

MR. MOORE

It was the time of year again when the trees on the mountain ran riot in oranges and yellows while the air was as still and hot as any desert - Indian Summer, Richard would have called it, although he'd just got back from seeing his granddaughter's train off at the Amtrak station downtown, so he supposed he should call it Native American Summer. In another life, he would have grabbed his rifle and a liter of vodka and gone up the mountain to shoot quail, but he'd turned 80 that June, and his edema was worsening, to the point that his calves and ankles made one straight line. Cankles, his granddaughter called them, fretting over her own. Richard didn't want to be a pervert, or an ass, but he could never fail to notice that Keira's legs were like her father's - big, beefy thighs, and calves slathered in dark ethnic hair. His daughter, may she rest in peace, had legs like Betty Grable's. He'd had the pinups like everyone else on his ship during the war, but his appreciation for Betty's legs had been aesthetic rather than erotic. At the time, he'd considered himself superior to his shipmates. Now he wondered if he hadn't been missing something.

He fumbled in his shirt pocket for the cigarettes he'd been forced to give up five years ago, then, feeling like a senile old goat, hawked up a ball of phlegm and spat it to the side with disgust. It wasn't the phlegm that disgusted him so much as the notion that he was entering his dotage, a prospect Keira had entertained with much relish. She'd seen him in the kitchen with his vodka and water, watching Bill O'Reilly on the thirteen-inch, and she'd teased him that she knew he was a Republican, but she didn't think he was a crazy one (except she'd used the term "nutfucker," which sickened Richard - he'd not indulged in use of the F word since his days in the Navy, and he maintained an admittedly sexist stance on women's employment of it) and brought up the possibility that he was developing Alzheimer's. He couldn't see how the two were

linked - admittedly, Bill O'Reilly was a blowhard, but he was Richard's blowhard, inasmuch as that Keith Olbermann was Keira's, but he was drunk enough to go along with the conceit. Keira cried if you didn't go along with her jokes; it had to do with her mother, Richard's daughter, and her twisted machinations that passed for love. Richard couldn't help but blame himself for Frances, his daughter, so he indulged Keira's clumsy, mostly unfunny comedy more than he should have, and parried back that Keira had been born with Alzheimer's and that's why she was a commie today. It was just how they loved each other and he'd thought nothing of it until he reached for the cigarettes that hadn't been there in years.

If I ever get like Daddy, he'd told everyone from his late wife on down to his great-nephews, *I want you to take me up the mountain and blow my brains out. At least the last thing I see'll be pretty.*

His father had hung on in a state of suspended animation for years, in a nursing home in Chester County, mistaking Richard alternately for Richard's deceased older brother Georgie or one of the nursing home attendants. Often he pulled Richard's head down and asked him to get some of his mama's shoo-fly pie (his mama had died when he was eighteen). His living will stated specifically that no one was to pull the plug. He'd finally expired, a vegetable, at the ripe old age of 96. Richard had managed to block the whole business out with alcohol and the attrition of time until earlier that year, when those bawling yahoos in Florida had been pulling their hair out over the alleged responsiveness of their comatose daughter. *Get over it, you goddamned pantywaists!* he'd silent-screamed at the TV. *There's nobody ter home!*

It was the first time, too, that he'd substantially disagreed with FOX News about anything, shaking his head in dismay when that Peggy Noonan, whom he ordinarily thought was pretty cute, spoke of "a road to Auschwitz" that "ran through Pinellas Park, Florida." Keira had been thrilled to find that she and he were on the same side in this case; she claimed it was proof he was actually a libertarian instead of a Republican, which meant she could still converse with

him without feeling like she'd gone over to the enemy. He'd chuckled dutifully but wondered, in the end, if it would matter much if he and Keira still conversed. They really had very little to say to each other except for the same things over and over again. Sort of like Bill O'Reilly, he realized now, but he still watched him, too.

He puffed back up the hill to his house, an elegant, sprawling ranch that Gloria, his wife, had singlehandedly turned into her sanctuary, complete with Royal Doulton figurines and the expensive Early American furniture everyone told Richard needed updating but was still sturdy and had cost such a pretty penny he was loath to replace it. That was what the Depression did to a man - forced him to shell out his hard-earned money on furniture as solid as Pennsylvania flagstone and clothes that held up for decades, just so he could make more money and sock it away for a rainy day. Next to drinking, nothing gave Richard more pleasure than pinching pennies. It disgusted him no end that the current Republican president couldn't see fit to follow his good example. He had no qualms about bombing Baghdad again but he was horrified at the \$12 trillion it cost to do so. If *he* ran the world, God forbid, he'd just go in there and shoot that Saddam bastard in the face. This was the kind of talk that prompted Keira to call him a crypto-Nazi, which prompted him to pen a letter to her that, invariably, made her cry.

Richard was about halfway through a vodka and water when the phone rang. It was Danny Brumbaugh, who called everyone incessantly now that his son and daughter-in-law had hooked him up with a cell phone.

"Come on out to the legion," Danny commanded.

"Can't," Richard responded reflexively.

"Now why in the hell not?"

"Because I'm losing it," Richard said. "I'm losing my mind."

“You ain’t never had much a one o’those and the one you did have got pickled like an egg long ago,” Danny argued. “So come out here and shoot pool with the rest of us.”

“I’m no good at shooting pool today. I tell you, I’m losing my mind, what’s left of it, as you say.”

“You’re just drunk, like always.”

“It’s more than that, Dan. Today, I looked in my pocket for cigarettes. Cigarettes! You know I haven’t smoked since I come down with pneumonia five years ago. What in the name of sweet hell’s going on with me?”

“Sounds like you got yourself a case of CRS.”

“The hell’s that?”

“Can’t Remember Shit.”

“You’re a regular Johnny Carson, ain’t you.”

“I’m just tryin’ to say you’re 80 years old and that’s the kind of thing you’re gonna do now that you’re 80. Especially since you’re pickled like you are.”

Richard didn’t say anything.

“Is it that granddaughter of yours? Is she givin’ you hell?”

“Aw, Dan, come on.”

“Grandkids are the worst. Especially them that leave Harrisburg. Think they’re too good for us dumb Dutchmen. Ask that granddaughter of yours how much she pays in rent a month, then have her come back and tell us to our faces how dumb we are.”

“Whatever,” Richard said, by way of shutting Danny up. He hated when Danny or his other Legion friends started in on Keira. They hadn’t liked her since she’d gone off to New York for college and had come back brimming with a lot of ideas about Marxism. They also thought it was ridiculous to go so far away for school when you could just go to community college for two

years and finish up at Penn State Harrisburg. And what was the kid majoring in, anyway? Women's studies. And urban development. What happened to teaching and nursing, they wanted to know. What in the hell did she think she was too good for?

The hell of it was, when he stepped outside of himself, Richard felt exactly the same way they did. But there was Frances. Always Frances. She'd ruined Keira and it was his fault.

"So you're gonna stay at home and drink, is that it?" Danny asked. "Stay at home with Old Man Smirnoff."

"He's the only Rooski I'd let in my house," Richard tried to joke, "and I still gotta watch out for him."

"Up to you, Moore," Danny grumbled and hung up.

Richard nursed the rest of his drink, lost in thought. It wasn't because he was losing his mind that he didn't want to go to the Legion. It wasn't even the pot shots they took at Keira and her ilk. No, it had to do with that sense of missing something, of not fitting in, that he'd experienced with the Betty Grable pinups. A line from Peggy Lee popped into his head. *Is that all there is?*

Is what all there is, goddamnit, he thought irritably.

As he fixed himself a plate of cold cuts and vegetables, he thought of Gloria and the first time they'd met, at a skating rink in Enola, on the other side of the river from Harrisburg. (The skating rink was still there; Gloria had taken Keira there as a little girl in a disastrous attempt to teach her to skate.) It was 1944. Gloria had been with her parents. He'd been in his uniform. She was 16 going on 17 and he was 19 and had been through D-Day two days after his birthday. Their ship had been number thirteen in the Dixie Line and they'd been hit. *I'm not superstitious,* he told a starry-eyed Gloria, *but.* She'd been beautiful, a real Ivory Soap girl, with big blue eyes and

ripe peach cheeks. A month later, he'd asked her to marry him. They were married in May of 1945, just before Gloria graduated from high school and he was to ship out to New Orleans.

He'd always taken a great deal of pride in his preference for the wholesome girls over the vamps and tramps, the Deanna Durbins and Ann Rutherfords to the Bette Davises and the Marilyn Monroes. With the lone exception of his virginity loss to a 300-pound prostitute his first week in North Africa, sex was not about screwing or fucking to him, it was about making love. You screwed whores. You made love to ladies, and Gloria was a lady. And yet he'd convinced her to go to bed with him on New Year's Eve, 1944. They'd made love in the back of his daddy's Studebaker on a dirt road in Perry County. For the rest of her life, Gloria would tell the younger, unbesmirched women in her family that it was perfectly fine to go to bed with a man before marriage if you were engaged, but then and only then. In his more introspective moments, he wondered if this was Gloria's way of justifying it.

Was that what he'd missed out on? Fucking? Real fucking, not the 15 seconds it took to plunge in and ejaculate with that hooker. Rough, up against the wall porno sex, the type he didn't think should be on film but had no problems with people engaging in in the privacy of their bedrooms? (He was a libertarian, after all.)

Was he going to die unfulfilled because he'd never shoved a Marilyn Monroe lookalike up against a wall?

He finished his lunch, rinsed his plate, and retired to the bedroom to nap off all that vodka.

He woke himself with his snoring two hours later. His apnea was worsening along with his edema. In the last fifteen years or so of their marriage, Gloria took to sleeping in the guest bedroom down the hall, a pristine little room she'd painted white with green trim. She blamed

his snoring, which was also to tacitly blame his drinking. It wasn't just the snoring his drinking had affected, though they never spoke of his impotence aloud. Gloria, for the most part, had considered herself "past that" not too terribly long after her hysterectomy at age 40. Had he started drinking before or after that? He couldn't remember. He'd always drank; he used to pass out on the subway when his ship was in New York, only to be prodded awake by the railroad dicks at Coney Island. But that had been the only consequence of his drinking in those days. The divide between before and after was when his actions had begun to have repercussions.

The phone rang.

"Lo," he said gruffly.

"Were you asleep?"

"Keira?"

"I just got back to the city. I got your letter. I hate you. I fucking hate you." She was sobbing.

"What in the hell are you talking about?" He said nothing about her obscenity. This encouraged her.

"Just, you know, fuck you, too. I'm sorry I'm so fucking negative and depressing you don't want to talk to me." She hiccuped. "Oh, and thanks for sending the fucking thing on my fucking birthday. That was a real nice touch."

"First of all," Richard began, "I don't know what in the name of God you're talking about. Second, you know I don't care for that word, and we've spoken many a time about its unnecessaryness."

"I am talking," Keira said through gritted teeth "about this fu—about this *letter* you sent me, on my birthday, that reads 'Dear Keira: Please stop calling me. I don't enjoy it and we have so little in common. If you must call, please restrict it to a specific subject.'" She sobbed again.

A faint glimmer of recognition pulsed through his head.

“Do you know the letter I’m talking about? Do you?”

“I do,” he said calmly, “and all I meant was, I don’t enjoy talking on the phone.”

“Then why the fu—why didn’t you just say that?” Keira wailed. “You have, like, no tact. Like, none. You just get wasted and write shit down and mail it without thinking how people are going to feel when they have to deal with your bullshit. You just don’t *think*,” she spat.

Richard flinched. Frances had used that line on Keira, usually just before she hit her. He remembered a particularly nasty episode on the Jersey Shore when Keira had ordered shrimp without thinking to ask if it was breaded. Frances had hissed those words, clocked Keira across the face, and refused to let her order anything else. Later that night, Richard had surreptitiously fixed her a peanut butter sandwich. How was a seven year-old supposed to think to ask if her shrimp was breaded? She probably thought they emerged from the ocean that way.

How was it, he thought fretfully, that he remembered things from fifteen years ago in twelve-dimensional Technicolor but he could scarcely remember sending a goddamn letter not one week before?

“I am sorry,” he said at last, “to have hurt your feelings. All I meant was...”

“No, it wasn’t. You think I’m too negative. You told me so, when I was visiting. ‘Why do you have to be so down all the time?’ you said. This letter just confirms that.”

“I fail to see...”

“Why don’t you ask your daughter why I’m so negative? Huh? Why don’t you just break out the fucking Ouija board and fucking ask her why I’m such a fucked up mess. Goodbye. Get bent.”

Richard sat on the edge of his bed for a minute or so listening to the dial tone. When the phone began to beep, he finally replaced the phone back in its cradle.

It was true he didn't especially like to talk on the phone, at least not in the way most women did. It was also true that Keira was too negative. He'd wanted to indulge her as best he could but the combination was just too much. She always called just as he was about to settle in for an afternoon of heavy drinking or for a nap, for starters, although he supposed that's when everyone called, since those were his default states. But Keira always wanted to talk about her depressions, her mother and how awful she'd been — and Richard couldn't take it. He knew it was his fault. He didn't need to be reminded. Besides, depression wasn't something you talked about, it was something you endured stolidly, that you kept under wraps until it went away, or it didn't.

What was that term Frances had liked to use? A Freudian slip. He didn't believe in psychology but it was the only explanation he could apply to this letter he scarcely remembered sending.

He checked the clock, an oversized digital number he'd bought for the purpose of seeing the time clearly through his cataracts. Three o'clock, only an hour and a half until supper time. He weighed his options - the liver and onions special at the Peachtree Diner for \$5.95, or the prime rib at the Country Oven out at the Best Western off I-81. The promise of the Country Oven's cheese bread, plus a Scotch with his meal, won him over. That was another thing the Depression did to a man, instilled in him a sense of thrift while at once imbuing him with a quiet but desperate thirst for the finer things in life. He'd taken Gloria and Frances on modest vacations to Wildwood as a rule, but once he'd turned fifty, something had snapped in him — maybe it was that midlife crisis thing everyone talked about — and he'd insisted on spiriting Gloria off to Aruba, Bermuda, or the Virgin Islands at least once a year. They rarely made love anymore, but Richard wanted to show Gloria, or perhaps himself, what a swashbuckling romantic he could still be if he cared to, potency be damned. Yet once they got there, they lived

their typical separate lives, Gloria roasting on the beach (that peach skin had become a leathery brown, which Richard didn't have the heart to tell Gloria he found distasteful) and Richard in the poolside bar or in their room, conducting important insurance business long-distance. Eventually the notion of emptying their coffers to fund a fancy trip to the Caribbean where the two of them carried out business as usual struck Richard as an obscene luxury, and once again they restricted their vacations to the Jersey Shore, where they could rent an apartment, eat grocery store food, bake on the beach, and avoid each other, all for a far less prohibitive amount.

He got up from the bed, went "tink-a-link," as he called it, in the bathroom, washed his hands, and scooped up the pills he'd need to take with supper. He realized he was out of his blood pressure medication. Vaguely, he remembered making a note to have it refilled. Where had he put it? It must have been in an irregular place; he kept a wad of Post-It Notes for that purpose on the kitchen table, but he'd seen no sign of anything pending during his morning drinking hours. He combed his hair, went back to his room, and chose a tweed coat with leather elbow pads from the closet. He had no problem looking like a bum in most situations, but the Country Oven demanded a man clean up a little. Richard took no issue with wearing clothes twenty years out of fashion, but he was adamant about looking decent in a decent place, and he always, always removed his hat in mixed company. Next to Keira spouting the F word, there was nothing so obscene as a man who kept his hat on.

He started the car, a massive Buick station wagon Gloria had called the Jew Canoe, and headed over to the Rite-Aid on Linglestown Road, in the same plaza as the supermarket Gloria had called the Jewy Giant. Susquehanna Township was full of Jews, which had thrilled Keira when she'd moved there with her daddy after Frances died. Frances had a thing for Jews, too—all the men she'd dated after divorcing Keira's big, Italian father had been skinny little Jewish men who resembled Woody Allen, even though they didn't especially look like him. Richard

supposed the attraction had to do with their mutual fetishization of New York City. He wasn't attracted to Jews in the way Frances and Keira were, but he had a great deal of respect for them, something he'd told Keira's friend Josh on one of his trips up to visit. Keira had been mortified, but Josh had taken it in stride, although he later confessed he first thought the reference to "his people" meant aspiring standup comedians.

Richard pulled the Buick into a space right in front of the Rite-Aid, next to a Subaru Forester with a bumper sticker that read CLOSE THREE MILE ISLAND. He snorted. Yuppie hipster liberals and their goddamn tree hugging. If they really gave a damn about the earth, they'd give up their Subarus and drive horses and buggies like the Amish. Besides, nuclear power was the most efficient form of energy known to man. Hell, nuclear anything was efficient — look at Hiroshima. He was old enough to remember V-J Day, where these trust fund hippie kids were not. America had done the only thing she could do in the face of the Japs. Those bastards would not have given up. That was what these self-righteous little snots didn't understand, that feeling of holding on by the skin of your teeth for four long years of your life, never sure where or if you'd wake up in the morning, counting your blessings when you received an extra can of Spam or a Hershey bar. No, for them it was all about "human rights." Which humans, Richard wanted to know. The good ones or the bad ones?

That was another concept the 1960s had made relative. Good and bad once meant something. Richard shuddered. What a horrible time.

Keira was of the opinion that Three Mile Island had killed her mother. Why else would an otherwise healthy forty year-old woman have dropped dead of colon cancer? Richard was forced to concede her point, but what was the alternative? Living in yurts? They'd die of dysentery if they lived like that. He reckoned he'd sooner take his chances with cancer, assuming he couldn't quietly pass of a heart attack in his sleep like Gloria had, ten years before.

As if to mirror his thoughts, or to mock him, Richard stood behind a bald woman wearing a headscarf picking up some medication to counteract the effects of her chemotherapy. When it was his turn, he handed the bottle to the cashier, a Latina woman, or maybe mulatto; he couldn't tell.

"Lasix," he told the woman. "Richard Moore."

"Just a minute," the woman said, punching a string of numbers into her computer. When she frowned, Richard knew he was about to get screwed.

"What's the problem?" he asked.

"You're not coming up in our system," the woman said. "Are you on Medicare?"

Richard grunted. Did he look young enough *not* to be on Medicare, he wanted to snap at her.

"Mr. Moore, I'm checking, and I have no record of you or your Medicare ID. Are you sure you've been here before?"

On any other day, Richard would have said hell, yes, he was sure, and give him his damn pills. Today, though, he had to wonder.

"I'll pay out of pocket," he told the woman. He would pay out of pocket for everything if the goddamn government would let him. What right did they have to tell him he "had" to have health insurance?

The woman frowned and shook her head. "That's not the issue, Mr. Moore."

"Listen, you goddamn gutless Spic, are you going to give me my pills or not?"

The woman froze, her eyes blazing.

"I want to see the manager," Richard snapped.

"Oh, you'll see her, all right," the woman retorted.

The people behind him began to murmur excitedly.

The woman was back shortly with an older, heavysset white woman with a mushroom haircut. “Mr. Moore?”

“Yeah.”

“Mr. Moore, I can't have you talking to my staff like that. I'm going to have to ask you to leave.”

“And not come back, I reckon?” Richard inquired, his voice catching.

“If you insist.”

“Well, that's fine,” Richard grumbled. “The hell with you and the hell with your store. I've been coming here for twenty-five years and you don't even have me in the damn system. That's just rich.”

“Goodbye, Mr. Moore,” the manager said pointedly.

The small crowd behind him parted like when Moses parted the Red Sea. Richard could have sworn they were laughing at him. One girl even pointed.

Once in the car, he leaned his head back on the head rest and sighed exasperatedly.

He didn't even particularly dislike Latinos. He thought mulattoes were a social problem, but he had to admit it wasn't their fault that their black and white parents had ill-advisedly decided to fall in love and procreate.

What in the hell, he thought, shaking his head.

He could go one night without the Lasix. He wasn't in the mood to deal with this bullshit again at some other pharmacy.

Richard started the car and nosed out of the parking lot, down Linglestown Road toward the Country Oven. The leaves on the mountain were erupting in red now. Unbidden, he felt a lump in his throat.

Oh, come on, now, he chided himself. *Pull yourself together.*

The tears spilled over. He pulled the car to the side of the road and let himself cry. Trucks whizzed by him.

It may not have been much, what he'd missed out on, but it was enough.

The sun scorched his eyes. He tipped the visor. On it was the Post-It Note reminding him about his blood pressure medication?

Why in the name of God had he put it there?

Oh, hell, he thought, impatiently wiping his eyes, why in the name of God did anyone do anything? Who could say how or why the mind worked the way it did? He remembered Frances in Hershey Medical Center not long before she'd died. Visiting hours were ending. He'd tucked her in and kissed her goodnight and she'd said brightly, like a child, *Now I lay me down to sleep.* He'd taught her to pray those words as a little girl. For one brief, wildly shining moment, he thought he hadn't failed her, after all. What had made him think that? What had made him unable to hold onto it? He'd told Keira about that night, to give her evidence that Frances hadn't always been the monster she remembered her as. Keira had been less than impressed. What was it about Keira's mind that wouldn't work the way he wanted it to? Richard shook his head, readjusted the visor, and started the car again.