

Mary McGrail

STEEL BEACH

She woke from a dream to the altered feel of her own bed—more warmth, less room. Seconds before, in the dream, she had reached for a drink of water with an arm gone suddenly limp, a flapping thing she couldn't maneuver towards the cup. And now, awake, she discovered her right arm bent awkwardly beneath him, its circulation cut off. She eased free and kept still while blood pricked open her capillaries. With the smallest movement of her head she looked at the boy lying next to her and winced, remembering. Everything was painful after a night of drinking. A light above the garage door shone through her yellow curtains onto his neck, arms and belly, turning them yellow. His chest rose and fell, his mouth hung open and one hand rested delicately on his cock.

She pictured him back at Drumlin's, talking to her loudly across a wobbly table in the packed bar. A boy leaning towards her with blue eyes, a black crew cut, a rasping, adolescent voice. He'd mentioned a branch of the armed forces. Air Force? She closed her eyes and saw his sturdy black shoes amid the seesawing in her head. She studied the line of the ceiling where it met the wall. Was his name Steve? Phil? None of the letters of the alphabet caught in her mouth to begin his name. A boy from Nevada or New Mexico, she was pretty sure. Or was that thirst talking, conjuring up only arid, land-locked states?

Thirst turned her body to straw and bone. She rose cautiously to her knees on the bed, focusing on a spidery mesh of wall cracks while she moved first one, then the other long leg over the boy's hips and onto the floor. Nausea flipped over in her throat and the pattern of cracks dipped and swooned.

She left the nameless soldier and made her way through the pantyhose, magazines and bottles that littered her bedroom. Using both hands to seal her mouth shut she made her way to the bathroom, flipped on the bulb above the sink, then sat down on the cool linoleum. Please please please she prayed to the black and white tiles. As a child she always ran the bathtub faucet before throwing up, and

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she did the same now to cover the sickness that pushed at the back of her clenched teeth.

If only she were alone. Never had she been sick in a bar or at work or in front of anybody, ever. She'd held the line, and when her speech got away from her and things were taking a turn she'd made her way home every time, like a cat mauled in a fight. She had licked herself clean. The idea of him standing that very moment on the other side of the door made her swallow hard a few times, as if that might stay the contents of her boiling stomach. She stared at the knob, frozen, listening. Easy, she thought, just take it easy, inhale and exhale, take a sip from the gushing tub. Slowly she stood and took a step toward it, and then something big came loose and she threw up twice into the rising water.

When the vomiting was over and she could breathe again, she drew the shower curtain closed and drank from the sink. Her hands shook but the cold water soothed her acid throat. Small, dark splashes covered the oversized T-shirt she'd worn to bed, and they remained despite fierce rubbing with a towel. She wore no underpants. The medicine cabinet mirror caught her pale, tired face. Had she ever looked this bad? The purple under her large blue eyes appeared painted on and a puffiness she hadn't noticed before blurred the contours of her mouth and jaw. Gray strands in her blond hair looked clownish in this light. She plucked them in fascination and dread. Margaritas always made her feel lousy in the morning but this time it showed on the outside.

"Shit," she whispered.

She picked up a jar of Noxzema and smeared the mirror with it, burying her reflection in white cream. She checked an urge to smash the jar to pieces. He'd burst in to the sight of her cooling herself in a puddle of blue glass. Better to think twice.

Besides, she was a good, quiet girl and breaking things caused a scene. It was a matter of pride with Barbara that her drinking not make trouble for others. She thought of her co-worker at the Early Catch Seafood Restaurant: Bob Kiernan, a bartender, had snuck so much Wild Turkey and Coke last Thursday that he mourned the Bruins' last losing minutes as they blared from the bar TV by heaving a marble ashtray at the screen. He hit instead the forehead of a devoted regular named Ruthie. With tears in his eyes Bob taped and gauzed Ruthie's open cut, bought all her Absolut martinis that night and Friday too. And there was Patterson, his midsection a protruding drum, his arms and legs doing slapstick as he fought his way down from the high mahogany barstools on his way to the john. All of these were people she'd served and drank with, and among whom she was the very model of restraint.

She sank to the floor in exhaustion, her shapely legs angling out as if they'd lived a different life. She looked on them with gratitude. Absently, she fingered her

thick, sticky pubic hair and brought her fingers to her lips and nose. All the goo and smell of sex clung to her.

Actually, the fucking had been very nice. She hadn't slept with anybody in three years and had feared numbness, rejection, the thought of taking off her bra. He might see something bad in her that she couldn't hide with liquor or darkness. The feel of some part of her body on his. The wrong thought could flicker across her face. A thousand things. It had taken shots of tequila to dull the many points of this fear. Cuervo had helped, smoky and warm, almost green. And then her appetite had made its appearance.

In bed he drove into her wearing one orange sock. She watched the sock move and tried to remember his name, and then his mouth found her nipple. He shut his eyes tight and sucked as if he were getting milk out of her. The sight of him there was comic but a humming wire ran from her breasts down between her legs, tripped by the boy's rough nursing. When she tumbled sideways off the bed, laughing, he scooped her up easily and put her back into place. A little later she put his cock in her mouth. Its surface was silky. She had forgotten about cocks, the spilling, bloodwarm reality of them. In the dark of her room she was naked, presenting parts of her body for touch or penetration, but not inspection. She was a secret. Even when she climbed aboard his hips, put her palm on his chest for balance and ground herself to an orgasm that soaked into her calf muscles and the soles of her feet, she had kept her face down, private and smiling.

Barbara wiped the Noxzema off the mirror with a washcloth and crept to the bedroom.

"Hey," the soldier whispered.

"Did I wake you?" She asked.

"No, no. I mean, yeah."

"Sorry," she said, pulling her T-shirt down in front. As soon as the shame hit her she was angry. Who the hell was he? Sunlight shone on the empty bottles, electric bills, tossed clothes, waitressing aprons that emitted the same frying oil and tobacco smoke cologne she smelled in her own hair, issues of *Self* magazine, the pair of bloody underpants it was too late to kick away, Fig Newtons. And a few nice things: the jewelry box she found at a flea market, inlaid with ivory and pillowed on the bottom like the casket of a tiny sultan, a silver and turquoise bracelet glinting from the floor by the bureau, her record collection.

She hadn't really seen any of it in a long time. The paths that cut through it were all rote; she walked them in her dreams.

"What's your name?" she asked.

He blinked at her.

"I'm sorry," she said. "You said it and I forgot. I'm terrible with names." She placed her hand lightly across her mouth.

“Scott Foley. Jesus.” He glanced at the curtains, then laughed once. “Jesus,” he said again.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s OK. Barbara, right?”

“That’s it.”

“Barbara something. I remember.”

“Yes.”

She looked at Scott’s sleepy eyes. A pink scar cut through one of his brows. Daylight and her own parched sobriety made his face less and less familiar. She hoped he would go soon. His youth embarrassed her. What would happen if she threw him out now, before breakfast, without apology, and drew the yellow curtains back over her life?

“Want some toast? I have juice too, I think.”

Scott didn’t answer. He sprang up and stood on the bed, his rather short, powerful body bouncing slightly. There was fat on his belly, she guessed beer and candy went in there. He scratched his stubbled cheek and appeared to be weighing a number of options. “Guess what they call my ship?” He asked, and he jumped to the floor, began hunting for clothes and shoes.

“Ship?” Had they discussed ships?

“Aircraft-carrier. Ship. It’s docked about eight blocks from here, I’d say.” He pointed at a wall, beyond which lay neatly furrowed rows of triple-decker houses, snow-narrowed streets, Bingo halls, and, finally, Boston’s urban shore. “Guess what the nick-name is.”

“I don’t know, Scott.”

“Yeah, but I mean, guess.”

She took a deep breath, willing herself to be the kind of woman who might want to play this game. The muffled surf of early traffic could already be heard. If she closed her eyes she would fall down.

“Why not just tell me?”

“Sure, OK,” he said. “We call it the Steel Beach. See, in summer we can make a swimming pool by collapsing two parts of the deck”—he formed a V with his hands—“like this. Like a huge gully. Then flood it up with ocean, nice and cold.” He stared seriously at his hands and she imagined the glistening tons of water sloshing over the hot bow, deep and foamy, full of surprised fish. She thought of the many things she had never seen.

“How old are you, Scott?”

“Oh, I don’t know. How old are you?”

“Forty-one. I will be in two weeks.”

“Hey, that’s cool,” he said, quickly, and he seemed to be matching those years to what he saw. He bent and kissed her dry mouth lightly, his lips closed and soft.

"You?" She asked.

"I'm nineteen."

"Well," she began, "well."

"Pretty funny," he said, buttoning his shirt. And it was funny so they laughed and Scott shook his head as if to say, "what's the world coming to?"

They finished dressing in silence and he stood with his fists buried in the pockets of a Navy pea jacket, a knit cap on his head, ready. For a moment he stood with his back to the bedroom door.

"Really. Eat something if you want," she said. It was her waitressing voice she heard. Anyway, his coat was on him, and that was that.

"I used to cook at a steak house," he said. "Not cook, really. I was the prep guy." He took a step further into the room. "Man, that work's too intense for me."

"Oh, I'm not a chef."

"No, it's just, I mean the whole restaurant scene. You know." He blushed and she realized that he wanted to flatter her.

"Are you a good cook, Scott?"

"Me? Right now I'm learning air-traffic control. I just want to see the world, mainly. You ever been to the Mediterranean Sea?"

He was back again, sitting next to her on the bed, kneading the soft cap in his hands. The phone rang and the machine picked it up on the fifth ring. Barbara felt her heart beat and she thought she would be sick again, but mostly she worried that it was time to speak and she couldn't. The easy yes or no to Scott's question eluded her, she was left with his face in profile and the woolen, damp smell of his coat.

"I traveled around Europe when I was twenty-two." She chose words at random, scanned the clutter of her room for what it might offer up. "I saw Paris, Lausanne, Switzerland, a lot of places. Got on train after train on my Eurail pass." She had kept herself moving forward to the next new city, and the next. Amsterdam, Paris and Brussels passed in a single night's ride. She remembered the landscape between them, the moon-silvered roofs glimpsed and then extinguished by dark trees and the sleeping car's rocking speed. It had been so long since she had thought of that trip or Europe that for a second she feared both were inventions Scott would easily disprove. "I'd dance too, I think, waltzes or tangos or something." This last she couldn't say without a little astonished laugh.

He smiled at her and undid the buttons of his coat. "My little sister takes jazz tap. I dance like an ape." He spied the jewelry box and leaned forward to look more closely at it, but did not pick it up.

"Go ahead," she said, watching him. She could run to the convenience store for bread and eggs. It seemed possible. It seemed she could say anything, true or untrue, and it would all vanish into the pockets of Scott's pea coat. "That's a nice

coat," she added.

"This? This coat's why I joined the Navy."

"Well, it is nice. Looks warm."

"I could send you one, seriously. If you want."

"Could you really do that?" She dove for her purse, which brought on fresh throbbing in her skull.

"No. I'll send it to you. No problem." He waved away her checkbook ceremoniously, as if it were his first act as a man.

She pressed her palms tightly together, the way she did when describing the day's specials. "Wait while I put on a pot of coffee." There were saltines and peanut butter, maybe Poptarts, and the oranges on the counter were probably still OK. He'd have to stay until he was full, until she had filled him and said everything. She hurried towards the kitchen like a traveler about to arrive at the spot marked on a new and inscrutable map. **RR**