still sitting in the gloom when the phone rang. It was Mary Alice, all excited.

"You'll never guess what happened. It's really peculiar."

"I give up. What happened?"

"This storm. Our power's been off for two hours already. Yours too?"

"You know it. And I've got all my ironing to do and no power."

"Well," Mary Alice continued, "there I was waiting for the power to come back on so I could watch my programs and getting angrier all the time. I finally got so mad I sort of glared at the TV and yelled at it."

"So? I yell at my appliances lots of times. Everyone does."

"Maybe, but I really did it. I screamed that I wished it would come back on and never go off again, ever. And it did. It came on."

"Just a coincidence. Your power came back on and..."

"No, don't you get it? The power is still off, only the TV is on. Actually the only problem is that it's stuck on one channel. I tried changing it with the remote and with the controls on the set, but I can't change the channel or the volume, or even turn it off. Luckily, I had it tuned to where most of my favorites are, so I guess I'll just make the best of it and just leave it running. What do you think?"

"Sounds peculiar to me, but I don't understand all this electronic stuff anyway. Let me know what happens. Call me tomorrow, OK?"

She phoned early the next morning. "When William came home, the television was still on, even though I was in the kitchen cooking dinner, and he asked me to turn the TV off. I told him what happened when we had the storm and how I can't even change the channels, let alone turn it off."

"So what did he say?"

"Nothing. He pulled the plug out of the wall, tried pushing the off/on button and even unscrewed the cable connection, but nothing worked. He got really upset then, and moved it into the den, so he wouldn't hear it at night and could sleep.

"This morning he took it to the repair shop. I begged him not to do that. I don't want to miss my programs, but he said I could watch them on the set in the living room, and you know how he hates that."

"I've heard you say that."

Mary Alice sighed. "So that's where it stands. I'm watching General Hospital in the living room, but it isn't the same, you know what I mean?"

When I called her the next time, she filled me in. William told her the television repairman took one look at the set and shook his head. He said it must have been the power surge when the lights came back on. He was going to try to fix it, but he couldn't find anything wrong and

neither could the other repairmen he tried. She said William finally brought it back home and put it in the den, so now they were stuck with it since no one can fix it.

The next time I was over there I got used to the background drone of the television set in the den. Mary Alice said she was beginning to enjoy some of the programs she hadn't watched before, and generally sat in the den and sewed while those were on.

But that day during an especially boring program, she was mad about something anyhow. I saw her get red in the face. I knew that look from when we were kids. She stood up, hands on her hips and started yelling at the set. Finally she lost it. She stood there glowering and shouted at the set, "I wish you'd just shut up once."

And it did. It was weird. We kind of looked at each other for awhile before she tried the controls, but now nothing worked. She shrugged and we went into the kitchen for lunch.

We watched William's set all that day and when he came home, she told him what happened. They both tried shouting at the set to turn it back on, but nothing worked.

After that, whenever we talked, she always complained about William.

"William watched his football games (or basketball games or hockey games) and I didn't have anything to do. I even sat in the den and stared at that lousy set. Life is boring. William is boring. I miss my sitcoms. He doesn't want me to watch his TV during the day and won't let me get another set for the bedroom. I don't know what Murphy Brown is doing or if Rebecca's twins will be all right."

I sympathized with her as best as I could, but there wasn't much I could do. It was her problem, she'd have to solve it herself. Little did I know how she would.

The next time I saw her was at William's funeral. She was beside herself with grief. "It's all my fault," she kept saying. "I did it, I killed him."

"Don't, Sis, don't get yourself all worked up. The doctor said it was a massive heart attack. You didn't do it."

"You think so? Well maybe, but it is strange. That night when it happened, William was sitting there watching a preseason football game, like he always did. And I came into the living room and asked him if I could watch just half an hour. There was a program I heard about, and I figured half an hour wouldn't make any difference.

"But no. 'You've got a set of your own,' he said, and went back to his game.

"Well, I just saw red. It wasn't as if I was asking him to miss the whole game or anything, and anyhow it was half time, but no, he wouldn't budge. I got so mad I just stood there, kind of glowering at him, and I said..."

"Yes," I prompted.

"Just once you could share. You don't have to be so selfish."

"No way," he said, "I'm watching this game."

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far around the Empire. I told her there were waves in the air just like in the water. As I spoke, the zoom of Kamikaze Angels cleaved the sky in two. The radio ceased. Misa fell asleep. That was the last I recall of her in the earthly sense. I went back to the platoon that night, and the attack came in the morning.

Now, my platoon was dead. I was alone and scratching myself with rank weeds. Smoke clouds from splintered mimosas arose and scoured the jungle like phantom hunters. Dark webs of charred bamboo made me choke up everything I ever cherished in a mixture of blood and flame. Stripes of dead, glowing tigers bound me to the stagnant, smoldering earth. I saw red flares from American gunboats. I heard soldiers march and the slicing of machetes through struggling branches and silent lotus blossoms. All the sounds got longer and the distances closer.

Then everything stopped. The red, white and blue was hoisted over the island. I felt the shredded skin at my side.

Be Careful Around Mary Alice

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"So I said, 'I wish you'd drop dead.'"

"And he did."

After the funeral, Mary Alice sat around the house for weeks. Every time I came over, she was there staring at the walls, rarely turning the television set on. She hated her television set, still standing in the den, its blank screen mirroring her face, reflecting, never showing anything. She seemed to remember William with fondness. She'd say he wasn't so bad, and even if he was boring, at least he was company. I suspect that sometimes she wished he were back with her, but she was careful not to say it aloud. Then she'd finally turn on the TV in the living room.

Her friends decided that Mary Alice needed cheering up, so we all invited her to a barbecue on Labor Day. "It will be just the neighbors," one said, "and maybe we'll invite the new people who moved in the corner house. You can bring your icebox cake, OK?"

"I haven't done much cooking lately, let alone make fancy desserts, but I guess I can dig up the recipe. Yes, I'd love to come. Sounds like fun."

The barbecue was rained out, so the men moved the grill into the garage and the women sat on the screened porch and talked. The card tables were all set, paper tablecloths covering their scarred tops.

"Don't you hate this weather?" asked Amy, the simpering blond who lived next door and flirted with every man in sight, even my husband.

"Oh, I guess, but it's been so dry, I guess we need it. I just hate having to run around when it rains. What about you, Mary Alice?" asked their hostess.

"Doesn't matter to me. I can take it or leave it. All I do is sit around or maybe watch TV anyhow. This is the first time I've been out except to shop, for ages."

It was light and sleek like a row of feathers. I looked down and saw a girl with a bright wreath of sunflowers and a black sarong. Misa? It was Misa. The seashells on her necklace were tiny trumpets issuing a summons. I saw her row down the stream in a canoe, her arms tawny and fragrant with coconut oil. Her slim bronze shoulders, strong and agile, powered the oars with ease, making every splash a song. I recognized song and stream. I repeated the sounds I heard though I don't know why or how, and I kept repeating them as she sailed on past, as though I were a parrot.

Had I died in my sleep and my soul returned so quickly in another form? I remember nothing of Hell. I should have died in battle with the rest of my platoon. I ran away. What a mysterious mercy! I echo the oar's resilient strokes. Yes! The wandering voices. I am a parrot on the longest branch looking below where my Misa paddles away past the island's shadow.

"Well I hate it," said Amy, shaking her head. "I just wish I could make it stop."

"You gotta be careful what you wish for," said Mary Alice, "it might happen."

"Yeah, sure, like you could turn the rain off."

"I might, if I wanted to."

"Let's see you," she taunted.

"I don't want to."

Their hostess came between them. "Hey, you two, stop it. Let's have another rum and coke and see how the men are coming along."

Amy looked at Mary Alice, then laughed.

Mary Alice scowled at her. Amy laughed again, a malicious, snickering sort of laugh, the kind that used to set Mary Alice off.

Mary Alice downed her rum and coke and tried to avoid looking at Amy as she went into the kitchen to refill her glass. I watched Amy follow at her heels, still gibing. "You're always such a know-it-all, but this time I've called your bluff. Turn off the rain, indeed."

It was the last straw. Mary Alice put her drink down, turned, and faced Amy. "You'd better be quiet, or..."

"Or what? You'll turn off the rain?"

Mary Alice glowered at her. "I wish you'd shut that big fat mouth of yours forever."

And she did.

So now Mary Alice sits alone in her house, seldom venturing out. We talk sometimes and once in awhile I can get her to come over for dinner. My husband likes to tease her about being alone in that big house, but I've warned him not to get her mad. You never know what will happen when Mary Alice gets mad.