

Mary and Maud

Most any day you're downtown you might easily encounter either Mary or Maud on their way to uphold opposite ends of the city's social structure. Mary rushing along the Mall to her fourth floor office building overlooking Capitol Park. Maud, making her way west to conduct her daily business meeting right in the center of Capitol Park.

Mary's storied ascent to Capitol powerhouse had its beginnings almost four years before in the canny minds of the three Capitol bureaucrats tasked with overseeing that year's crop of summer interns. And so good at their job were they, that, within hours, they'd accurately identified both winners and losers. The twenty winners, they'd reward with the plum assignments that would all but assure their future employment as permanent Capitol staffers. The losers, they'd have opted to dump right off, but for the time-honored protocol of working them hard over the summer with a cart load of busy-work that mattered not one damn to anyone. Except, of course, to their wealthy-donor

parents who'd quickly choke off the political donor-spigot had their kids being summarily shit-canned early on.

About one matter though, the bureaucrats were unanimous. Among the winners there was one star who could easily take her place in any Capitol Office right this minute. Hell, with a little more honing and polishing, who knew how far up the career ladder this beauty might climb?

"To start with," reported the first captivated bureaucrat at their second staff meeting, "none of the others can come within yards of the one hundred words per minute Mary knocks out effortlessly on her keyboard."

"Impressive. And?"

"Would you believe," said the second, "only yesterday I gave her three sensitive letters for draft response—Governor's office no less. Figured to keep her busy for a week or more. And maybe bring her down a peg or two, with the way I usually shred rookie-staff-work. You know, bloody it up real good with my red pen. Except, that not one damn word did I have to change *and*, she had all three responses back to me in less than four hours."

"Okay fellows, hold on here," interjected the third bureaucrat, "we have nineteen other winners to think about here, so, let's focus a little on them too. And, Jack, before we go all ga-ga over Mary, let's see how she handles being dropped into a little deeper water."

"Like how?"

“Well, for months now, we’ve been hearing that certain higher-ups in the Governor’s office have been scratching around for some creative ways to deal with the State’s homeless population—you know, something the Governor can float to voters before next year’s election. Something that will knock everyone’s socks off, but, and this a huge but, without any additional expenditure of State general funds. So, just for kicks, why don’t we deep-six any mention of fund restrictions and give her two weeks to come up with something?”

By next staff meeting Mary had already handed in a finished proposal including a comprehensive plan complete with goals, objectives, action steps and timelines.

“Cripes, fellows, I have to tell you, not only does it read great, but she even costed the damn thing out to the penny. Makes total sense too, even though the cost factor sinks it for now, of course. So, let’s keep it on file for better budget times down the road where I predict it will be a sure-fire keeper.”

By summer’s end the bureaucrats were left with only one unanswered question. “Well fellows, there’s no question Mary’s exceeded our expectations in every way. With the poise and panache she’s got in spades along with the best analytical skills I’ve seen in my thirty years here at the Capitol. And, strictly between us, those curvy calves and blonde tresses won’t hurt her much either. So, my only remaining question, is she too fragile to survive the pressure cooker of on-going Capitol politics?”

“Why do you ask that?”

“Well, with her obvious silver-spoon upbringing, you think she can handle the real down and dirty of long-term Capitol politics?”

“Don’t rightly know. We’ll need to wait and see I suppose.”

Nor could they have guessed their wait would last no longer than the interns’ farewell party a few days later, when one half-soused intern decided to assist Mary on her way to the bathroom.

“Mary dear, why don’t I personally escort you so you don’t get lost like what happens a lot around here, believe me.” Given the occasion, Mary initially chose to play along in a good-natured way.

“Thanks, Ollie, but I think I can do this.”

“But, Mary, sweetie, I must insist,” he continued taking a firm grip on her arm. And that’s when everyone heard it. The sharp crack of Mary’s swat to his hand followed by her ten-second whispered conference that had a totally chastened Ollie go stumbling back to his seat like a whipped cur. *Well, sakes alive, thought the veterans, has the answer to our question just now been dropped in our laps?*

Nor would Ollie disclose a single word until, late the following Friday evening when he’d turned a sodden eye to his drinking buddy in their favorite watering hole.

“You up for a little hard-earned advice, Bill?”

“Sure.”

“Don’t ever cross any dame with boundaries thick as mission walls.”

“Got it. But tell me Ollie, what the hell did Mary say to you anyway?”

“You really wanna know?”

“Sure.”

“She wanted to know how I’d like having my balls adorn her next Christmas tree if I didn’t return to my seat right then.”

“She didn’t?”

“She damn well did. God’s truth.”

So that within hours everyone knew. *Mary’s velvet scabbard held a sword of steel.*

With her savings dwindling by summer’s end, Mary chose the prestigious lobbying firm that had been recruiting her hard over the ton of Capitol job offers she received. Good move too, in that, within a year, her star power had become a force to be reckoned with around the Capitol.

Like, when she showed up one morning to testify at an important Capitol mass-transit hearing and the committee chair immediately called a short recess so he could have a private word with her in his office. Later that evening over Tapas and chilled Albarino, Mary quickly pivoted to her own priority after first giving a hearing to the chairman on his concerns. “Let’s put it this way, Senator, you commit to help sponsor our *Housing the Unhoused* bill and your transit bill gets a cushy ride from us.”

“All right then, Mary, we both understand each other. But let me also say, your bill will have to take its place in line given the State’s current budgetary restrictions.”

“Fair enough, Senator, but I’ll be watching progress.”

But while her main focus would always remain on pending legislation, Mary is never averse to switching hats when a friend needs help. Like one morning when a large State Agency manager called right after he'd just been reamed by the Agency Director.

"Easy there, Tom. What's got the Director's knickers in such a twist?"

"Everything, Mary!"

"Spill."

"Well, like I said, he comes charging into my office just now morning roaring like a bull. 'Remember that Child-Care bill we just sent on to the Governor's Office on your recommendation?'"

"Yes?"

"Well, the Governor hates it. And he hates it so much he wants a strong veto message from us by COB today."

"You're kidding?"

"The hell I'm kidding, and there's more. The veto message must also include how much he loves the bill but can't sign it."

"Why not?"

"The *money* he can't spend and survive the next election."

"I make no mention of money then?"

"Of course not. Absolutely no mention of money. Just explain how Child-Care is a top priority for him even if he can't sign the damn thing into law right now."

“But how am I supposed do that?”

“That’s what you get paid to figure out. And figure out in such a way that mob of Child-Care zealots don’t take to disemboweling the Governor once they get wind of his veto. On my desk by noon, or your ass is toast.”

“Mary, I’m desperate.”

“Tom, take a deep breath before you FAX me the Child-Care folder over here and give me an hour.”

“By noon, Mary. Remember.”

“Got it, Tom.”

Mary’s fourteen-hour work days she interrupts only for the small yogurt and double Espresso she takes at her desk. She’s single because she likes it that way. Her work is the oxygen that fuels her life dating back to her extraordinary metamorphosis from cub summer intern to top lobbyist in only a few years.

On this mid-summer morning, Mary is taking a rare break and is sipping a double Espresso in a comfy corner of the mid-town Starbucks. The rookie analyst she’s supposed to meet is late. Not cool for someone with enough screw-ups on his resume to have his future right on the firing line. *With a little more seasoning could he be a keeper, or are those weird cogs spinning around in his brain beyond calibrating?* That’s what his supervisor wants Mary to tell him.

Mary scans the slew of jaded looks passing by outside. It's the same drained look she's sees around here a lot in summer's stifling heat. No more than eighty miles to the south west, she supposes, the morning fog is likely being scattered about now by the rush of marine air through the Golden Gate. Despite her successes here, she still misses the City she calls home. Her parents. The Wharf. The cable cars. Her former law-school buddies working hard to make their mark in law offices across the City. *Eventually, she'll find her own sweet gig over there. Eventually.*

Reality returns with the sound of Cathedral bells. It's already gone noon with no sign of the rookie she's supposed to meet. Five more minutes and she's headed back to her office to deal with the mounting pile of folders awaiting her attention. Top of her list—nail down the big-ticket funding for the State's unhoused people that she's been chasing these past few years. Like the Senator reminded her, it would take time, but the need to house the unhoused is already at crisis stage.

Like it undoubtedly is for that pitiful older woman across the street pushing her old rusty shopping cart along in this stifling heat. Her long belted raincoat and sturdy brogues must have her close to suffocating in this awful heat. But there she goes determined to get to wherever she's going with that garish old red hat jammed down on her head like she's expecting some kind of wind-storm. And true to form, the sidewalk crowd keep parting for her like the waters parting for Moses at the Red Sea. Where she's off to is anyone's guess? And why? Who knows other than that she's one more of society's walking wounded wandering aimlessly through life?

"What's her story?" Mary wonders as she's already up to the counter in search of cold water. *Crap! Here comes that pesky rookie rushing up, (I'll be the tall one in the white*

lines suit) and begins whining over the ton of expedites dumped on his desk right as he's about to leave. "Relax," Mary tells him. "Get yourself a cool drink and I'll be right back."

Glass of water in hand, she hurries outside--too late. That poor outcast is nowhere in sight.

That's because Maud keeps moving right along like she does every day on her trek west to Capitol Park. Every day and for so long, it's become the mainstay of her sad life that began its downward spiral over thirty years before when she'd only greeted him with, "What's up, Dad?" A question she might never have asked had she first taken time to read the signs. The hunched shoulders and slovenly appearance. Clearly her father had been drinking. Likely all night.

"Plenty, if you want to know, child, and *none* of it good." Then came the litany of questions being hissed at her like he's some petulant old gander. Had she any idea about the daily torture he'd been enduring? Well, had she? Or, how totally distraught he'd been this past year over the sad state of her mother stretched out in the back bedroom like some damn zombie not even sure what day it is? Well had she, dammit? And, if she did, why couldn't she answer him? Because, if she really understood what he's been going through, she'd have no choice but to answer, yes.

Yes, to what? Maud wanted to know.

"Yes, to helping with my goddamn plight for starters."

"But how?" Maud had foolishly asked again.

“Time, child. A little time. That’s all I need. Just enough time to be out there with my customers to shake their hand and shake loose some of their money like any good sales-man. Just long enough that I can keep a roof over our heads and provide some decent care for your poor mother.”

Well, at least, he’d stopped hissing at her. And, when Maud still wasn’t sure how to respond, the wily salesman in him began quickly moving in to seal the deal.

“Okay, Maud, child. Listen to me. I know we can do this together. I just told you what I need to do. And, your part? Just one short year away from college to help care for your mother, so I can be out there where I’m needed. And I swear, by the end of one year, I’ll have sorted things out and you can return to college. So, Maud, will you say the yes that will earn your parents’ eternal thanks?”

Her college friends didn’t hesitate to nix that idea. “Maud, that’s just some more of his bullshit and don’t you buy it. He got your mother in the state she’s in largely through his own drinking. And, besides, you’re easily the smartest of us and you need to be in college. Don’t help him get away and leave you holding the bag.”

And, still Maud remained unsure until the following afternoon when she returned home from shopping with her friends to find her father chatting amiably with their pastor in the family room. *A setup like her college friends would likely say? No way,* Maud thought, *not by a man of God.*

“Maud, you must listen to your father,” the man of God opened with after cheerfully inviting her to take a seat. “Remember now, you’re still very young and one year away from college is but a bauble compared to the priceless gem you’re been offered. Caring

for the precious person who gave you life. Think about your father's offer as a pearl of great price, which you can either pick up and treasure or, walk away and let be trampled in the dust."

Toward the end of Maud's first year away from college, reality hit with mallet-force when her father declared he needed more time. *So, had her college friends been right? He didn't need more time. More likely, he'd enrolled the family pastor to help prey on her good nature, figuring that no matter what, she'd never leave her mother uncared for.* Not even after her college friends were unwilling to come around and endure her mother's constant wailing from the back bedroom.

"Maud, dammit, you out there? One more lousy glass is all I want! Maud! You out there? Anyone out there who gives a rat's ass whether I live or die? Come on, one lousy glass!" Until finally, Maud would finally relent with a second or third glass from the generous stash of jug wine her father supplied on his infrequent visits home.

"Now remember, Maud," he'd often warn her, "no more than one or two small glasses a day for mother. I'm depending on you to be firm."

So, Maud was firm. *Well, wasn't her father depending on her? Sure he was from the comfort of some nice hotel room far from the nightmare he'd inflicted on her. Leaving her to flounder in a sea of chaos and despair over the never-ending moaning from the back room that often took three, four, sometimes five glasses of wine to calm down, so Maud could have a little respite from the daily nightmare hollowing out her heart.*

Until, one day when Maud was driven to think about the unthinkable. She'd seen firsthand the destruction wrought by alcohol on both her parents. Her father's horrible-

tasting gin she'd tried once as a child before vowing never to touch again. Or, her mother's Thunderbird wine that had her sometimes wonder, *how could my mother ever swallow this foul-smelling stuff? Could there be some weird reason only her mother knew?*

And then one day, more to relieve the boredom and misery than anything else, Maud decided to find out for herself. Her first taste of Thunderbird had her coughing and sputtering all over the place. But a second swallow the following day had her coughing only half as much. And when she didn't cough after her third taste the following day, Maud also noticed a curious thing. Somehow she'd also begun to experience a not-unpleasant warm feeling throughout. And with a sweetness similar to honey.

Several sips over the following days filled Maud with an even warmer feeling. Not unlike the feel of a dear friend. And, how pleasant was that in her otherwise miserable world where, for the first time in ages, she began to feel she was living again?

Only this time in company with a friend. A friend she could call on to be of comfort and support. But even as Maud began to be more and more taken with her new friend, she also knew how careful she must be. *No alcoholic fog for her like the miasma suffocating her mother back in that room. Only to travel with her friend to a very agreeable place when she felt the misery totally constricting her soul.* Thirty-two years in all did Maud settle into this cloistered existence and in the cherished company of her trusted friend.

After her mother passed and she never saw her father again, homelessness became Maud's lot once she could no longer afford the rent on her modest home. The difficult life in her small tent she might never have survived during summer's torrid heat and

winter's cold rain had it not been for the strength wrought in her by her cherished friend. Maud's ever so simple needs she barely met with the monthly pittance she received from the county. Half a Cornish hen that first Christmas with the second half she reserved to welcome in New Year.

From December to March that first year the city lay shrouded under a heavy Tule fog. Until one day when the sun finally broke through to brighten Maud's tent and fill her with a strange restlessness. *Was this miserable life all she would ever know again? Never again to enjoy happy times like those long-ago family picnics over in Capitol Park. So very long ago and so improbable she could ever go back to that happy place again.*

Not even for one visit to their old picnic table in the shade of the giant cedar tree? What a crazy, dimwit idea that was? Out there alone struggling to cope in the madness of city streets filled with honking horns and screaming sirens and people scrambling to avoid a freak like her. Had she lost her blessed mind?

Until, after sunset that evening in the warm embrace of her cherished friend, back came the longings with renewed intensity. To wander again over the clipped grass holding tight to her mother's hand to revel in the cheery palette of pinks and reds and whites crowding the Capitol's rose garden. And later returning to join their friends and share food and laughter and good times in the cool shade of the massive evergreens. And most precious of all, when she'd sometimes be allowed to go skipping barefooted over the cool velvety moss overgrowing the park's smooth paths.

Next morning Maud awoke with her mind in total turmoil. *How could she even think about risking everything by going back there instead of remaining here in the safety of*

her tent insulated from the total madness out there? A dilemma she might never have resolved were it not for that one brazen sunbeam entering her tent with a lingering kiss for her mother's old hat box. It was the sign Maud needed.

Less than two blocks from the camp on mid-morning of the following day, the voices in Maud's head began howling their warnings. *Get back to camp now before it's too late. You're nothing but a freak to these people out here. And,* Maud might have faltered too, had it not been for the reassuring voice of her cherished friend bidding her take tight hold on her shopping cart and go marching across town like she was the newly-elected mayor.

Down by the corner of Twelfth and J. streets Maud heard the Cathedral bells striking the hour of noon. *Just a little farther and keep on being be strong,* Maud's friend kept reminding her. Three blocks further on she saw again what she hoped she would, those shimmering green fronds high atop the endless row of gnarled palm trunks siding the park along L Street. Onward Maud went with renewed with new vigor and wonder at how little had changed these past thirty years. The trimmed lawns, the spreading cedars and, best of all, the same smooth paths still overgrown with velvety moss. *Welcome back Maud* everything seemed to be saying.

And over beyond the huge fountain Maud saw so many empty picnic tables where she could safely park her shopping cart and enjoy her picnic. Half a peanut butter sandwich and a handful of sunflower seeds washed down with several sips of the warm comfort she'd been careful to bring against the arduous trek back to camp.

After shedding her trusty rain coat and the red hat, Maud begins to eat. Minutes pass in sweet succession before she's aware there's something else going on. Like a definite chattering coming from beneath her table. *Goodness me*, Maud thinks staring down at the cheeky little squirrel peering up with its coal-black eyes and tiny nose twitching for a treat. *How dreadful*, Maud thinks, *that I've nothing left to share with him and his three little friends who've just arrived to join him*. Lucky for them, Maud knows hard times too. "Nothing left for today," she tells her new friends sadly, "but I'll be back tomorrow with something nice for you all."

The following day Maud returns to the Park with a modest stash of sunflower seeds and the loaf of two-day old bread she managed to glean from the supermarket dumpster near her camp.

There's a new spring to Maud's step these days as she returns for her daily picnics with her little friends. And for so many days and months that people along her route have begun to take notice. *You can set your clock by her*, they say; *just listen for the sound of Cathedral bells striking noon and you'll likely see the squirrel lady tromping her way west*. Most days, a few kind folks cautiously drop squirrel treats into her shopping cart with Maud smiling broadly in gratitude. Peanuts and raisins and oatmeal and corn kernels. *Goodness, who knew people could be so kind and caring?*

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The occupants of the second floor Capitol hearing room hear the Cathedral bells as their meeting is breaking up. Mary is totally elated now that the committee has unanimously voted to send her Housing the Unhoused bill on for a floor vote. Finally,

she has the votes and now it's time to celebrate on behalf of the State's unhoused people who will soon have millions coming their way for a ton of modest dwellings. On her way down the west steps of the Capitol, Mary hears the wail of emergency vehicles departing the remaining flashing red and blue lights. "Some homeless old lady pushing a shopping cart right there in the crosswalk," a tearful young girl answers Mary's inquiry. "Right there in the crosswalk she was and thrown more than a hundred feet, they said."

Seeds and nuts are scattered everywhere and wrapped around one of the giant palm trunks is a bent old shopping cart. And further down the sidewalk is an old red that no one but Mary can be bothered to pick up.