

The Shore I Stand Upon

Beau's the one who told me to go.

His name's actually Matthew but he goes by Beau, which made him sound interesting to me. In reality he's one of the *most* interesting roaches I've met in Rockshore; if one at all. I guess you could say he's like me, trapped amongst the throngs of clambering zombies so intent on continually devouring their vapid lives.

I was trapped in a cubicle, one of rectangular shape, giving me the much-deserved extra swivel space afforded only to a *Senior Office Advisor*. My legs feel great, but a *Senior Office Advisor* begins to feel pompous when they're only advising the likes of Gary, Diane, and Mitch. Their cubicles are actual cubes, smooshing them together like sardines. A tin of roaches.

I hear my name and a throat clear.

Phoebe

"Reminder, you're on for two-thirty this afternoon"

For god's sake it's my job.

"Yes, I know Phoebe."

She pauses, then says, "I hope you've made sufficient progress. If you have to work through lunch, do it; I don't want this rushed last minute."

She probably saw the pile of discarded origami cranes in the corner.

I tilt my head, only one eye matching hers. "Yes Phoebe, I understand."

Once again, a pause, then, "You know I put you here because I thought you had vision. Please don't waste my time or yours."

"I understand. Yes."

She leaves.

What does she know about *vision*? She couldn't recognize *vision* if it were sold with her name on it.

I hear the plastic wheels roll across the floor and the smell of lemon hand sanitizer.

“What is it Mitch?” I say, turning over my shoulder.

He just shrugs. “Nothin. I was just hearin what she said...I think you've got vision too. This'll be a good presentation, I think.”

“Thanks Mitch. Let's just finish it then.”

He idolizes me for some reason. He's a roach like any other, impressed by the simplest example of extra ability, yet so content with not being able to reach that level himself.

On Friday's I always swing through Marvin's Market to stock up for the week. I'm smart enough to understand that Orson is an absolute deathtrap at this hour, so I park four blocks off the drag and walk the rest. A sea of red bumper lights greets me as I round the sidewalk corner - the angry eyes of a thousand souls wishing they could escape. Rockshore is a frigid place in February, and I'm not a fan of inhaling exhaust; yet, the warmth it provides me as I trek along reminds me that I'm moving faster than all of them.

Marvin's is one of those grocery stores that likes to stick old grannies at every isle corner to peddle little cheesy pretzels or the newest vegan salami. I think it's supposed to give one the impression that the granny *actually* made it herself. They really know how to get you. I'll humor them from time to time, but not today.

The same cashier girl is there every Friday; cheery and not a day over twenty. She flashes her perfect teeth to me, and her eyes seem to brighten when I start laying out my pasta and meatballs and alfredo. I'll admit that endlessly bagging fruits and veggies was probably better

than listening to Gary blow that mucus farm of a nose all day, but still her abundant joy is ever a mystery to me. Roaches do what roaches do, I suppose.

These are the things I think about at Marvin's Market.

"Did you find everything alright?"

"Yep, of course," I say with a smile.

"Did anyone help you today?"

"Nope, only you."

She smiles as if it's the greatest compliment she's ever heard.

I live over at the Towers on Marigold. Eighth floor, number 824, down the second hallway, at the corner of the building. I pay fifty extra each month for the corner apartment; that way I can get a view of the lake instead of a brick wall. I like to sit by the window on summer days and watch the sailboats tack and gybe along the waves. The opposite shore is home to the Yonder Prairie Forest Preserve, not to be confused with the larger Westerfield State Park to the south. When summer is in full swing, the western shore is ripe with the verdant foliage that covers a large ridge rising up to the north. A much nicer view than the rocky outcroppings that mar the shore I live on.

It was February though; the sky was dark, the trees were dead, and the lake was frozen. And Jennifer in 924 is playing Dance Dance Revolution, once again reminding us all that she really likes to "move it." For god's sake it's a Friday, Jennifer, get some friends and go find a place to *actually* "shake it up."

Just things I think about at the Towers.

The phone rings, as I assumed it eventually would. I pick it up.

"Hey whatcha doin," Billy's voice comes through.

“Nothing.”

“Let’s go to Mack’s. Trevor and Paul wanna go.”

“Alrighty. I’ll meet you there.”

I go to Mack’s every weekend. Never alone, always with Paul, Billy, and Trevor, or some roach they bring along. It’s not exactly what one would call a *vibrant* hangout, but not a dump either. I’d call it a mix of both: enough to pull you from the doldrums but not too much to have you believing you’re a rockstar. And trust me, I love rock and roll as much as any, but I don’t pretend to play it.

Billy puts *another* beer down in front of me. Paul and Trevor work on theirs. They brought some guy named Christopher along, a manager for a Men’s Warehouse or something.

“You know how many schmucks I see comin in lookin like Lego dudes,” he says.

Trevor almost spits his drink out.

“Some people really just buy off the rack without even thinkin.”

“I couldn’t say the last time I bought a suit,” Billy says. “I don’t think I’m much fatter than I was when I was in college.”

“You ain’t too bad,” Christopher says, scanning my friend down with his enlightened eyes. “I’m tellin ya, if you come in while I’m workin I’ll fix you up nice and clean.”

“I bet prom season gets pretty hectic?” I say, taking a large mouthful of beer.

His cheeks flush with a twinge of color.

“I mean yeah you’re right about that one. Every spring”

Now, for the rest of the night, whenever Christopher starts blabbering about how he fitted some powerful executive it will be mixed with the image of a seventeen-year-old pimple-faced dweeb. We won’t have to see through his charade; he’ll see through it himself. Trapped under a

cloud of honesty until he can go home. He'll probably be waiting for Monday eagerly; ready to go back to the Men's Suit Barn and prove to himself that he *isn't* just a prom stylist. Prove to himself that he's a rockstar.

By the end of the night, I'm absolutely loaded.

Paul and Trevor don't drink as hard as they used to; they're uptight! Billy likes housing pitchers with me, but not as often as I can do it alone. They're all sissies. Don't wanna feel hungover Saturday?? As if they're going to feel too sick to do all the super-duper important stuff they do. In my...hup...opinion, if Friday's all ya got, then ya gotta make the most of it. Carpe Diem, babbyyy.

The next morning I feel awful.

And now I have to get up and meet my squad of roaches, along with everyone else, at some rock-climbing gym on the west side. *Unpaid*. On a *Saturday*. All due to some initiative Phoebe and the directors put together aimed at uniting the employees through "Natural Entertainment and Bonding."

NEB.

If I were Gary, Diane, or Mitch I could probably get away with skipping a few of these; however, I decided to expand my illustrious career by accepting a promotion, and now I'm obligated to go. This will be event 3/6. Halfway there.

I'm standing next to Gary, Diane, and Mitch, watching some instructor explain how to keep three points of contact. I have a headache. Phoebe is standing off to the side chatting with the other directors, extremely proud of the turnout.

"Hey, we should race later," Mitch says, giving me an elbow bump.

"Yeah man."

We're there for a while and I find myself wandering around the gym, observing the veterans fervently perfecting their technique.

And that's how I meet Beau.

He's sitting next to me at a rest bench as I mindlessly watch the wall.

"You ever climb before?" he asks out of nowhere. He must be able to tell that I'm out of my element.

"No, never," I say.

"I'm Matthew, but I go by Beau," Beau says extending a hand. I introduce myself.

"Are you here to learn to climb?"

"No. I'm here on a company...retreat I guess."

"Dang. Must be a good gig."

"I work for the Westerfield State Park Department of Conservation. I...write reports and present new ways to engage with the community."

"Are you serious? That's cool as hell man," he says, a look of true intrigue on his face. I can tell he's not pretending. Maybe it's the long flowy hair. "I absolutely love Westerfield. I live over on Oaklawn, so it's only like a ten-minute drive for me."

Oaklawn? Southwest Rockshore? That has to be the dumpiest part of the city, without contest.

"You spend a lot of time there?"

"No," I say with a laugh. "I'm an office guy. I'm good at speaking and I...have vision I guess."

"Man, I'd be out there every day after work if I were you. Your presentations would benefit from true experience."

I shake my head. “People go out to the park to escape their lives. Pretend like they’re woodsy. It’s just what roaches do.”

“Roaches?”

“The common man. Eating up their empty lives and pretending it’s what they want. They go to the State Park to escape but tell themselves they’re into it because they loooove nature.”

Beau sits back for a moment. “Roaches...hmm. Gotcha.”

I suddenly feel weird for saying roaches in front of him. Just the stupid jargon that runs through my skull. He doesn’t seem too impressed with my definition, like it didn’t affect him at all. Like he sees right through me.

“But I mean, like, I used to be into hiking and stuff. In college. It’s been years though. Lot of beer got in the way,” I say with a chuckle. Beau doesn’t laugh. As if my words didn’t even make a sound. His lean cut arms are crossed as he sits back silently.

“When’s the last time you saw something glorious?”

The question startles me.

“Glo...what do you mean?”

“Glorious. You know the word.”

I have no idea what to say to that.

“I don’t know. I don’t know what you mean.”

Beau nods.

“You know Yonder Prairie Forest?”

I nod.

“Go there. Tomorrow.”

“I’d have to park and hike in for like five miles,” I say incredulously.

He shrugs. “If it’s too far, then just park and walk across the lake. It’s frozen. Not nearly as far.”

“And do what?”

“Hike to the ridge tomorrow night, climb to the top, and just look. You’ll see something glorious.”

With a pat on my shoulder he gets up, straps his helmet on, and walks off to a wall.

“Maybe I’ll see ya around,” Beau calls over his shoulder.

Glorious was the word he used. And he was the only one I’d heard utter that sound as long as I could remember.

And I suppose that’s part of the reason I was now shuffling through the snow blanketing Lake Augustine. The twilight sun slowly falling over the western horizon, sending streaks of orange and rose across the naked sky. I’m bundled to the max, also feeling naked out on this open tundra. Nothing but me and the world.

I couldn’t place exactly what it was about Beau that had shook me enough to be out here now. Maybe it was his hair, or the assurance in his voice. More so, and resoundingly, I knew it was the fact that my words didn’t affect him. And it wasn’t about the content; it was me. None of my insight was insightful in the least from his perspective. It was as if he truly and honestly knew something I didn’t. About what? Sitting there by him, I was naked.

Roaches. What a stupid word.

I reach the opposite shore and the sun has descended. It’s not nearly as beautiful in the winter, but it’s still nice. The monstrous ridge rises up before me, and I know my body is not ready for this. Beau said I would see something glorious, and I haven’t come this far for nothing.

I tap into the spirit of my college days and begin the haul up a crisscrossing path of switchbacks, barely recognizable from the undisturbed snow.

The going is slow now, as I knew it would be. My face is cold, and my rectangular-cubicle-pampered legs are dying for me to sit down and swivel. The looming trees around me watch silently, indifferent to my suffering. I take a break.

I reach the top of the ridge, and the darkness of night has enveloped the land. I'm here to see something glorious. Beau said I would. I look out upon the region beyond the other side of the ridge - land I've never witnessed.

And I see nothing. Only darkness and the dead landscape of the prairie. No life and no spectacle. No glory.

What am I here for? Because some hippie had convinced me that I would see something life changing? Because I hoped there could be something I didn't know? What a fool am I.

Ready to throw my efforts away, I turn around.

And I see my life.

The city of Rockshore below, ablaze in the nighttime with a million dazzling lights. Life teeming through the cold darkness, evaporating the void. I see the office, nestled in a cluster of trees, Phoebe and Gary, Diane, and Mitch ready to connect the people with the nature they grew from. I see Marvin's Market in the center - a staple for the every-day person. I see the Towers, where I live, standing tall along the lakeshore, every window alight with the life of its occupant. I see Mack's, where I meet my friends, vibrantly buzzing with people ready to enjoy each other's company. I see Maximum Grip, where I met Beau, alive with the adventurers inside. And I see Oaklawn Road, where Beau lives, lined with cheap houses filled with those just trying to get by.

Or so it would seem. So it would always seem. But this...this is nothing I've ever known before.

Or maybe just something I could never admit.

And it's glorious.